

Since 2003 all councils have received a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) from the Audit Commission which rated their overall performance according to one of five categories: Poor, Weak, Fair, Good and Excellent. In its last inspection in 2004, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council was determined to be 'Weak'

Since that time the Council has made considerable progress in terms of its performance, customer satisfaction and value for money and we are quite clear that the category of 'Weak' is no longer an appropriate description for us. These achievements are due, in large part, to the dedication and efforts of all our partners and those with a common interest in our priorities.

Following a Peer Review late last year, carried out by the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) we are now confident of a significant improvement on the CPA score of 2004. The Audit Commission has accepted our application for re-categorisation (copy enclosed) and, in doing so, noted that the panel was impressed with the application and said that there was "clear evidence of improvement in a number of areas". This reinforces the messages that were received in a peer review we commissioned late last year.

The next steps relating to the inspection will be as follows:

Submit completed self-assessment	26 September 2008
Initial early impressions meeting	20 October 2008 am
Tour of the borough	20 October 2008 pm
On-site inspection	10-14 November 2008
Draft report received within 10 days to comment	16 January
Pre-publication report	13 February
Report and CPA category publication	17 March

The Lead Inspector is David Bryant. He and the inspection team will visit the Council on 20 October when we will be given initial feedback and early impressions from their document review and our self-assessment. This feedback will highlight key areas of focus for the on site inspection in November.

This assessment process will be a great opportunity for the Council with its partners to demonstrate the excellent services we work so hard together to provide and to recognise the significant difference we make to the lives of our residents in the borough.

We would like to thank you for your ongoing support and commitment to helping us achieve our vision of working in partnership to *Enhance the Quality of Life for All*.

Yours faithfully,

Sheila Wheeler

Chief Executive

Where we were – 2004

In 2004, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council was identified by the Audit Commission as a weak council:

"... is not well led and has not clarified what it wants to achieve for its residents. It is weak because it has not made the best use of its capacity to deliver improved services for residents. The Council has been complacent up to very recently and has not put in place a number of the key elements needed to deliver consistently high quality and improving services" (ref 1)

The Council was characterised by significant weaknesses in its ambitions, an inability to prioritise its resources, little ability to comprehensively manage performance and made poor use of its available capacity to deliver for the communities of Tunbridge Wells.

The Council was close to being classified as 'poor' by the Audit Commission, and to being offered government intervention.

Decisive action

Members grasped the issues and took difficult decisions to drive through changes in the organisation – starting with a shared commitment from staff on the way forward. This was articulated in the CPA Improvement Plan (ref 2).

In early 2005 Members and officers put in place plans to ensure that we, as a Council, were fit-for-purpose to deliver on the commitments made to our communities.

Members recruited a new Chief Executive and a reorganisation of staff resources followed soon afterwards to ensure delivery of Members' priorities for the community.

Our journey – the first steps

The CPA of 2004 showed we had weak relationships with key stakeholders, an incomplete understanding of the community's needs and did not provide adequate community leadership.

By renewing the Sustainable Community Plan (ref 3) and revitalising relationships with stakeholders, Members and officers have forged effective working

relationships. Significant capacity has been directed towards improving partnership working over the past three years. A new service of Community and Corporate Planning was developed and a Partnership Protocol implemented to enhance long-term sustainable partnership working (ref 4).

The partnership-led Gateway, being established in Tunbridge Wells this autumn, is testament to the confidence and leadership the Council has developed. Numerous partner organisations are making a shared commitment to the project to provide a seamless access point to services for our community.

Setting the long-term direction

Following extensive consultation with the community and partners in 2005/06, we worked to establish a vision and a set of Corporate Priorities – these are underpinned by a set of Corporate Commitments to our public. The consultation programme with residents and stakeholders was the most extensive that we had undertaken up to that point. The vision and corporate priorities were informed by the national, regional and local priorities articulated in the Sustainable Community Plan.

The process enabled us to maintain focus during a period of considerable change. For example, the Council has turned around poor performance during the change programme. In 2004, 66% of all performance indicators were in the worst quartile. In 2006/07, 50% were performing in the top quartile. Three-year improvement is in the top 11% of all District Councils (ref 5). A truly outstanding achievement.

We have also been open and proactive in seeking external challenge to help us improve. For example, inspections in cultural services, housing and planning as well as reviews of our LSP and grants process have all contributed to our improvement journey. Since 2005 we have invited the I&DeA, the Leadership Centre, Trevor Roberts Associates, the Institute of Community Cohesion (iCoCo) and the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) to work with us on areas of weakness. We have listened and learned from these experiences to implement best practice to help us on our path of improvement.

Enabling place shaping

A real inhibitor to achievement in 2004 was the Council's inability to prioritise its resources. This was evident in poor strategic thinking, reactive policymaking and a weak framework in which Members could make decisions. The Council had an annual operating plan, which existed without a medium-term plan for financial resourcing; there were only a small number of service plans and only 30% of staff had an appraisal.

By providing effective leadership and developing a shared commitment from staff, we now have an effective three-year Strategic Plan (ref 6) aligned with a Medium Term Financial Strategy (ref 7). The Council has an extensive suite of Service Plans (ref 8) and all staff receive an appraisal. The Peer Review in 2007 found:

"Staff at all levels are seen as customer focused, approachable, able, and enthusiastic to 'do their bit'"(ref 9)

An extensive partnership-led training programme for all staff and Members supports these findings. The Council's Corporate Priorities and Corporate Commitments guide this framework to ensure that the whole organisation is focused on delivering the community's priorities.

By putting in place these mechanisms, we have enabled staff and Members to acquire the tools they need to plan and allocate resources effectively. This has not only delivered improvements in services but has also moved us towards 'place shaping'. The recent Peer Review noted:

"[t]hese priorities are well understood and have provided a focus for improvement in the organisation. The Council's [three-year] strategic plan operates in conjunction with its improvement plan. With a medium-term financial strategy (MTFS) in place – used to inform budgetary and service planning decisions – the Council has a robust programme of improvement. There is a commitment to put the needs of customers first. External communication has improved"

Our journey – sustaining long-term improvement

The progress made during these times has been underpinned by the basic building blocks to ensure long-term improvement is sustainable. In 2004 the CPA report outlined a lack of investment in key

areas that undermined the corporate governance of the Council's business:

Corporate performance management – is now truly embedded within our organisation. It has improved immeasurably since 2004 and was praised by the Peer Review

"the Council now has a strong performance management culture which has led to real improvements".

This is backed by a comprehensive performance management system called Covalent. Improvement has been evident in all services.

Councillor development – this has been addressed by the 'Fit for our Future' programme – a comprehensive training programme is in place, regular Member Briefings and tools such as the Councillor's Kitbag have given Members the necessary resources to do their job in their communities.

Decision making structures – the Council has put in place a streamlined and effective Cabinet arrangement, backed by a robust Code of Conduct. (ref 10) A successful Standards Committee and a rigorous Audit Committee is now in place. An effective scrutiny function is also making a real difference in challenging Cabinet and developing effective proposals for recommendation. For example, the scrutiny of the MTFs and People Strategy has enabled real improvements.

Corporate risk management – we now operate the Council's Strategic Risk Register as part of the normal performance management process. Risk Management is now a clear strength for the Council.

To summarise this improvement journey the Peer Review found that:

"the top political and managerial leadership is clear about roles and responsibilities. This approach is respected by stakeholders and partners. There are strong officer and member working relationships. Staff are well motivated and 'up for change'. They see the leader and chief executive as integral to continued improvement"

Our journey – making a difference

It is because collectively we have taken tough decisions, and invested in the right areas, that our residents are now benefiting from value-for-money

services. We are now delivering high quality services with high satisfaction and at relatively low cost.

High quality services

- Tunbridge Wells Borough Council is ranked 43rd out of 388 councils for percentage of PIs improved in the last three years. 68% of PIs have improved compared to 56% for the average district authority.
- 50% of performance indicators are in the top quartile, significantly above the 33% average for district authorities.
- The Audit Commission ranked our housing and sustainable communities outcomes as 1st out of 354 local authorities in England for three-year improvement.
- Significant improvements in service perception. For example, in 2006 only 66% of residents did not think litter, rubbish and vandalism was a problem. In 2008 87% did not think it was a problem – a 21% improvement in two years.

High satisfaction

- 92% of the public are happy with Tunbridge Wells as a place to live, significantly higher than most authorities.
- Tunbridge Wells recorded higher or the same rate of overall satisfaction for its services as 25 'excellent' rated District Councils and is comfortably in the top quartile nationally.
- Satisfaction with Council services from BME communities has improved from 55% in 2005/06 to 65% in 2007/08. This has closed the inequalities gap in satisfaction rates that existed previously where there was a 13% difference between overall satisfaction and satisfaction from BME communities. The gap is now just 3%.
- We have achieved top quartile satisfaction rates for street cleanliness, sports and leisure facilities, museums, theatres and concert halls and parks and open spaces.

Low cost

- Value for money is embedded as a discipline and challenge in all we do – for example, through our involvement with the Kent Pricebook (ref 13).

- We provide excellent value for money to our residents and have the second lowest Council Tax level in Kent and 58th lowest level out of 238 District Councils in England – top quartile performance.

What we have achieved

Shared ownership of the Council's priorities has brought about significant improvements in service provision and has made a real difference to people's lives. Some notable outcomes include:

- The recent Borough-wide survey identified 92.2% of respondents felt 'fairly safe' or 'very safe' when outside in the neighbourhood/local area. This has partly been the result of Tunbridge Wells' successful Community Safety Partnership in reducing crime. For example, since 2004 criminal damage is down 15% and assaults are down 15%.
- The ranking of the town of Tunbridge Wells has improved in a national survey of retail town centres from 63rd to 55th. This indicates the improvement in quality of the town centres for residents and good business advice provided by the Council.
- Tunbridge Wells is performing similar or significantly better in 30 out of 31 health indicators, compared to the national average (ref 15).
- The number of affordable housing units provided per annum has increased from 41 in 2005/06 to 122 in 2006/07. This is meeting a key demand from local people and transforming the life of local families.
- Top quartile satisfaction with cleanliness of streets. This is a result of the Council targeting 'Grot Spots' in the Borough. Improvements in street cleanliness have been achieved through graffiti removal teams, street cleaning activities, fixed penalty notices against those who drop litter and the speedy removal of fly-tipping. More recently our parking attendants were the first in Kent to be given the powers to enforce against these 'crimes'.
- The Council's key statutory services are now performing strongly with top quartile performance in benefits, recycling and composting and planning applications.

- Working with partners to deliver on a major capital project (TN2 community centre) as a focus for improving lives in a deprived area. The number of users has almost quadrupled since it re-opened. This has made a significant difference to the lives of people in Sherwood – one of our priority neighbourhoods.
- In the past three years, levels of VAT based businesses have been sustained and actually increased during 2007. This is helping to provide a vibrant local economy and been partly a result of our effective business advice services.
- Top quartile performance for parks and open spaces. The improvements and maintenance of our parks and open spaces is a key element of caring for our environment – an important aspect of improving the quality of life for all.
- We have led regionally and nationally on innovation in service provision. For example, we have been the only District Council in England to pilot the Councillor Call for Action; we have led the way in Kent on developing Local Action Plans to support the LAA process; we have contributed to the Lifting the Burdens Task Force reviews; we have been amongst leading authorities in delivering the partnership Gateway concept.
- Through partnership with the private sector we have enabled projected savings of £7 million over ten years following the re-letting of the Leisure Management Contract in October 2006. Our partnership agreement has increased participation rates by 23% (2007/08 compared with 2006/07) and illustrates the improved quality of service that has been achieved.

Our journey – continuing our progress

The Council is now characterised by strong political and managerial leadership, excellent working relationships with partner organisations and motivated staff. The organisation is significantly different from that in 2004.

However, we are not complacent. The Council has agreed to put in place a long-term relationship with a development partner that has at its heart Town Centre Masterplanning. This is a ten-year commitment that will help support the achievement of our vision and the continued prosperity of our towns.

The Council is also garnering the views of our residents through innovative engagement activities across the Borough and with the active engagement of all our staff and members through our 'Ward Walks' initiative (ref 16). This has enabled us to engage with sections of the community that we have been unable to reach before.

The changing demographics of the area are also providing challenges and opportunities. We are working innovatively with new migrant communities and their embassies in the UK to understand community needs and this is helping to influence service provision. We have achieved Level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government, only one of three District Councils in England to make the leap from Level 1 in a single year. This demonstrates our improvement in involving hard-to-reach groups in shaping service provision (ref 17).

Our journey – acknowledging the transformation

The 2007 Peer Review found that the Council has:

"made significant strides since the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) inspection in 2004. The reform programme put in place as a response to that inspection has enabled the Council to undertake an impressive improvement journey"

We are confident that the CPA recategorisation process will acknowledge our transformation journey and the very significant differences that we and our partners have made in our communities to achieve the shared vision of *"enhancing the quality of life for all"*.

Finally, the Peer Review report told us that we needed to celebrate success. We hope that this story can go some way to doing this by recognising the efforts of our Members, staff and partners through the CPA process. We hope we can be an inspiration to other Councils that are seeking to make substantial improvements; showing that bold decisions, a shared willingness to succeed and effective partnership working can make a real difference to peoples' lives.

Our Council is no longer weak – we are an excellently performing Council.

Reference Key Documents

- (1) CPA Report 2004
- (2) CPA Improvement Plan
- (3) Sustainable Community Plan
- (4) Partnership Protocol
- (5) Audit Commission Performance Indicator Profiles (Dec 2007)
- (6) Strategic Plan 2008–11
- (7) Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) 2008–11
- (8) TWBC Service Plan Book 2008–11
- (9) I&DeA Peer Review Report 2007
- (10) Council Constitution
- (11) People Strategy
- (12) Borough-wide survey 2008
- (13) Kent Price Book 2007
- (14) Improvement Plan 2007–10
- (15) NHS Health Profile 2007 – Tunbridge Wells
- (16) Ward Walks Programme 2007 and 2008
- (17) Equalities Annual Report 2007/08

For further information on the Council's improvement programme, additional evidence or any core documents, please contact:

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