

Inspection report

July 2004



Comprehensive performance assessment

Dartford Borough Council

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Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) is part of the wider agenda set out in the Local Government White Paper *Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services*. The White Paper encourages greater focus on improved services for local people by freeing good councils from central government controls and restrictions, and providing poorer councils with more, and better focused, support for improvement. CPA is the first step in this process, that of making an overall judgement of where each council stands.
- 2 This report presents an analysis of the council's overall performance as well as two short diagnostic assessments which cover important areas of responsibility. It also includes an assessment of the council's benefit service by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI), and the appointed auditor's assessment of performance on each of the main elements of the code of audit practice. The appendices to this report set out further details on the findings of these assessments and the framework for CPA.
- 3 The official version of this report is also available on the Audit Commission's web site at www.audit-commission.gov.uk. The Audit Commission cannot verify the accuracy of and is not responsible for material contained in this report which has been reproduced by another organisation or individual.

Summary of Comprehensive Performance Assessment judgements

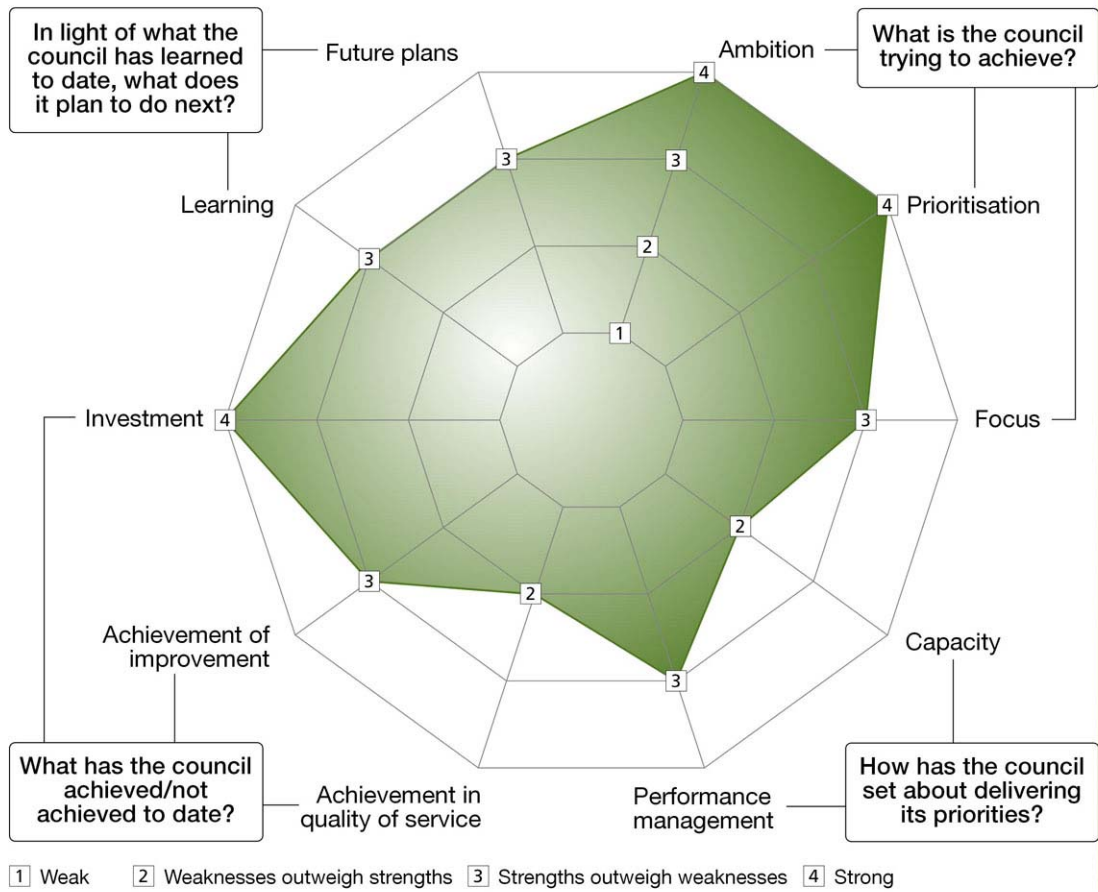
- 4 Dartford Borough Council is a good council that is well placed to improve further. However, it has failed to deliver improvements in some priority areas, due to its focus on regeneration.
- 5 The council is extremely ambitious and has clear aims to contribute to the large-scale development of Kent Thameside, while looking after the interests of existing communities. It engages effectively with partners at a regional and sub-regional level and has been successful at bring about developments like Crossways business park, Bluewater and Ingress Park. The council is also working with partners to continue these developments up to 2025, to include an international train station at Ebbsfleet and over 7,000 new homes at Eastern Quarry. Despite being one of the smallest council's in Kent, it has competently undertaken its role in this arena. However, unsurprisingly, this has stretched its resources and has taken its focus away from core services. The council is achieving inconsistent results for its services and is failing to deliver in some of its key priority areas as a result. These include raising its housing stock to meet the decent homes standard and minimising the levels of waste collected. Satisfaction levels with the council are below average and falling.
- 6 The council has taken steps to ensure that it is able deliver quality core services and to maintain its focus on regeneration. It has improved its political and officer structures and realigned its resources within its corporate plan. It has created a regeneration directorate to focus on regeneration and has restructured the remainder of its organisation to ensure improved levels of service delivery. It is a key player in setting up the Kent Thameside delivery board to oversee the regeneration agenda and has provided additional support to the Dartford and Gravesham local strategic partnership (LSP). It has recognised that its numerous local partnerships have lacked focus and have drained its resources and has undertaken a review of their effectiveness. Its financial management is sound and it has sufficient resources to meet its immediate needs.
- 7 The council is adept at securing resources for investment and is open to external challenge. It is engaged in a planned £90 million re-development of Dartford town centre and a multi-use development at Dartford Park that will provide 1,500 new homes. It is working with its partners to secure funding for a fast track public transport system to link new and existing communities across Kent Thameside. The council has externalised a number of services, including refuse collection and street cleansing.
- 8 The council is self aware and has a number of realistic and robust plans to bring about future improvements. These include its local plan, regeneration strategy and the LSP's community strategy. However, its housing stock options appraisal is late in development and 52 per cent of homes do not meet the decent homes standard. Early indications are that the cost of maintaining and improving the housing stock will be £173 million over the next 30 years and this throws up significant challenges. In addition, the council has no firm plans to meet future recycling targets or to reduce the levels of waste collected.

Summary of assessment scores

NB – weighted scores - please remember to multiply the themes of achievement in quality of service and achievement of improvement by three, and the theme of investment by two.

Top level question	Theme	Grade	Weighted score
What is the council trying to achieve?	Ambition	4	4
	Prioritisation	4	4
	Focus	3	3
How has the council set about delivering its priorities?	Capacity	2	2
	Performance management	3	3
What has the council achieved/not achieved to date?	Achievement in quality of service	2	6
	Achievement of improvement	3	9
	Investment	4	8
In light of what the council has learned to date, what does it plan to do next?	Learning	3	3
	Future plans	3	3
Weighted score			45
Corporate assessment category			Good

Dartford Borough Council



Recommendations

- 9 It is recommended that the council:
- ◆ actively and promptly shares the findings of this assessment with the public, partner organisations, councillors and staff; and
 - ◆ uses the strengths and weaknesses identified in this report as the basis for its improvement planning.

Context

The locality

- 10 Dartford borough is located in North Kent along the banks of the river Thames. It is the smallest borough in Kent in terms of both population and area. It covers just 7,632 hectares and has a population of around 86,540 residents in 35,000 households. However, by 2010, this population is expected to increase significantly by nine per cent, which is nearly twice the expected national growth rate. The borough is at the centre of the major redevelopment of the Thames Gateway. Kent Thameside includes Dartford and Gravesham boroughs and has been earmarked for over 11,000 new homes by 2015. Developments at Dartford include a new international station at Ebbsfleet and over 7,000 new houses being built at Eastern Quarry over the next decade. Dartford town centre is the major conurbation and population density is three times the regional and national averages. However, the borough is semi-rural, as it also consists small, historic villages and hamlets to the south of the A2 dual carriageway.
- 11 The population is younger than the regional and national averages, with the proportion of residents of pensionable age being just under 17 per cent, compared with nearly 19 per cent in the region. The proportion of residents from black and minority ethnic groups is close to the regional average at approximately eight per cent, but lower than the national average of 13 per cent.
- 12 The borough is relatively affluent, with average weekly wages of £420 being higher than the national average of just over £400, but lower than the regional average of £445. Unemployment at nearly two per cent is higher than the regional average of one and a half per cent, but lower than the national average of nearly two and a half per cent. Economic activity is reasonably diverse and is spread across public administration, distribution, finance, manufacturing and construction. House prices at nearly £170,000 are above the national average of nearly £162,000, but well below the regional average of nearly £205,000. However, areas of high deprivation exist, such as Swanscombe and Joyce Green. These tend to be surrounded by the new developments.

The council

- 13 Following the elections in May, overall political control of Dartford Borough Council switched to the Conservatives after a period of eight years of Labour administration. The borough comprises 17 wards represented by 44 councillors. Political composition consists of 21 Conservative, 16 Labour, 6 Resident Association and Independent group councillors and 1 New England councillor. The Conservatives, Residents Association and independents form the new administration on the seven-strong cabinet.
- 14 The council piloted a modernised cabinet, with leader, model of governance in 2000. It formally adopted this model in 2001 after public consultation and introduced a new management structure. There are two cabinet advisory panels, two overview and scrutiny committees, one deals with service issues and the other corporate matters, and a best value review committee.

The council is also made up of an audit & standards board, development control board, licensing panel, appeals panel, discretionary housing payments panel and a standards committee.

- 15 The council employs around 430 staff, led by a managing director and three strategic directors. Its net budget for spending 2003/04 is £11.4 million. The council tax increased by 2.5 per cent over last year in line with inflation.
- 16 The council carried out, as requested, a scored self assessment for this inspection against each of the corporate assessment themes. The self assessment was informed by a peer review commissioned by the council and undertaken by SOLACE Enterprises in October 2003. Using the Audit Commission's scoring mechanism the council has assessed itself as 'good'.

What is the council trying to achieve?

Ambition

- 17 Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses in this area.
- 18 The council has an ambitious long-term agenda over the next 10 to 20 years for the development and regeneration of Kent Thameside by working with partners, including those on the Dartford and Gravesham LSP. The partnership encompasses the boroughs of Dartford and Gravesham and adopted a community strategy in 2003. The strategy focuses on local people's priorities and needs; better planning; co-ordination and delivery of services; and improving quality of life within the area. The strategy clearly identifies the lead partners for each of the eight themes. The two councils lead on four. The council has also prepared an over arching regeneration plan to link plans for existing communities within the borough. It promotes the development of a strong, diverse and expanding local economy with an international outlook, leading to new employment opportunities and improved prosperity. This is reflected in the council's corporate plan. The regeneration plan also sets out the councils approach to social inclusion.
- 19 The council has specific longer-term ambitions for improving the quality of life within the borough that reflect the diverse needs of the community. It has a vision 'to make Dartford the place of choice, a place where people choose to live, work and enjoy their leisure time' by 2011. Partners have a clear understanding of the council's ambitions for the locale. The council's statement of values sets out its approach to the local community and forms a basis upon which it develops its policies. The priority themes are robust as they have been developed into a set of corporate targets for the coming year that provide a focus for the council's ambitions. Following the elections in May 2003, the council's ambitions include a renewed focus on improving the quality of the services that it provides. The corporate plan links to the regeneration strategy and the council's updated service plans. It has also identified risks relating to achievement of its ambitions. They are also realistic in balancing new initiatives with service reductions required by the medium-term financial strategy. However, there is a risk of the council failing to deliver the its ambition to deliver the decent homes standard to its own housing stock by 2010 as it has not yet developed its standard and has not made firm plans to commit the necessary funds up to 2010.
- 20 The council gives and is seen to give, clear leadership to strategies to build cohesive and sustainable communities. It took a positive lead in lobbying for the new international railway station at Ebbsfleet to help bring large scale economic benefits to the community. Proposals for developments at Eastern Quarry and Dartford Park demonstrate its ambition. It has worked closely with residents and other stakeholders in planning the future of existing communities. It is working closely with private and public sector bodies and government agencies to plan and deliver ongoing improvement and regeneration for local people across the region.

- 21 The council has now made progress in providing political and officer leadership internally to ensure that its ambitions are owned and understood by councillors and staff. For example, council meetings now have an improved focus through the prioritisation of meeting agendas. However, overview and scrutiny committees do not have a sufficiently strategic focus in monitoring the achievement of key ambitions. This means that not all councillors are sufficiently engaged in the decision-making process.

Prioritisation

- 22 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.
- 23 Following the elections in May 2003, the council revised its corporate strategy. The new strategy, approved by the council this year, outlines the priority themes for the next five years, including the following:
- ◆ citizenship and the community;
 - ◆ the environment;
 - ◆ regeneration;
 - ◆ housing;
 - ◆ leisure time; and
 - ◆ quality services.
- 24 The council has identified its local priorities for the coming year of community safety, health matters, town centre development and on achieving a low council tax increase. It is now reflecting these priorities in strategies and work plans and is developing its approach to consultation via a communications and consultation action plan. There is a clear basis for these priorities. Its priorities reflect the views of residents, LSP and other partners based upon a wide range of consultation techniques. These have taken a variety of forms, including borough-wide surveys on corporate priorities, customer surveys on service standards and resident surveys on regeneration priorities. It is developing its approach to consultation based on the experience gained.
- 25 The council effectively communicates its priorities externally, although internal communications have been weak. Mechanisms for external communications include the council's community newspaper, a series of 'Dartford talking' ward-based forums, community strategy consultation and the council's website. It recognised that internal communications were a weakness in its self assessment and has introduced a programme of improvements that are helping staff to understand its agenda. For example, regular bulletins now go out to all staff from the managing director and leader.
- 26 The council has shifted resources to match its priorities. It has a three-year budget setting process that reflects corporate priorities. Following the recent adoption of the new corporate plan, it has shifted some resources to reflect priorities.

This included more money to parishes, for cleaning and community safety with budget reductions in arts and culture, tourism and in some back office services. The process will continue into the next budget cycle. This recognises the priority of reducing costs and setting a sustainable budget without the need to use reserves.

- 27 The council is recognised by stakeholders as achieving a balance between the priorities of existing communities and the pressures for development in a challenging environment. The corporate plan recognises that it needs to prioritise activity given the limited resources available and these priorities are reflected in the council's service plans. The council is prioritising resources in a focused and balanced manner against both national and local priorities. Priorities are now identified in both corporate and updated service plans. However, the council has yet to effectively balance the national priorities for housing and waste management.

Focus

- 28 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.
- 29 The council has improved its mechanisms for maintaining focus to ensure that it does not get distracted from its agenda. It has recognised the risk of being distracted in the face of major development pressures and is ensuring focus by reviewing policy documents, budgets, targets and service plans to focus resources on corporate priorities. It has also restructured to ensure clearer lines of accountability and greater empowerment of staff to allow senior staff to focus on strategic issues. Each strategic director is responsible for driving each one of these priorities. For example, it is staying focused on the key issue of regeneration by establishing a new regeneration directorate under a revised structure. It has revised its meeting agendas to focus councillors on key decisions.
- 30 The council has been able to sustain its focus on the major re-development of the Kent Thames Gateway and the need to harness this for the benefit of local residents. It has shown a willingness to work in new ways to deliver regeneration with partners and developers. It has encouraged an upward shift in design quality, prioritised sustainable development and ensured that new investment benefits existing priority communities as well as new ones. This focus on raising standards for new developments has been demonstrated at Bluewater and Ingress Park. However, this has resulted in the council placing a lower emphasis on some core services and it is only achieving mixed levels of service quality overall.
- 31 The Kent Thameside delivery board for ensures key projects are delivered in a co-ordinated and timely fashion within Dartford and Gravesham. The business plan sets out working arrangements and provides a detailed programme highlighting priority activity. As well as having a key role in providing a focus for regeneration work for the two boroughs, it will also oversee activity and the development of prioritised action plans for the LSP. However, the board is at an early stage of development.

How has the council set about delivering its priorities?

Capacity

- 32 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area.
- 33 The impact of the massive regeneration programme has impaired the council's ability to deliver core services in the past. However, it has some high calibre councillors and officers and is taking steps to ensure that it has the capacity needed to deliver priority improvements. This includes a new officer structure (see investment section below). The leader and managing director are capable and well regarded by partners. The management group acts as an effective team and relationships between councillors and senior officers are constructive.
- 34 Some staff are not clear about the impact of the new officer structure and morale is poor in some areas. However, senior officers and councillors are clear about their responsibilities. For example, as half of councillors were newly elected following the elections last year, the council provided induction training for them. There has also been specific training for cabinet members on policy development, the standards committee and for group leaders on conduct. In addition, officers and councillors are aware of their responsibilities to reduce discrimination. The race equality scheme is led by the cabinet and all councillors and directors have a role to play in implementing the equalities policy. Most staff are generally enthusiastic and committed.
- 35 The LSP was overlaid onto existing structures and has not significantly added value. Also, the council has not been successful at engaging the private sector in the LSP. There has been a lack of clarity about the purpose and remit of the numerous partnerships in place. Whilst delivering important initiatives on the ground, this lack of direction has proved a drain on resources. The council has recognised this concern and is taking steps to improve the effectiveness of the LSP and to review its other partnerships. However, the council has effectively engaged with partners at a regional and sub-regional level to deliver big regeneration initiatives, such as the Bluewater shopping complex and an international station at Ebbsfleet. It is engaged in the Dartford and Gravesham LSP and over ninety other partnerships to deliver priorities.
- 36 The council has yet to deliver effective training and development to maximise its capacity in priority areas. Problems still remain in recruiting and retaining professional staff in planning, legal and environmental health services. However, it is enhancing its capacity in certain areas through some effective human resource practice. This includes, graduate recruitment in the cabinet office, sickness monitoring, health initiatives and information technology training. It recently revised its pay and retention package, which has contributed to a 20 per cent reduction in staff turnover. In addition, it is unlocking the potential of the local community as it has achieved a staffing demographic similar to the profile for the area. Following recent appraisals, the council is completing a training needs analysis for all staff.

- 37 The council acknowledges that the scrutiny committees need to develop their strategic direction. Whilst, the working groups have been more effective and have investigated and developed policy in areas like e-government, travellers and youth services. Before the election in May 2003, although the style adopted by councillors was highly politicised in the past and had an adverse impact on councillor/officer relations. Whilst this behaviour has improved following the elections, scrutiny is not now resulting in clear actions. The council has two overview and scrutiny committees (corporate and services) and has established a work programme and working groups to undertake specific reviews. Committees are chaired by opposition councillors.
- 38 With respect to the housing revenue account, early indications are that the costs for maintenance and improvement of its housing stock over 30 years will be in excess of £170 million. This requires an average investment of £3.7 million every year to reach and retain the Decent Homes Standard (DHS). The council had previously transferred the management of its housing stock to a private contractor, but brought it back in house to enable it to have better control over the stock options appraisal. The capital programme also reflects this position. Of the £10.5 million capital budget this was under spent by £3 million, although the council was directly responsible for only £780,000 of the underspend. However, the council currently has the finances to achieve its priorities and used its reserves to set a balanced budget for 2003/04, although a number of budgets are under spent. For example, it under spent on employee budgets for the last three years and has now built in a five per cent staff vacancy in the budget (£425,000).
- 39 The council has two cabinet advisory panels that have the potential to improve the quality of decision-making. However, many councillors in opposition have declined to take up their positions on the panels, meaning that the council is not utilising its full political capacity. The new administration implemented a system of panel meetings to address concerns among backbenchers that they felt disengaged from the political process. Panels meet to consider issues in detail before making considered recommendations to the cabinet.
- 40 Council meeting agendas contain no explicit links to the corporate priorities and little reference is made to the priorities at meetings as a result. However, the council has recently improved its agendas by requiring councillors to consider key decisions and motions first. Cabinet meetings are well managed and consultation with the community is used to inform decisions. The cabinet effectively uses the cabinet advisory panels and overview and scrutiny committees within the decision making process.
- 41 A procurement strategy to guide the council's decisions is not yet in place as it is due in September 2004. However, it is prepared to consider alternative methods of delivery. It has contracted out its refuse collection, street cleansing, grounds & parks maintenance and housing repairs services and has leased out its' major leisure facilities. This has added a private sector perspective to service delivery.
- 42 The council uses information technology to extend its capacity. For example, it has implemented electronic document management within its planning service. It has also made the tracking of housing repairs, payment of rent accounts, requesting rent statements and requesting rent cards available to users online.

Performance management

- 43 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.
- 44 The council's planning and performance management culture is driven by the corporate priorities. It cascades corporate objectives and performance targets down to the service and individual level. The council has recently revised its service plans in light of the new corporate strategy and in line with the budget cycle. Service plans now contain targets that will allow councillors and senior officers to monitor and manage achievement. However, this is a recent development and the quality of performance management information has been variable and inconsistent in the past.
- 45 Councillors and managers have been able to use performance information to identify issues and take action. The council has improved the system by introducing quarterly monitoring reports on best value and local indicators to the cabinet. These are reported on an exceptional basis, with recovery plans from officers as to how they will address the issues. Officers supply monthly financial information to the leader and portfolio holder. Officers also supply monthly updates to the portfolio holders for revenues and benefits, tenancy and community services. Human resources provide weekly recruitment information to the senior officer. These reports will also include key corporate targets. The cabinet also receives regular budget and project monitoring reports. However, mechanisms for keeping councillors up to date are less formal elsewhere and performance and financial information are not routinely reported together.
- 46 The council has a record of sound financial management and resources are used flexibly in line with priorities. It is able to demonstrate that it achieves value for money. For example, the streets scene best value review led to more rigorous contractor specification and collaborative contractor relationships. This was demonstrated when the council introduced a dry recycling collection scheme. In procuring the service from the existing contractor, the council agreed a fixed fee for a pilot scheme and re-specified following the trial before negotiating a final price.
- 47 The council identifies and manages risks in some key service areas and projects. It is becoming increasingly risk aware and has assessed the risks in key areas of service delivery. It has worked with its consultant to identify and evaluation of all significant business risks and to develop a methodology to assess and rank risk. The council has identified ten key corporate risks, adopted a risk management strategy and has incorporated risk assessments in the new service plans.
- 48 Staff have a clear understanding of what is expected of them in delivering the corporate plan. This was achieved through the recent service plan review and appraisals against a competency framework. However, the council recognises that a performance management culture is not yet systematically used throughout. Users do not always have access to information about standards and targets as they are not always in place or made available at the point of contact. However, housing and building control provide examples where standard information is easily accessible. The council rely upon the best value performance plan and borough newspaper to inform users.

There is a corporate 'comment, compliment or complaints' management system in place. Leaflets about the scheme are made available at reception desks at the civic offices. The council is able to demonstrate that it takes corrective action and uses this information to manage performance.

What has the council achieved / not achieved to date?

Achievement in quality of service

- 49 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area.
- 50 The council's focus on regeneration has been at the expense of core services and it is achieving some poor results in their priority areas of housing and waste management. However, it is achieving a high level of quality with respect to its ambitious agenda for the regeneration of the borough. In 2002/03, 57 per cent of key performance indicators were below average, of which 21 per cent matched the performance of the worst performing councils. Of the 43 per cent of indicators that were above average, 21 per cent matched the performance of the best councils. The satisfaction level with the overall service provided by the council at 64 per cent was below average in 2000/01. Early indications are that this has deteriorated further to 57 per cent.
- 51 The recently revised corporate plan built on the themes established in the previous corporate strategy and has added 'quality services' as a priority. However, it was not explicit about the hierarchy of its priorities and many targets were not results focused, making progress difficult to measure.

Housing

- 52 Housing management services achieve below average or poor performance for six out of eight indicators returned by the council. Fifty-two per cent of the council's housing stock fails to meet the decent homes standard. The housing service was transferred to a private contractor from 1995 to 2000. The council brought the service back in-house as it wanted more information on the condition of the stock and wanted to ensure their compliance with the decent homes standard. Tenants exhibited below average satisfaction with the service and poor satisfaction with the opportunities to participate in 2000/01 just after the service had been taken back in-house. It achieved an average of 135 affordable homes per year during 2002-04, well short of its own target of 250 against an identified need for 395 annually. However, it is likely to meet its total target over the next nine years due to large developments coming off site.
- 53 The council's revenues and benefits service was judged as being 'fair towards good' with 'fair towards good' prospects for improvement by the benefits fraud inspectorate in March 2004. It matches the performance of the best councils for the average time taken to process new claims and changes in circumstances. However, it only achieves below average performance for the number of renewals claims processed on time and the percentage of claims processed correctly. The percentage of users satisfied with the service in the benefits office in 2000/01 matched the performance of the worst performing councils and early indications are that this has remained static. Satisfaction with the service overall is below average.

Environment

- 54 The council is failing to achieve a satisfactory level of performance on waste management. The levels of recycled waste and waste collected both match the performance of the worst performing councils. Early indications are that satisfaction with the standard of cleanliness of the area has fallen from 64 to 58 per cent from 2000 to 2004. Satisfaction with waste collection and recycling facilities is below average.
- 55 The council's 'street scene' service was judged as providing a 'fair' service with 'promising' prospects for improvement by the Audit Commission in January 2002. The service includes environmental cleansing, highways, grounds maintenance and car parks. The council achieves average performance for the standard of cleanliness and grounds maintenance standards are acceptable. However, resident satisfaction with the standard of cleanliness was below average in 2000/01.

Leisure time

- 56 The quality of leisure provision is variable across the borough. Satisfaction with parks and open spaces matches the performance of the worst performing councils and satisfaction with sports and leisure facilities is below average. The museum is poorly attended and also achieves poor satisfaction levels. However, there are examples of good quality open spaces, such as Darenth Country Park. Satisfaction with the Orchard theatre matches the performance of the best performing councils. The council has also consulted young people and developed a number of popular leisure initiatives in response to identified needs.

Citizenship and community

- 57 The council's involvement in the Dartford community safety partnership (DCSP) is delivering a reasonable level of service quality. It has provided 44 close circuit television (CCTV) cameras in the town centre, five temporary cameras and a speed gun. It has also extended CCTV coverage to some parks and employed a park ranger. Sixty-three per cent of key crime indicators are better than average, of which a quarter matched the performance of the best partnerships. Of the 37 per cent that were worse than average, only 12 per cent matched the performance of the worst partnerships.

Regeneration

- 58 This has been the council's main area of focus and it has achieved excellent results. It encourages developments that meet regeneration needs while maintaining high-quality and innovative design. The planning and land services were judged as being 'good' with 'promising' prospects for improvement by the Audit Commission in May 2003. It has achieved above average performance for 63 per cent of key planning indicators. Developments include Crossways Business Park, which comprises high quality workspace and has attracted major companies. In addition, the council facilitated the development of Bluewater, Europe's largest shopping and leisure. The council has had a major influence locally through its commitment in this service area.

Achievement of improvement

- 59 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.
- 60 In relation to its own baseline performance and context, the council is meeting a significant proportion of its own targets and service standards. Its best value performance plan reveals that in 2003/04 it achieved 49 per cent of its targets. Whilst, overall satisfaction levels with the council are deteriorating, early indicators also show that satisfaction levels are improving for a number of services, such as revenues and benefits, waste collection and parks & open spaces.
- 61 The council is able to demonstrate that it is achieving overall improvement and that many of these are in priority areas, including the regeneration of the area and the level of waste recycled. In 2002/03, overall, 55 per cent of key performance indicators improved. Only 45 per cent of indicators did not improve, including 23 per cent that already matched the performance of the best councils. Changes in quality are assessed below against the council's previous service priorities.

Changes to regeneration

- 62 The council is engaged in massive regeneration and development of the area as part of the Thames Gateway. Its efforts are widely recognised by stakeholders. It has enabled improvements by encouraging high quality environmental design and by ensuring community benefits via its use of planning law. For example, it was innovative in acquiring land to ensure a mixed development. This included Darenth Valley Hospital, funded through private finance initiative (PFI) and over 300 houses. The council purchased the remaining site in December 2001 for the provision of open space at Darenth Country Park. The council enabled the development an award-winning private development known as Ingress Park. This was a 30 hectare brown-field site formerly used as a marine training college and paper mill. The development features high quality housing, 95 affordable homes, a primary school, local shopping and infrastructure for a sustainable transport system. The council's use of brown-field sites illustrates good progress in adverse circumstances.

Changes to citizenship and community

- 63 Through the DCSP, the council and its partners have achieved improvements to community safety in line with local constraints. The partnership has appointed an antisocial behaviour co-ordinator and has already obtained three antisocial behaviour orders and four acceptable behaviour agreements. The partnership has also introduced police community support officers, town centre wardens and rural community wardens to bring about reductions in crime and the fear of crime. In addition, the council is improving the quality of life of local people. For example, it has introduced concessionary travel for young and elderly people. It has also entered into a partnership with the primary care trust, the Diocese of Rochester and others that is improving services through the Temple Hill healthy living project.

Changes to leisure time

- 64 The council refurbished the auditorium at the Orchard theatre and revised its programming, which has led to an increase in full houses from 54 to 61 per cent over the last three years. It has begun a three year programme to refurbish all of its playgrounds and will also build a new one by securing £1 million of funding. It has already consulted local communities and improved three playgrounds. In addition, it has improved the safety of people using the parks and open spaces with a new parks security contract, extended CCTV coverage and by employing a park ranger. Early indications are that the percentage of residents satisfied with the council's sport and recreational facilities and parks & open spaces has significantly increased.

Changes to the environment

- 65 The council is improving the level of waste recycled, although it is failing to minimise the levels of waste collected. To meet its statutory targets of recycling 14 per cent of waste for 2003/04, the council rolled out kerbside collection of dry recyclables to all households in March 2003. Early indications are that it is on course to meet its recycling target for 2003/04 and that satisfaction levels with waste collection and recycling are increasing. The level of waste collected matches the worst performing councils and has increased from 437 to 463 kilogrammes per head of population between 2000 and 2003.
- 66 The council is improving the cleanliness of the local environment. It introduced 'deep cleans' in 2003, carried out in addition to regular planned maintenance. Having consulted residents, it carried out 'deep cleans' in Swanscombe, Wilmington Village, Darenth and West Hill throughout the second half of 2003. All of the projects were tailored to local areas and were welcomed by the communities. In addition, the council along with Kent Fire Brigade, the Police and the DVLA piloted a project entitled 'CUBIT' to deal with abandoned vehicles. During the 12 week pilot, over 1,000 vehicles were removed from Dartford and Gravesham and the Brigade reported a 42 per cent decrease in the number of fires in the target wards as a result.

Changes to housing

- 67 The council has been slow to carry out its stock option appraisal and has yet to improve the condition of its housing stock to meet the decent homes standard. However, there is some progress with its housing management services. The council also is to be commended for the way that it managed the process of bringing the service back in-house. It has made the following improvements. It has reduced and improved the average standard assessment procedure energy efficiency rating of its council houses by installing double glazing. Un-audited PI's show that the average stay for homeless families has reduced to just over five weeks. The council achieved this improvement through better use of vacancies in its housing stock, the availability of properties in new developments and its increase use of private lets. The housing service is becoming more responsive to the needs of its users.

Investment

- 68 There are no significant weaknesses in this area.
- 69 The council is putting in place some of the right building blocks that will enable future improvements and is making tangible progress. Investments include support for the new Kent Thameside delivery board to overview the regeneration of the Thames Gateway. It has seconded a former director to the board to focus on supporting the LSP and has provided £10,000 to improve its effectiveness. It has revised its senior officer structure to three strategic directors, a cabinet secretary and a managing director. This has enhanced strategic capacity and has clarified responsibility for operational delivery. It has carried out a training needs analysis of staff and has provided additional funding for a corporate training and development programme. It is investing in information technology to enhance responsiveness and service delivery. This includes a customer relationship management system; new systems for finance and revenues & benefits; and electronic document management for building & development control. It is also developing a more corporate focus on performance by structured and regular reporting of performance information on key corporate targets and indicators councillors and senior officers.
- 70 The council is also putting in place the right building blocks to enable the continued regeneration of the area. It has speculated in land for the Dartford Park development, which incorporates a mixed use development. It is working with partners to regenerate Dartford town centre. The proposed £90 million development of Lowfield Street features increased retail and residential developments and improved public areas. Its 'managing the marshes' initiative aims to create a nature reserve on Dartford marshes.
- 71 The council is receptive to external and internal challenge and is open to changing its processes as a result. For example, challenge has been provided via the various public consultations and the council has revised its service in response to these. It commissioned Kent County Council to undertake a corporate governance audit and private consultants to review its internal audit service. The council has used best value reviews to drive improvements. This has resulted in higher standard of parks maintenance, a more robust monitoring regime for contracted services, better environmental enforcement, better interview facilities for benefits applicants and public participation at the development control board. It has also been open to securing services in different ways and has externalised a number of key services, including refuse collection.
- 72 The council is adept at securing external funding for improvements. For example, it is considering the needs of existing communities in the regeneration of the area and has secured £7 million of European Union funding for ten neighbouring wards in Dartford and Gravesham with statutory partners. These wards have high levels of deprivation and border some of the major development sites in the area. The council, along with Gravesham Borough Council, received £1.2 million from the children's' fund local partnership in 2001 to spend over three years in 11 priority wards. In addition, it has received significant funding from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), including £6.5 million for the regeneration of Dartford Town Centre, and £5 million for the regeneration of Swanscombe, with further funds potentially available.

The ODPM also awarded the council and its partners £4 million towards a fast track public transport scheme across Kent Thameside, £2 million to establish the Kent Thameside Development Delivery Board and £4.5 million for a green grid' and public open space across the North Kent Gateway.

- 73 The council has a robust approach to medium term financial planning. It is taking action so that it can sustain a low council tax increase in the medium term without impacting on reserves and is now making progress in realigning resources with revised priorities. It is also ensuring that it links performance targets more closely to the annual budget setting cycle and is identifying risks to the achievement of medium term financial plans.

In the light of what the council has learned to date, what does it plan to do next?

Learning

- 74 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.
- 75 The council learns from others and make changes as a result. For example, it shares housing best practice through Housemark and the south east benchmarking club. It established new estate cleaning arrangements based on learning from visits to beacon housing authorities at Leicester and Canterbury. The council exchanged information and experiences with other Kent authorities on illegal encampments that led to the adoption of a county-wide protocol.
- 76 The council welcomes external challenge. For example, human resource consultants assessed training needs and recommended a training and development strategy. External facilitation enabled it to undertake an assessment of the town centre partnership, which led to new partnership arrangements, new town centre regeneration objectives and an action plan.
- 77 The council is self-aware and has a high level of understanding of the regeneration requirements and the impact that large-scale developments will have on existing communities. Its self assessment demonstrates an understanding of what it has achieved, what remains to be achieved and possible solutions. It uses research to review policies and services. For example, the council used a retail capacity study to develop local plan shopping policies. It has used the housing needs assessment to revise its affordable housing policy. It based the Swanscombe neighbourhood renewal strategy on extensive consultation. This identified window replacement and improvements to environmental cleansing as priorities.
- 78 The council has learnt from its own experiences and made changes as a result. It made a number of changes as a result of the peer review, such as the format of committee agendas. Exit interviews undertaken by the council highlighted the need to review pay, benefits and management arrangements, which it has completed and implemented the required changes. It has also improved information given to planning objectors based on an analysis of corporate complaints. Corporate complaints have not been analysed more widely to enable better sharing of learning. The council is reactive to learning opportunities as they arise.
- 79 The council shares learning experiences between departments to derive maximum benefit from them, although this is not yet fully systematic. For example, the housing service trialled a system for on-line customer services and is sharing the outcomes at the start to the expansion of the system with other services. The new staffing structure is geared towards co-ordination of enforcement activity on planning, illegal encampments, fly tipping, nuisance and intelligence sharing. The council is promoting 'excellence groups' to share best practice. However, processes to monitor and review performance at strategic and operational levels are not yet fully developed.

- 80 The council has yet to foster a culture and management style appropriate to its stage of organisational development. The impact of the recent approaches to scrutiny means that many staff are still nervous of councillors and some senior officers. This inhibits innovation and presents a risk to progress.

Future plans

- 81 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area.
- 82 The council has some robust plans and strategies for the future in place. It has made improvements to its corporate planning and performance management arrangements and has adopted a corporate plan. It also has service plans, linked to the corporate plan and budget, with delivery targets and performance measures. It has identified corporate and service plan risks. It has a number of robust subsidiary plans to enable future improvements. The Government Office for the South East rated the council's capital strategy and asset management plan as 'good' and the housing strategy and business plan as 'above average'. The council is concluding its local plan review and aims to complete a new-style local development framework by 2005/06.
- 83 The council has demonstrated that it is able to review progress against its plans and respond effectively to the needs of the local population. However, it did not do this systematically in the past. Following the elections in May 2003, it reviewed its corporate plans and progress against priorities and is aware of where it has not achieved desired outcomes or where local and national priorities have changed.
- 84 The council has credible and robust future plans for the continued development of the area. An action plan is being developed to deliver the plans of the LSP and should be ready in the autumn. The council has been instrumental at encouraging the development of Ebbsfleet station, an international and domestic railway station on the Channel Tunnel rail link, providing access to London in less than 20 minutes and Paris in two hours. The new station, which is due to open in 2007, will bring new opportunities for local people through the 790,000 square metres mixed commercial development. In addition, the council is engaged in planning a large-scale development at Eastern Quarry with its partners. The chalk pit adjoins Bluewater and will have a direct link to Ebbsfleet. By 2025 this site will have 7,250 new homes and 278,700 square metres of offices, shops, leisure and community facilities. Overall, by 2025, 22,000 new houses will have been built, 40,000 new jobs created and one million squared metres of commercial floor space developed.
- 85 The council's capacity to manage the pace and scale of these developments is reliant on its ability to engage with statutory partners regionally and nationally. Whilst it has been adept at securing the necessary resources for investment it anticipates that there will be a time delay in increased grant support from the government to cope with the huge increase in its local population. It is working with partners to seek to retain part of non domestic rate proceeds to help fund the infrastructure needed for the major development within the borough. It is also pressing for improvements to the process for determining developer contributions to communities.

- 86 The council is addressing many areas where it has not achieved what it wants to. It plans to improve customer relations by becoming more outward-facing. In recognition of the public's concerns about complaint handling and responses, it has plans to introduce a customer contact centre to deal with queries at the point of contact for the majority of callers by the end of April 2006.
- 87 The council has engaged with staff, partners and communities in developing its plans. However, the council recognises that it needs to improve its consultation processes and is developing a communications and consultation strategy.
- 88 The council has demonstrated that it is able to review progress against its plans and respond effectively to the needs of the local population. However, it did not do this continually in the past. Following the elections in May 2003, it reviewed its corporate plans and progress against priorities and is aware of where it has not achieved desired outcomes or where local and national priorities have changed.
- 89 The council has begun to take steps to ensure that it has the personnel capacity to deliver future improvements. It realigned resources and restructured the management group, including creating a regeneration directorate. It is in the process of empowering service managers to deliver more effectively. It has conducted a training needs analysis following staff appraisals, but has yet to develop this into a corporate training plan.
- 90 The council does not have comprehensive plans to address weaknesses in two areas. It does not have credible plans to minimise waste or to meet its statutory recycling targets in the future, although these are not a high priority for the council at the moment. The success of the council's future plans for its housing stock rests on the results of the stock options appraisal. It is still reviewing its housing policies in relation to housing allocations.

Summary of theme scores and strengths / weaknesses

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ambition	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10-20 year ambitious Kent Thameside regeneration agenda • Regeneration plan links needs of existing communities to the new developments • Robust ambitions articulated in a corporate plan • Strong internal and external leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a risk to delivering the decent homes standard by 2010 as there have been delays to the process
Prioritisation	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identified local priorities that reflect the community strategy • Priorities informed by effective consultation and engaging partners • Evidence of financial and human resources moved to match priorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal communications have been weak
Focus	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustained focus on delivering regeneration improvements • Focusing of resources to meet priorities • Improved mechanisms for sustaining focus • Councillor use performance information to focus on priorities for improvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There has been a lack of focus on some core services
Capacity	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some high calibre councillors and officers • New political and officer structures have improved capacity in priority areas • Partnerships have delivered some big regeneration initiatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regeneration work has adversely affected capacity for core services • Staff morale is low in some areas • Corporate training and development not fully implemented
Performance management	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate priorities cascade down to service plans and individual targets • Sound financial management • Becoming increasingly risk aware 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance management system has not been consistently applied • Service standards not made available across the board
Achievement in quality of service	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent performance in priority area of regeneration • Sound performance in priority areas of community safety and 'street scene' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average PI performance • Low satisfaction levels • Poor performance in priority areas of homelessness, decent homes standard and waste
Achievement of improvement	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall improvement in PIs • Improved satisfaction with many services • Improvements in priority areas of regeneration, community safety, 'street scene', leisure & recycling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure to improve priorities for decent homes and waste minimisation
Investment	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investing in many of the right building blocks, including staff restructure, Delivery Board and IT • Adept at securing external resources • Open to external challenge 	

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Learning	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self aware • Learns from experience and others and makes changes • Examples of shared learning across departments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact of over robust approach to scrutiny in the past has caused nervousness among staff and is a risk to improvement
Future plans	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many robust future plans in place • Sound statutory plans • Lobbying government to ensure sufficient capacity for improvements to the infrastructure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No robust plans for meeting decent homes or minimising waste

Scoring key:

1= weak;

2= weaknesses outweigh strengths;

3= strengths outweigh weaknesses; and

4= strong.

Appendix 1 - Decent homes standard (DHS) diagnostic assessment

What is the council trying to achieve in relation to the standard? Does the council know the condition of their housing stock and their compliance with the decent homes standard?

- 91 There is a high risk of service failure and/or poor outcomes in this area.
- 92 Delivering affordable housing is one of the council's priorities and there are clear links between the housing strategy and other key strategies, such as community safety, private sector renewal strategy and the local plan. The Darthomes business plan 2002 contains details of housing investment planned for 2002-07. The council is aiming to achieve the decent homes standard, a government minimum standard, by 2010 as shown in its target contained within its DHS implementation plan. However, its objectives relating to the standard are unclear. In addition, it is in the early stages of a stock options appraisal and current tenant views have not yet been captured. It has yet to determine the best option for meeting the investment need.
- 93 The council is preparing detailed information about the condition of its housing stock. It completed two stock condition surveys, of 1,000 homes or 20 per cent of its stock. The first survey identified the need for major investment in roofs, bathrooms and kitchen updating, heating and insulation. As it was undertaken during the release of the DHS a second survey was done to validate the findings of the first survey and ensure that their information met DHS criteria. The second survey confirmed the findings of the first survey, namely that 52 per cent of homes failed the DHS. It has utilised its housing investment programme (HIP) and best value performance indicator (BVPI) database to hold this information and produce the initial work programmes. The council plans to secure data on 70 per cent of its stock in relation to the DHS by adjusting an asbestos survey of 50 per cent of its stock to enable additional DHS information to be collected at the same time. This will give the council a high level of detailed knowledge of stock conditions enabling it to develop more robust plans to reach the DHS by 2010. It anticipates that the number of homes reported to be failing DHS will reduce by around ten per cent when it merges data from its different databases. The report of the merged data is due in mid May 2004 so we cannot say if this reduction in failure rate will be achieved. A significant increase in the average standard assessment procedure rating is indicated by the second stock condition survey (at 61 this is one point lower than the highest SAP rating in the region).
- 94 The council's evaluation of the range of options to enable it to achieve the decent homes standard is at an early stage as the stock options appraisal project is in its first phase. Consultants have undertaken a financial appraisal and will now explore the options for future management and ownership of the housing stock. Plans to appoint an independent tenant advisor were highlighted in the council's self-assessment but have not yet been implemented. It is relying on its stock options appraisal to determine how it will meet the DHS. Meeting the DHS is estimated to cost £26 million. The council can afford to meet this cost and current spending is in line with meeting the DHS by 2010. However as the council operates on three-year budgets there is no commitment to finance DHS work in the years 2007-10.

The stock options appraisal consultant has identified a shortfall of £30 million if the council decides to deliver modern day standards that exceed the DHS.

- 95 The council has used data from stock condition surveys to develop short and medium term programmes of work up to 2007 as it has the practice of committing resources over no more than three years ahead. It also has programmes designed to reach and sustain DHS over the next 30 years but the stock condition survey reports do not spell out the investment needed to meet DHS by 2010. The council has only committed funding to DHS works over the next three years with £3.7 million in 2004/05; £3.6 million in 2005/06 and £2.7 million in 2006/07. If an average of £3.7 million was made available each year the council could meet DHS by 2010 but no commitment has been made nor will be made until the stock options appraisal has reported at the end of 2004. Sustaining the DHS over thirty years would require the same average level of annual funding.
- 96 It has good information within its housing strategy; stock condition surveys, local housing markets and housing need survey and is adopting many of the good practice measures included in government guidance on stock options appraisal, introduced after its first stock condition survey. Its action planning in the decent homes implementation plan includes specific, measurable targets to be achieved within particular timescales but does not spell out the finances required to deliver DHS. Tenants will be asked to express their views on what standard they think should be achieved in future. The standards that have been delivered through the council's planned maintenance packages and their treatment of empty properties is high and likely to form a baseline for tenants' expectations.
- 97 Delivering the decent homes standard will be challenging for the council as 52 per cent of its housing stock did not meet the standard in 2002. The average percentage of council homes failing DHS across the country is 46 per cent. The first survey identified that heating and insulation deficiencies existed within the housing stock and the council has undertaken steps to prioritise spending to address them. The estimated cost of meeting the minimum decent homes standard is £26 million. Cyclical, responsive and work done to empty properties (which are in addition to the DHS) scheduled for 2003-10 will cost an estimated £18 million. Combined expenditure of £44 million will be required if the council continues to apply its current standards. A review of standards is underway. The whole cost of catch up, major works and cyclical over 30 years, excluding inflation, administration, fees and VAT is £173 million. This represents an average cost per home of £40,000. The Audit Commission questioned the rigour of the council's decent homes diagnostic self assessment in 2003 as it did not involve stakeholders and relied on inadequate information about property conditions. The council is now involving tenants in the process and a full understanding of the condition of homes will be in place by the end of this financial year when the council's planned programme of works will have been piloted in all home types and the survey of asbestos has been completed. This will mean that the council and tenants will work to a very tight timetable to consider and determine their preferred option(s) for the future ownership and management of their homes.
- 98 The council engaged tenants in developing standards for council house improvement programmes since bringing the management of the housing stock back under its direct control in 2000.

This has focused on increased standards for void properties, and the planned maintenance programmes that deliver kitchen and bathroom modernisation. Tenant participation has a relatively low but increasing profile. Although the council has a participation compact in place, it has few targets and is not used as a monitoring tool. The tenants' forum plays an active part in strategic discussions and the council is attempting to create a stakeholders group. However, there are few resident organisations and only a loose network that support and enable a range of participatory practices. In the next phase of stock options appraisal, staff will support tenants in gaining access to independent information and advice. This will enable them to constructively challenge the council, develop the working relationships built up over the last three years and further develop joint working. Councillors and tenants do not have much formal contact.

- 99 The council is unlikely to reach a consensus with tenants about the future of the housing stock in time for the July 2005 deadline, as the work that it needs to do is complex and time demanding. In addition, the absence of a Dartford DHS and specific targets in the decent homes implementation plan and housing revenue business plan represent additional risks to the council meeting its deadline of December 2004. The council believes that it will meet the deadline without difficulty and their project plan contains all of the main tasks that will have to be delivered to reach a conclusion. However the short time available to the council to involve tenants in this complex process presents a high risk of failure. Although the council believes that it can meet the July 2005 deadline to sign off their option appraisal there is a significant chance that they will have to cut corners in order to do so, for example they may undertake less rigorous consultation on the new Dartford DHS.
- 100 The council achieves a high standard in its planned maintenance programmes (kitchens, bathrooms, rewiring and front doors) and this is recognised by tenants who have responded to post contract feedback requests. However, the cost of rolling this standard out to all council houses is unsustainable and the council is reviewing the current high standard of work. It is relying on the stock options appraisal to determine the best option(s) for delivering these new standards, to be agreed with tenants. Roofs, heating, kitchens, rewiring, bathrooms and windows are the main elements of the homes that fail the DHS.
- 101 The council is open to alternative forms of ownership and management of the stock. This is shown by the previous contract with a housing association for running the housing management service. However, the future external contracts will have to be more focused on standards expected and service outcomes supported by a robust performance management system if they are to be successful in delivering modern and improved standards in housing.
- 102 Achieving the DHS is a council priority although they have not yet determined a Dartford DHS with tenants; they are currently delivering an unsustainably high standard of improvement work; they are still testing their understanding of stock conditions in each home type and there is a higher than average failure rate against DHS. Consequently, the council is not currently in a position to deliver DHS by 2010.

Is the council delivering its plans to meet the decent homes standard?

- 103 There is high risk of service or function failure and/or poor outcomes in this area. Weaknesses outweigh strengths.
- 104 The council is currently delivering its plans to meet DHS but this is only sustainable if it spends its capital receipts on its own homes and no decision has been taken on the Dartford DHS or the allocation of capital receipts beyond 2007. Revenue budgets are under pressure, the capital cost of retaining their existing standards of work is beyond the means of the council and the stock options appraisal timetable has slipped.
- 105 By replacing elements rather than carrying out patch repairs, the council increases the value for money it gets in its capital and planned maintenance programmes. This is recognised as the more cost-effective way to operate. However the ratio of planned to responsive repairs in Dartford is 36:64. The Audit Commission recommends a ratio of 60:40 relating to revenue funded expenditure. A higher ratio of 70:30 or 80:20 can be expected when a council is using capital resources to fund improvement work as is the case in Dartford. Un-audited figures provided by Dartford indicate a ratio of 70:30 for both capital and revenue funded works in the year 2003/04 and it will be interesting to see how such improvement has been achieved.
- 106 The Audit Commission identified a trend of overspending on repairs and under spending on planned maintenance over recent years. The council overspent its responsive budget by £300,000 in 2002/03 and managed to under spend by £200,000 in 2003/04. It under spent its capital budget by £1.7 million in 2002/03 and by £933,000 in 2003/04 (although this figure also includes savings realised through negotiating contracts). This indicates that the council is achieving improved performance from a base line of poor management and inefficient use of available resources that existed when the council took the homes back under their own management. Some of the council's low levels of tenant satisfaction might be related to tenants expecting improvement work that was not then delivered when promised.
- 107 The council is improving its performance; has identified that it has miscoded some items to revenue expenditure and is reviewing its repairs service standards, having already agreed areas that will reduce revenue expenditure and provide better value for money. For example, tenants requesting a new kitchen who are scheduled to receive one in a planned programme within the following 18 months now have to wait for the planned programme. The council is set to improve the ratio of planned to revenue expenditure through more efficient working and better coding. The new administration has reduced the capital budget to a figure that can be achieved and plans to adopt this more realistic approach to budgeting across the council. The previous administration is said to have preferred to publish high budget figures and saw this as evidence of their commitment to particular priorities. The council's track record of delivering projects on time and within budget is generally poor, with housing capital funds carried over regularly.
- 108 The council is making some progress towards using Egan principles. These involve using a partnering approach to procurement and are recognised as a way of achieving greater efficiency.

Such principles are embraced by Dartford although the council is still predominantly using traditional procurement contracts. By negotiating housing improvement package contracts with existing contractors for the next two years, the council can achieve significant savings. Savings of £180,000 (5 per cent of the capital budget) will be realised for the year 2004-06 and these savings are to be recycled into programmes to meet the DHS. The Cabinet agreed this approach at a meeting on April 1st 2004. Key performance indicators are in place for all partners. They are actively used by staff and tenants to monitor performance of partner contractors. The council's new procurement strategy will be in place by September 2004.

- 109 As a result of three years of improvement programmes the council's average SAP rating has improved significantly. Audited figures show the SAP rating has improved from 50 to 61 over the period. This is only one point below the best performance of similar councils and puts Dartford in the top quartile for this work. All work programmes are linked to the objective of decent homes and investment in the housing stock is logged and related to the database of stock condition as compared with the DHS. In the current financial year 2004/05, the planned maintenance for rewiring, upgrading bathrooms, kitchens, and new doors is delivering improvements to empty properties of differing stock types. This will help inform the council's appreciation of actual conditions while also improving the conditions of tenants' homes. The provisional target ratio of planned to responsive repairs in 2004/05 is 70:30 and if achieved this will represent a radical improvement.
- 110 Housing improvement programmes have been prepared with reference to stock condition data. The business plan has a clear analysis of the council's investment programme albeit this is limited to the five years up to 2007. A conscious decision was taken, when housing management was brought back in-house, to prioritise the improvement of council housing, adopting a standard in excess of DHS.
- 111 The council is taking a number of steps to maximise income and make savings, for example the council has a good track record in relation to collecting rent and writes off very little rent arrears. Its repair costs per week are the lowest at £11.29 compared to the lowest regional figure of £11.34. A range of potential savings has been agreed with the tenant forum and is being introduced in the current financial year 2004/05. These include progress towards target rents set by government being accelerated; savings being secured through a restructuring of the housing service; achieving better value for money by negotiating contracts; extending the use of capital budgets; increasing service charges to the allowable limits; and undertaking an urgent review of spending on repairs, work done on empty properties, redecoration policy and the free grass cutting service for older residents to balance the budget up to April 2006. The proposed reductions in service standards for repairs would require tenants to undertake minor repairs to their own home eg, repairs to splashback tiling and replacement of internal door handles. The council's management costs are the highest in the region at £15.29 per week and arrangements for re-chargeable repairs require improvement.
- 112 The council's capacity to meet the DHS will be enhanced by its ability to target expenditure to meet the deficiencies in its council housing conditions. Once fully integrated, the stock condition databases will inform decisions about which properties to invest in and initial findings have informed the programme for 2004/05.

A best value review of the planned maintenance service has not been undertaken and as the service spends £6.3 million (around £5 million is capital/MRA and the remainder is from the HRA) a year it is an important factor in determining the council's ability to meet the DHS.

- 113 The way that the council managed the re-integration of the housing service following an external contract between 1995 and 2000 was commended by the Audit Commission in its monitoring visit report of September 2003. The council is increasing its capacity to deliver decent homes by employing independent consultants to work with tenants. This shows its commitment to complete a thorough options appraisal identifying aspirations and assessing the options and recognition that they lack some of the skills to undertake stock options appraisal in-house. Commitment to investing in appropriate IT systems is evident, for example the work done to integrate stock condition databases, enabling the council to make investment decisions based on reliable data. Briefings on the information now available have been given to staff, councillors and tenants and training for staff is being arranged to ensure they can fully utilise the information before making appropriate decisions about work to be done.

How well does the council monitor its progress and how effectively does this feed into future strategies and plans?

- 114 There is a high risk of service failure and/or poor outcomes in this area.
- 115 Despite the existence of the decent homes project management team, with responsibility for measuring progress and tackling any slippage, validation of stock condition data has resulted in the stock options appraisal project being delayed. Such a delay suggests a failure to recognise how long it takes to complete a comprehensive stock options appraisal.
- 116 Monitoring arrangements are in place and information about performance is reported to the council's management team on a monthly basis. However, the under-spend on capital repair works and the over-spend on revenue in recent years strongly suggests that this is not working effectively, although there are signs of improved performance in this area as indicated at paragraph 105. Feedback from tenants is secured both in advance and during improvement works. Post completion feedback relies on tenants completing reply postcards. This system could be improved by introducing random telephone calls to ask tenants how they feel the work has been completed. The housing strategy 2003-06 recognised that user satisfaction is an area where more work was needed. The council recognises that tenants should be involved in monitoring performance and it established a tenants' forum in 2000 that plays an active part in setting performance standards, appointing contractors and monitoring their performance regularly. This is evidence of joint working that enables tenants to influence the shape of the service.
- 117 The council relies on partnerships to increase its capacity to deliver effectively against objectives and there is evidence of a wide range of partnerships that have produced results. For example, at Swanscombe, tenants are fully involved in negotiations with developers to ensure that the Section 106 Agreement achieves as much as it can for local people and is in line with their preferences.

Despite the difficulties of securing off site benefits through planning powers, they are attempting to direct planning gain from the Eastern Quarry development into improving existing council homes in Swanscombe.

- 118 There is some evidence of learning from others that has improved the council's ability to deliver the DHS. Staff looked at Ashford and developed their planned maintenance improvement packages as a consequence and visited Beacons councils when researching their new approach to procurement.

Summary of decent homes standard diagnostic judgements and strengths / weaknesses

Area of focus	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
What is the council trying to achieve in relation to the standard? Does the council know the condition of their housing stock and their compliance with the decent homes standard?	c	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing is a top priority for the council The housing strategy balances national and local priorities There is now good quality information on stock conditions Information on planned and responsive work is used to update the stock conditions database which directs the future investment programme 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No clear statement of what the council wishes to achieve in relation to meeting the Decent Homes Standard, following change of administration Tenants have not yet been consulted on what they want the Dartford DHS to include 52% of council homes failed decent homes standard in 2003 Council's lack of awareness of stock conditions prior to stock conditions survey High standards in improvement programme cannot be sustained across stock Financial pressures on HRA require focus on Stock Options Appraisal, yet delays have been considerable
Is the council delivering its plans to meet the decent homes standard?	c	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnering initiatives are in place and plans to further review these to maximise benefits from S106 Agreements towards meeting DHS Negotiation of contracts with existing contractor will save 4-5% of capital budget to be recycled into meeting DHS Capital budget commitments made for next 3 years that will assist council to meet DHS SAP (energy efficiency) ratings have increased from 50 to 61 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Decent Homes Implementation Plan lacks some detail and the DHS Project Group has overseen 10 months delay on Stock Options Appraisal project High management costs without clear benefit to tenants Procurement system will not be in place until September 2004 The balance of planned to responsive maintenance is poor (36:64) although seems to be improving. Service still not subject of a BVR Overspend on revenue budgets and under spend on capital budgets continues although improving Meeting DHS requires an average investment of £3.7 per annum. Only committed to 3 years out of next 7
How well does the council monitor its progress and how effectively does this feed into future strategies and plans?	d	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tenants are involved in setting and monitoring standards and appointing contractors Involving residents in negotiations with developers could contribute to meeting DHS in future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Performance Management System has to be consistently applied There is reliance on "reply cards" sent in by tenants to identify service failures. Little knowledge beyond key staff member of how their actions contributed towards reaching DHS Significant delays with stock options appraisal overseen by DHS Project Team
Decent homes standard diagnostic assessment judgement	C		

Scoring key:

For each of the key areas looked at within the diagnostic assessments **the need for improvement**, based upon the risk of service failure and poor outcomes, is identified using the following scale.

a = very low; b = low; c = high; and d = very high

Appendix 2 - Public space diagnostic assessment

How well does the council contribute to the management of the physical environment?

- 119 Very low risk of service or function failure and/or poor outcomes in this area.
- 120 The council is clear about securing quality in its environment and uses planning policy effectively to achieve this. The theme of 'quality' is also a core priority in its corporate plan and links to the local plan. There is evidence of this feeding through into new developments such as Ingress Park, where the council has won a Royal Town Planning Institute award for urban design in 2001, and has been recognised by the Government for its progress in these developments.
- 121 The council's statutory planning response targets for both minor and major applications have been exceeded, and they are providing this efficient service to planning applicants at a lower cost when compared to similar authorities throughout England. Progress in achieving the statutory planning targets is good and places the council in the top quartile of similar councils. The guidance given to prospective developers is clear and contributes towards securing sustainable developments, for example the level of requirement to fund new sports facilities depending on the size of the development. The council thoroughly monitors its local plan and it is clear that it is achieving both its own and national priorities in planning for the area.
- 122 The council is clear about the contribution it makes to secure a decent local environment for its residents. Its commitment to this is evident in the local plan principle 'to achieve a high quality, sustainable environment' and its own response to environmental issues. For example, as part of the Thames Gateway regeneration project, both a regional and national priority, the council has planned for sustainable development considering both new and older communities in the process.
- 123 The council has an in depth understanding of the social, economic and environmental impact that of such large regeneration schemes that will bring (40,000 new homes) to the Thames Gateway area. This has resulted from significant consultation with the public at both an area wide and local level and examination of others' experience in regeneration areas. An example of local consultation include, planning weeks in Greenhithe, where residents and local business are encouraged to attend and contribute ideas towards the planning of their area.
- 124 While recognising the need to develop sustainable new development, the council has not lost sight of the needs of existing communities, and is influencing the improvements in these areas through section 106 agreements and its supplementary planning guidance. Where possible it is ensuring new community wide developments are located in existing communities and these communities have the chance to influence the impact of such new build, through consultation and direct input to negotiations with developers.

- 125 Recent improvements to park areas and open spaces have been influenced by consultation with the public and the council's own management plans for each open space it owns or manages. Contracts to improve these areas have been let and work has begun in areas of most need. The council has managed to secure external funding for some of these improvement programmes. It has introduced the post of an environmental enforcement officer as a result of its street scenes best value review. This post has had an impact the removal of fly tipping, abandoned vehicles and graffiti. In addition the council has specific rapid response teams for the quick removal of similar environmental intrusions.
- 126 The council maintains the local environment through both planned and reactive maintenance. Planned maintenance is secured through contracts which include the ability to negotiate, improving and enhancing service delivery. Reactive maintenance is secured through the same contracts supplying specific teams to deal with environmental nuisance quickly. The council's air quality action plan and screening reports are recognised as examples of good practice by DEFRA and appear on the DEFRA website. The actions resulting from these plans are being implemented and air quality targets are being met, despite Dartford's close proximity to the M25.
- 127 The council has secured environmental improvements through its own developments. For example at Ingress Park, the council has worked in partnership with the Environment Agency ensuring protection for new and existing developments from future flood risk, by raising the height of flood barriers as part of this new development. This scheme has included the creation of a riverside walkway open for all residents to use.
- 128 Through the council's commitment to the Disability Discrimination Act, and in line with the deadline of April 2004, it has plans for and has begun work on improving access to its own buildings for people with disabilities. These plans are on target to meet the requirements of this Act. In turn, Dartford also makes efforts to secure such improvements, outside of its specific control, through its planning policies and guidance.
- 129 There is some evidence that the council does encourage the use of environmentally friendly materials and machinery in maintaining its area. For example all the refuse vehicles are new and have low CO₂ emissions. However, the council is yet to finalise and implement its procurement strategy and does not have comprehensive plans for including environmental friendly aspects into all of the contracts it lets.
- 130 The public can report nuisance and environmental intrusions, such as street littering to the council, using the internet, phone or by e-mail. However, in some instances it is not clear where to report specific issues. The council has separate reporting systems for all of its responsibilities and this can lead to confusion for the public and a lack of efficiency in service delivery. However, the council is making most of the necessary investments to ensure that its long-term ambitions are supported by IT. For example, in support of its priority of 'transforming our local environment', the council has secured the second major phase of the implementation of Capita Direct.

It is extending it to encompass customer care for the street scenes services which attract the most public calls, including, grounds maintenance, refuse collection, street cleansing and highways maintenance. This will establish a single point of contact for those services and provide a fast and responsive system for logging and tracking customer complaints about the maintenance of the public spaces.

Does the council help keep the locality clean?

- 131 High risk of service or function failure and/or poor outcomes in this area.
- 132 The council's performance on recycling is weak and is unlikely to meet statutory recycling targets. It's recycling targets for 2001/02 show only a six per cent recycling rate, in the bottom quartile for similar authorities. Un-audited figures for 2002/03 show the council will meet its 14 per cent target for the last full year. The plans to improve this recycling rate further are not yet developed. This combined with a lack of planned future funding for increasing recycling makes it difficult for us to see how the council will achieve future targets. However, the council has a history of delivering new schemes to the people of Dartford. It was one of the first councils in Kent to introduce kerbside recycling to 100 per cent of its households, with a fortnightly kerbside collection service for newspapers, magazines and cardboard.
- 133 Overall the council performs poorly in its waste collection BVPIs, being in the lowest quartile for amount of waste collected per household. Satisfaction with the service being low, although early indications are that this has improved considerably. However, missed collections are few and the council's performance, for this area of service delivery, is in the top quartile of similar authorities.
- 134 Take-up of this home composting is not having an effect on the reduction of waste collected. The most recent trials on the collection of compostable materials have failed to result in a borough wide scheme to collect such waste from its residents; in fact their performance for this area was 0 per cent in 2002/03. The lack of ability to collect such large amounts of re-usable waste reduces Dartford's ability to minimise waste and meet future waste minimisation targets. Dartford's waste management policy does not define any clear ambitions for the management of waste. The document only sets out targets for recycling and does not detail any specific plans for the improvement of service delivery in waste management and collection. It does not clearly link into the ambitions set out in the Kent waste forum strategy.
- 135 The volume of waste collected is not reducing in Dartford and its performance is in the worst quartile of similar authorities. There are no specific plans to address the issue of waste minimisation to meet the Government 2005/06 targets, despite the predicted, significant levels, of new households as part of the Thames Gateway regeneration scheme. Failure to address this issue will result in further increases in the amount of waste collected, and the council not being able to address the issue of waste minimisation.

- 136 In ensuring areas of highest need are kept clean, the council has introduced a new scheme called 'Deep Clean'. This scheme has been implemented in areas such as Dartford Heath and Swanscombe, resulting in significant improvements to the street scene. The removal of fly-tipping, abandoned vehicles, graffiti, litter, redundant street signs and street furniture, plus the repairs of potholes and minor highways defects, demonstrates these improvements. In some areas, such as Dartford Heath, the street scene is returning to its original condition prior to the 'Deep Clean' programme.
- 137 The street cleaning and grounds maintenance contracts keep the streets of Dartford clean at regular intervals. The town centre is cleaned seven days a week and the rest of the borough at least once a week. The streets of Dartford are clean and arrangements are in place to ensure this continues. The balance of cleaning frequencies does leave some areas in need of further cleaning as they become untidier quicker.
- 138 The council has addressed the issue of graffiti removal by offering a free service to private and domestic residents. It has delivered successful prosecutions relating to graffiti, showing a willingness to deal with this difficult issue. Reported incidences of graffiti are removed within 72 hours using the council's contractors. There is a graffiti wall for people to use in the Central Park and young people are educated in the nuisance of graffiti in youth groups. The Dartford Youth Council has been consulted on the issue of graffiti and is actively involved in developing ways to help reduce the instances of this environmental nuisance.

Does the council work with partners to improve community safety?

- 139 Very low risk of service or function failure and/or poor outcomes in this area.
- 140 The council provides strong community leadership in securing improvement in community safety. It has a clear understanding of the priorities in this area, based on their own Crime and Disorder Audit in 2002. The plan addresses the areas of most need, both geographically and by area of crime, such as anti-social behaviour. It recognises and plans for addressing national priorities.
- 141 The council has clear action plans and targets for community safety within the crime and disorder reduction partnership (CDRP). The action plan is divided into seven aims and has specific actions to support the delivery of these aims. All of these aims and actions are specific and measurable, with it being clear what actions the council is responsible for. It is monitored effectively on an annual basis by the Dartford Crime and Safety Partnership sub group, with its main aims linking to the council's 2004 corporate strategy.

- 142 The council has implemented a number of initiatives, many being delivered in partnership. These include:
- ◆ 129 vulnerable residents dwellings having improved security as a result of the council's handy van scheme;
 - ◆ doubling CCTV coverage to 44 cameras, funding temporary CCTV cameras and a speed gun;
 - ◆ expanding the existing 'shop safe' radio link system and appointed a crime intelligence officer, supported by a networked computer system that has improving safety in the town centre;
 - ◆ introduced seven police community support officers, town centre and rural community wardens; and
 - ◆ introduction of 'cab watch' scheme to improve safety for taxi drivers and passengers.
- 143 These initiatives have contributed towards 20.5 per cent reduction in street robberies in the first quarter of 2003/04. BVPs show that the incidences of robbery and car theft have reduced. However, the number of domestic burglaries and violence against individuals has increased.
- 144 In recognising the geographical areas of most need the council has delivered area specific improvements to aid the delivery of a safer community. Through consultation there is an understanding of peoples' needs resulting in locally tailored work. These include "Deep Clean" with the removal of dangerous litter such a syringes, and advice to the community about dealing with unsociable behaviour.
- 145 The council has successfully mainstreamed community safety issues into the planning and delivery of all of its services. All service plans include information on how the services can contribute towards community safety. The council implemented mainstreaming training for all councillors and staff in 2002, using Crime Concern. Partners see this mainstreaming activity as beneficial to the improved delivery of community safety.
- 146 Within the community services team there are close links between the council's community safety work and that of its own arts and sports development staff. There are high levels of staff vacancies, including the community services manager post. Without staff in post, plans to recruit staff or plans to manage this situation, the team is unlikely to continue to deliver new improvements. However, the council has begun to take steps to address weaknesses in capacity.

Does the council contribute to activities to positively engage children and young people?

- 147 Low risk of service or function failure and/or poor outcomes in this area.
- 148 The council has systems and processes in place to ensure the protection of children its staff and volunteers come into contact with. Provision has been made within its employment procedures to ensure existing staff coming into contact with children are properly screened and potential staff are also screened via the criminal records bureau disclosure service. The council has effective links with other key agencies regarding child protection issues and protocols have been set up with Kent County Council social services department to help with the identification of children that are at risk. Councillors, senior management and officers are committed and to engaging local young people in delivering their work. The community strategy and the council's corporate plan 2004, recognise the need to engage young people and to develop the availability of youth services in Dartford. Through such engagement the council has a clear understanding of the needs of the young people living in Dartford. For example, following a series of consultations with young people, plans are now in place for the provision of a skate board park in the borough.
- 149 The council mainly engages its youth population through the Dartford Youth Council (DYC). This was established in 1999 to represent the views of young people living, working and going to school educated in the Dartford area. It is facilitated by Kent County Council Youth and Community Services. An example of youth engagement is consultation with this group on community safety, using the annual community safety partnership survey. The work with the DYC is considered to be of high priority to officers, and has been reviewed by the Council's Youth Services Working Group in 2002, resulting in recommendations to improve the groups' influence. The council has implemented a local performance indicator to monitor the participation rates in the DYC, and this has achieved steady upwards progress over the past year.
- 150 The council has begun a three-year programme to refurbish all of its playgrounds and construct one new one, securing £1 million of funding to deliver this work. The contract for completion of this work has been let, one playground refurbishment has been completed, with the remaining works being programmed over the next two years. Using external consultants, local communities have been consulted on the changes to these facilities, incorporating and their views into the final designs.
- 151 The council provides a wide range of activities for younger people, through partnerships, grants and schools. As part of the development of these activities young people are actively consulted through questionnaires, focus groups and through the DYC. Priority for this type of work is given to the geographical areas recognised in Dartford Community Safety Partnership Strategy. Examples of projects that developed in response to identified needs include DJ workshops, dance classes, basketball and judo sessions. Also, the council plans to deliver a youth shelter in Temple Hill. It has provided 'summer sizzlers' programmes for young people up to the age 18 throughout the summer holiday period, with 929 taking part last year.

- 152 Kent County Council social services staff visit the projects to ensure they are operating in accordance with legislation. The council has also implemented good monitoring procedures to assess the success of such schemes, including the use of local performance indicators. These are monitored quarterly with any major variations addressed.
- 153 A sports grants scheme is operated by the council to support local clubs and organisations in their delivery of sporting opportunities. The sports development officer directly organises events such as summer and half term activity programmes, which offers young people a range of activities in a safe and structured environment. Ten courses were organised in August 2002, at a variety of venues across the borough.
- 154 A recent application (in September 2003) to the Children's Fund, made on behalf of the Dartford and Gravesham health action teams, resulted in the delivery of a "Don't sit - Get Fit" project. This enabled the council to place project workers in Dartford and Gravesham to co-ordinate sporting and physical programmes to tackle problems of childhood obesity, especially in the disadvantaged wards. The Sports Development Officer has supported numerous events throughout the year, including the Kent Youth Games 2002, where children represented Dartford in football, basketball, netball and archery. Further support was given to the Dartford Kwik Cricket Festival involving six primary schools across the Borough, with the winning school going on to represent Dartford in the county finals.
- 155 The council has secured significant investment for the funding of arts and cultural schemes that benefit young people. This has been achieved through encouraging and promoting participation with schools, clubs and other organisations, and providing guidance and advice. Such successful grants include a national foundation for youth music grant of £9,900. Also, a pledge for £6,000 from British Council Visiting Arts towards creative collaborations with artists from Turkey. In partnership with Dartford Grammar school for Boys and Southern and South East Arts, it obtained a £35,000 Arts Council of England grant funding to for education and training projects. In addition, it made a total of twelve grants to the value of £8,500 through an arts grants scheme. Together with The orchard access grants scheme and the Mayor's arts bursaries, these programmes have enabled events to take place that might not otherwise have gone ahead.
- 156 Dartford Borough Council is also committed to the Kent Children's and Youth University schemes, which the council subsidises, enabling children to access the service free of charge. In addition to this, the arts and culture development team is involved in attracting other external funding for events and schemes in the Borough, amongst these are a special needs workshop programme by the City of Canterbury Symphony Orchestra, taking place in three schools, as well as "First Person Dance" and "Dream, Think, Speak", two projects funded by the regional arts lottery programme.
- 157 The number of visits to the museum the council owns has not reached its target predominantly due to the extended closure of the library. The offering in the museum does not encourage young people to visit and as a result the council has commissioned a three-month research project exploring the needs of schools. It is anticipated that this will help the museum to focus more successfully and at the same time raise its profile leading to an increase in visits.

Summary of public space diagnostic assessment judgements and strengths / weaknesses

Area of focus	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
How well does the council contribute to the management of the physical environment?	a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Quality' of the environment and services in corporate plan and local plan • Statutory planning response targets met • Local consultation on future regeneration and developments • Integrating new communities into old communities • Promoting sustainable forms of transport, such as Fastrack • Enforcement against environmental nuisance • Air quality action plan is seen as good practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unco-ordinated lines of communication with the public
Does the council help keep the locality clean?	c	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Deep Clean' project to tidy up areas of most need • Competitive sewage collection service • Streets are cleaned regularly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with Kent Waste Forum not producing results • Recycling targets unlikely to be met • No pro-active plans to reduce waste
Does the council work with partners to improve community safety?	a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vision and plans set out in the Community Safety Partnership Strategy • Evidence of work completed on the ground • Ability to work in partnership with other key stakeholders • Recognition of areas of most need through consultation • Community safety is mainstreamed into all the councils work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High levels of staff vacancy
Does the council contribute to activities to positively engage children and young people?	b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dartford Youth Forum (DYC) • Consultation with young people through the DYF • Programme for refurbishment of playgrounds • Evidence of activities being delivered to young people • Management and monitoring of projects for youth in partnership with Kent County Council • Securing external funding for improvements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Museum is not providing a resource that is used by young people
Public space diagnostic assessment judgement	B		

Scoring key

For each of the key areas looked at within the diagnostic assessments **the need for improvement**, based upon the risk of service failure and poor outcomes, is identified using the following scale.

a = very low

b = low

c = high

d = very high

Appendix 3 - Appointed auditor assessment

158 Appointed auditors are asked to score five areas which relate to the statutory code of audit practice. When scoring each area a range of issues are taken into account. These issues and the score that has been given in each area are set out in the table below.

Area for auditor judgement	Grade	Issues included in this area
Financial standing	4	Setting a balanced budget Setting a capital programme Financial monitoring and reporting Meeting financial targets Financial reserves
Systems of internal financial control	3	Monitoring of financial systems An adequate internal audit function is maintained Risk identification and management
Standards of financial conduct and the prevention and detection of fraud and corruption	4	Ethical framework Governance arrangements Treasury management Prevention and detection of fraud and corruption
Financial statements	3	Timeliness Quality Supporting records
Legality of significant financial transactions	4	Roles and responsibilities Consideration of legality of significant financial transactions New legislation

Scoring key

1 = inadequate

2 = adequate overall, but some weaknesses that need to be addressed

3 = adequate

4 = good

Appendix 4 - Benefit Fraud Inspectorate assessment

- 159 The BFI has undertaken the assessment in this appendix as part of the CPA process. The assessment covers two aspects, the current level of performance and the council's proven capacity to improve. Each assessment is measured on a five-point scale (poor, fair, fair to good, good and excellent). The assessment of the council's benefits service is 'fair towards good'. The council's current performance shows a number of strengths. These include the following:
- ◆ challenging local performance targets for processing claims and counter-fraud;
 - ◆ introducing a new benefits information technology system in January 2004;
 - ◆ getting ISO 9000 certification for the benefits service;
 - ◆ matching the performance of the best performing councils for processing new claims and changes of circumstances; and
 - ◆ forming a benefits partnership with all the other councils in Kent.
- 160 However there are some areas where the council needs to develop further to fully meet the performance standards framework. These include:
- ◆ improving advice to landlords;
 - ◆ monitoring the effectiveness of suspected fraud referrals; and
 - ◆ follow-up audits did not take place on the service and benefit fraud and visits team.
- 161 The council's proven capacity to improve has a number of positive aspects, including the following:
- ◆ councillors approved the improvement plan, following a best value review of the service in June 2001; and
 - ◆ progress against the targets in the improvement plan was reported to councillors every three months.
- 162 However, the following areas question the extent to which council was able to prove its capacity to improve:
- ◆ it had no plans for meeting the full range of performance standards; and
 - ◆ benefits service staff had not been trained on the requirements of the Race Relations Act 1976 as amended by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000.

Appendix 5 - Framework for Comprehensive Performance Assessment

- 163 This comprehensive performance assessment was carried out under the Local Government Act 1999. Local councils have a general duty under Section 3 of this Act to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of their functions. Section 10 gives the Audit Commission the power to inspect councils' performance of the general duty of improvement.
- 164 The main elements of the assessment were:
- ◆ a self-assessment completed by the council;
 - ◆ accredited peer challenge to inform the council's self-assessment;
 - ◆ a corporate assessment of the council's overall effectiveness in supporting services to deliver improvements;
 - ◆ an assessment of the council's service delivery performance through two diagnostic assessments on:
 - ◆ management of public space;
 - ◆ progress in meeting the decent homes standard;
 - ◆ BFI assessment of benefit services;
 - ◆ appointed auditor assessments of performance on each of the main elements of the code of audit practice; and
 - ◆ audited performance indicators, inspection reports and plan assessments.
- 165 The assessment for Dartford Borough Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 29 March 2004 to 7 April 2004.
- 166 This report has been discussed with the council, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This report will be used as the basis for improvement planning by the council.