

# **Environment: Waste, Street Cleaning and Planning**

**South Staffordshire District Council**

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high quality local services for the public. Our remit covers around 11,000 bodies in England, which between them spend more than £180 billion of public money each year. Our work covers local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we ensure that public services are good value for money and that public money is properly spent.

### **Copies of this report**

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0845 056 0566.

© Audit Commission 2006

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 020 7828 1212 Fax: 020 7976 6187 Textphone (minicom): 020 7630 0421

[www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk)

# Contents

Service Inspection	4
<b>Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Scoring the service</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Report</b>	<b>10</b>
Context	10
The locality	10
The Council	10
Scope of the inspection	11
<b>How good is the service?</b>	<b>12</b>
What has the service aimed to achieve?	12
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?	14
Access, customer care and user and/or community focus	14
Diversity	16
Service outcomes for users and the community	17
Waste and cleansing	17
Planning	19
Is the service delivering value for money?	21
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	23
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	23
How well does the service manage performance?	24
Does the service have the capacity to improve?	26

## Service Inspection

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. These principles embody the objectives of our Strategic Plan and Strategic Regulation. They also reflect the principles from *The Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services (July 2003)*.

Audit Commission service inspections should:

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater co-ordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's web site at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk).

This report is issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

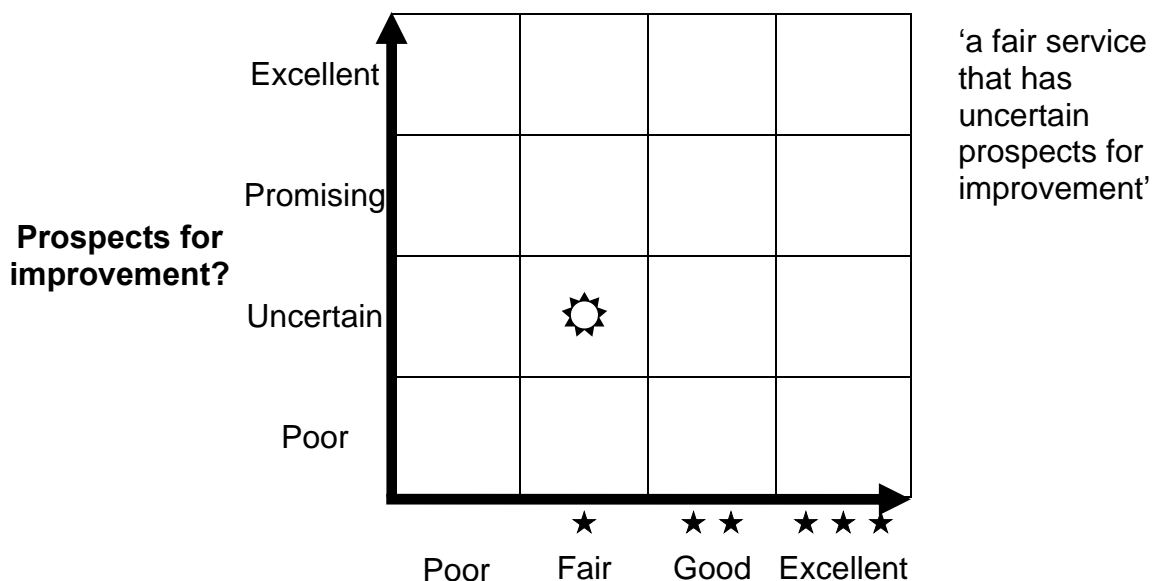
## Summary

- 1 South Staffordshire is an attractive rural district situated on the north-western edge of the West Midlands conurbation. It is predominately green belt with no large towns, and is characterised by its distinctive villages, 19 conservation areas and numerous listed buildings. The area is relatively affluent, has a population of 106,000 with 3.2 per cent from ethnic minority communities and an increasing number of older people.
- 2 The protection and enhancement of the environment is a corporate aim and top priority for the Council and its communities. Therefore the inspection focused on how well the Council is delivering on this, but limited the scope to improvement areas identified through the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) in 2003. This included the strategic framework and service delivery of waste, street cleansing and planning. As a consequence we did not examine landscaping, environmental health, transport or parks and open spaces. In addition, as the Council is receiving attention to improve the speed of determining planning applications as a planning standards authority, we did not look at the operational aspects of this service.
- 3 We concluded that overall, the Council is delivering environmental services that meet minimum requirements. Progress is being made, although this is not at the same rate across all areas and the quality of services is inconsistent. More needs to be done to make a more positive contribution to wider environmental and community aims, which would better reflect the Council's priority for this area.
- 4 The Council has sufficient financial resources to deliver what it sets out to do. It has shown strong leadership in delivering recent improvements to recycling performance and is progressing well with the development of new planning policy. However, the Council has a mixed track record in delivering improvements, with recent increases in recycling and composting being offset by historically poor performance in waste minimisation and development control. While corporate performance management arrangements have been strengthened, there remain significant weaknesses in strategic and service planning and local performance monitoring. The planning service has experienced capacity problems but the Council is taking steps to address these and generally there is adequate human and financial capacity to deliver improvement.
- 5 The service inspected cost £2.2 million in 2004/05, with 21 full time equivalent staff.

## Scoring the service

- 6 We have assessed South Staffordshire Council as providing a ‘fair’, one-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

**Table 1 Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>**



### A good service?

- 7 The service is a **fair**, one-star service due to the following reasons.
- The Council has been successful in protecting the green belt and the distinctive character of the area.
  - The area is clean and tidy, and the waste and street cleansing services are responsive.
  - There has been a significant recent improvement to the amount of waste recycled/composted.
  - Satisfaction levels are good.

<sup>1</sup> The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

However:

- the Council is not effectively addressing waste minimisation;
- there is no waste enforcement action to act as a deterrent;
- the Council is not effectively managing how its own activities impact on the environment;
- consultation, communication, customer care and access to services has improved but is not of a consistently high standard across all areas; and
- the service is not delivering good value for money in all areas.

8 The service has **uncertain** prospects for improvement due to the following reasons.

- The waste strategy is weak. It does not focus sufficiently on waste minimisation and is not fully aligned to deliver regional aims.
- Performance management is not yet fully embedded; scrutiny arrangements and service planning are weak.
- The Council has a track record of delivering what it sets out to do but has been slow to respond to the national waste agenda.
- There is a history of poor performance in relation to waste minimisation and speed of processing planning applications.
- Plans for the implementation of an environmental management system are under-developed.
- The Council has the financial capacity to deliver its improvement plans but is dependent upon building capacity in planning to deliver sustainable improvement.
- The Council has shown strong leadership in improving recycling performance through its re-configured waste service.
- The Council has responded positively to external challenge and is improving in some areas like corporate capacity and its approach to equality and diversity.

## Recommendations

- 9 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the Council. In addition we identify the approximate costs<sup>2</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

### **Recommendation**

*R1 Review and update the Council's waste strategy to ensure that there is clarity around all aspects of the waste hierarchy and that it supports the delivery of the Staffordshire Joint Waste Management Board 2020 vision of zero waste to landfill.*

- *Supporting policies for second bins and other collection services to be reviewed and aligned as appropriate.*
- *The delivery of the strategy is supported by a robust communication plan which engages with partners and all sections of the community including local businesses.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are as follows.

- The Council's activities deliver national and regional waste minimisation objectives.
- Improved community leadership and a more holistic contribution to the Council's objectives for the environment.
- Improved partnership working towards minimising cost and realising sustainable waste management solutions.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2007.

### **Recommendation**

*R2 Review the management and operation of the street cleansing service.*

- *Assess alternatives to operating a client contractor split.*
- *Develop systems to identify potential areas of high costs and/or inefficient practices.*
- *Introduce a highly visible, targeted enforcement presence.*

<sup>2</sup> Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are as follows.

- Value for money is demonstrated.
- Enforcement acts as a deterrent to people who fly tip and responds to residents concerns.
- The Council has access to improved data to ensure that the service can continually respond to changing circumstances whilst keeping costs under control.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by June 2006.

<b><i>Recommendation</i></b>
<p><i>R3 Implement the Environmental Management System through a plan which delivers a cultural and behavioural shift to support the Council's aims for environmental stewardship.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Communication/training events should include all staff and councillors.</i></li> <li>• <i>Policies and services to be reviewed and aligned as appropriate.</i></li> </ul>

The expected benefits of this recommendation are as follows.

- The Council demonstrates community and environmental leadership.
- The Council's aims for environmental stewardship are delivered.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by September 2006.

<b><i>Recommendation</i></b>
<p><i>R4 Develop and deliver improvements to service planning by integrating:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>all improvement plans/actions for the service into the service plan; and</i></li> <li>• <i>financial plans, income and targets for unit costs.</i></li> </ul>

The expected benefits of this recommendation are as follows.

- Staff and councillors are clear about planned service improvements and what is expected.
- There are opportunities for effective challenge of poor performance, slippage in delivery and areas of high cost.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by April 2006.

# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 10 South Staffordshire is a rural district situated on the north-western edge of the West Midlands conurbation. It is an attractive area covering 101,000 acres, 80 per cent of which is classified as green belt. There are 27 parishes and no large towns, but a number of diverse settlements which range in size from hamlets to large villages of over 13,000 residents. The district includes 19 conservation areas and 856 listed buildings.
- 11 The population is 106,000, residing in 43,000 households (2001 Census). The district has an ageing population; significant growth is anticipated in all age groups over 44 years old, particularly in the over 80s. However, there is a predicted decline in those under 44 years of age, particularly in the 0-19 year age group. Some 1.96 per cent are from ethnic minority communities.
- 12 The District is largely affluent, being ranked 144 least deprived in the country out of a total of 388. However, there are pockets of deprivation which include Huntington (one of the worst 25 per cent of English wards). There is no clear correlation between ethnicity and deprivation in South Staffordshire, indeed the least deprived ward records the highest number of people from ethnic minorities. Employment is mainly in service industries, and many people commute to work in the surrounding areas of Wolverhampton, Walsall, Dudley and Telford. Unemployment is currently 1.5 per cent which is below the regional average of 3 per cent and national average of 2.5 per cent.

### The Council

- 13 The Council comprises 49 councillors elected every four years, and it has been under Conservative administration since its formation in 1974. Currently there are 35 Conservative councillors, eight Labour councillors, one Liberal Democrat, one Freedom Party and four Independents. The 'cabinet and leader' governance model was adopted in 2001 where most decision making is made by the executive. This consists of six portfolio councillors representing support services, direct services, community services, environmental services, strategic services and partnership services. The remaining councillors form a single scrutiny committee with a remit to examine all aspects of council business.
- 14 After a long period of stability, the Council has recently elected a new Leader and is undergoing a major change to its management structure. A new Chief Executive and Deputy Chief Executive have been appointed, which together with five new portfolio managers (mirroring the scope of the portfolio holders) form the strategic management team (SMT).

- 15 The Council has a solid financial footing, has significant reserves and receives income from its investments. It is debt free following the transfer of its housing stock to South Staffordshire Housing Association. The net revenue budget for 2004/05 is £14.3 million, and the capital budget is £6 million.
- 16 The Council was able to set a zero Council Tax for seven years up to 2000/01 and had the seventh lowest district tax in England for 2003/04. The Council currently employs 400 staff, equal to approximately 200 full-time equivalents.

### **Scope of the inspection**

- 17 The comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) carried out in 2003 identified areas of weak performance including the speed of dealing with planning applications, low recycling rates, gaps in the strategic approach to environmental stewardship and poor performance management.
- 18 The purpose of the inspection was to assess how effectively and efficiently the Council is contributing towards the protection and enhancement of the environment. This closely mirrors the Council's aim to 'celebrate and improve South Staffordshire's distinctive environment' and its top priority of 'protecting the environment'. This included the strategic framework and service delivery of waste, street cleansing and planning (hereafter referred to as 'the service'). The inspection considered links between parts of the service and other council services such as environmental health, and how service delivery contributes to wider environmental and council aims. We limited the scope of our inspection to improvement areas identified through CPA. As a consequence we did not examine landscaping, environmental health, transport or parks and open spaces.
- 19 The Council has been identified as a planning standards authority in 2004/05 and 2005/06 for its poor speed of determining planning applications. It is working with the ODPM to improve the time taken to process planning applications and therefore inspection of the operational aspects of the development control process in planning was limited to the degree to which they contribute to the Council's strategic aims for the management of the environment.
- 20 The service inspected has 21 full time equivalent staff who deliver in-house planning policy and street cleansing services and manages external waste contracts. The service cost £2.2 million in 2004/05, made up in the following way:
  - waste management £1.6 million;
  - street cleansing £426,000; and
  - development planning £175,000.

In addition the service received a Planning Delivery Grant of £5,190 in 2004/05 and a further £165,691 in 2005/06.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 21** The Council and its partners are clear about the overall vision, aims and priorities for the district. The Council's corporate strategy 2003-08, shares the vision set out in the community strategy, 'As a well managed council, we will strive to make South Staffordshire a safe and healthy place to live, with prosperous villages and thriving communities where everyone can develop their abilities to the full and pass on to future generations a better environment'.
- 22** Environmental stewardship is at the forefront of the Council's focus. There are five corporate aims.
- To be a council which celebrates and enhances South Staffordshire's distinctive environment.
  - To be a healthy and safe district in which to live work and visit.
  - To be a prosperous district with thriving communities.
  - To be a district which promotes lifelong learning.
  - To be a well managed council.
- 23** Four clear priorities have been developed following consultation with residents, partners and other stakeholders. These endorse the Council's overall aims and reflect what matters most to local people:
- protecting the environment;
  - providing high quality services;
  - promoting community safety; and
  - pursuing low council tax.
- 24** The community strategy for South Staffordshire aligns with these aims and priorities, having one of three themes for delivery as 'environmental quality'. Action plans for the delivery of both the community strategy and the corporate strategy are largely measurable and clear, and complementary.
- 25** The Council has a well established understanding of the demographic and economic pressures that impact on the built environment and local quality of life. Population growth in the last 20 years at 9.7 per cent is significantly higher than that of the region as a whole at 2.4 per cent. This reflects the attractiveness of the area as a place to live and puts pressure on the built and natural environment. Local average house prices are currently £187,544 compared with £172,003 nationally (2005/06) and the supply of affordable homes is a key concern. The Council is aware of issues around the age profile and diversity of its communities and is making positive steps to integrate new strategies for young people and the elderly into service strategies.

- 26** Development in the district is guided and controlled by the development plans - the Regional Spatial strategy approved in 2004, the Structure Plan approved in 2002 and the South Staffordshire Local Plan which contains policies specific to the district. The local plan for the area was prepared to conform to the Staffordshire Structure Plan approved in 1991 and was adopted in 1996. It covered the period up to 2001 and therefore does not reflect more recent local or regional needs or national priorities. A replacement local plan had been in preparation but due to the implementation of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act in 2004 and revised housing requirements in the new Regional Spatial Strategy, the Council resolved to cease work on it in March 2005. The 1996 plan therefore remains the development plan for a further three years until it is superseded by the new emerging local development documents.
- 27** The Council has responded to changes in the planning system which replaces local plans and the regional structure plan with a local development framework (LDF) and regional spatial strategies. A local development scheme (LDS) has been agreed with the Government Office of the West Midlands and a draft statement of community involvement is currently being consulted on. The LDS identifies key gaps in existing planning policies and priorities for the preparation of these policies - for example affordable housing and section 106 obligations (legal agreements which may be attached to a planning permission which require a developer to provide or contribute towards specific items for a major development).
- 28** There is a developing understanding of wider environmental issues, especially in relation to waste. This complements an established and successful focus for the protection and enhancement of distinctive landscapes and open spaces. The Council approved its first waste strategy in 2004 which will be delivered by the end of 2005/06. This involves re-configuring the waste service to integrate recycling and collection and introducing alternate fortnightly collections of recyclable green and residual materials.
- 29** The Council, as a waste collection authority, in common with other districts has to work in partnership with the County Council as the waste disposal authority. The Staffordshire and Stoke Joint Waste Management Board (SSJWMB) was set up in 2001 to work collaboratively to meet government targets and European directives aimed to reduce waste to landfill and increase recycling and re-use. The Council has signed up to the SSJWMB challenging ambition for 'zero waste to landfill by 2020'. The first draft strategy set out thirteen agreed principles including pursuing joint collection arrangements where practicable and pooling resources to develop new waste treatment facilities. The strategy is currently under review to take account of new legislation aimed to encourage the diversion of waste to landfill.
- 30** In partnership with the SSJMWB and the County Council, the Council has signed up to both rounds of local public service agreements with government (LPSA1 and LPSA2). The Council and its partners receive performance rewards for meeting voluntary targets. In the case of LPSA1, this was for a stretched target for recycling/composting 20 per cent of waste by 2005.

## 14 Environment: Waste, Street Cleaning and Planning | How good is the service?

For LPSA 2, there are two stretched 2007/08 targets; one for reducing the percentage of relevant land that is heavily littered to 9 per cent, and the second to increase the amount of organic waste diverted from landfill by 4,000 tonnes.

### **Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?**

#### **Access, customer care and user and/or community focus**

- 31 The Council is making progress in developing its approach to designing and delivering services around the needs of all. However, there is some way to go to ensure that consultation, communication, customer care and access to services is of a consistent standard. For example, compared to other councils, the planning service scores poorly against a checklist of its quality of service.
- 32 Waste services has a good track record of consulting with local residents through the council newspaper, liaison with parish councils and a network of local environmental action groups. All residents are able to request additional dog or litter bins provided the need is established. Street cleansing routines are responsive and adjusted to meet local needs.
- 33 The Council is utilising a variety of methods to engage with the public and stakeholders in the preparation of planning policy. For example, a variety of exhibitions in villages and presentations have been made to parish councils and local groups seeking comments on issues and emerging policies to tackle them. Use of extensive consultation provides a sound basis for policy development and ownership by local people.
- 34 More recently, consultation and communication at corporate level is improving in an attempt to reach all sections of the community, not just the vocal majority. A resident's panel was set up in January 2005 and the results from the environment-specific survey have helped the Council to develop a clearer understanding of customer satisfaction. For example, the survey shows the relatively lower levels of satisfaction with regard to clean streets and cleanliness overall compared to other aspects of the service.
- 35 However, there are still gaps.
  - Waste services do not directly operate a trade waste service and has limited engagement with the business community on this topic. The Council is therefore not taking opportunities to advise and influence this important stakeholder group in waste management issues.
  - There is limited ongoing engagement with users of the planning service. There is no regular planning user forum to inform service delivery and as a consequence, the planning service cannot be sure that it is addressing their needs.

- The Council is one of a few that do not permit the public to address the planning committee prior to determining planning applications. This is an accepted procedure at most other councils and regarded as national good practice by the Local Government Association, the Royal Town Planning Institute and Planning Officers Society. As a consequence local people may perceive that they are being prevented from putting their views forward.
- 36** Access to services for some customers is difficult. Improvement has focused on the new one stop shop for visitors to the Council offices at Codsall. There are no additional facilities provided, although it is recognised that parish councils and district councillors provide an informal network of access points for remote communities or individuals without transport. However, this is reactive and dependant on people knowing who their councillor is. Contacting the service by telephone is through the main switchboard or a plethora of published numbers. This makes it more difficult to ensure a consistent and responsive service is provided, the right person is reached and/or multiple queries answered at point of contact.
- 37** The Council's website is improving but is only now providing a basic service with new facilities such as the ability to submit a planning application on line recently introduced. The national Pendleton survey of planning websites scores website using 21 criteria, the higher the score the better the website. The survey indicates that the Council's website scored only 6 out of 21 in 2003 which increased to 12 out of 21 in May 2005. This still falls behind many other councils.
- 38** Access to specific waste services is mixed and does not offer a consistently high service to all sections of the community. Both civic amenity sites in the district are closed on Wednesday and Thursdays as a result of requests to offer longer weekend opening times. Most residents see this as an improvement but it still falls short of services offered elsewhere. Efforts by South Staffordshire District Council to persuade the County Council to open throughout the week have so far been unsuccessful. Currently very remote properties or those considered as non-standard such as flats are not included in kerbside recycling schemes; this is around nine per cent of households. On a positive note, the Council provides 650 litter bins in the area which are well positioned, useable throughout the day and of appropriate design. In addition, there are 23 mini-recycling centres dotted around the district which collect a variety of different materials. Residents therefore have easy access to these facilities.
- 39** Customer service standards are not in place for all services and where they are, are not always sufficiently responsive.
- Clear and responsive standards for waste and street cleansing have been set which include rectification of missed bins, bulky waste collections and clinical waste. Charges are clear and payments can be made over the telephone, by post or in person. These standards are published in the council newspaper, website and some other council literature so it is clear what customers can expect from the service.

## 16 Environment: Waste, Street Cleaning and Planning | How good is the service?

- There are no published customer service standards for planning so, unlike waste, users of this service are not aware of what to expect or staff expected to provide.
- Standards are in place for dealing with visitors to the one stop shop, via the telephone and for responding to complaints. However, the Council aims to answer complaints in 28 days which is not challenging or responsive to customer needs.

40 Communication with customers is not always consistent, clear and does not always use appropriate language. For example:

- the leaflet explaining changes to the waste collection and recycling service was poorly laid out, difficult to read and used technical terms, such as 'contaminants', not in everyday use;
- there is little planning related information specifically aimed at those who are not represented by professional agents. Some existing leaflets contain out-of-date information and the colour scheme used does not help those with visual impairments; and
- navigating the Council's website is hampered by the use of council terminology, such as going through environmental health for waste collection queries.

However, the Council has some examples where communication with residents is good.

- The council newspaper, the main communication vehicle for the districts residents, is informative, well laid out and written.
- More recent publicity on the new local development framework has successfully sought to provide a simple and clear explanation of what is, in reality, a complex regime.

### Diversity

- 41 The Council has developed a good understanding of diversity issues but has some way to go to ensure that this results in fair and equal access for all in service design and delivery.
- 42 The waste service can demonstrate that it embraces most sections of the community. For example, residents with special needs can have their waste collected from the back door and there is an effective clinical waste service operating. The Council also does not charge people on means tested benefits for its bulky waste collection service and offers a bigger residual waste bin for large families.
- 43 At corporate level, the customer contact centre is fully accessible for users with disabilities and consultation about the new Local Development Framework was made available in audio tape and on a video/DVD. There is an equal opportunity policy and race equality scheme in place, and whilst the Council is using equality impact assessments in examining cross cutting issues this has yet to work through to visible changes in services that local people notice.

## **Service outcomes for users and the community**

### **Waste and cleansing**

- 44** For waste (including street cleansing), the Council is successful in delivering what it promised to do, has generally high levels of public and user satisfaction, but is only recently moving towards balancing local needs with a more proactive approach to the regional and national waste agenda. Although responsive, it does not take enforcement action to act as a deterrent for people who litter.
- 45** The refuse collection service is reliable. The number of missed collections in 2004/05 is low at 24 per 100,000 collections, and 99 per cent of those reported are collected within 24 hours. There is no mess after the bins have been emptied; streets are not littered from the operation as a result. Public satisfaction with waste collection is high at 95 per cent (2003/04) and significantly better than would be predicted based on levels of deprivation.
- 46** The Council operates a responsive bulky waste service which enables residents to dispose of waste efficiently. The Council promises to collect items within seven days of payment and has been achieving 99 per cent within this time since 2002. The service is effectively integrated with the general waste collection service, using the same compaction vehicle wherever practicable. This ensures that the service is efficient.
- 47** The area is clean and tidy. The Council has set challenging customer standards for responding to reported litter complaints which it meets. For example in 2004/05 the Council responded to 100 per cent of reports of dog fouling, fly tipping and to untidy recycling centres in 24 hours, and 96 per cent of general litter complaints were responded to within published timescales (three hours for sensitive public areas, two days elsewhere). Known litter hot spots have been identified and action taken. For example, by gating off lay-bys frequently suffering fly tipping and cleaning some private shopping areas which were a cause of local concern. Fly posting and abandoned cars are not seen as a major issue locally. Overall satisfaction with cleanliness is high at 75 per cent (2003/04) and significantly better than would be predicted based on levels of deprivation.
- 48** Staff and councillors have a good understanding of the impact of waste and cleansing operations on multi-agency issues such as community safety and drug misuse. This has been translated into areas of joined up operations such as alerting other drug prevention services when drug related litter is collected.
- 49** The Council has had some success in delivering wider environmental and community aims. For example, in 1996, the Council set a target of increasing the energy efficiency of the residential accommodation in the district by 30 per cent in ten years. By March 2005, an increase of just over 20 per cent had been achieved, above the national average for the period, and 60,652 tonnes annual reduction in carbon dioxide emissions (the main greenhouse gas linked to global warming). Overall, air quality is improving.

## 18 Environment: Waste, Street Cleaning and Planning | How good is the service?

**50** The Council is not effective in minimising the amount of waste it collects. Historically, the Council has collected more waste per head of population than most other councils, and performance in this area is in the worst 25 per cent nationally. Prior to 2004/05, the Council had focused on some reasonably successful waste minimisation pilots and the amount of waste collected decreased slightly from 457 kg per head in 2001/02 to 440 kg per head in 2003/04. However, new green waste collections were introduced in 2004 and since then this trend has been reversed. In 2004/05 the Council collected 475 kg per head of population, and is predicting this will continue to rise this year. However, as it is predominantly from green waste for composting, this will result in a small reduction in residual waste to landfill. This performance does not sufficiently address the wider national aims to reduce the amount of waste collected and reduce waste to landfill.

- 51** The Council has some policies which contradict the overall aim of waste minimisation and which contribute to the continued high levels of residual waste collected.
- The Council operates a twice yearly waste amnesty collection. This enables residents to put out unlimited amounts of rubbish for collection without penalty and this waste goes straight to landfill.
  - The criteria for larger or having a second residual waste bin is generous. It includes a range of offerings for families of four upwards and families with babies. In addition, any household can have a second 240 litre bin for a payment of £20 per year. Whilst take up of second bins is low so far, there clearly is potential for this to grow and counteract the benefits of fortnightly collections.
  - An additional Christmas residual collection is planned for those on fortnightly residual collections.

These policies send conflicting messages to residents and hinder significant progress in this area.

**52** Until this year, the Council has not supported the community sufficiently to recycle waste. Recycling performance has been poor and almost static for four years from 2001 at 6 to 8 per cent. However, where implemented so far the reconfigured waste service is having a positive impact. Recycling rates are increasing, participation is high and as a result the Council is on track to deliver its target of 13 per cent recycling and 15 per cent composting for 2005/06 (unaudited data).

**53** Although the area appears clean, the Council only achieved below median performance (18 per cent in 2003/04) for relevant land that is heavily littered. The Council can demonstrate that this is predominantly down to borderline levels of grit and detritus in road verges and not attributable to litter. However, it does point to insufficient attention to road sweeping operations, which is important not only for aesthetic reasons but to keep road drainage operating properly.

- 54 The Council has an insufficient focus on waste enforcement action. The Council is effective in keeping the area clean and responding to litter complaints, but has no track record of enforcement action to act as a deterrent in this area.
- 55 The Council is not able to demonstrate that it is taking effective action to minimise the amount of waste it produces itself or is minimising the impact it has on the environment, It has recently commissioned an examination of all areas of the councils business and activities where there is a potential impact including transport, energy usage and materials usage. This produced good baseline data or the future and confirms more needs to be done to deploy best practice in this area.

## Planning

- 56 The Council has successfully protected the local environment. Sufficient housing land has been identified to meet local housing need up until 2011. Much of this incorporates land previously developed to reduce further encroachment into the green belt. In 2004/05, 90 per cent of new housing was built on brownfield (previously developed) sites which is above the national target of 60 per cent. Effective redevelopment of previously developed sites is important to ensure that the use of green field (previously undeveloped) sites is minimised in order to protect the character of the area.
- 57 Listed buildings are being retained and new uses found for them. For example Works Hall has been converted to provide flats whilst maintaining the historic and architectural features. A pragmatic approach is adopted and alternative solutions sought to ensure issues such as the fire regulations are met whilst retaining important elements of listed buildings. A grant scheme has operated to provide financial help for roof and window repairs to listed buildings or those in conservation areas and it is currently being reviewed to make it more effective.
- 58 The Council is encouraging quality new development. Specialist advice is available from the Council who encourage pre-application discussions. It has negotiated with both local and national developers, such as Laing Homes, to improve proposals to secure high quality developments. Developers are also being encouraged to provide high quality development through design awards. The Council operated its' own awards scheme and has recently signed up to the South Staffordshire Partnership Design Initiative Awards. A number of schemes have been given design awards such as the Tower at Stoughton Castle and a site in Kinver.
- 59 The Council has integrated community safety into its planning function. Councillors and officers have attended training, all committee reports include reference to crime and disorder implications and development schemes are referred to the police architectural liaison officer to ensure crime features, such as dark walkways and areas not overlooked are avoided - for example in Huntington.

## 20 Environment: Waste, Street Cleaning and Planning | How good is the service?

- 60 There are a number of areas where development has been hindered by the lack of up to date planning policy. The current local plan contains no specific percentages or thresholds relating to the delivery of affordable housing, which the Council recognises is a key area that it has, in the past, not delivered. This has meant that the planning regime has not been effective in maximising affordable housing so that the overall gap between supply and demand is widening. The Council has recognised the issue and in May 2005 issued interim guidance to developers and landowners on affordable housing and this included percentage contributions and thresholds. It has successfully negotiated affordable housing contributions on some recent schemes - for example at Huntington 30 per cent (95 units) of affordable housing has been secured.
- 61 There is also an absence of policy to ensure effective retention of appropriate industrial and employment sites to meet local employment needs. The absence of such policy and high residential land values means that sites have been lost to residential use or are under threat - for example in Wombourne.
- 62 Delivery of national planning priorities is mixed. The lack of up to date policies and a reluctance to approve some proposals that accord with national priorities has hindered delivery. Reuse of brownfield development site is good and improving. Audited performance indicators (PIs) for 2004/05 show 90 per cent of new homes were built on brownfield sites compared to 81 per cent and 66 per cent in the preceding two years. However, delivery of higher densities and the wider sustainability agenda has not been so successful. Data provided by the Council indicates that whilst some recent developments are achieving densities of over 30 dwellings per hectare (eg Codsall and Essington) a number of other sites are not. Officer recommendations to approve higher density schemes are also being overturned by councillors and there are a number of recent examples where the Council has lost the subsequent appeal. PIs for 2004/05 indicate the Council is losing 46 per cent of appeals against the Council's decision to refuse planning permission. This is in the worst quartile (ie poor) when compared to other councils. There is also an absence of policy to help assist the Council deliver other priorities - for example there is no policy to require waste storage facilities that can accommodate the current waste collection streams the Council now operates.
- 63 There is no detailed written guidance on what section 106 agreements will be required, to address the impacts of new developments. The Council has secured contributions but it is relying on negotiation rather a clear policy and as a result may be missing opportunities. Other than a general reference in the local plan the amount (in kind or funding) and the justification for seeking such a contribution has not been clearly stated. Staff should have clear guidance to ensure developers are treated consistently and that the Council does not miss opportunities. The provision of additional guidance and justification is important if the use of section 106 is seen by the public and developers to be transparent, fair, and consistent.

- 64 There is an absence of information on conservation areas and buildings at risk. Out of 19 conservation areas only one has had a conservation area appraisal undertaken. Work on a 'buildings at risk' register has been slow with only 55 per cent of the 850 listed buildings inspected to date. Without up to date information the Council can not be sure that it is focusing its resources on those areas that are most in need. With the introduction of a best value performance indicator the Council has realigned the conservation budget in order to fund a consultant to undertake appraisals and the completion of the building at risk register is now recognised as a priority.
- 65 There is limited monitoring of delivery against policies particularly those aimed at meeting local need. Whilst housing land availability is monitored there has been a lack of local performance indicators to measure and monitor delivery of matters important to local people - such as affordable housing.

### **Is the service delivering value for money?**

- 66 The Council is inconsistent in delivering value for money environmental services. There is a mixed economy of outsourced and in-house services, with a well established focus on cost control and how costs compare to others. However, the service does not always use comparative information to review cost effectiveness or to highlight differences in the services being compared.
- 67 Street cleansing has positive indicators of value for money, but this is insufficient to demonstrate that this is consistently above minimum requirements. For example, spend per head of population is low compared with similar authorities, public satisfaction is high, response to complaints is good and the streets are clean. However, some of this is offset by the lack of enforcement activity and, insufficient road sweeping. As there is no information about unit costs, the service is unable to address potential areas of high cost, target improvements and drive efficiency. The service was last subjected to re-tendering in 2002, and as a result remained in-house, operated by environmental services as the 'client' and engineering services as the 'contractor'. The Council has not taken the opportunity to examine how it could increase efficiency or reduce management costs or overheads through the removal of this artificial split.
- 68 The waste collection and recycling service is changing and has made some progress towards delivering value for money. Waste collection costs per household have been historically below the median and lower than in similar authorities at £33.46 in 2004/05. However, this does not in itself point to value for money as the Council has lagged behind others in providing additional recycling services, and continues to out-turn poor waste minimisation performance. The re-configured waste/recycling service will increase the cost per household to a predicted level of £45.90 per household in 2005/06. The method of kerbside recycling has been benchmarked, produces minimal contaminated waste and is efficient. Increased costs therefore may be offset by improvements in recycling performance but comparison with others has not proved possible.

## 22 Environment: Waste, Street Cleaning and Planning | How good is the service?

- 69 The use of modern procurement methods and partnerships to deliver value for money is inconsistent. The Council has an established policy of procuring services competitively to ensure value for money. It does not provide a direct commercial waste service to local businesses (although it will to comply with legislation) as there are other suppliers in the district, but operates a number of historically provided discretionary services which have not been robustly evaluated or subjected to competition. The Council justifies continuation of these arrangements on the basis that they break even and the facility provides operational flexibility, but cannot adequately demonstrate value for money. These services include cesspool emptying, skip hire and drainage/flood works.
- 70 The process of securing recent waste contracts has been focused on best value for the district, for example:
- the Council's contract for waste collection has been extended to 2011 by negotiation. This has significantly reduced procurement costs and guaranteed continuity of a well regarded service during a period of major change. The negotiation took account of the whole life costs of the contract and was on an open book basis. An external evaluation of the process concluded that the Council met the requirements for best value; and
  - arrangements to deliver green waste to three local contractors under short term contracts minimises risks in having an available disposal route and allows the Council to cut down on transport costs. There is rapid development of new technologies for composting food waste co-mingled with green waste and therefore the Council's approach will enable them to quickly take advantage of new facilities as and when they come on line.
- 71 Overall the planning service is not delivering value for money. The costs of the planning service, particularly when compared to other councils are difficult to assess due to the differences in the way the data is collected and calculated. Cost comparison and trends are also being distorted by the allocation of external funding through a planning delivery grant and the numbers of applications dealt with that attract no fee. Audited performance data shows the planning cost per head of population was £12.89 in 2002/03 and £13 in 2003/04. This is an average cost when compared to other councils but this is offset by poor performance in some areas. For example, meeting local needs such as affordable housing and in the overall speed of determining applications. Applicant satisfaction remains above average but is falling with 79 per cent satisfied in 2003/04 compared to 83 per cent in 2000/01. Overall, the audited 2004/05 PIs show that four of the seven planning PIs are in the worst quartile.
- 72 The Council has not benchmarked planning costs against other councils or explored alternatives to in-house provision. A review of development control carried out in 2004/05 did not include consideration of alternative service delivery methods and their costs and benefits. Specialist consultants are employed where there are skills gaps and consultants have been used to deal with up to 75 per cent of all householder planning applications. Whilst there is a £20,000 budget in development control for the use of consultants during staff shortages, it is unclear whether the Council can demonstrate that this is the most effective use of resources for the longer provision of 'routine' work.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

### What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 73** The Council has recently increased the amount of waste that is recycled and it has a track record of high public satisfaction with the waste collection service and with standards of cleanliness. However, it has yet to deliver significant improvements in other areas. The amount of waste collected is amongst the highest of all councils and the development control service has performed persistently poorly.
- 74** Waste services has been slow to respond to the national waste agenda, but is now improving quickly. Recycling performance between 2001 and 2004 was poor and almost static as explained earlier; and the 2003/04 statutory recycling/composting target missed. New green waste collections, started in 2004, enabled the Council to exceed its LPSA1 target of 20 per cent. Currently, the Council is implementing changes identified from its best value review and waste strategy. It has taken the bold step to reconfigure the service and in doing so introduce alternate weekly collections of residual waste and recyclable waste. By the end of 2005, all properties will have been included in kerbside recycling schemes, including for the first time, some remote and non standard properties. The process is on schedule, is achieving good participation rates and has already met its 2005/06 statutory recycling targets of 18 per cent. However, with the exception of improvements in recycling the Council has delivered few other significant improvements for service users. The amount of waste collected continues to match the worst performing councils and the Council has no clear plans to address this. The Government's intervention in declaring the Council a planning standards authority highlights the poor track record of the performance of the development control service.
- 75** The Council is starting to use more innovative approaches to deliver savings. For example by purchasing specialist recycling collection vehicles instead of the contractor supplying them, the Council is forecasting a saving of £65,000 per year for the six-year life of the contract. The Council is now seeking advice on whether it is appropriate to purchase vehicles for neighbouring authorities in the same way which will produce a revenue stream for the Council.
- 76** The Council can evidence some changes that have been made as a result of a review of value for money. For example, demand for the drain clearing service (discretionary) fell on introduction of charges in 2003. As a result of a service challenge in 2004, an evaluation concluded that there was insufficient justification to continue, there was adequate provision in the private sector and the service is due to cease in April 2006. However, the comparison of costs and performance and targeting of best practice is not routinely embedded in service planning.

## 24 Environment: Waste, Street Cleaning and Planning | How good is the service?

- 77 The Council has responded positively to improve its approach to equality and diversity issues raised in inspections. Although this has yet to feed through into all areas of the services, progress is being made. For example, consultation for the new Local Development Framework and the introduction of bulky waste concessions for people on benefits. These things are noticeable to local people.
- 78 The Council has been slow to exploit new technology to deliver improved value for money and access to services. The one stop shop is providing a better visitor experience to the office at Codsall, but the Council has not developed this into a fully functioning contact centre with the potential to deliver back office efficiencies. The development of electronic services is slow and has lagged behind other councils. Performance has been consistently below the median between 2001 and 2004, and was in the worst 25 per cent in 2004/05. For example, the Council's website has only recently included new functionality to submit on line planning applications. The Council therefore has some way to go to ensure that the maximum benefit is delivered from its investment.
- 79 The Council has recognised and is taking action to address key gaps in planning policy. Interim guidance to developers and landowners on affordable housing, including percentage contributions and thresholds, was issued May 2005 to provide a basis for negotiating and securing the delivery of affordable housing. Guidance on section 106 obligations is to be one of the first development documents to be produced as part of the new local development framework.
- 80 Progress is being made in implementing improvement plans. Of the 48 actions identified in the development control improvement plan 28 have been completed and all but nine of the remaining actions started. However, the improvement plan is largely process focused. Therefore it is unclear what benefits are being delivered to users and if these focus on the right things.

### **How well does the service manage performance?**

- 81 The Council has some significant weaknesses in strategic and service planning which do not support the improvements it has made to its corporate performance management framework. It has demonstrated strong leadership in changing the waste collection arrangements but has yet to ensure that the arrangements for scrutiny are fully effective.
- 82 The Council and its partners' strategic planning for waste is weak. There is no clear or approved plan to show how the partnership will deliver on its 2020 vision of zero waste to landfill, or how the Council will contribute to this. The Council's own waste strategy approved in 2004 only covers the actions up to 2005/06 and does not address the issue of waste minimisation. Officers are aware that a further significant change will be required post 2010 with other changes needing to be in place leading up to this time, but this is not articulated in current plans. For example, there are no plans to review current policies for second residual waste bins and additional collections outlined earlier. It is therefore not clear how the Council's performance in recycling and minimisation will improve beyond the life of the current waste strategy and how it affects the delivery of the SSJWMB vision.

- 83 Service planning in waste is weak. Although service plans include clear links to corporate aims and objectives they lack service aims, planned improvements, major changes or efficiencies to be delivered. It is therefore unclear what services are planning to do, how the Council is monitoring progress or what it is aiming to achieve.
- 84 The Council has a strengthened corporate performance management framework in place but the management of performance throughout the Council is not yet fully embedded. The new performance management framework links the Council's strategies and plans to the Council vision, and brings together the role of the public, staff, senior management team and councillors to deliver corporate and service improvements through 'challenge' processes and a performance monitoring group identifies poor performance and monitors its improvement. The process of service challenge is starting to be used to allocate resources to priorities but the process of staff challenge is not so well developed. Performance management to service level is also not yet comprehensively effective. For example, the street cleansing service lacks unit cost data which would enable the service to target productivity and efficiency improvements.
- 85 Performance monitoring is in place but is not always consistent throughout the service. Key performance indicators, local indicators and budgets are monitored regularly. However, targets are not always challenging. For example, the 2005/06 target for missed collections is higher than the 2004/05 out-turn performance. In addition operating street cleansing as an internal contract results in staff not always having a clear idea of current or comparative performance.
- 86 Scrutiny arrangements are not fully effective. All councillors who are not portfolio holders sit on the only overview and scrutiny committee. The size and scope of this committee is a concern, which impacts upon the level of training required, the level of appropriate challenge and its overall effectiveness. The Council is considering various options for its overview and scrutiny arrangements but has yet to decide how best to fulfil this function.
- 87 The Council does not always deliver improvements within the timescales set and the delivery of the capital programme suffers from regular delays. For example in 2003/04 there was a £1.1 million under spend on the Council's social housing grant. Consequently, residents had to wait longer to benefit from this investment.
- 88 However, there are strengths.
- Strong leadership is visible in relation to the Council as a whole and the service. Within the waste service this is demonstrated by the decision to implement fortnightly residual waste collections despite a vocal minority opposing the change. The Council has also shown leadership in clearing litter hotspots not directly its responsibility and signing up to LPSA 1 and 2 targets.
  - The service demonstrates that it can use resources effectively and flexibly. The waste service has redirected resources to deal with customer contacts during the implementation of the reconfigured waste service. This has ensured the new service was delivered to target and that an increase in customer enquiries was managed.

## 26 Environment: Waste, Street Cleaning and Planning | How good is the service?

- The Council has increased budgets to tackle areas of poor performance. In 2005/06 an additional £138,000 to implement the service review improvement plan and the planning delivery grant is being used to develop further the delivery of an electronic planning service and develop a monitoring scheme required for the new local development framework.
- In planning there is a clear timetable and priorities for the preparation of the new planning policy framework. In development control, an improvement plan is already in place to improve the speed of determining planning applications, but, this is largely a short term plan to improve performance rather than long-term plans to built on and maintain improved performance in the future.
- The Council can demonstrate its ability to learn from others and from user feedback. For example, staff surveys a year ago showed low morale amongst staff and feedback that internal communications in particular were poor. A recent survey shows that the Council has improved morale and addressed concerns around internal communications. The Council sought best practice from Lichfield District Council, a high-performing Council for recycling, when implementing its new scheme of waste collection. However, it has yet to address high levels of household waste by seeking out and adopting best practice in the area of waste minimisation.
- The Council's proposals for monitoring its own environmental performance through an environmental management system are comprehensive and challenging and if implemented should enable the Council to be an exemplar in this area. However, arrangements for the implementation and delivery of this programme have yet to be developed and therefore it is unclear whether the good intentions of senior officers and councillors will be fully delivered.

### **Does the service have the capacity to improve?**

- 89 The Council is in a strong financial position. The Council has healthy level of general reserve which stood at £2.9 million as of March 2004, and significant capital reserves of £22 million in 2003/04. The Council's external auditor concludes that the Council is well positioned to finance its future plans. However, the Council's capacity to bring about sustainable improvements in planning is vulnerable.
- 90 The Council is investing in areas that will address some service weaknesses, for example, in litter enforcement allocating funding to pay for a warden and buy mobile CCTV equipment. At corporate level, the Council is investing in a new telephone system which will allow it to develop options for new service delivery models in the future.
- 91 The Council is developing services supported by external funding and works jointly with other authorities. LPSA2 pump priming funding has been secured to allow the street cleansing service to jointly buy a new road sweeping vehicle with Lichfield District Council. This should improve the levels of detritus and grit in road verges and improve the performance indicator for this area.

- 92 The Council has a comprehensive induction and training programme which covers councillors, staff and the parish councils/district liaison group. A councillor training and development programme for 2006 will be delivered in partnership with other Staffordshire authorities paid from the government's ODPM capacity fund. Staff have annual appraisals which identify future training needs. Investment in training and development ensures that the Council has the right skills in place for the future.
- 93 There is good capacity in waste services. This is due to a low staff turnover, improving morale and low levels of sickness. Service challenge encourages managers to consider staffing and resource needs and whether these are sufficient for future requirements. For example, succession planning for staff in street cleansing is considered against service requirements and future plans prior to contract renewal.
- 94 Improvement to corporate capacity is not fully in place. The 2003 CPA assessment identified that corporate capacity was hindered by a lack of clarity over some roles and responsibilities at senior level. The Council has responded positively to this and has introduced changes which align the scope of portfolio holders with senior managers. There has been a robust process of appointing a new senior management team comprising deputy chief executive and five portfolio managers. The proposals for the new structure seem robust, though not everyone is in post yet including a new portfolio manager for environmental services.
- 95 The Council does not always have sufficient staff resources to deliver high quality services across all services. Specific staff shortages in specialist areas like planning hinder the Council's progress. There have been a number of vacant posts and difficulties in recruiting and retaining development control staff which affected other parts of the planning service such as enforcement. Although this is a national problem the Council has not compared employee terms and conditions with others to ensure they are competitive and help staff recruitment and retention. To build capacity:
- trainee posts have been created and filled. Staff are undertaking external training to assist in the longer term;
  - a new planning support team was put in place in September 2005. This aims to streamline planning application validation, and reduce unproductive time of qualified planning officers;
  - development processes are being re-engineered to streamline;
  - a senior planning officer is supporting the introduction of the support team and oversees the trainees; and
  - consultants are used to provide additional resources or expertise to boost capacity. For example to undertake the sustainability appraisal of the local development framework and in the past were used to undertake a pilot conservation area appraisal.

## 28 Environment: Waste, Street Cleaning and Planning | How good is the service?

Whilst these measures will assist capacity improvement in planning they will not aid retention of experienced officers which is necessary to ensure longer term stability and improvement of the service.

- 96 The Council has a mixed record of using procurement to improve the efficiency and value for money of services. The external contract for waste collection has delivered a reliable service with good public satisfaction at a relatively low cost. However, the internal client/contractor split in cleansing has yet to be challenged to demonstrate value for money and partnering options have not been explored in planning to achieve efficiencies and help address capacity issues. The Council has therefore not been rigorous in enhancing the quality and value for money of services through partnering and procurement.
- 97 The Council and its partners in Stoke and Staffordshire will be reliant on new waste treatment processes and facilities which have yet to be developed. The region is well served by existing waste incineration plants but current technology relies on the most contaminated ash generated being disposed of to landfill. To reduce the amount of biodegradable waste to landfill in the medium term the partnership is depending upon the development of in-vessel composting facilities. Subject to licensing from DEFRA this would allow food wastes to be included in the green waste collections and significantly reduce the amount of organic waste in the residual waste stream. However, there are no local in-vessel facilities available at present, and so it is difficult to predict if the 2020 vision will be delivered.