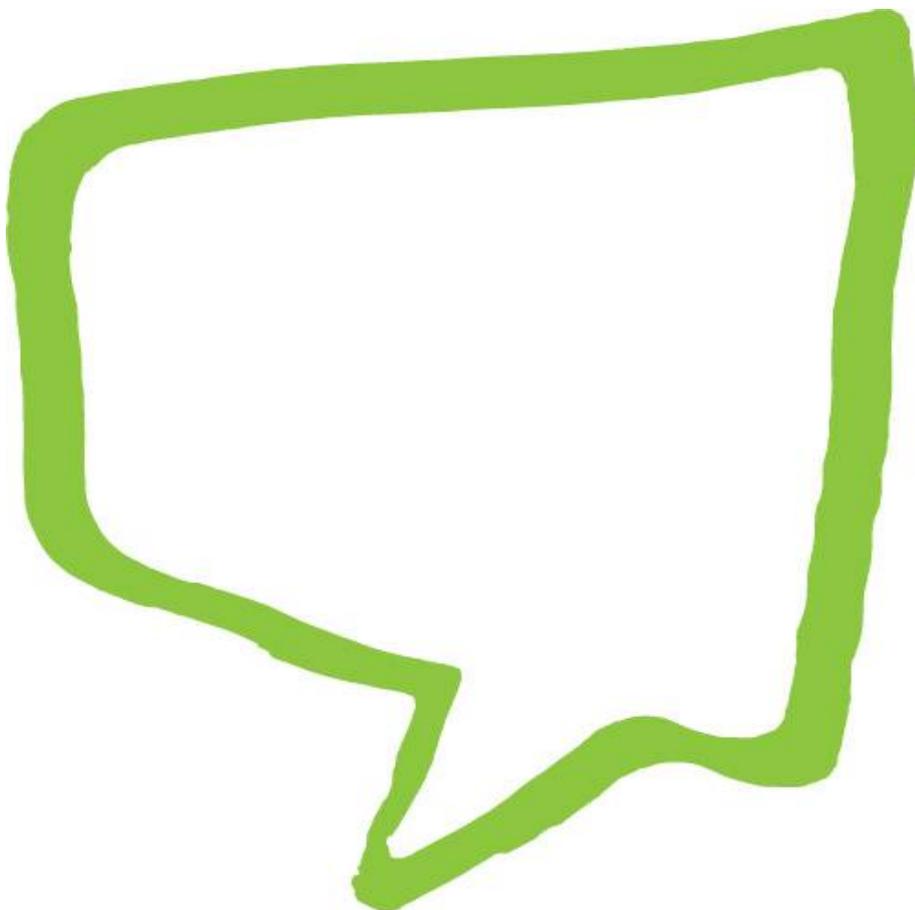


Joint Direction of Travel Report

Wiltshire District Councils

Audit 2008/09

January 2009



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Status of our reports

The Statement of Responsibilities of Auditors and Audited Bodies issued by the Audit Commission explains the respective responsibilities of auditors and of the audited body. Reports prepared by appointed auditors are addressed to non-executive directors/members or officers. They are prepared for the sole use of the audited body. Auditors accept no responsibility to:

- any director/member or officer in their individual capacity; or
 - any third party.
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Main conclusions

What evidence is there of the councils improving outcomes?

- 1 All of the districts have contributed improved outcomes in line with some of the LAA priorities this year. But there are also some areas where progress has not been as good. Some examples include the following.

LAA priority	Areas of strength	Less progress
Stronger, resilient communities	Funding and support for community projects in Kennet; improved leisure facilities and play areas in North and West Wiltshire; and setting up a parish council for the City of Salisbury.	
Affordable housing	Provision of affordable houses through section 106 agreements; reduction in use of temporary accommodation across Wiltshire (with the exception of Salisbury); use of B&B eliminated in Kennet and West Wiltshire and reduced use of B&B in Salisbury.	Performance of private sector housing functions across the districts; planning performance weak in West Wiltshire, deteriorating in North Wiltshire and Salisbury, mixed in Kennet; use of B&B in North Wiltshire.
Lives not services	Benefits service improved and strong in North Wiltshire and Salisbury, improved, about average in Kennet but still below average in West Wiltshire.	
Economic growth	Partnership working in Kennet and North Wiltshire, five towns initiative in West Wiltshire.	Slippage of some regeneration activity in Salisbury.
Environment	Generally strong performance on waste, recycling and street cleanliness across Wiltshire.	

- 2 Performance in dealing with complaints and in dealing with vulnerable people across the districts is mixed. In terms of complaints referred to the Ombudsman, Kennet has strong arrangements, North Wiltshire's are good, West Wiltshire's are adequate and Salisbury's are the weakest. Both North Wiltshire and West Wiltshire have done good work around improving access for people to council services.

- 3 All four districts can demonstrate adequate or good value for money in the provision of services.

How much progress is being made to implement improvement plans to sustain improvement?

- 4 All the districts have taken appropriate approaches to transition planning. Salisbury District Council has produced a very comprehensive climate change scrutiny report and North Wiltshire District Council is making good progress on plans to improve sustainability. It is grant funding energy efficiency audits in community buildings and investigating the viability of a hydro-electric plant on the riverbank adjoining its Monkton Park offices. These initiatives should prove useful to the new Wiltshire Council to help it meet its LAA targets in this area.
- 5 The districts are working well together to develop some of the services for the new council. Good work has taken place in developing planning services and in bringing the four housing services together. For example, the councils are working together to implement choice based lettings but some uncertainty remains about whether the amalgamation of housing services will progress as quickly as it needs to without a service head in place.
- 6 Performance management systems differ across the district councils. Performance officers are starting to meet and review the various systems and associated performance management frameworks. The County Council is leading on setting up new performance management arrangements for the new authority.
- 7 All the districts are working well to support their staff through the transition but some uncertainty remains among some staff about the future.

Introduction

- 8 In April 2009 local government in Wiltshire will change. Instead of a two tier system comprising a county council (Wiltshire County Council) and four districts (Kennet District Council, Salisbury District Council, North Wiltshire District Council and West Wiltshire District Council) there will be one unitary council - Wiltshire Council. Wiltshire County Council will be the continuing authority and the four district councils will cease to exist.
- 9 As part of the current Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) framework for county and unitary councils, the Audit Commission undertakes an annual assessment of each council's direction of travel (DoT). This annual assessment is scored. For district councils, the Audit Commission carries out an unscored annual DoT assessment. This assessment is reported in each council's annual audit and inspection letter (AAIL).
- 10 For Wiltshire County Council this year, the Audit Commission has agreed to carry out a scored DoT within the existing DoT framework as usual since it will continue to exist after April 2009. The scope of the work will focus on the issues and risks that will be relevant to the new unitary council.
- 11 For the districts, the Audit Commission agreed with the Joint Implementation Committee (JIT) for the new Wiltshire Authority to produce a composite report that compares performance across the districts. The aim of this report is to use the principles and resources of a DoT assessment to highlight any risks and issues to help inform the new unitary council. This combined report for the Wiltshire districts addresses two questions.
 - What evidence is there of the councils improving outcomes?
 - How much progress is being made to implement improvement plans to sustain improvement?

Background

- 12 Wiltshire has recently (June 2008) agreed a new local area agreement (LAA) - an agreement between national government and local public service providers about what the priorities in the area should be. This lists the priorities for the area as:
- build 'resilient communities' with high social capital through people feeling socially included, enabling people and communities to build skills, abilities, knowledge and confidence to take effective action and play leading roles in the development of their communities and so enhance their quality of life;
 - improve affordable housing;
 - 'Lives not services' - support more people to have independent and fulfilling lives as part of their local community; support families to provide the strong foundations for children and young people's development; enable individuals to make informed choices to improve their long term health and well being;
 - Wiltshire exhibiting a positive and sustainable environment for economic growth;
 - reduce particular crimes, change behaviours and inform the public to bring about communities that are safe and feel safe;
 - Environment: Tackle climate change and promote a high quality, natural environment that enriches the lives of people; and
 - work together to achieve the ambitions, including new governance arrangements for the 'family of partnerships' and the establishment of community area boards.
- 13 We have used these priorities to structure our work around for the first question for this combined districts report.
- 14 We have used housing as an example service to see how well the councils are working together to ensure seamless transition and service delivery as well as how strategic plans are being aligned across Wiltshire.

Audit approach

- 15 We reviewed a range of documents and spoke to key people from each district in order to answer the two questions.

Question 1 - improving outcomes

- 16 This question relates to the priorities as articulated in the local area agreement. The following table sets out the four sub questions related to this question along with our particular focus of investigation.

Question	Focus
Are services improving in areas the councils have identified as priorities and areas the public say are important to their communities?	Corporate plan and performance against the targets set out in it for each district. Other inspectorate findings and PI data.
What contribution are the councils making towards wider community outcomes?	LAA and performance against the targets set out in it, ombudsman letters and PI data.
To what degree are the councils improving both access and the quality of services for all citizens, are they focusing on those who are made vulnerable by their circumstances?	Access strategy, consultation and engagement strategies, outcome from consultation and engagement and what the councils have done with that.
Is value for money improving as well as quality of services?	We have used the value for money part of the use of resources assessment for this question.

Question 2 - improvement plans

17 This question focuses on transition plans to the new unitary authority. The following table sets out the four sub questions related to this question along with our particular focus of investigation.

Question	Focus
Do the councils have robust plans for improving (aligned with other plans, SMART, detailed, resourced, agreed and widely communicated)?	Any specific improvement plans and specific roles in the transition plans. We have looked in more detail at housing as a diagnostic.
How well is the improvement planning being implemented: are key objectives and milestones being achieved?	Contribution from each district to transition and any other improvement plans. Extent to which regular performance monitoring is still taking place. Support for staff.
Do the councils have the capacity to deliver their plans?	What arrangements are in place to ensure services are delivered in the transition period. Arrangements to ensure post-reorganisation spending matches resources available.
Are there any significant weaknesses in arrangements for securing continuous improvement, or failures in corporate governance, that would prevent the improvement levels being sustained?	Auditor view, monitoring officer views. Maintaining balance between planning and managing LGR issues and maintaining existing services. Approach to risk management of transition and internal controls.

What evidence is there of the councils improving outcomes?

Improvement against corporate and LAA priorities

Stronger, resilient communities

- 18 Kennet District Council is using surplus capital funds well to help fund community projects. The Council has increased the amount of grant aid available for community projects that meet corporate priorities including a multi-use games area at Le Marchant Barracks site. The Council is closely monitoring the use of its leisure centres to help inform the leisure strategy for the new Wiltshire Council.
- 19 North Wiltshire District Council is improving leisure opportunities for local communities. The Council has continued to implement a programme of enhancements to its leisure centres including upgrades to increase energy efficiency and reduce running costs. The Council is targeting grant funding to improve play areas throughout the district and to increase the number of play schemes, leisure and sporting activities. It has upgraded all its play areas to comply with the DDA and is encouraging town and parish councils to follow through targeted grant aid.
- 20 Salisbury District Council is setting up a parish council for the City. This is in line with a widespread aspiration amongst residents, the business community and other stakeholders to have an effective city council that can ensure the residents of Salisbury have a strong voice in shaping their city's future.
- 21 West Wiltshire District Council has made improvements in leisure services. It has improved play areas and the number of people using leisure facilities has increased. And the Council is working with DC leisure to improve access for disabled people. This includes the development of the Inclusive Fitness Initiative which provides specific sessions and clubs.

Affordable housing

- 22 Over the past year the districts have met their targets to provide affordable homes and are on course to meet the LAA target for the current year. This has been achieved through successful use of section 106 agreements with developers.

What evidence is there of the councils improving outcomes?

- 23** Performance of the private sector housing functions across the districts is weak. Their current knowledge is insufficient to allow them to proactively enforce the housing health and safety rating system (HHSRS). Work has, however, begun to address this lack of information. The districts have collaborated with the Building Research Establishment (BRE) to design a survey to take place in early 2009. The districts have managed to increase the funding available for enabling vulnerable people to stay in their homes through grants and associated funding initiatives but this has taken resources from other parts of the private sector function. There is a risk that the present complex structures, with some work being undertaken outside the housing departments, different reporting mechanisms and lack of inherited knowledge in the districts will make it difficult for the new authority to use the greater resources it will have at its disposal.
- 24** Kennet District Council has met many of its housing targets. Last year it enabled 250 affordable homes and a further 88 have been delivered in the first half of this year, against a target for the year of 100 for the whole year. It has significantly reduced the number of priority homeless applicants to nine against a target of 75, continued to avoid using bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation while reducing the number of people who are in temporary accommodation to just 29 families. But it has failed to meet its targets for the length of time households are remaining in hostel accommodation.
- 25** North Wiltshire District Council has met some housing targets early. Homelessness prevention is good and the number of households in temporary accommodation has reduced to 32, significantly beyond the target of halving it by 2010. But it is not meeting targets for the number of households in B&B and the length of stay in B&B and hostels. The council looks likely to exceed its target for delivering new affordable homes in 2008/09 with 117 new affordable homes delivered to date against a target for the year of 135.
- 26** Salisbury has improved performance in managing income from its social rented houses and has sufficient knowledge of its stock to help it comply with decent homes criteria by 2010. Satisfaction with the repairs service is high but its actual performance has been problematic with confusion around giving or keeping appointments and problems completing repairs on time. It has delivered 46 new affordable homes so far this year and exceeded targets for reducing B&B and preventing homelessness. But it has not sustained a reduction in the number of people living in temporary accommodation and the length of time households stay in B&B. Attempts to renegotiate its maintenance contracts, using modern procurement methods, have been stopped by the freeze on entering new contracts until a cabinet for the new council is in place. Governance arrangements for the landlord function have not been finalised by the Implementation Executive making it unclear what level of involvement tenants and leaseholders will have in the delivery of housing services by the new authority.

What evidence is there of the councils improving outcomes?

- 27 West Wiltshire District Council has met some housing targets early. It has eliminated the use of bed and breakfast entirely and reduced the number of people who are in temporary accommodation to just 60 families. This is a target that the Council had to reach by 2010, but the council has not met targets to reduce the length of time households are remaining in hostel accommodation. Last year the council failed to meet its target of 200 new affordable homes, delivering 133. So far this year (in the first two quarters) 79 new affordable homes have been delivered against a target for the year of 116. West Wiltshire District Council's Housing PFI project is progressing despite now only having one bidder.

Planning performance

- 28 Planning performance across the districts is mixed. It is important that the new Council improves the planning service, not least because it has an important role to play in delivering affordable housing targets.
- 29 Kennet District Council's planning performance is mixed. Processing of major planning applications is improving and is only just below the Council's annual target after the first six months. But processing of minor and other applications are currently below target.
- 30 North Wiltshire District Council's planning performance is mixed. Although the processing of major planning applications remained among the best performing councils nationally in 2007/08, performance in the first six months of 2008/09 has fallen and processing of minor and other applications has deteriorated.
- 31 Salisbury District Council's planning performance has deteriorated throughout the year but its performance for dealing with minor and other applications remains above average when compared nationally. But the amount of time taken to deal with major planning applications has now slipped to below average. And completion of the core strategy has been delayed because of new decision making processes.
- 32 The performance of West Wiltshire District Council's planning service continues to be a problem. Performance indicators show that performance deteriorated between 2006/07 and 2007/08 and is amongst the worst nationally for dealing with all types of planning applications. There have been recent improvements and a new interim manager is making changes and the Council is providing resources to secure further improvement. But the way that the Council currently does things (for example how decisions are made about what applications need to be decided by a committee) means that performance is slow to improve.

Lives not services

- 33 Kennet District Council's performance in dealing with housing benefits claims has improved. The Council reduced the time taken to process new claims from 30 days in 2006/07 to 26.6 days in 2007/08. It has also reduced the time taken to process changes in circumstances to 9.2 days. The Council reports that the time taken to process new claims and change events in 2008/09 is only 9.83 days. Performance is now around the average for district councils.

What evidence is there of the councils improving outcomes?

- 34 North Wiltshire District Council has delivered significant performance improvements to its benefits service. The improvement achieved by the application of lean thinking methodology has reduced the time taken to process new claims and change events in 2008/09 to seven days, a transformation acknowledged by the Department for Work and Pensions. The number of complaints about the Council's benefits service has fallen considerably allowing the re-deployment of two contact centre staff.
- 35 Salisbury District Council improved its performance in dealing with benefits claims. It has reduced the amount of time it takes to deal with new claims from 22.3 to 18.4 days. It has decreased the time it takes to process changes in circumstances from 3.8 days to 3.3 days and accuracy remains at 100 per cent. And it is amongst the best performing councils nationally for all these indicators.
- 36 West Wiltshire District Council has improved its benefits service. The Council carried out a review to improve the approach to benefits processing and this has improved the service for people. It has reduced the amount of time it takes to process a benefits claim (from 36.7 days in 2006/07 to 26.3 days in 2007/08 for new claims; from 9.7 days to 8.9 days for changes in circumstances, improved accuracy (from 96.8 per cent to 97.87 per cent) and reduced running costs by £40,000 per year. The Council delivered these improvements at the same time as the number of cases it had to deal with increased by over 3 per cent. But performance for both speed and accuracy still remains below average when compared nationally. The Council reports that it is now processing new claims and changes in circumstances in six days.

Economic growth

- 37 Kennet District Council is working with partners to preserve employment opportunities in the area. The Council has maintained a watching brief on the economic state of the District and maintains good relationships with key business partnerships. Through community leadership the Council has secured significant external funding for community based projects.
- 38 North Wiltshire District Council is working in partnership to support and improve the local economy. Work has started on the redevelopment of the Phelps Parade in Calne and the Council is working with Wiltshire County Council on redevelopment plans for Bath Road in Chippenham. The Council has also requisitioned an economic assessment of the district looking at the impact of the current downturn on the local economy.
- 39 Salisbury District Council has not made the progress that it had planned around its economic development priority and some timescales have slipped. The County Council has employed a new director responsible for this area of work.
- 40 West Wiltshire District Council has delivered a range of projects aimed at improving the vitality of its five towns. Good progress has been made in developing partnerships and processes to deliver future regeneration as well as improvements in some areas and funded proposals for others.

What evidence is there of the councils improving outcomes?

Safer communities

- 41 Overall crime in Wiltshire is low. Home Office statistics indicate that crime in Wiltshire is the second lowest in the south west relative to population. For the first six months of 2008/09 crime levels have fallen by eight per cent when compared to the same period in the previous year. Of the four districts, Kennet and North Wiltshire have lower crime levels than the average for their most similar Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs), West Wiltshire crime levels are average and Salisbury's worse than average. The level of crime relative to population varies across the districts, with West Wiltshire being nearly one and a half times as high as Kennet.

Environment

- 42 Kennet District Council is maintaining high levels of recycling household waste. The Council has exceeded its target of 45 per cent in the first six months of 2008/09 and has achieved 26.87 per cent of household waste recycled and 21.81 per cent of household waste composted. The Council has cancelled its plans to introduce kerbside collection of plastics and cardboard. The Council exceeded the DEFRA target and has maintained service levels with limited resources and within tight financial constraints.
- 43 Street and environmental cleanliness in Kennet is excellent. The Council has maintained zero levels for graffiti and fly posting and is exceeding its target of 9 per cent for litter and detritus in 2008/09 reporting a current rate of 5 per cent.
- 44 North Wiltshire District Council is steadily reducing the amount of waste collected and meeting its recycling targets although it hasn't reported the performance data to show this. Roadshows held in June 2008 identified a local desire to recycle plastics and cardboard and the Council is implementing six new collection sites across the district. Another series of roadshows aimed at reducing food waste is planned for the run up to Christmas. The Council has not fully implemented its garden waste strategy due to a limited supply of wheely bins but the introduction of new depot systems allows targeting of specific communities. As a result the green waste collection service has improved and the associated income has increased.
- 45 North Wiltshire District Council is making good progress in improving the cleanliness of its streets and public open spaces. The Council has introduced new cleaning schedules and work patterns and introduced two emergency response units. As a result, the Council has exceeded its LPSA target for 2007/08 and residents have recognised the improvements.
- 46 Salisbury District Council has improved its recycling and composting rate although is not yet meeting its targets due to a delayed roll out of new collections. Currently (quarter 2) recycling rates are at 26.21 per cent an improvement on the last quarter (23.68 per cent) against a target of 29 per cent. Composting rates are at 4.59 per cent for quarter 2 compared with 4.23 per cent for quarter 1 against a target of 7 per cent. Performance against street cleanliness targets has been mixed but remains on target.

What evidence is there of the councils improving outcomes?

- 47 Salisbury District Council is on target for most of its public realm ambitions. These include competitions for ideas and consultation for market places and some new bus shelters. But problems manufacturing signs for Salisbury city centre pedestrian schemes have resulted in delays but the Council hopes that these will not impact on the final completion date of January 2009.
- 48 West Wiltshire District Council is making good progress with its recycling services. Its target is to reuse, recycle or compost 41 per cent of waste this year. So far in the first two quarters it has achieved 51 per cent and 47 per cent respectively. But the amount of residual waste at quarter two was 213 kg per head against an annual target of 403kg per head in total and there is a risk that the Council won't meet this figure.
- 49 Cleanliness in West Wiltshire is mostly improving. West Wiltshire District Council has met the targets that it set itself for litter, graffiti and fly posting but not fly tipping which continues to be problematic. As a result the Council has increased surveillance to get enough evidence to take action. The Council signed a new joint contract last year with the County Council, Selwood Housing and a landscape contractor. This has resulted in improvements to street cleaning and grounds maintenance reflected in a reduction in related complaints in West Wiltshire.

Wider community outcomes

Complaint handling

- 50 Kennet District Council's handling of complaints referred to the Ombudsman is good. The Ombudsman's view is that the Council's complaints system is working well and the Council responds to the Ombudsman faster than any of the other Wiltshire districts, and exceeds the Ombudsman's target of 28 days, at an average of 21.7 days.
- 51 North Wiltshire District Council's handling of complaints referred to the Ombudsman is good. The Ombudsman's view is that the Council has a robust and easily accessible complaints system. Responses are good and appropriately self-critical with appropriate remedies. The speed of response to the Ombudsman was slightly below target this year, 32.6 days, because of the complex nature of some of the issues but the Ombudsman found officers to be prompt and helpful.
- 52 Salisbury District Council's handling of complaints referred to the ombudsman is comparatively weak. It took longer than any of the other Wiltshire districts, on average, to respond to the Ombudsman. The Council took 87.5 days on average (the target is 28 days). And the Ombudsman's view is that the Council's complaints system could be improved. But the average time taken does reflect the impact of one particularly complex case that took a long time to resolve and there has been an overall reduction in the number of complaints to the Ombudsman.
- 53 West Wiltshire District Council's handling of such complaints is adequate. The Ombudsman's view is that the Council has a robust complaints procedure and that complaints receive careful investigation. But the Council takes too long to respond to the Ombudsman at an average of 47 days (the target is 28 days).

What evidence is there of the councils improving outcomes?

Access to services

- 54** Kennet District Council continues to provide quality services that are good value for money. The Council focus is on the provision of services to local residents in line with agreed minimum standards. It recently merged its reception and call centre teams improving capacity and broadening the skills mix. Improvements to the Council's website include the planning portal and development of e-forms on behalf of the new Wiltshire Council.
- 55** North Wiltshire District Council has made it much easier for customers to access council services. The Council's customer contact centre is working towards developing a one-stop-shop approach in line with the plans for the new Wiltshire Council. Improvements to the Council's website include a wider range of online payment options, better search facilities for planning applications and comprehensive information about consultation and feedback.
- 56** Salisbury District Council's website provides helpful information about consultation. It clearly sets out what consultations are currently underway and how you can get involved. It also provides results of recent consultations and gives information about the different mechanisms that the Council uses including citizens' panels and consultation aimed at young people.
- 57** Salisbury District Council considers the views of local people in setting its budget. It uses an online tool to get the views of local people on how resources should be allocated. And the results from this are presented alongside the annual budget setting report to full council.
- 58** Salisbury District Council has made some progress this year with its work on equalities. It has produced a draft equalities scheme, delivered some training and carried out some equality impact assessments.
- 59** West Wiltshire District Council works well to support vulnerable people. Recent examples include improved translation services; changes to the phone system to improve usability and access for customers with learning difficulties; revenues and benefits roadshows and provision of a court desk service to provide housing and related advice for repossession cases.
- 60** West Wiltshire District Council has successfully bid for money to carry out research into the housing needs of its migrant worker community. It used the money to carry out a survey of Polish workers living in houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) which helped to inform the Council about the state of such housing in the district as well as the aspirations of some of its migrant workers.

Value for money

- 61** All four districts can demonstrate adequate or good value for money in the provision of services.

What evidence is there of the councils improving outcomes?

- 62 At Kennet District Council, expenditure per head on services remains below average. Service performance has been maintained with limited resources and within tight financial constraints. Through its community leadership role the Council has secured significant external funding for a range of community based projects. The Council has a record of strong performance management arrangements.
- 63 At North Wiltshire District Council the costs of services are mostly low compared to similar councils. Total expenditure has reduced since last year in comparison to others with most significant reduction in environment, planning and transport. The Council targets its resources in priority areas and areas in need of improvement. It does not use cost comparisons with other similar councils to help monitor value for money. Any comparisons it does carry out are increasingly limited to the other Wiltshire districts in preparation for the unitary council next year.
- 64 Salisbury District Council's costs are mixed when compared to other councils but the Council has a good understanding of where costs are relatively high and can provide reasonable explanations for this. People at the Council are committed to delivering efficiencies and this is reflected in the way they work. Managers have performance targets for the efficiencies needed in their areas and they manage these along with other performance measures and the budget. Local government reorganisation has resulted in less emphasis on these targets this year.
- 65 West Wiltshire District Council has continued to keep costs low whilst maintaining service performance in comparison with others. Total expenditure on services per head remains low and is amongst the lowest 25 per cent nationally. The Council continues to have robust arrangements for managing costs and performance. It has a clear process of service review where costs or performance is not satisfactory and action is taken to improve both. The Council has a tradition of buying in services and using others to deliver services, either individually or with others.

How much progress is being made to implement improvement plans to sustain improvement?

Quality of plans

- 66 Kennet District Council is taking a pragmatic approach to transition planning. Normally the Council would update its corporate strategy as part of the annual best value performance plan (BVPP) review but is focussing on the LGR process as a more effective use of resources. Officers from the Council are working closely with Wiltshire County Council and the other Wiltshire districts to ensure a smooth transition of services and reporting arrangements once the new authority is in place.
- 67 North Wiltshire District Council has developed a robust approach to transition planning. The Council's Transitional Corporate Plan focuses on three priority areas with associated goals and key actions supported by a strategic corporate risk register.
- 68 North Wiltshire District Council is making good progress on plans to improve sustainability. The Council is investigating the viability of a hydro-electric plant on the riverbank adjoining its Monkton Park offices. The Council is also releasing £0.5m in community grants for community owned assets such as parish halls and community centres to provide energy audits including a comprehensive report and fitted energy meter.
- 69 Salisbury District Council has adopted a pragmatic approach to transition planning. It has produced a corporate and transition plan that clearly sets out what the Council plans to do in the short term and aligns it to the LAA. The plan sets out immediate priorities and the related actions, with some SMART targets, to deliver them. The Plan also describes longer term aspirations for south Wiltshire and includes a comprehensive risk assessment.
- 70 Salisbury District Council has carried out a comprehensive scrutiny review looking at what it can do to adapt to and mitigate climate change. The resulting report is comprehensive, recognising the role of some key services such as planning, estates management and housing. It includes some detailed recommendations to reduce environmental impacts that cover some key areas where councils can have the greatest influence. This report could prove very useful to the continuing authority.
- 71 West Wiltshire District Council has taken a pragmatic approach to its transition plans. It has put plans to review its corporate plan on hold and has set out what work it will continue, what work will change significantly and what it will stop as a result of LGR. Managers have revisited their service plans accordingly. This is a sensible and pragmatic approach that clearly sets out the rationale for what will and won't continue in West Wiltshire prior to vesting day.

How much progress is being made to implement improvement plans to sustain improvement?

- 72 West Wiltshire District Council has clearly set out the existing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with its five towns improvement initiatives. This provides some clarity about what the new council needs to consider in the West Wiltshire area but it lacks SMART targets or actions to ensure that the five towns initiative continues.

Future plans for housing

- 73 Combining the four Housing Options services will be difficult as they are currently structured differently and have a variety of approaches to preventing homelessness and providing temporary accommodation. An added complication is that one of the three districts retains its housing stock and the other three do not. There is a risk that essential homelessness policies and procedures to allow the new authority to fulfil its statutory duties will not be in place for vesting day as they are dependant on staff being in place to develop them, particularly a head of service.
- 74 The districts have made the pragmatic decision to survey the housing markets across the county and to develop county-wide policies before developing a new housing strategy in 2010. As three of the current strategies have either ended or been extended to April 2009 a risk that new opportunities will be delayed exists and issues affecting individual housing markets will be missed.
- 75 The districts are working closely together to implement a choice based lettings scheme. Homes 4 Wiltshire is intended to provide an integrated service across Wiltshire to improve access to housing by applicants. Building on the experience of Kennet and West Wiltshire, the districts have obtained a government grant of £128,000 to develop the IT for the scheme. The councils are doing this in partnership with 29 housing associations and two homebuy agents. Initially the scheme will only cover general needs housing allowing statutory requirements to be met but also factoring in local connection and suitability. This will be extended to specialised social housing, other forms of low cost housing and accredited private landlords in the future. The districts have jointly developed a common policy and from November 2008 applicants will fill in a single application across the County. Implementation of the scheme will provide a useful chance to test the structures envisaged for all housing services. But the implementation of the scheme has been delayed and is now due to start in February 2009, not September 2008 as originally intended. Further delays are likely. Homes 4 Wiltshire will also reduce the ability of landlords to transfer tenants. This risks affecting satisfaction with landlord services in the new authority.

How much progress is being made to implement improvement plans to sustain improvement?

Implementation of plans

Districts role in the transition

- 76 The districts are contributing well to the development of services in the new council for Wiltshire. For example, a group of councillors from the cross council joint overview and scrutiny committee, supported by officers from West Wiltshire District Council and with contributions from others, produced a comprehensive report with recommendations for how development control should be delivered in the future. This work involved discussions with the planning advisory service, meeting with parish councillors, district councillors and officers. The new Service Director responsible for this area will be using this report as a basis for developing the future service delivery.

Ongoing performance management in districts

- 77 Performance management systems differ across the district councils. Performance officers are starting to meet and review the various systems and associated performance management frameworks.
- 78 Kennet District Council is continuing to monitor performance robustly against its corporate priorities. The Council is concentrating on the new national and local performance indicators that measure key performance against the corporate strategy but continues to collect data that may be useful to the new Wiltshire Council. The Council continues to report performance quarterly to the its Overview and Scrutiny Management Board and to the Management Team. The Council is working closely with Wiltshire Council to ensure the smooth hand over of data collection systems and is leading on the co-ordination of performance information for the whole county in the areas of economic development, housing, planning and environmental health services, where key targets have been agreed across the county.
- 79 North Wiltshire District Council's arrangements to monitor performance during the transition phase are good. The Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee meets quarterly to review performance against the transitional corporate plan targets. However although the Council is continuing to record performance against the new national indicator set and a bundle of local performance indicators it does not plan to report performance against these until January 2009.
- 80 Salisbury District Council is continuing to report performance across most priorities but not all. The latest performance report (December 2008) does contain updates on a number of key tasks and performance indicators but not all. For example, there is no report on tasks around air quality in urban areas that should have been completed in September and October 2008. And for key tasks around reducing inequalities in health and improving wellbeing the report simply states 'range of events delivered' for numerous actions. Councillors do receive additional information via press releases etc. for some of these actions.
- 81 Regular performance monitoring is still taking place at West Wiltshire District Council. The Council produces regular performance management reports that contain highlights of good and poor performance and corrective action where necessary.

How much progress is being made to implement improvement plans to sustain improvement?

Support for staff in districts

- 82** All of the districts are providing support for staff throughout the transition but we still found some people who are uncertain and anxious. This is inevitable at a time of such change but highlights the need to continue with regular and consistent communication across all the councils.
- 83** Kennet District Council is providing good support for its staff during the transition period. Information on key performance areas is cascaded to officers through the staff bulletin and to the public via the Council newspaper and press releases. The Council has a standing agenda item at Management Team and Policy Board meetings to discuss staffing issues and provides a fortnightly newsletter to staff complimented by informal meetings and updates from the Chief Executive and directors. The new Wiltshire Council has also been running road shows for staff.
- 84** North Wiltshire District Council is providing good support for its staff and councillors through the transition period. The Council has delivered a comprehensive programme of member training since April 2008 including development for roles in the new Wiltshire Council. A number of workshops have been provided for employees aimed at supporting individuals through the period of uncertainty. These include career planning, interviewing skills, writing CVs and pre-retirement courses. The Council has been open and transparent and staff have a good understanding of the situation which is reflected in good retention of staff. The morale of staff is higher than expected although some staff do not yet know where they will be geographically based in the new Council.
- 85** Salisbury District Council has provided good support for staff and councillors through the transition period. The Chief Executive has made significant efforts to regularly engage with staff by holding monthly face to face sessions and attending two service team meetings a month. The Council has also provided training and coaching to help team leaders to take on more responsibilities as service managers have left. It has a detailed action plan to ensure that staff are supported through the transition to one council. The plan contains a wide range of actions to cover things like leadership; communication; training; dealing with unions; redundancies; secondment opportunities, backfilling and reward for acting roles.
- 86** West Wiltshire District Council is providing good support to its staff through the transition. It has redirected training resources to provide training and support around skills for the transition such as CV writing, interview skills and project management and it has regularly communicated with staff. Despite this, some staff, particularly those on temporary contracts are still uncertain about their future.

How much progress is being made to implement improvement plans to sustain improvement?

Capacity

- 87** Kennet District Council is responding well to the challenge of delivering its corporate plans during the transition period. The Council has responded to the loss of key members of staff by merging several senior posts, for example the Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer roles are now covered by a single officer. The Council has reduced the number of committees and have arrangements in place to retain the services of its senior directors, including the Director of Resources, as they transfer to the County Council. The Council is also employing more temporary and agency staff to maintain capacity but turnover of staff has stabilised and is now low. Arrangements are also in place with the County Council providing cover for the audit office. Sickness levels are also low. A further £200,000 of grant funding has been awarded to improve play areas in conjunction with Devizes and Marlborough Town Councils.
- 88** North Wiltshire District Council is managing its resources well to retain the capacity to deliver its corporate plans. Capacity is gradually declining but the Council is reducing the number of regular committee meetings and associated support and re-deploying staff to priority areas. Where necessary interim managers have been appointed on temporary short-term contracts rather than recruiting. The Council's six month review and report forecasts a £650k underspend in 2008/09, a large underspend on permanent staff but overspend on temporary and agency staff in line with the strategy.
- 89** Salisbury District Council is responding well to ensure that services are delivered in the transition period. For example because the County is funding secondments from the Council, it is able to put backfilling arrangements in place. This includes employing interim managers to cover for sickness and responding to individual issues as they arise with appropriate actions. And the Council continues to enhance capacity by attracting external funding, for example, a Stage 1 Heritage Lottery Bid for £48,700 to upgrade Victoria Park and external funding for sports and active recreation of £105,000.
- 90** West Wiltshire District Council is managing the transition well. It has made decisions about which services to focus on and there has been little deterioration in services during the time of change. The Council has secured external funding to ensure future leisure service provision. For example, it has secured £240,000 lottery funding for play areas, delivered this year, and £126,000 for community sport initiatives over the next two years.

Arrangements and corporate governance

- 91** Developing arrangements for the smooth transition to the new Wiltshire Council, while maintaining service standards, are key priorities for Kennet District Council. The Council identified risks associated with transition at an early stage and is working with Wiltshire County Council to minimise the impact of these risks. Community leadership, developing strong, safe and healthy communities, stewardship of the environment and improving services remained priority areas. Funding has been made available for a range of community based projects, in consultation with Wiltshire County Council, within a sound financial framework. Robust governance arrangements remain in place and this is reflected in our Use of Resources 2008 assessment, which again showed that the Council was performing well in all areas. The Council continues to monitor arrangements to ensure that these remain sound in the period leading up to the establishment of the new Wiltshire Council.
- 92** North Wiltshire District Council recognised at an early stage the need to review its corporate plans and priorities and the revised plan focussed on three priority areas: cleansing and amenities; revenues and benefits; and customer focus. The Council has continued to implement action plans to improve services in these priority areas. Governance arrangements remain adequate and action has continued during the year to strengthen existing arrangements to ensure that sound governance arrangements remain in place in the period up to the establishment of the new Wiltshire Council. The Council has adequate financial reserves, despite uncertainty around £4m invested in Icelandic banks. The non repayment of £1m due in October did not cause the Council any short term problems, as the Council has been able to draw on other funds.
- 93** Relationships between Salisbury District Council and the County council have improved in the last six months and Salisbury District Council has a good approach to risk management for the transition. Transition risks appear in the corporate risk register and service heads are currently in the process of updating their service risk registers to include service specific transition risks. And the Council has produced a risk register around managing if service heads leave. No significant weaknesses exist in financial arrangements at Salisbury District Council that impact on the future one council. The Council continues to exercise tight control of its budget with no major variations in spending patterns. Reserves have generally been strengthened, apart from the use of capital receipts to fund capital spending which have been further used during 2007/08 in accordance with the existing investment policy.
- 94** West Wiltshire District Council is taking a pragmatic approach to the transition. Councillors are making appropriate decisions to ensure that they pass on a council where service performance has not deteriorated and appropriate projects (such as refurbishing a multi-storey car park) have been completed. The Council is using its established risk management approach to incorporate risks to its services resulting from the transition. No significant weaknesses in financial arrangements exist at West Wiltshire Council that impact on the future one council. The Council has moderated its spending to avoid borrowing.

The Audit Commission

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