

Service Inspection Report

July 2008



# Planning Inspection

**Bassetlaw District Council**

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## 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 coordination 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 (KLOEs) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website 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

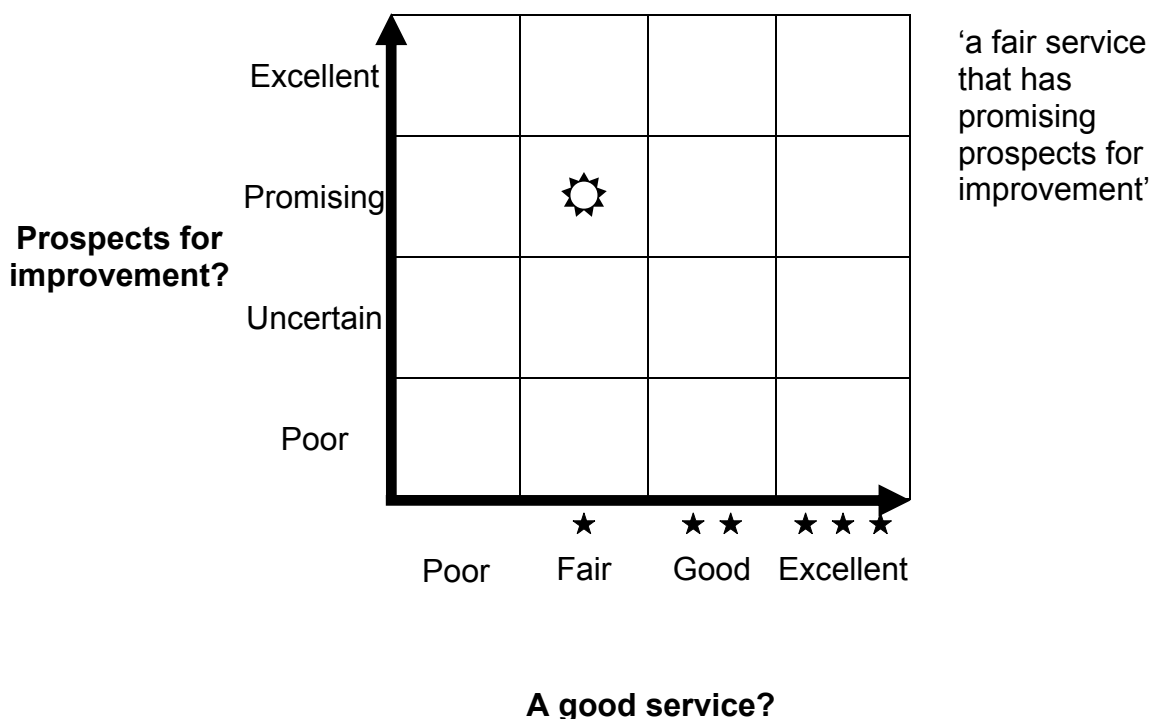
- 1 This report is based on an inspection undertaken in two stages. The first stage of the inspection was undertaken in June 2007. It was agreed that rather than issue a report and score for both judgements at that time, as there were a number of significant changes taking place, it was necessary to re-inspect in April 2008 to clarify the prospects for future improvement. The first judgement has been fixed as at June 2007 with the second judgement reflecting the findings in June 2007 and April 2008. The overall report therefore reflects the service at two different times.
- 2 Bassetlaw District Council is in north Nottinghamshire with borders to Lincolnshire and South Yorkshire. It has two main towns, Worksop and Retford, and a relatively low population density of 171 people per square kilometre. The district has a population of 109,400 with 2.74 per cent from minority ethnic communities which is below the national average of 13 per cent. There are good road and rail links and Bassetlaw is within easy commuter distance of Sheffield, Rotherham, Mansfield, Nottingham, Doncaster and Lincoln.
- 3 The Council identified three strategic priorities for 2005/07 which are: community safety; community prosperity and community engagement. The Council's Planning Service should be a key contributor in helping the Council deliver its priorities. The Planning Service should also be at the forefront of delivering the national priority of delivering sustainable communities and place shaping.
- 4 The Council's Planning Service was inspected by the Audit Commission in early 2005 which found the service to be a 'fair' service with uncertain prospects for improvement. Following the 2005 inspection an action plan was put in place to improve performance over a three year period. Phase one focussed on improving the speed of determining planning applications and at the time of the 2007 inspection visit phase two, which focussed on aligning the service with strategic priorities and improving the service for customers was just being started.
- 5 The inspection which started in 2007 and concluded in 2008 was undertaken using a revised methodology set out in 'Approach to Service Inspections' published in May 2005. This methodology takes a wider approach and covers in more depth how well the service achieves value for money and takes account of diversity as well as being more focused on outcomes. The inspection examined development control (including enforcement and appeals); planning policy; other sub-sections of planning such as design and conservation; and planning administration. We concluded that overall, Planning Services at Bassetlaw District Council are 'fair' with 'promising' prospects for improvement.

- 6 The Council is delivering a fair Planning Service. The service is assisting in the delivery of the Council's priorities including the enabling of new employment and residential developments to provide jobs for local people. The staff are helpful and provide constructive advice to enable the public to improve the quality of proposals and understand the process. There is a range of written guidance available and pre-application discussions are encouraged to help issues to be identified and resolved. Until recently the Council has been slow to determine planning applications but since 2006/07 these are now being determined quicker and within the national targets.
- 7 However, there are no published service user standards which reflect users' needs and set out the level of service they can expect to receive. There is a lack of up-to-date local planning policy which is hindering the delivery of local and national priorities. The percentage of appeals which overturn the Council's decision to refuse planning permission is high. Engagement with, and assessment of the impact of service delivery and policy implementation on the diverse and disadvantaged sections of the community is not established, so the Council cannot be sure that the Planning Service is meeting their needs. There is no effective enforcement function to ensure the amenities of residents and the natural and built environment are protected. Overall, the service is not delivering value for money.
- 8 The service has promising prospects for improvement. There is a clear commitment by councillors and senior officers to improve the Planning Service. The previous poor performance relating to the speed of determining planning applications has been addressed and the monitoring and management of service performance has improved. Until the Council is able to fully progress local planning policy, it has been progressing its evidence base upon which the Core Strategy will be based through a range of studies with neighbouring councils. The service has responded positively to previous issues around capacity and has increased and refocused its capacity to prepare for future service demands. The Council has strong and visible leadership of its Planning Services and the Council is starting to become actively involved in the place shaping of the district.
- 9 A comprehensive workforce plan has yet to be developed and put in place, although the service is taking action to develop and train its staff. In addition, a councillor training programme, which is clearly linked to skill gaps or priorities, has not been developed. The service improvement plan is centred around the weaknesses identified in the service but it is not SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, resources and timely) with clear user focussed outcomes identified.
- 10 To help improve the service the Commission makes three recommendations to address the weaknesses identified. These are: to improve customer focus; improve value for money; and make and implement plans to meet the future demands on the service.

## Scoring the service

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

**Figure 1 Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>:**



Source: Audit Commission

- 12 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- the service is assisting in the delivery of the Council's priorities including the provision of employment and housing;
  - staff are helpful and provide constructive advice to enable the public to improve the quality of proposals and understand the processes;
  - a range of written guidance is available and pre-application discussions are encouraged to help issues to be identified and resolved; and
  - planning applications are now being determined quicker and within the national timescales.

<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.

## 8 Planning Inspection Revisit | Scoring the service

However:

- there are no published service user standards which are informed by users and set out the level of service users can expect;
- understanding and consideration of diversity issues relating to service delivery and policy implementation is not established;
- a lack of an up-to-date local policy base is hindering delivery of local and national priorities;
- enforcement is ineffective; and
- the service is not delivering value for money.

13 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- there is clear commitment by councillors and senior officers to improve the Planning Services within the Council;
- the Council has strong and visible leadership of its Planning Services and is starting to become actively involved in the place shaping of the district;
- the Council has increased and refocused service capacity to prepare it to meet future identified demands on the service;
- the service has improved areas of poor performance relating to the speed of determining planning applications. It has also sought to address capacity and recruitment difficulties through a variety of means; and
- service performance is clearly monitored and managed within a robust performance management framework.

However:

- the service is not supported by a SMART improvement plan with user focussed outcomes. This will limit the potential for significant improvements being made that the public and users will notice;
- a comprehensive workforce development plan has yet to be developed and progressed. This is resulting in a less than optimal use of limited training resources; and
- the Council has not developed a councillor training plan linked to skills and knowledge gaps. This would ensure that members are kept up-to-date and would enhance the quality and value of decisions made in respect of planning applications.

## Recommendations

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 Improve the customer focus of the Planning Service by:*

- *enhancing the existing arrangements for engaging with stakeholders, agents, developers and other service users in order to fully understand their needs to shape service improvements and policy;*
- *proactively engaging with the minority and disadvantaged sectors of the community to ensure their needs are understood and met;*
- *developing, publishing and regularly reviewing customer service standards for all parts of the service; and*
- *ensuring written guidance is readily accessible.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to ensure improvements are what customers want and need;
- to provide more effective service delivery for the customer and Council;
- to clarify customers' expectations of what service levels are provided;
- to improve equality of access to Planning Services; and
- to improve customer satisfaction.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2008.

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<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.

**Recommendation**

*R2 Improve value for money by:*

- *managers and councillors using cost information alongside performance information to challenge and drive up performance;*
- *using the comparative data to identify areas in which performance is low compared to that achieved in other councils; and*
- *using benchmarking with other high performing councils and councils that have significantly improved their performance.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- that improved value for money will be secured by the service; and
- improved performance.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2008

**Recommendation**

*R3 Make and implement plans to meet future demands on the Planning Service by:*

- *investigating alternative ways of delivering Planning Services, for example shared service agreements or partnering with other councils or organisations for enforcement;*
- *develop and train staff through the implementation of a comprehensive workforce plan; and*
- *an ongoing programme of councillor training linked to priorities and skill gaps.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- greater service capacity resilience;
- availability of skills needed to maintain and improve services;
- delivery of outcomes that meet local needs; and
- enhanced value of decisions made in respect of planning applications and the minimisation of upheld planning appeals.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2008.

# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 14 Bassetlaw District Council is in north Nottinghamshire with borders to Lincolnshire and South Yorkshire. The population of the area is 109,400 with 2.74 per cent from minority ethnic communities. The main towns are Worksop and Retford. Bassetlaw has a relatively low population density of 171 people per square kilometre. It has good road and rail links, with the A1 and the East Coast mainline running through the district, and is within easy commuter distance of Sheffield, Rotherham, Mansfield, Nottingham, Doncaster and Lincoln.
- 15 There is a relatively high level of deprivation, Bassetlaw District Council being ranked 82 out of 254, and there are seven areas which fall into the most deprived 10 per cent in the country. These fall into Carlton, Worksop North West, Worksop South and Worksop South East wards. The main employment sectors in Bassetlaw are public administration (24.5 per cent) and distribution (23.5 per cent).
- 16 The district is a former coal mining area and has received assistance for the economic redevelopment of the area since the early 1990s. This means that regeneration and attracting new jobs to the area are important to the Council. In addition, the new Robin Hood airport at Finningley lies just outside the district, and making the most of this opportunity is a significant challenge faced by the Council.
- 17 Bassetlaw is situated adjacent to Clumber Park and parts of the district encompass the woodland of Sherwood Forest. Within the district there are four sites on the English Heritage 'Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historical Interest in England,' 19 conservation areas, over 1,000 listed buildings, and 20 sites of special scientific interest.

### The Council

- 18 The Council is made up of 48 Councillors. Following the May 2008 elections, there are 30 Conservative, 16 Labour and 2 Independent Councillors. The Conservative Group forms the Political Administration of the Council. Cabinet members' portfolios are aligned to each of the services, which reflect the Council's priorities which were revised in January 2007 following the implementation of a new organisational structure.
- 19 The Council employs 483 (FTE) people, having a net budget of £16 million, and a capital programme of £15 million. In December 2003 the Council was judged as 'fair' (out of a range of poor, weak, fair, good and excellent) in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment.

## The Council's Planning Service

- 20 The Council's Planning Service was inspected by the Audit Commission in early 2005 which found the service to be a 'fair' service with uncertain prospects for improvement. The inspection carried out in 2007 was undertaken using revised key lines of enquiry and methodology set out in the Audit Commission's 'Approach to service inspections' published in May 2005. This revised approach is wider and covers in more depth how well the service achieves value for money and takes account of diversity as well as being more focused on outcomes.
- 21 The purpose of the inspection was to examine the Council's strategic planning function and in particular to look at how the Council is using its planning powers and functions to deliver its strategic priorities around community safety, community prosperity and community engagement. The inspection also looked at the functional areas of planning such as development control and enforcement in order to establish the impact of these activities on achieving local, regional and national priorities but it did not focus on operational detail.
- 22 The services inspected included:
- Planning Policy and Implementation;
  - Development Control (including enforcement and appeals); and
  - Planning Support providing services to the above units.
- 23 The inspection did not include specific examination of:
- Building Control;
  - Searches; or
  - Economic Development.
- 24 Following the 2005 inspection, the Council produced an action plan which has formed the basis of actions to improve performance over the last three years. Phase one focused on improving the speed of determining planning applications. At the time of this inspection the service was embarking on a second phase of prioritised improvements set out in the service plan for 2007/08. This includes implementation of a lower level restructure and the recruitment of a new Head of Community Prosperity, whose remit includes the Planning Service. During this transitional period the service had an interim, part-time Head of Planning to replace the Head of Planning Services who left the authority in October 2006. The Council carried out a further internal review of Planning as part of its review of Community Prosperity services, which it concluded in March 2008.

- 25 The Council was identified by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) as a Planning Standards Authority for its poor performance in dealing with planning applications in the following years: 2005/06 for major applications and 2006/07 for major and other applications. As such, the service has been subject to a detailed examination by the DCLG of the operational aspects of development control. This inspection has not repeated this work but rather has examined and reports on how development control contributes to: access, customer care, user and/or community focus; the delivery of corporate, regional and national priorities and; value for money. The service was not designated as a Planning Standards Authority in 2007/08.
- 26 The net cost of the service in 2007/08 is £1,354,130 compared to £1,526,060 in 2006/07. The Council was awarded £189,143 Planning Delivery Grant (PDG) in the 2007/08 allocation.
- 27 The service employs 54.6 FTE staff.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 28 The Community Strategy 2003/07 identified six key areas for action:
- A Prosperous Place - creating more jobs and more wealth for everyone;
  - A Learning Place - helping you to reach your potential;
  - An Attractive place - working to protect and improve our environment;
  - A Healthy Place - Helping you to improve your health and well-being;
  - A Fair Place - developing your community, with equal access to services for everyone; and
  - A Safe Place - working to reduce crime – and the fear of crime.
- 29 The Community Strategy is currently being revised for the period 2007/09.
- 30 The Council's vision for 2002 to 2007 identified in the Strategic Plan 2002/07 was 'We want Bassetlaw to be a place where people want to live, work and invest because of: our vibrant economy; our healthy, safe and inclusive communities and our quality environment'. The vision was underpinned by the following aims that the Council wished to achieve by 2007:
- promote local economic prosperity;
  - put people first;
  - increase pride and confidence in the area;
  - take care of attractive local environment;
  - increase well-being through improved community safety;
  - increase the good health of our residents; and
  - achieve excellence in public service.
- 31 In the Strategic Plan 2005-07, there are planning-related actions in the action plans under the 3 strategic priorities which include the following.
- Community Safety - community safety policies and guidance will make sure we consider community safety in new developments and planners will consult the police to make sure new buildings have security measures.
  - Community Prosperity - include a variety of well-serviced land for development within the Local Development Framework.
  - Community Engagement - consult on the preparation of the Local Development Framework as set out in the 'Statement of Community Involvement'.

- 32 For 2007/08 the Council has identified three priority areas:
- Clean and Green;
  - Safe and Strong; and
  - Jobs and Enterprise.
- 33 There is an additional cross-cutting priority of Efficient and Effective.
- 34 The vision of the Planning Service is 'To establish and implement a vision for the future planning of Bassetlaw, in consultation with the community, so as to foster enterprise and regeneration in a manner which is sustainable, improves the environment, protects our built and natural heritage, looks after the safety of buildings and helps disabled people with their mobility.'
- 35 In addition to overall corporate priorities there are service specific priorities for the year 2007/08 set out in the Planning Service Plan. These are as follows.
- Adding value to the Planning Service by maximising the benefits to the community through revisions to the Council's guidance and procedures relating to planning obligations.
  - Ensure the Council contributes to emerging regional policy to secure the best possible outcome for the community of Bassetlaw.
  - Maintain progress on the Local Development Framework (LDF).
  - Maintain levels of performance in development control while reducing appeals.
  - Prepare appraisals and management proposals for the District's Conservation Areas.
- 36 Whilst there are corporate and service visions and priorities these are not supported by outcomes that the public would recognise. It is therefore unclear what the Planning Service will deliver for the people who live, work or visit the District.
- 37 The Council's Planning Service should be a key contributor in helping the Council deliver its aims and priorities. The service, through planning policies, control of development and enforcement, should help to enable developments that satisfy the local and regional housing, employment, recreational and social needs of the community whilst at the same time conserving the environment. Planning should also be at the forefront of delivering the national priority of delivering sustainable communities and place shaping. The Planning Service operates largely within a statutory framework and development is guided and controlled through policies contained in the development plans comprising the local and structure plans and the emerging regional spatial strategy (RSS) and local development framework (LDF).

- 38 The Council has no adopted local plan. The local plan initiated in 1993 has never been formally adopted, albeit it has been given some weight in determining planning applications and appeals. The importance of having up-to-date, adopted planning policy is recognised by the Council who were quick to respond to the changes introduced by the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and it was one of the first councils to prepare and submit a core strategy. The spatial objectives for the emerging core strategy were initially devised to reflect the Council's refreshed strategic plan for Bassetlaw (2005-2007) and the Community Strategy (2003-2007) and these were subsequently revised to reflect the new strategic priorities. However, issues relating to targets for housing and employment land raised in the emerging RSS for the East Midlands have resulted in the preparation of the Council's core strategy being put on hold for reasons outside the Council's control. Additional supporting evidence will be needed before the core strategy can be put before a public inquiry for approval, which is now not expected until 2008.
- 39 Although Bassetlaw lies within Nottinghamshire, given the location of the district it is more influenced by the cities of Sheffield, Rotherham and Doncaster than Nottingham. Bassetlaw is part of the Sheffield City Region (SCR) and is at the early stages of trying to influence the economic and housing growth pressures that impact on the district.

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

#### **Accessibility, customer care and community/user focus**

- 40 Two of the Council's key aims for 2007 are to put people first and to achieve excellence. Whilst the service has made improvements, service users are not yet at the heart of service delivery and user focus and accessibility remains mixed.
- 41 Satisfaction rates are relatively high. In 2003/04, 72 per cent of customers were satisfied with the service and unaudited data for 2006/07 indicates 80 per cent are satisfied but data is not available to judge how this compares to other councils.
- 42 Planning staff are keen and helpful. Pre-application discussions are encouraged and advice given is constructive. Specialist advice on issues such as trees and conservation is available. There is, however, a reliance on senior officers such as the Interim Head of Planning and Director to negotiate with applicants due to the service employing a relatively high proportion of inexperienced officers. Customer access to such senior officers can be limited and some service users stated the quality and consistency of advice could vary depending on who gave it.

- 43 There is a range of written advice and guidance. These include leaflets on extensions and repairs to old buildings and include helpful drawings to illustrate good and bad design. There are also a number of procedural advice notes including commenting on applications and enforcement procedures and an application check list has been recently introduced. However, public awareness of it may be limited as it is not all available in public areas such as libraries and the main council reception areas. Such information helps improve the quality of applications and give the user a clear understanding of the process and requirements.
- 44 The public have the opportunity to engage in the determination of planning applications. Planning committees are held in the evening, which enable those at work during the day the opportunity to attend. Applicants and third parties are permitted to address the committee before applications are determined. This means the public are able express their views on developments that may affect them.
- 45 There is some cross-departmental working. Development teams are used for large proposals, and these teams consist of officers from relevant council departments and representatives from external organisations involved in pre-application discussions; this allows all issues to be identified early. Work with leisure and housing services led to the provision of play projects to address local health issues - for example at Brindon.
- 46 Planning-specific councillor codes of conduct are in place. These set out the role of councillors and officers, the protocol for site visits and declarations of interest. Councillors and staff are aware of and apply these protocols. Published procedures and codes of conduct which councillors, staff and service users are fully aware of are essential to ensure the decision-making process is seen to be fair, transparent and consistent.
- 47 However service users are not yet at the heart of service delivery. The Council's draft report on the Customer First Programme in September 2006 acknowledged that the Council needed to address a number of corporate weaknesses including poor customer standards and a lack of embedded, coordinated or systematic community engagement. The accompanying project milestones include achievements to May 2007 but few relate to planning and none referred to user-focused outcomes. Within the service the focus over the past two years has been on improving the speed of planning applications with other aspects, including accessibility and user focus, yet to be tackled.
- 48 The service has not, until recently, actively sought to understand the needs of its users to inform service delivery. An Agents' Forum was set up in 2006 and meets quarterly but there is little evidence how this has been used to improve service delivery. This means that the service cannot be sure it understands what its users needs are in order to take action to ensure the service addresses these needs.

- 49 There is no published service charter setting out what users can expect. The Council is signed up to the East Midlands Charter, which sets out the role of the case officer and timescales for applications, but this only applies to new or extended industrial or office developments. A number of service protocols are being prepared - such as dealing with enquiries but these are internal guidance. There are no user standards in place for householder or minor applicants who are the majority of applicants or for key activities such as the time taken to deal with the approval of conditions or materials. Since a planning permission can not be implemented until information to satisfy conditions (materials, landscaping) has been approved it is important that such actions are also undertaken in a timely manner. Without service standards users cannot be clear exactly what level and quality of service they can expect, nor officers required to provide.
- 50 There is limited published guidance on S106 obligations. Apart from general information on affordable housing and open space requirements there is no detailed guidance on contributions required with the justification and methodology for calculating contributions. The provision of such guidance helps ensure developers are treated consistently, that the Council does not miss opportunities and that use of S106s is seen by the public and developers to be transparent, fair, and consistent.
- 51 Ongoing training of councillors and officers is limited. All councillors responsible for making decisions on planning matters are required to attend a training session at the start of each year but there has been no ongoing programme of regular training to cover matters such as legislation changes, policy interpretation and current issues. A Skills Pathway scheme is enabling officers who are not professionally qualified to obtain professional planning qualifications but other ongoing training of officers is not clearly linked to the needs of the service. Awareness of cross-cutting issues such as community safety and the planning implications of the Disability Discrimination Act is patchy. Well trained councillors and officers will be better equipped to make informed contributions to policy formulation, negotiations and enforcement matters.
- 52 Accessibility to the service is limited. The service has its own reception and a duty planner deals with visitors and telephone enquiries since the One Stop Shop does not include the Planning Service. Limited remote access to the service is provided via the network of service hubs and video access points in rural areas known as the BISCUIT project (Bassetlaw Information Services Communicating Using IT). To date technical problems have meant plans cannot be viewed remotely. There is no out-of-hours or weekend service and no evidence that service users and non users have been asked about their needs. With 40 per cent of the population living in rural areas and people unable to contact the service in normal working hours, current access arrangements may not reflect the needs of service users.

- 53 Electronic access to the service has improved but remains below that provided by many other councils. The national Pendleton survey of planning websites scores websites using 21 criteria, the higher the score the better the website. The survey indicates that out of 21 the Council's website scored 6 in May 2005 and in December 2005 it rose to 17. The separate annual Society of Information Technology Managers (SOCITM) 2007 survey rated the Council website as standard (on a ranking of standard, transactional and excellent) with no improvement since 2006. Detailed results indicated the website had an ineffective A-Z index that did not allow quick access to services and information; had no information on planning restrictions and did not give the user the ability to make online appointments. Over half the service advice and guidance publications cannot be accessed electronically. The website does, however, allow viewing of applications and associated documents, submission of comments, and online submission of applications.

### Diversity

- 54 The Council's performance on diversity falls behind that of other councils. There has been a lack of corporate ownership and capacity to progress. Diversity is not embedded at the heart of service delivery.
- 55 The Council has reached Level 1 of the Equality Standard for Local Government, which is below the standard of many other councils. It is putting in place a comprehensive equality programme and action plan which is intended to enable Level 2 to be obtained by March 2008. The Council acknowledges that, to date, diversity is viewed in isolation and is not at the heart of service delivery.
- 56 The service has undertaken very limited assessment of the equality impacts of its work. It has undertaken a limited number of equality impact assessments on some parts of the service such as public access but they only give an overview of community need and lack sufficient detail to show how service has, or will, change to meet local needs. It is unclear whether the service is routinely assessing its decision-making, policies and regeneration projects to identify the impacts on disadvantaged or minority sections of the community. Identification of actual and potential direct and indirect impacts is important so that unintended adverse impacts are addressed or minimised whilst positive impacts enhanced.
- 57 Engagement with all sectors of the population is limited. A range of methods has been used to consult on policy development - for example exhibitions, 'Planning over a Pint', via the LSP sub groups and organisations and individuals identified on the Council's consultation data base. However there is a reliance on individuals coming forward voluntarily with no specific initiatives to ensure the views of those who may not come forward for cultural, religious or social reasons are heard. In addition, there are a high proportion of elderly persons, households containing persons with long-term illnesses and people living in rural areas and such parts of the community often have limited or no access to IT, transport or, for other reasons, will not come forward voluntarily. Without a sound understanding of the needs of all sectors of the population the Council can not be sure its policies and service delivery addresses their specific needs.

- 58 The service has taken some action to improve accessibility. The new planning reception area at the Worksop offices is now fully compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Written advice can be provided in a variety of alternative formats although this is not always clearly advertised. However, the SOCITM 2007 website survey showed the Council's website scored poorly in respect of (visual) accessibility.

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

- 59 Delivery of Council and national priorities is mixed. Outcomes that local people would recognise have been delivered but the lack of an up-to-date policy basis and service leadership is perceived by some as having limited achievements. Also in some instances, the impact of the Planning Service is unclear with some evidence gathered during the inspection indicating that economic development, not planning had been the driving force.
- 60 The impact of a lack of up-to-date policy basis is recognised by the service as a serious weakness. The 2007/08 service delivery plan states *"The lack of an adopted Development Plan for Bassetlaw is a serious deficiency, which means that our customers (the public and developers) lack a fully robust local policy basis for decisions related to prosperity and the environment. It also reflects poorly on the Council's performance standards"*. The service has relied on current national planning guidance set out in planning policy guidance and statements to supplement its own policies but this does not address the specific local needs of the district. The absence of up-to-date policy was cited by some within and outside the Council as limiting achievements.
- 61 We examined how the service delivers against the corporate priorities set out in the strategic plan 2005/07 and national priorities.

### **Community Safety**

- 62 Designing out crime is incorporated into some new developments. The Police architectural liaison officer is consulted on applications to ensure crime can be reduced by design - for example by improving safety and security in Sandy Lane. Section 106 contributions have been secured to enhance community safety - for example £90,000 to enhance community safety in the Carlton and Turner Road regeneration area and £45,000 from the redevelopment of the former Tannery site and bus depot to fund CCTV. However, there is limited officer training and guidance to applicants to ensure community safety is routinely considered in all proposals.

### **Community Prosperity**

- 63 The service is contributing, with other services and partners, to the provision of employment, housing and social facilities within the district.

- 64 New employment opportunities have been created. A number of former colliery sites have been redeveloped to provide employment - part of Manton Colliery now includes a B&Q distribution centre which opened in 2006 and will employ 1,000 people when fully operational. The site also includes a health club and car show room. The Manton site also includes the Wilkinson's national headquarters and distribution centre employing 1,500 people. Many of these jobs have been taken by local people but the Council has not undertaken detailed analysis to ensure there has been true community benefit as opposed to generating inward commuting from other areas.
- 65 Unemployment has been reduced but wage levels have remained low. Over the last ten years over 5,500 jobs have been created in the district but many of them have been in warehousing and distribution centres providing relatively low wages. Whilst this has helped reduce unemployment it has not helped in raising the low average wage level. The Council is now seeking to attract higher value employment - for example the Turbine Business Innovation Centre provides facilities to support new businesses and employs 270 people. The service has also negotiated a proposed state-of-the-art manufacturing plant for a major construction company on the former Steetley colliery site which will provide over 250 jobs. Current planning policy has sought to retain employment land to ensure it remains available to provide future employment, subject to satisfactory access and environmental considerations but some sites, such as the Bridon wire works site may be reused for other uses. The future challenge will be to ensure that employment created meets local needs and the shortage of employment sites in the west of the district is addressed.
- 66 The overall number of houses provided exceeds regional targets but provision of housing to more specific local needs is less successful. Unaudited data shows an average of 330 dwellings a year have been provided against a structure plan target of 90 per year. The provision of affordable housing is not so successful, albeit it is recognised that the Planning Service is not solely responsible for its provision. The present planning policy to seek 25 per cent of units to be affordable on sites over one hectare or 25 units does not secure adequate provision. The area housing strategy 2006/08 indicates a shortfall of affordable housing of 105 units per year in 2001 which rose to 201 units per year in 2005. Unaudited data indicates that 15 units were built in 2006, 6 more in 2007 and that there is permission for a further 73. The gap between supply and demand is therefore widening. There are planning policies which permit houses to meet local needs within villages but over the last three years no exceptional or special needs housing has been provided. As a consequence the housing needs of the more vulnerable sections of the community are not being met by the planning process.
- 67 Social and educational facilities have been provided. A variety of social and community facilities have been supported or enabled through the Planning Service. Section 106 contributions have provided £47,000 for community facilities in the Gringley and the Crossing Church and Community Centre in Worksop provides a crèche, café, local community and voluntary groups information and meeting rooms. Replacement schools have been built, funded by £126.6 million PFI funding.

- 68 The impact of the service in engaging with and influencing other decision-makers is mixed to date. The service has prepared responses to the proposed regional spatial strategy (RSS) especially in respect of housing. Concern is raised about the amount and location of new housing which would result in a significant increase in the use of green field sites for development if allowed. The impact of the Council's submission is not known since the RSS has not yet been finalised. The service contributed to the draft master plan for Robin Hood airport - especially in respect of disabled access and freight. The Council is represented on the Sheffield City Region forum but the forum is new and only just finalising its governance arrangements. To date the role of the Planning Service remains unclear.

### **Community Engagement**

- 69 This has been dealt with earlier in the report.

### **National priorities**

- 70 Until recently the Council has been slow to determine planning applications but recent improvement now means national targets for speed of decision-making are being met. Performance indicators for the period 2003/04 to 2005/06 show the comparative time to determine all types of application to have increased to be below average to the worst 25 per cent of all councils nationally. More recent unaudited data for 2006/07 shows an improvement with 74 per cent of major applications, 84 per cent of minor and 89 per cent of other applications determined within timescales against national targets of 60, 80 and 80? per cent respectively. This has been achieved by a number of actions including the formation of a major applications group, increased delegation and the creation of a planning consultation group. Whilst the speed of determining applications has improved, some parts of the process are still variable - for example the time taken to register new applications can take up to a week thus, significantly reducing the time available for officers to consider and negotiate amendments.
- 71 The number of appeals allowed against the Council's decision to refuse permission remains high. In 2005/06, 33 per cent of appeals were allowed, which is worse than the national average. Unaudited data for 2006/07 indicates that
- 72 32 per cent were allowed but it is not possible to yet compare this to national averages. The service could not provide an analysis which identified causes, which could be due to a lack of up-to-date policy or poor quality of decision-making.

- 73 Delivery of the national priority of sustainable communities is ad hoc. The Council relies on national planning guidance since it has no adopted policy of its own to ensure consideration and incorporation of issues such as climate change, biodiversity, energy and material conservation. Despite this it is securing more sustainable developments - for example the proposed supermarket and leisure complex has been re-sited on a more sustainable site at Carlton Road and a £400,620 contribution by the developers to support an integrated transport scheme serving the site has been agreed. The proposed Steetly colliery redevelopment includes a variety of sustainability criteria covering the construction phase including rain water harvesting, use of renewable energy from PV cells and a green travel plan for the workforce.
- 74 Increased residential densities in line with national guidance are now being delivered - unaudited data indicates densities are increasing with 57 per cent above 30 units per hectare achieved in 2005/06. The reuse of previously developed land for new housing has been poor and amongst the worst 25 per cent of all councils for the last three years. In 2004/05, 38 per cent of new housing was on brownfield sites and in 2005/06, 44 per cent against a national target of 60 per cent. Unaudited data for 2006/07 suggests this has now risen to 62 per cent. Reasons for this include the need to clean contaminated sites before they can be redeveloped. The Council has also refused planning permission for sites that are not close to services and public transport - for example Ellersley.
- 75 The Council failed to meet the milestones for the production of the Local Development Scheme. For reasons set out earlier in the report this is due to issues regarding the emerging regional spatial strategy. However the absence of up-to-date planning policy is a serious issue for the Council and it is clear that a significant amount of supporting evidence will need to be prepared before the core strategy can be put forward for approval. A lack of up-to-date policy which specifically addresses local circumstances means the Council's negotiating position is weakened and thus developments may not meet local need.

### Other issues

- 76 There are examples of the built and natural environment being protected. Constructive specialist advice is available and there is detailed written advice on repairs to old buildings. The service is now starting to use its legal powers to protect listed buildings such as the Banana Warehouse. Proposals for the Idle Valley will conserve and enhance a site of special scientific interest within a former gravel pit and also include educational and leisure facilities, including a green gym. However, there are 73 buildings on the 'building at risk register' and this has not been decreased. Also, of the 19 conservation areas only two have published appraisals and management proposals. A lack of appraisals in such areas mean it is more difficult for the Council to protect and enhance them.

- 77 The approach to enforcing against inappropriate or unauthorised development is ineffective. Enforcement is a key component of the planning system to ensure the amenities of residents and the natural and built environment are protected. The function is reactive with no clear prioritisation. There is no active targeting of, for example, planning conditions relating to tree protection measures. Once there has been a breach of the condition, the potential damage to the trees is irreversible. Building control staff do not routinely check plans to ensure consistency between building regulation and planning applications and reporting of potential unauthorised developments is ad hoc and reliant on individuals rather than being a systematic requirement. This means that enforcement activities are not being focussed on priorities or where infringements can be prevented.

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

- 78 The service is not delivering value for money. Value for money is the efficient and economic use of resources to deliver effective services that deliver outcomes that address local and national priorities. A cheap service does not necessarily equate to one that is delivering value for money or vice versa. Limited cost comparison indicates that costs are low but much of the performance has been poor or weak and remains below that of the best performing councils. In the latest published Audit Commission Use of Resources assessment for December 2006, value for money scored 2 (only at minimum requirements – adequate performance).
- 79 The service has only undertaken very limited comparison of cost and quality. Within its CIPFA family group few councils made returns but the service has not also sought to compare itself with the best performers nationally. The limited cost comparison undertaken and data held by the Commission indicates expenditure per 1,000 population is better (ie lower) than average. However, for the last three years performance has been in the worst 25 per cent or below average for many indicators, (see Appendix 1) albeit there has been improvement more recently. Furthermore, whilst performance and cost information is collected they are not reported together so that value for money can be routinely assessed.
- 80 The Council's approach to delivering efficiency savings and value for money is still being developed. An efficiency and value for money strategy was prepared in September 2006 setting out the approach to be taken to deliver Gershon savings and value for money. The strategy is descriptive and, apart from some high level objectives, contains no specific plans to deliver outcomes. Rationalisation of management and administration costs and protection of frontline services through a structured organisational review is cited as an objective but within the Planning Service it is not clear how this would be undertaken or the benefits expected.

- 81 The service approach to delivering efficiencies is mixed. Unaudited data provided indicates the number of planning applications determined per officer is higher than other councils but there is no comparative information on the type of application, which influences workloads. Changes to the constitution and the introduction of the Planning Consultation Group has led to an increase in the number of applications determined under delegated powers (decisions on applications are made by officers rather than by councillors). Data published by the Department of Communities and Local Government for the period January to March 2007 indicates 99 per cent of applications were determined under delegated powers. The effective use of delegated powers ensures decisions are made quickly and efficiently whilst allowing councillors to focus on those applications which are more complex or have greater local interest or potential impacts for the area.
- 82 Whilst the overall speed of determining applications has improved, parts of the process remain inefficient. The administration and validation process remains overly complex and time-consuming with many officers involved in separate elements of the process. This delays applications being considered by the planning officers and is vulnerable to delay if staff are absent. The Council is starting to undertake process mapping but this has not yet been undertaken in planning.
- 83 Alternative methods of service delivery have not been routinely considered. The Council's approach to procuring services and goods is being developed and a procurement strategy was approved in June 2007. There is no evidence that the service has investigated joint service delivery with neighbouring councils or contracting out parts of the service in order to secure service improvements, savings or access to additional expertise. However there are a few isolated examples of partnership working. The service has recently joined with neighbouring councils to undertake an employment survey to inform the LDF. Corporately, legal services are provided by 'EM Law Share' - a partnership of four regional law firms and the in-house lawyers of 18 East Midlands councils. Without an ongoing assessment of alternative forms of service delivery the service can not be sure it is maximising its efficiency and effectiveness.

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

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

- 84 There is clear commitment by councillors and senior officers to improve the Planning Services within Bassetlaw Council. This is illustrated by investment into the service in both finance and human resource. The Council appointed a part-time planning consultant in 2007 to focus on improving the service's performance in relation to planning application turnaround times and also to focus on major applications. Improvements have been delivered but some areas of performance remain below that of other councils and user focus and value for money have yet to be addressed. A permanent post of Head of Community Prosperity has been appointed in late 2007 to head the Council's Planning Services. Planning now has a higher profile within the Council and both councillors and senior officers are confident in the Council's ability to deliver service improvement.
- 85 Corporately the Council's performance is improving although much remains below that of other councils. The 2006/07 Annual Audit and Inspection Letter highlights that the Council's overall performance was improving but it has not been as strong as most other councils. While the proportion of Performance Indicators improving over the last 12 months was worse than the national average it is better than the average for all councils over the previous three-year period. The corporate focus on improvement of Performance Indicators has been mirrored in the Council's Planning Services. The Council had also made good progress in addressing the recommendations made in relation to its housing inspection, with the re-inspection undertaken in summer 2007 judging the quality of service as having moved from fair to good.
- 86 The service has improved the speed of determining planning applications. Between 2004/05 and 2006/07 the percentage of planning applications processed within government target times has improved across all three types of application, with all now above the national averages. Since 2004/05 there has been a 111 per cent; 40 per cent and 20 per cent improvement in the proportion of major; minor and other applications respectively, processed within government target times. The Council's unaudited data for 2007/08 indicates that this improvement in turnaround performance has continued. At the time of both stages of the inspection all government targets in respect of application determination times were being met.

- 87 The Planning Service has taken some action to address previous criticism. The recommendations from the 2005 planning inspection, DCLG's review of development control in January 2006 and other reviews of the service were integrated into a wider improvement plan. Following these the Council made a decision to focus on improving the speed of determining applications which has meant other improvements have yet to be fully delivered. The recommendations and weaknesses identified in June 2007 have also now been incorporated into its latest improvement plan and the Council is progressing these.
- 88 Improvement in other areas of the service performance is mixed. User satisfaction with the service has increased. The percentage of new housing built on brownfield sites has also increased but from a very low base and remains in the worst 25 per cent of all councils. However, performance in some areas has not improved - for example the percentage of planning application appeals allowed against the authority's decision to refuse planning permission remains high. The reduction of these is now part of the service's improvement plan together with a programme of councillor training.
- 89 Improvements to user focus are less advanced. The latest Pendleton survey carried out in 2005 scored the Council's planning website lower than most other councils. The Council has since made a number of improvements to its planning website and has self assessed it as now meeting all 21 of the Pendleton criteria. The separate annual (SOCITM) 2008 website survey found the Council's overall website had not improved since the survey in 2007. A service-specific user charter is not in place and whilst a service pledge has been agreed in April 2008, key tangible improvements have yet to be delivered.
- 90 Updating the planning policy basis has been slow but this is not wholly due to the Council. There is a range of supplementary policy documents to help guide and give advice to applicants in preparing their applications. Most of these have not been updated in the last three years and the Council acknowledges that some of the current policies - for example affordable housing and S106 obligations do not meet current needs. The Council has been progressing its evidence base upon which the Core Strategy will be based through a range of studies with neighbouring councils such as; a joint Strategic Housing Market Assessment for the Northern Sub Region; a joint Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment for the Northern Sub Region; The Northern Sub Regional Employment Land Study and a Strategic Flood Risk Assessment. This work has enabled the Council to increase the proportion of affordable housing that it is seeking developers to provide to 30 per cent. Progress in preparing the core strategy is currently being delayed by the emerging RSS.

## 28 Planning Inspection Revisit | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 91 The Council cannot demonstrate how the value for money of its Planning Services is improving. The Council has a value for money strategy in place but this has yet to be used across the Council to deliver significant outcomes for users. An overall assessment of value for money for planning services has been made, however this is not a comprehensive analysis and comparison for all elements of cost and performance. Some service improvements, as set out above, have been delivered. There is evidence of some efficiency gains and savings - for example £6,000 per annum made by providing councillor training in-house as opposed to being externally provided. In addition the recent service review has also highlighted potential service savings. Limited comparative analysis of cost has been undertaken and performance and cost information are not being systematically and comprehensively linked to enable the service to judge whether it represents value for money or to deliver further improvement.

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

- 92 The Council has clear corporate priorities which link directly to the Planning Service. The three priority areas, Clean and Green, Safe and Strong and Jobs and Enterprise are all directly influenced by the Council's use of its Planning Service. In addition to the intention to improve planning application turnaround times, this has helped the service receive an increase in its budget commitment of 23 per cent in 2005/06 and a further 2.9 per cent in 2006/07 investment. Overall, the Planning Service is aiming to transform itself from a Standards Authority to Excellence. The service's performance plan for 2007/08 does identify links to the corporate priorities and includes some actions which support these.
- 93 Service performance is now monitored and managed. The Council now has a performance management framework in place with integrated service and budget planning. In the past, due to a lack of capacity, poor performance was not effectively dealt with. Now performance indicators and planned actions are systematically monitored to identify the need for remedial action where necessary. All the Council's key performance indicators are monitored on a monthly and quarterly cycle by Management Team, Corporate Management Team, Cabinet and Scrutiny Committees. The recent improvements made in the performance of application turnaround times have been directly influenced by the application of this corporate monitoring, together with other actions taken such as the introduction of the major applications group.

- 94 Use of local indicators to monitor service delivery and outcomes is limited. The Council has recently agreed a service pledge which incorporates a range of service user measures and standards. However, this has yet to be used for systematic customer focussed performance monitoring. Case officers' self-monitor application progress, which enables team leaders and the manager to focus on those applications which are likely to overrun government target times. This has contributed to improved performance. Performance outside of the overall application turnaround times such as against a suite of local performance indicators taken from the 'service pledge' is limited. Despite recent improvements, validation times, for example, still vary considerably. There is an absence of systematic monitoring against local Performance Indicators identifying user-focussed outcomes linked to corporate priorities.
- 95 The Council is using strong financial planning to manage the finances of its planning services. The Council has used a review of its corporate services to deal with a potential budget deficit in 2008/09 and now set a balanced budget. To address the 2009/10 situation onwards the Council is introducing a series of 'Star Chambers' to scrutinise each service's budget and ensure that savings or budget reductions will not adversely affect the Council's priority spend areas such as planning services.
- 96 The service lacks a SMART implementation plan. The Corporate Plan has recently been refreshed and the corporate service planning process has been delayed to ensure that service plans are informed by the refreshed Corporate Plan. In the interim period the planning service has established an improvement plan to drive the services, which includes the weaknesses identified at the first stage of this inspection work carried out in June 2007. The plan has a number of objectives that do not have fully quantified actions, outcome measures and resource implications. The lack of a SMART implementation plan with user-focussed outcomes reduces the potential for significant improvements being made that the public and customers will notice.
- 97 The staff appraisal system is helping the Council deliver its service priorities. Individual staff targets are required to link to the corporate priorities and service specific priorities. Human Resources review appraisals to identify corporate training required and gaps that need to be addressed to help staff to meet the service demands. Last year all staff in planning received an appraisal and the Council overall retained its Investors in People standard in June 2006. The delivery of service specific training linked to skills gaps (other than training to provide professional planning qualifications) is, however, less developed.
- 98 The service does not yet have clear and robust proposals or plans for meeting efficiency targets and improving value for money. There are examples of where efficiency savings have been made and the organisational restructure in planning is expected to result in some efficiency savings. The Council and the service have made some savings over the past few years through managing its vacancies and the service has also benefited from savings resulting from unfilled posts. This approach is however not sustainable as the Council has to make three per cent savings in line with Gershon requirements each year.

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

- 99** The service has responded to previous issues around staff capacity. Despite deciding to increase planning staff levels in 2005, the Council found it difficult to attract suitable applications at a time of a national shortage of planners. Through its 'Skills Pathway' initiative, the Council has encouraged and promoted existing staff in return for taking on more responsibility and also undergoing training and achieving national qualifications. A recruitment drive undertaken within local universities led to several graduate appointments. The service review carried out in late 2007 has focussed further on ensuring that the new service restructure helps support the recruitment and retention of staff. This has helped enhance the capacity across all of Planning Services, but the level of experience is generally low resulting in a lack of capacity at a more senior level until recently.
- 100** The service is preparing for the resource implications arising from significant issues facing the service. The service has recently undergone a review of its staffing levels and structures which in addition to identifying savings also identified future service demands and resource requirements. A comprehensive and inclusive review of staff levels and skills was carried out in December 2007 together with a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis. This has helped inform the service review which the Council has now agreed. The new staffing structure introduces a career grade for staff to help reduce barriers created by the current structure and increase the potential for progression for staff and the likelihood of staff retention. A dedicated post of Projects Officer will also be created to create a specific focus on this area. This structure will help the service be better placed to tackle future service demands through improved staff progression and retention.
- 101** The Council has increased and refocused capacity to prepare it for future service demands. Before the Council can progress its planning policy framework, considerable preparatory and supporting evidence will be needed. The Council has recently appointed a new Planning and Implementation Manager with technical and managerial experience in this area. The Head of Community Prosperity appointed in 2007 is also a planning specialist and together with the Head of Planning Policy will provide planning services with capacity and experience to help address the planning and control service demands.

- 102** The Council has successfully enhanced planning leadership. The Head of Community Prosperity is providing clear internal leadership for staff and this role should now be enhanced by the Planning and Implementation Manager appointed in March 2008. The Head of Community Prosperity together with the Acting Director of Community Services are now starting to provide the Council with a visible presence locally with agents and partners. The government priority, as set out in recent White Papers, of delivering sustainable communities and the central role that planning is expected to have in 'place shaping' will also change the role of planning and the skills and capacity required. The Council is becoming more actively involved in the place shaping of the district and the part it will play in the residential future of the Sheffield City Region. The Acting Director of Community Services is leading on this on behalf of the Council. In addition, the service is partnering with other neighbouring councils in regional studies which are helping inform the direction of planning in the district.
- 103** The Council has responded well to previous governance concerns. The members' Code of Conduct on Planning has been revised together with the Bassetlaw Code of Conduct relating to Planning Matters. Together they are helping set the foundations for clearly defined roles and responsibilities in order to ultimately help improve the service to planning customers.
- 104** The Council has improved communication channels between the service and councillors. Bassetlaw acknowledged that political engagement needed to be improved as identified in the previous inspection in 2005 and set up the Planning Consultation Group to help it achieve this. The PCG, made up of a small group of cross party councillors from the Planning Committee, including the Chair, Vice Chair and opposition party spokesperson, provides the service with an improved channel of communication with experienced councillors. The PCG is regarded as a useful support mechanism for the Council's Planning Committee and enables quicker access to councillor input which has helped the service improve its application turnaround.
- 105** The Council has suitable finance in place to deal with the anticipated financial pressures currently facing the service. The Council is using its Medium Term Financial Plan (MTFP) to identify potential future budget deficits and has plans in place to address these. The Council's current level of reserves is above the minimum level it has set for itself and suitable funds are being held for identified potential pressures such as restructuring and job evaluation. Prior to 2008/09 the receipt of Planning Delivery Grant was built into the MTFP. This situation has now been addressed and the PDG is no longer used to fund any permanent posts in planning services. Suitable financial capacity is in place to support the Council's planning services.

## 32 Planning Inspection Revisit | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 106** The service is not currently delivering an effective enforcement function. The function has had long-term vacant posts and at the time of the first stage of the inspection also suffered staff shortages through sickness absence. The role of other planning officers within the service had been widened to include enforcement issues although this was expected to potentially impact on other parts of the service. The impact of sickness absence issues in enforcement has now lessened however the service has yet to address the capacity issues facing planning enforcement. Coordination of enforcement activity with other parts of the Council or linking of enforcement capacity with other councils is not in place. Although steps have been taken to increase capacity, the size and scale of the Council's enforcement function remains vulnerable to any future changes in staff capacity.
- 107** The Council is committed to having well trained planning staff and workforce planning has improved. A Skills Pathway was introduced in planning in 2005 which has contributed to improved morale and speed of application determination. The Council has made a significant training budget allocation to planning services and in the last two years planning services have had one of the largest shares of the service-specific training budget. However, a large amount of this is taken up by the graduate trainees and to date the remaining budget does not appear to be well targeted. Each member of staff is allocated a proportion of the remaining budget and some have been unclear of the need for inclusion on certain courses and how these will help them in their work. The work carried out for the service review has helped identify the current skills and needs of planning services staff. To date this has not yet been embedded into a targeted programme of skills training covering all planning services staff. This is leading to a less than optimal use of the limited training resources.
- 108** Councillor and officer technical capacity through training is not yet being maximised. Training is provided but there has been no structured regular ongoing training covering legislation changes and updates and focussing on key hot topics pertinent to Bassetlaw. Following the first 'in house' delivered councillor training in 2007 the Council plans to continue this on targeted topics. Such a programme ensures that members are kept up-to-date, enhances the value of decisions made in respect of planning applications and helps avoid a high level of upheld planning appeals.
- 109** The Council does not have a structured ongoing investment in ICT to maintain service improvement and efficiency. The Council's planning service uses a system which is externally hosted by a private company. The Council has recently invested in an IT package to manage the Local Development Framework consultation and publication process. A number of councils have systematically used PDG awards to invest in ICT improvement and increase capacity. Bassetlaw has not used all of its PDG funding on planning in the past and in recent years has used it to fund human resource capacity. However the separation of PDG funding from the base budget for 2008/09 will increase financial capacity. Planning Services have not benefited from a structured ongoing investment programme aimed at ensuring that improvement of services is fully supported by ICT systems.

- 110** The Council has not robustly reviewed alternative means of Planning Service delivery. Procurement is an improving area within the Council but is still underdeveloped. Procurement within planning has yet to develop and there is no evidence that the service has reviewed alternative methods of service delivery of planning services.

## Appendix 1 – Environment performance indicators 2002/03 to 2006/07

PI	2003/04		2004/05		2005/06		2006/07	
	Figure	Quartile	Figure	Quartile	Figure	Quartile	Figure	Quartile
BVPI 106 - % homes built on previously developed land	7%	Worst	38%	Worst	44%	Worst	62%	Worst
BVPI 109a - % major planning applications determined within 13 weeks	42%	3rd	35%	Worst	54%	Worst	74%	2nd
BVPI 109b - % minor planning applications determined within 8 weeks	58%	3rd	60%	Worst	63%	Worst	84%	Best
BVPI 109c - % other planning applications determined within 8 weeks	78%	3rd	74%	Worst	74%	Worst	90%	2nd
BVPI 179 - standard searches within 10 days	87%	Worst	97%	3rd	87%	Worst	Deleted	
BVPI 200a - Plan making - Development Plan	-	-	-	-	Yes	-	Yes	-
BVPI 200b - Plan making - milestones	-	-	-	-	No	-	No	-
BVPI 200c - Plan making - monitoring report	-	-	-	-	Yes	-	Yes	-
BVPI 204 - % planning appeals allowed	-	-	28%	2nd	33%	3rd	32%	3rd
BVPI 205 - quality of planning services checklist	-	-	67%	Worst	89%	3rd	94%	2nd
BVPI 219a - conservation areas - number	-	-	-	-	18	-	19	-
BVPI 219b - conservation areas - character appraisals	-	-	-	-	11%	2nd	11%	3rd
BVPI 219c - conservation areas - management plans	-	-	-	-	11%	Best	11%	2nd