

**Inspection report**

**September 2003**

# **Comprehensive performance assessment**

**Barrow in Furness Borough Council**

# Contents

Introduction	3
Summary of Comprehensive Performance Assessment judgements	4
Recommendations	6
Context	7
The locality	7
The council	7
What is the council trying to achieve?	9
Ambition	9
Prioritisation	10
Focus	11
How has the council set about delivering its priorities?	13
Capacity	13
Performance management	14
What has the council achieved / not achieved to date?	15
Achievement in quality of service	15
Achievement of improvement	16
Investment	18
In the light of what the council has learned to date, what does it plan to do next?	20
Learning	20
Future Plans	20
Summary of theme scores and strengths / weaknesses	22
Appendix 1 - Decent homes standard (DHS) diagnostic assessment	25
Appendix 2 - Public Space diagnostic assessment	34
Appendix 3 - Appointed auditor assessment	41
Appendix 4 - Benefit Fraud Inspectorate assessment	42
Appendix 5 - Framework for Comprehensive Performance Assessment	44

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## Introduction

- 1 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) is part of the wider agenda set out in the Local Government White Paper *Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services*. The White Paper encourages greater focus on improved services for local people by freeing good councils from central government controls and restrictions, and providing poorer councils with more, and better focused, support for improvement. CPA is the first step in this process, that of making an overall judgement of where each council stands.
- 2 This report presents an analysis of the council's overall performance as well as two short diagnostic assessments which cover important areas of responsibility. It also includes an assessment of the council's benefit service by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate, and the appointed auditor's assessment of performance on each of the main elements of the code of audit practice. The appendices to this report set out further details on the findings of these assessments and the framework for CPA.

## Summary of Comprehensive Performance Assessment judgements

- 3 Barrow in Furness Borough Council is a **fair** authority that has achieved much in relation to its main objective to regenerate the area. However, core service performance has been weaker and there are variances in quality. The council has plans to improve performance management and to strengthen corporate processes to achieve more consistent levels of performance.
- 4 The town of Barrow faces a number of challenges. The decline of traditional, high employment industries over the past decade has left Barrow with a number of problems and challenges. The council is clear of the extent of these problems and is ambitious in its efforts to address them. The council has been instrumental in setting up and supporting partnerships.
- 5 The council and its partners have achieved a lot in recent years. Significant investment has been made in shopping, business and leisure facilities and despite on-going job losses, unemployment levels have fallen. Local people feel that the town centre has significantly improved and there is greater pride in the area. Local problems such as violence in the town centre have been addressed with significant falls in levels of violent crime and less fear of crime.
- 6 Ambitions and setting priorities around council services are less clear and this is a weakness. Attention is generally focused on weaker performing areas rather than through a proactive approach to improving key services. Allocation of resources is not clearly linked to priorities.
- 7 The performance of council services is mixed. Housing services perform at high levels whilst poor recycling performance is only just beginning to be tackled. In other areas like environmental health and planning performance is not improving although there is scope for improvement. Access to services is a weak area and overall levels of satisfaction with the Council is low, although some service areas have high levels of satisfaction.
- 8 Whilst the council has limited resources and has experienced problems in recruiting staff in some areas, it has overcome these barriers through good staff development, sound financial management and through outsourcing and partnering. However, the capacity of councillors is undeveloped as are performance management arrangements. As the council does not have a corporate approach to learning it is reactive to the problems and challenges it faces.
- 9 The council has recognised that it needs to improve systems to support improvement and to challenge its own performance. It has invested in service improvements in recycling and enhancements to the environment. Improvements to overview and scrutiny and performance management are also planned but they are at a early stage of development.
- 10 In order to support further improvement, the council has developed a high level action plan identifying key areas of improvement. These plans identify the right areas for improvement but human resource and medium term financial planning have still to be addressed to ensure that plans are delivered.

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## Summary of assessment scores

Top level question	Theme	Grade	Weighted score
What is the council trying to achieve?	Ambition	3	3
	Prioritisation	2	2
	Focus	3	3
How has the council set about delivering its priorities?	Capacity	3	3
	Performance management	1	1
What has the council achieved/not achieved to date?	Achievement in quality of service	2	6
	Achievement of improvement	3	9
	Investment	2	4
In light of what the council has learned to date, what does it plan to do next?	Learning	2	2
	Future Plans	3	3
<b>Weighted score</b>			<b>36</b>
<b>Corporate assessment category</b>			<b>Fair</b>

## Recommendations

11 It is recommended that the council:

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

# DRAFT

## Context

### The locality

- 12 Barrow-in-Furness is one of six district councils in Cumbria. It consists of the large coastal town of Barrow-in-Furness, the small market town of Dalton-in-Furness and the parishes of Askam with Ireleth and Lindal. It is geographically isolated and remote from main transport links, being around 35 miles from the M6 and West Coast Main Line. Barrow has an operational port, which does not handle large numbers of vessels and has restricted tidal access. No passenger services operate from the port.
- 13 The borough has a population of 71,979 with 2 per cent being from ethnic minority communities. There has been a significant fall in the population in the past decade with the population decline being almost entirely due to out migration. There has been substantial out migration of young people of working age with the number of residents aged 20-30 falling by 35 per cent since 1991.
- 14 Barrow's economy was built on the heavy industries of iron and steel making and shipbuilding. Though still a shipbuilding town, during the 1990s the ship building yard reduced its workforce from around 14,000 to fewer than 5000. This has had a severe and long-lasting effect on the economy of the Borough. Jobseekers' Allowance claimant count is high (4.8 per cent compared with a national average of 3.9 per cent and a regional average of 4.6 per cent). The borough has above national and regional unemployment levels and high level of male sickness benefit claimants. Around 10 per cent of the registered unemployed have been out of work for over one year. Only 65 per cent of the working population is in work compared to the national average of 75 per cent.
- 15 The decline of the traditional economic base of Barrow has led to serious problems of deprivation. The 2000 index of multiple deprivation placed Barrow as the 24th most deprived local authority district out of 354 in England. Six of the Council's 13 wards are amongst the 10 per cent most deprived in the country. The borough has significant health problems.

### The council

- 16 The Borough Council is made up of 38 Members. The council has a Labour administration with the composition of the Council being Labour 21, Conservative 14 and Barrow Independent Group, three.
- 17 The constitution of the council is based around a streamlined committee structure. A single executive committee considers all policy issues and manages the council's business. There are separate regulatory committees for planning and licensing. The council recently established three overview and scrutiny committees dealing with corporate governance, economy & regeneration and community and environment.
- 18 The council's staff are organised into three divisions led by the chief executive, and the two directors of finance and regeneration, who make up the council's management team. Most of the staff are based at Barrow Town Hall and the housing department in Barrow town centre.

- 19 The council's net revenue expenditure for 2003/04 is £10.4m and planned capital expenditure of £7.3m for 2003/2004. The council directly employs 324 people, with a full time equivalent establishment of 272 posts. A number of services have been externalised, including housing and council tax benefits, revenues, refuse collection and street cleansing and grounds maintenance and horticulture. The council still owns and manages its own housing stock.
  
- 20 A peer review was carried out by the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives between April and May 2003 in preparation for this inspection.

# DRAFT

## What is the council trying to achieve?

### Ambition

- 21 Strengths outweigh weaknesses on ambition.
- 22 There are a number of challenges facing the area and there is a strong ambition to address them. The decline of traditional, high employment industries over the past decade has left Barrow with a number of problems and challenges. The council is clear on the extent of these problems and the need to address them. The strategic plan identifies four key priorities and these have been tested with local people and are based on good research and analysis. The priorities are based around economic regeneration and the diversification of the local economy, enhancing the quality of life for local residents, addressing issues of deprivation and the provision of quality public services.
- 23 The strategic plan outlines the key activities that need to be carried out in order to achieve these priorities. These are clearly communicated and well understood by councillors and officers at all levels. The council has recently reviewed the strategic plan and a number of outcome measures to assess success have been developed. These are ambitious and challenging and address important local issues, though they are at an early stage and need further refinement
- 24 The plan is less specific and ambitious in relation to council services and the links between council services and the broader economic and regeneration objectives are not clearly articulated. Targets for services are set in the best value performance plan (BVPP), but are not aligned to council priorities. Performance targets whilst set to improve are not compared to those of better performing councils. Targets for core services such as the maintenance of public space, planning and benefits have an impact on the achievement of aims to regenerate the town and to fight deprivation. These links have not been thought through and this is a weakness
- 25 There is good leadership within the council and there is clarity about the council's broad aims. Efforts are made to communicate key messages and they are widely known. Staff are positively encouraged to contribute to improvement and feel valued. However, there is a lack of corporate leadership around diversity issues. The council has not progressed its approach to race equality and has a number of areas to address if it is to achieve the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).
- 26 The council provides strong leadership for local partnerships and is involved in sub regional partnerships such as the West Coast Urban Regeneration Company. Partners are positive about the council's role and recognise that it has played a lead role in securing funding and lobbying for the area. Both the leader and the chief executive provide leadership and commit resources to partnerships. The council and its partners built on long established partnership arrangements though the Heart of Barrow partnership to establish the local strategic partnership (LSP) and the leader of the council is the chair of the LSP.
- 27 Effective partnership working is vital given the range of social and economic problems facing Barrow and whilst there is a generally positive view of the

Council as a partner, tensions with Cumbria County Council mean that strategic opportunities are not maximised. There are generally effective relations at a local level, but are strained at both a political and strategic level.

- 28 A draft community strategy has been produced and reflects issues that are important to local people. The draft document sets out specific targets to address a range of big issues such as tackling poor private housing, improving the environment, addressing low attainment and the health problems of the borough. The council and its partners have still to consult on the detail of the plan and to develop detailed action plans, although there are clear links between the community plan and the council's strategic plan.

## **Prioritisation**

- 29 There are more weaknesses than strengths in terms of prioritisation.
- 30 There is a strong sense that regeneration is a priority but the approach to prioritisation of council services is less well defined. There are mechanisms to help set priorities but prioritisation is not underpinned by robust target setting and budgetary processes.
- 31 The main priority for the council is to regenerate the borough. Councillors, senior managers and front line staff are all very clear about the number one priority to regenerate the area and rebuild the local economy.
- 32 The council is well aware of the priorities for improvement through excellent research and data and there is a strong focus on the more deprived parts of the borough which are in most need of improvement. The council has invested a lot of time in bringing in funding to regenerate the borough and this effort has been successful. Around £60M will be invested over the period 1999 to 2009 on regeneration initiatives. The council has used its capital budgets to match and maximise funding streams and has directed resources to priority areas. The council is opportunistic in seeking funding and is creative in using matched funding, but it is clear as to what are not priorities and has declined to bid for funding such as lottery funding where the benefits were not in line with regeneration priorities.
- 33 The council does consider local and national priorities. It has a good knowledge of the issues that are important to Barrow and sets priorities accordingly. For example, the council has prioritised violent crime as an issue as opposed to other national performance areas like burglary and vehicle crime as violent crime is the main issue in Barrow. However, in other areas there have been slower responses to national priorities – for example, compliance with the Race Relations Act and a slow response to waste minimisation issues.
- 34 The council sets out annual priorities for improvement in its Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP). For example, improvements in performance of benefits, recycling, play areas and public conveniences have been highlighted as areas for improvement. Best Value Reviews have been targeted to address weaker performing areas and this has resulted in improvements in performance. Officers are aware that certain services are important to regeneration objectives such as street cleaning and maintenance services.
- 35 However, there are weaknesses in the council's approach to priority setting in relation to services. Attention is focused on addressing problems rather than a proactive approach which focuses on improving areas that are performing at an

# DRAFT

average level and which closely align to corporate priorities. Target setting is across the board and there is a lack of clarity on those areas that are a priority.

- 36 Whilst resources have been allocated to priority areas such as regeneration, play areas and recycling, there are weaknesses in terms of budget setting which is incremental rather than policy led and there is no medium term financial planning framework in place.
- 37 The council have used public consultation to inform priorities. The council has consulted on its budget for the past two years, asking local people about areas where increased resources should be allocated. The main areas were regeneration and recycling and more investment has been made in these areas. Service specific surveys have been used to identify improvements in some service areas such as housing, benefits and leisure.
- 38 Whilst public consultation has been used effectively, the council acknowledges that it has weaknesses in terms of wider community engagement and communication with local people. The council is good at using techniques to gather local opinion about high level priorities, but has still to develop a comprehensive approach to engaging local communities, including minority and hard to reach groups.
- 39 Internal communication about broad priorities is good, but external communication is weak and local opinion is formed through the local newspaper. The council has no strategy to respond to this and other forms of communication. The outcome of this is that the council does not get the key messages about successes and priorities across to local people.

## Focus

- 40 Focus shows more strengths than weaknesses.
- 41 The council is very focused on achieving the regeneration of the area. The leader and chief executive allocate a great deal of their time to accessing and securing resources for the borough and their commitment is impressive.
- 42 The council and its partners have worked hard to secure improvements to the area and its economy. Severe job losses, poor pre-1919 housing and a declining town centre were a source of much local concern through the 1990s. A sustained focus on economic regeneration, reducing deprivation and securing funding for the area has brought about visible results. The council has taken a lead on securing funding and in bringing together partners to tackle the deep-rooted problems. There are good delivery plans for regeneration projects and these are used to secure improvements.
- 43 The focus on the priority of regeneration is strong and even a major crisis did not distract the council from its core focus. In 2002, a major legionella outbreak was managed without diversion from the main priority of delivering the regeneration agenda.
- 44 The council is strong at securing improvements in areas where it focuses on them. Despite weaknesses in setting priorities and in performance management, the council has proved that it has the ability to focus on important issues and

deliver improvements. The council has a track record of focusing on areas that have been identified as problems – either through consultation, weak performance indicators or because of national drivers. For example, the council's housing stock is in good condition and is near to meeting decency standards, the council has worked with partners to address high levels of violence in the town centre and improvements to benefits and collection rates have been achieved following public dissatisfaction and poor performance indicators. Once a problem has been identified, then there is a sustained focus on continuing improvement.

- 45 Councillors and managers remain focused on important issues. There are a range of mechanisms in place to ensure focus and provide a good foundation but some of these are at an early stage. Managers and staff have had personal targets for some time and service plans have been developed which provide a link between the strategic plan and appraisal targets. Service plans vary in quality across the authority and there are weaknesses in aligning all the council's plans with the strategic objectives. For example plans relating to benefits and housing have been criticised for lack of linkages with corporate objectives by inspectorates and regional Government office. There is a strong reliance on informality and the experience and knowledge of long serving councillors and senior officers. This has worked well in Barrow's case, but without strong systems to underpin this approach inconsistencies in performance occur.

# DRAFT

## How has the council set about delivering its priorities?

### Capacity

- 46 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in terms of the council's use of its capacity.
- 47 The council develops managers and staff to enable them to do their job effectively. It has Investors in People status and has had an appraisal system in place for some time. The system has some inconsistencies in application, but is widely used to identify training and development for staff. The council has a track record of developing people to take on additional responsibilities and to respond to new areas of work. It has also introduced a 'grow your own' policy and trainees in difficult to recruit areas like environmental health and housing are being developed.
- 48 The council has sound personnel policies in place and issues are dealt with effectively. There are problems with high levels of sickness absence. The main problem is long term illness and this has affected service delivery in housing. The problem is being managed and progress reports are considered by management team on a frequent basis. There has been a small reduction in sickness levels over the past year as a result of improved monitoring.
- 49 There is sound financial management which is reflected in current balances. This along with a favourable grant settlement and success in attracting funding to the borough, leave the council with significant capacity for investment in priority areas.
- 50 Capacity is enhanced through good working relations between councillors and officers. There are clear codes of conduct and schemes of delegation and a shared commitment to achieving the council's overall objectives. There is mutual respect and issues are debated and resolved. Member development and support is an area of weakness. Take up of training is low and the council has struggled with the overview and scrutiny function which is also a weakness. There is little research and information support to help councillors to work in their communities.
- 51 The council's capacity is enhanced through outsourcing and partnerships. Tough decisions to outsource services such as street cleaning and refuse collection, grounds maintenance and revenues and benefits have been taken in the past and improvements have been secured in these services. The outsourcing of the revenues and benefits service achieved a number of objectives in terms of cost savings and economic development as additional jobs have been created. This is significant given the employment agenda of the council. The council is also willing to enter into partnerships with other councils for professional services. The council has difficulties in recruiting legal professionals and has taken steps to address this through a partnership with neighbouring authorities.
- 52 The council has entered into a range of effective partnerships including the Heart of Barrow partnership, Furness Enterprise and the West Lakes Renaissance Urban Regeneration Company. Partnership working has secured positive outcomes for the borough in terms of leisure developments, town centre improvements and the creation of new jobs. However, partnership working with the county council are ad hoc. There are a number of examples of effective

working at a local level but some county wide partnerships progress at a slower rate. For example, joint working on waste management.

## **Performance management**

- 53 Performance management is weak with few strengths.
- 54 Despite some instances of good practice, in particular in the housing department, performance management has not been part of the overall management approach and much depends on individual managers. Whilst the council is putting in place systems to improve performance management, the quality of information provided in the past has been weak. Performance information was not compared to previous years or compared to the best performing councils which make it difficult to manage performance and set challenging targets. The 2003/04 Best Value Performance Plan now sets out comparisons between years which is a good start. However, the document does not yet compare Barrow with other councils.
- 55 Performance reports have been produced for councillors and management team, but these are more focused on the delivery of task and projects rather than performance of core services and the achievement of targets. Whilst there a number of performance indicators, there are no key performance indicators. Key performance indicators would enable senior councillors and managers to focus on the areas that are important to the achievement of corporate priorities. Scrutiny has been weak in managing performance and proposals to improve this are at an early stage.
- 56 Risk management is at an early stage of development. A process of identifying key corporate risks has been established guided by consultants and a strategic risk management action plan has been prepared. A risk management culture has still to be embedded across the council and through departments. Work on identifying departmental risks has still to be undertaken.
- 57 There are foundations to build on. The council has a good track record in managing projects and delivering on single regeneration budget work. Management of performance of the revenues and benefits service is good as are arrangements in housing.
- 58 The council has used customer satisfaction reports to drive service improvements in the past. There are examples of service improvements in leisure, housing and benefits which were initiated through user surveys and satisfaction data. Complaints have been used to identify problems – for example, improvements to the benefits service have been made as a consequence of the high number of complaints to the council and the Ombudsman. However, they are not used systematically to improve performance throughout the council.
- 59 Service plans have been developed for the first time this year and appraisal has been in place for some time. The purpose is to establish better links between service plans and individual targets to the council's corporate objectives. This is a good start, but in the past there has been little reflection on previous performance through these processes.
- 60 Financial management is sound. The council monitors progress against financial targets using quarterly reports. Over the past decade, close management of financial performance has resulted in a positive financial position from one of significant deficit. However, there is little focus on whether the council is getting

# DRAFT

value for money from service inputs as comparisons between the cost of services year on year or with other councils is not made.

## What has the council achieved / not achieved to date?

### Achievement in quality of service

- 61 There more weaknesses than strengths in terms of quality of service.
- 62 A stated priority of the council is to deliver high quality public services. Whilst there is a lack of detail about what this specifically means for all services, the intention is clear. The council has a number of areas to improve if it is to achieve its aim, with the performance of core services generally mixed<sup>1</sup>. More performance indicators are in the top two quartiles (59 per cent) than in the bottom two (41 per cent). 24 per cent are in the top quartile but there are still 24 per cent being in the bottom quartile. Overall satisfaction with council services at 55 per cent in 2000/01 put Barrow in the lower quartile and was amongst the worst in the country, even considering high levels of deprivation. However, in some service areas satisfaction is high.
- 63 Performance in terms of corporate performance is mixed. Performance indicators for 2001/02 show that for the percentage of senior management posts filled by women and early retirements as a percentage of staff in post, the council was in the top quartile. The payment of invoices, collection of non domestic rates, and voluntary leavers as a percentage of staff in post are in the middle quartiles. Levels of council tax collection, sickness absence rates and ill health retirements are in the bottom quartile.
- 64 Customer access to services is a general weakness across the council despite housing and building control achieving chartermark status. Physical access to service points is poor and service points are not all convenient for people with disabilities. Whilst in the top quartile, only a quarter of buildings are accessible to disabled people which given the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act and the levels of ill health in the borough is poor. The council has still to implement the requirements of the Race Relations Act and has not achieved level one of the Race Equality standard for services. E-government is behind schedule although the website contains useful information. The number of people satisfied with the council's handling of complaints is low.
- 65 Within the past three years five best value inspections have been undertaken. These are legal services, playgrounds, public conveniences, income and collection and the responsive repair service. For all of these inspections the service was judged to be 'fair'.
- 66 Benefits are an important local service and play an important role in the council's priority around tackling poverty. The service has improved over recent years, but has still a number of areas to address including customer service and the speed of processing claims which is near the lowest performance rates for councils.

<sup>1</sup> Performance indicators referred to relate to 2001/02 audited outturns unless otherwise stated.

- 67 Performance on environmental services is mixed. Environmental services are important because they impact on the quality of life of local people and have close links with regeneration objectives. Indicators for waste minimisation and recycling are amongst the lowest in the country. The council's recycling rate of 6 per cent compares unfavourably with the performance of the best which stands at 14 per cent and above. The amount of waste generated per head is significantly higher than the median (429 kilograms of waste per head of population compared to the median of 395 kilograms per head of population). The council has taken positive steps regarding recycling, but there is still some way to go to achieve good levels of performance.
- 68 Refuse collection services have low levels of missed bins and good satisfaction. The area is generally free of litter and the maintenance of parks and open spaces is good. Indicators for planning and environmental health are about average. Planning applications determined within 8 weeks have fallen in the last year but have generally have been at a level compared to the median (67 per cent) and satisfaction is high at 80 per cent. However, the service scores at below the median for compliance with best practice. The environmental health service scores low in terms of enforcement best practice (55 per cent compared to the best performers who achieve levels at 76 per cent and above) and complaints about noise and dogs are high.
- 69 Leisure services have mixed satisfaction rates. Satisfaction for the leisure centre, theatre and museum is good compared with other councils, but there are low rates for parks. The facilities in parks are generally well maintained and there are some innovative playground facilities, although an inspection of playgrounds in 2002 found that the provision was mixed with the majority not achieving the council's own standards. Facilities for young people under the age of 14 are good, but surveys consistently show demand for more facilities for those over that age.
- 70 Council housing is an area of strength. Performance indicators for the repairs service is strong with 99 per cent of urgent repairs being completed within government time limits. The condition of the stock is good and there are high levels of satisfaction – 79 per cent of tenants expressed satisfaction with the council as a landlord. Customer care is good and the service has achieved chartermark status. However performance indicators for private housing are weaker with low performance levels for the number of unfit dwellings being made fit or demolished – 1.6 per cent of dwellings were improved compared to the average of 2.1 per cent and 4.2 per cent for the best performers.
- 71 Crime levels are low and the council is a key partner in a number of joint initiatives around community safety. However, the council has still to ensure that all of its services address community safety issues as part of day to day operational planning.

## **Achievement of improvement**

- 72 There are more strengths than weaknesses.
- 73 The council and its partners have made an impressive start through imaginative use of external funding and there is clear evidence of improvement in line with the key priority of regenerating and improving the area.
- 74 There have been improvements to the town centre with major retailers locating to Barrow and the centre is now a regional shopping centre. The development of

# DRAFT

Hollywood Park has brought much needed leisure and retail facilities to the area and the council has facilitated the development of brownfield sites for industrial units which supports the policy of business diversification. The council is working with the learning and skills council and local college on retraining and re-skilling people to take advantage of new opportunities. There have been positive outcomes as a result of this work. More than a thousand new jobs have been created and unemployment levels have fallen in each of the last three years at rates faster than regional or national levels.

- 75 Work on regenerating the former shipyards has started with the development of the Channelside area. The dockside museum which tracks the history of the shipbuilding industry has attracted additional visitors to the area as part of a move to exploit the potential from tourism. Investment in parks, open spaces and public art have also improved the environment of the town.
- 76 Issues of low demand, depopulation and potential market collapse are the key issues for the private sector housing market. The sector has experienced substantial problems of disrepair, concentrated in the same areas as the fall in demand. The council is taking action to deal with these issues and a number of targets relating to numbers of properties renovated or cleared have been met.
- 77 Partners acknowledge the important role that the council has made in bringing about the improvements to the area. Local people also recognise the improvements. A survey carried out by the council in 2002 showed that 83 per cent of people feel that the town has improved and that 58 per cent have more pride in the town.
- 78 Good progress has been made on community safety. There has been a reduction in the level of crime in the priority area of violent crime which has resulted in a 15 per cent fall in the fear of crime. The council has supported the police to the point of contributing £80k to support policing at night time and have worked with the police on developing extensive CCTV coverage.
- 79 There have been strong improvements in a number of areas. The revenues and benefits service is a good example of performance improvement. After a fall in performance and poor satisfaction feedback the council has worked with its contractor partner to address service weaknesses and positive progress has been made. A recent survey showed 95 per cent satisfaction levels compared with levels half that in 2001. Not all performance targets have been met, but there have been significant improvements. Processing rates are up by around 40 percent and only one indicator is in the bottom quartile compared with eight in 2001.
- 80 There have been year on year improvements in the housing service with a number of areas improving which mean that Barrow is well placed to meet decent homes standards. The service responded well to the housing inspection of the repairs service and has taken on board the recommendations made by inspectors. The outcomes have been customer orientated, for example the introduction of a contractors' code of conduct and an appointments system. Consequently satisfaction with the service has improved. Performance in other areas of housing is also improving - for example rent collection performance is just outside the top quartile, with urgent repairs, energy efficiency and processing of homeless applications performance in the top quartiles.

- 81 For two other areas that have previously been subject to inspection, improvements are being made. For income and collection there is an increase in the collection of council tax and non domestic rates. Neglected playgrounds are gradually being refurbished and the council is beginning to incorporate the opinion of residents, including young people into its planning. Many playgrounds are now safe, attractive and clean.
- 82 The council's track record in driving improvement across the range of its services is inconsistent. It has a good record in driving improvements in areas that have been identified as requiring improvement or to respond to national and local priorities and in improving performance in some areas. In 1999, only two indicators were in the best performing category and the indicators for 2001/02 show that now there are 13 in the top group. However, 24 per cent of indicators remain in the bottom quartile.
- 83 Weaknesses in performance management mean that it is difficult for the council to demonstrate sustained year on year performance across all service areas and important areas such as recycling, waste, planning and environmental services have not improved.
- 84 Despite much investment in the infrastructure, parts of Barrow town still have a worn look. Inward investment remains a challenge because whilst there was previous major industrial, retail and leisure development, there has been no significant inward investment in the town over the past three years.

## **Investment**

- 85 There are more weaknesses than strengths at the current time.
- 86 The council has a good awareness of its weaknesses and has taken action to address them. A number of building blocks have begun to be put in place to take the council forward and these are focused on key service areas such as recycling and in addressing corporate weaknesses such as performance management and member development. However, a number are still in early stages and have yet to begin to show improvements. The council have been weaker at sustaining initiatives such as performance management in the past and need to ensure that the new investments are sustained.
- 87 There are some areas where investment is well embedded. The well established partnerships will be enhanced by the participation in the West Lakes Urban Regeneration Company. In addition, support from the North West Development Agency and the earmarking of significant funding will support further improvement in the area.
- 88 Significant investment has been made in recycling initiatives to improve performance in this area. Early signs are promising with (unaudited) improvements in recycling levels in recent months as a result of initiatives such as the kerbside collection service for recyclables. Other weaker areas are also being addressed including investment in facilities for young people. Barrow is a Sports Action Zone and there is a steadily improving provision of sports and leisure facilities, play areas and youth centres. These improvements are visible but there are no performance measures by which to assess other outcomes such as improved participation or satisfaction.
- 89 The council is aiming to stabilise the private sector housing market through a combination of targeted renovation and clearance. They have taken a pro-active

# DRAFT

approach towards the private rented sector, for example developing houses in multiple occupation, licensing and a tenants' passport scheme with landlords to address anti-social behaviour. It has also co-ordinated activity to try to balance the housing market through activities in private sector renewal, improvements to council stock, provision of new social housing and Neighbourhood Renewal activity. However it is clear that the scale of the problem requires more funding than they are able to raise through existing means.

- 90 Some building blocks to enhance capacity have been put in place, but are still at an early stage. In housing for example the council has invested in data warehousing software which will help inform its future planned maintenance programme. There are also new procedures being put in place including risk management and performance management although these are not supported by training.
- 91 However, some areas are slipping behind schedule. Whilst the council is working with other councils through the Connected Cumbria initiative, progress on e-government is behind its programme. Also the legionella outbreak slowed down progress of best value reviews and as a result of this the programme fell behind its original timetable.

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

### **Learning**

- 92 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in respect of the council's corporate approach to learning.
- 93 The corporate approach to learning is unstructured with a reliance on informal ways of working. This informal approach means that until recently, there were weak systems to support learning. Performance management has a number of areas requiring improvement one being capturing information on what worked and what did not work and to use this as a method for learning for the future. Leading councillors and management team do not reflect on successes and failures and consider how things could have been done better. This inhibits the council's overall capacity to learn and develop. A result of this is the council tends to be reactive to the problems and challenges it faces.
- 94 The council has developed some benchmarking activity, but this is limited. For example, there is little evidence that it has learnt from other areas facing similar problems around industrial decline. Service benchmarking is carried out, in particular with Cumbrian councils, but there are few details of how this information is used to improve services.
- 95 The self assessment highlights the problems facing the borough and is based on good intelligence and local knowledge. In particular it identifies the need for restructuring the local economy and tackle serious problems at the bottom end of the housing market. The assessment acknowledges that more needs to be done in establishing systems and processes to support more effective performance management and scrutiny and to use learning to help address and solve problems.
- 96 There are some good examples of an emerging approach to learning. The council has used staff /customer surveys to improve services and has used a range of approaches with staff to identify ways of improving services. The council has also responded well to external challenges and has learnt from them. For example, the housing repairs service used inspection and the experience of other councils to make improvements and to achieve chartermark status. Lessons from the implementation of the benefits verification framework were used as a basis for joint working between the council and the contractor to make improvements to services.

### **Future Plans**

- 97 Strengths outweigh weaknesses.
- 98 A high level action plan has been produced and this addresses the weaker areas identified in the self assessment, peer review and this assessment. The high level plan sets out the key actions, expected outcomes, lead officer and key date. The action plan is consistent with those in the draft community strategy and the council's strategy document. However, as mentioned above there is still a need to establish clear priorities and target setting for service areas. The council is using the community planning process to engage partners in agreeing a shared vision and priorities to tackle some of the issues facing the borough.

# DRAFT

- 99 The plans reflect issues that are important council and public priorities. The plan sets out actions to further progress the regeneration agenda, including the commissioning of a study into the collapsing housing market and to improve environmental standards and urban infrastructure. On-going work to improve performance in recycling and waste minimisation are also set out in the plan. Access to services will be addressed through the Connecting Cumbria partnership and there are plans to implement the requirements of the Race Relation Act and to improve performance around physical access to services in the main town hall.
- 100 There are robust regeneration plans in place and the single regeneration budget, neighbourhood renewal and European funding has been secured. Plans are clear about what needs to be done and focuses on the priority issues in the borough. The plans have been developed in partnership with the North West Development Agency and the Urban Regeneration Company.
- 101 The scale of the private housing problems in the borough is significant and the council has yet to identify how this will be achieved. The council is looking at housing stock options which could release funding to address the problem, if the option to transfer the stock is pursued. A report evaluating the options is due later this summer.
- 102 Government Office for the North West (GONW) were critical of the council's Housing Strategy. The council has acknowledged this and is working to improve their strategy and subsequent action plan in the future.
- 103 Partners and staff are engaged and committed to the delivery of the plans and the council has taken steps to ensure that it has the capacity to implement the plans. The plan sets out proposals to improve IT, overview and scrutiny, performance management and to improve corporate external communications which is a particularly weak area. A start has been made in most of these areas.
- 104 The local development plan has been changed to reflect the council's strategic priorities. It aims to balance the conflict between the environmental and regeneration needs of the borough. It also links with the county wide structure plan which identifies Barrow as one of Cumbria's major town centres and aims to stabilise population to current levels.
- 105 There are issues to address:
- ◆ Some important areas are not covered in the plans. There are no strategies for retaining and engaging young people - an important core group given the problems of out migration of younger people from the area.
  - ◆ There is a lack of detail about the resource projections. For example although there are financial projections for the next three years, robust medium term financial planning has yet to be developed. It is not clear that all services can maintain improvements – for example, in relation to public art and building maintenance.
  - ◆ The pragmatic approach to staff development has served Barrow well in recent years. However there is no longer term human resources strategy which given the age profile of the senior management and the difficulties in recruiting professional staff faced by Barrow is important.

## Summary of theme scores and strengths / weaknesses

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Ambition	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness of the problems facing the borough.</li> <li>• Strategic plan identifies priorities to address problems. Good links with draft community strategy.</li> <li>• Activity and outcome measures developed for a number of areas.</li> <li>• Priorities tested with local people and based on good research and analysis.</li> <li>• Leadership for councils broad aims which are widely known.</li> <li>• Strong leadership for local partnerships and key in establishing local strategic partnership.</li> <li>• Good partnership relations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ambitions for council services not specific and links between council services and broader regeneration objectives not clear.</li> </ul>
Prioritisation	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarity about overall priority of regeneration. Focus on most deprived wards.</li> <li>• Capital funding used to draw in additional funding in priority areas.</li> <li>• Clear about what are not priorities for community safety and funding bids.</li> <li>• Annual priorities for improvement set out in the Best Value Performance Plan</li> <li>• Recognition that street cleaning and maintenance services are important to regeneration objectives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approach to service improvements is reactive rather than proactive .</li> <li>• Blanket approach to target setting</li> <li>• Slow response to national policies in some cases – Race Relations Act and waste minimisation</li> <li>• Community engagement especially around hard to reach groups</li> <li>• Communication of priorities to the local public</li> <li>• Incremental rather than policy led budgeting.</li> </ul>
Focus	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong focus on regeneration and delivery of objectives</li> <li>• Mechanisms in place to ensure focus – delivery plans, individual targets, service plans, appraisal.</li> <li>• Ability to focus on priority or problems areas for improvement and secure improvements.</li> <li>• Not distracted by events such as legionella outbreak.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inconsistencies in approach to plans and not always clear links to corporate objectives.</li> <li>• Service plans vary in quality across the authority.</li> </ul>

# DRAFT

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Capacity	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good and clear relations between councillors and officers.</li> <li>• Management and staff development - IIP status.</li> <li>• Sound financial position through good financial management</li> <li>• Good use of procurement for key services such as refuse, maintenance, revenues and benefits.</li> <li>• Strong local partnerships that are delivering.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High levels of sickness absence have affected performance in planning and housing</li> <li>• Councillor development and support is poor.</li> <li>• Overview and scrutiny.</li> </ul>
Performance management	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good use of customer surveys and satisfaction to inform service improvements.</li> <li>• Delivery of regeneration projects.</li> <li>• Sound financial management, but value for money not assessed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inconsistent application of performance management</li> <li>• No key performance indicators</li> <li>• No comparisons of performance between year and other councils in previous years.</li> <li>• Weak engagement from councillors in managing performance.</li> <li>• Risk management at an early stage.</li> <li>• Value for money not assessed.</li> </ul>
Achievement in quality of service	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good levels of performance in housing</li> <li>• Cleanliness and maintenance of public space to good standards.</li> <li>• Leisure services and facilities for young people under 14.</li> <li>• Community safety initiatives and low levels of crime.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indicators relating to private housing below average</li> <li>• Waste minimisation and recycling outcomes amongst lowest in the country.</li> <li>• Lack of facilities for young people over 14</li> <li>• Access to services and e-government</li> <li>• Low levels of public satisfaction with the council</li> </ul>
Achievement of improvement	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improvements to town centre, retail, leisure and business facilities.</li> <li>• Over 1000 new jobs created.</li> <li>• Redevelopment of Channelside area.</li> <li>• Improvements recognised by local people.</li> <li>• Reductions in levels of crime and reduced fear of crime.</li> <li>• Good improvements in benefits service.</li> <li>• Good improvements in housing service</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No major inward investment despite large scale regeneration work.</li> <li>• No improvements in planning and environmental health.</li> <li>• Waste management has not improved.</li> </ul>

Theme	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
Investment	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building blocks that make improvements that the public would recognise:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regeneration</li> <li>• Recycling</li> <li>• Sports and leisure</li> <li>• Housing</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Building blocks to enhance capacity are at an early stage                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• performance management</li> <li>• Overview and scrutiny</li> <li>• Sickness management</li> <li>• Risk management</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A number of areas are still at an early stage and have yet to show signs of improved outcomes</li> <li>• Track record in sustaining new initiatives.</li> <li>• Some areas have slipped behind schedule – such as e-government and best value.</li> </ul>
Learning	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self assessment demonstrates good levels of self awareness.</li> <li>• Some good examples of learning – surveys and staff feedback and response to challenges.</li> <li>• Learning from challenges and problems – for example, housing inspection and benefits verification framework.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approach to learning is ad hoc and lacks systems.</li> <li>• Lack of reflection on what worked and what did not work on previous performance.</li> <li>• Tendency to be reactive to situations rather than anticipating and managing up and coming problems.</li> <li>• Approach to benchmarking limited and little evidence of learning from it.</li> </ul>
Future Plans	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High level action plan focuses on issues important to local people and in addressing corporate weaknesses.</li> <li>• Areas addressed include                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regeneration</li> <li>• Housing market</li> <li>• Access to services</li> <li>• Capacity development</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Consistent with                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• community plan</li> <li>• council strategy</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Financial position strong and work progressing in a number of areas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No strategies for retaining and engaging younger people</li> <li>• Medium term financial planning not in place</li> <li>• No longer term human resource strategy</li> </ul>

**Scoring key:**

- 1 - Weak
- 2 - Weaknesses outweigh strengths
- 3 - Strengths outweigh weaknesses
- 4 - Strong

# DRAFT

## Appendix 1 - Decent homes standard (DHS) diagnostic assessment

### Overview

- 106 The council owns 3,376 rented properties. It is aiming to achieve a higher standard than the Government's decent home standard (DHS). Tenants are involved in establishing this higher standard as well as other stock investment decisions. There have been good outcomes as a result of this inclusive approach. The council commissioned a robust stock condition survey, which was revised to take account of requirements of the decent homes standard. Consequently it has informed the council about the resources required to bring the stock up to the decent homes standard. The council has very few properties that do not meet the DHS and as a result it does not require additional resources to meet it. Properties that become non-decent between 2004 and 2010 will be dealt with as part of the normal planned maintenance and capital programmes.
- 107 The housing department is beginning to utilise partnerships to extend its capacity, deliver service improvement and to learn from others. It however has weaknesses in its strategic plans (HRA Business Plan and its Housing Strategy) and has received average ratings and not met the 'fit for purpose' criteria as assessed by the Government Office North West (GONW). There is a lack of commitment to consider diversity issues and the Council has not adopted the Commission for Race Equality (CRE) code on rented housing, nor addressing the DTLR Action Plan on the housing needs of black and minority ethnic people, or taking account of the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.
- 108 However overall we found the strengths outweigh the weaknesses and therefore a low priority for improvement focus.

### What is the council trying to achieve in relation to the standard? Does the council know the condition of their housing stock and their compliance with the Decent Homes Standard?

- 109 The council is able to meet the decent homes standard deadlines of 2004 and 2010. The council is also seeking to exceed the decent homes standard and is developing an asset management plan to help achieve this. Because of previous planned maintenance strategies it has very few homes that are currently non-decent. It has good data on the condition of its stock. However the council has a weak HRA Business Plan and Housing Strategy, and is also weak on diversity issues. There is a limited range of procurement methods and the council has been slow to develop partnering and other initiatives around national priorities. Overall, the strengths outweigh the weaknesses and therefore there is a low priority for improvement focus.
- 110 Private sector housing is priority because of high levels of disrepair and unfit and the need to balance the housing market in low demand areas of the district. For council housing, the priority is to ensure that the housing stock is maintained to a good standard through a balanced strategy of demand led and cyclical maintenance and improvement works. The council has shown its commitment to both these priorities by directing 51 per cent of its total capital spending for 2001/02 (£2.072 million) on its housing stock, with a further 27 per cent on the private sector (£1.117 million). This level of expenditure and prioritisation has continued into 2003/04.

- 111 The council has been successfully investing significantly in its stock over the last ten years by carrying out regular capital and planned maintenance programmes. Consequently there are few properties that fail the decent homes standard (around 1.7 per cent of the entire stock), and it plans to make those that are currently non decent meet the standard by 2004. Homes that become non decent between 2004 and 2010 will be dealt with through the planned maintenance programme. The council is funding this through its existing resources.
- 112 However, the council aims to achieve a higher standard than the decent home standard. In order to do this the council is developing an Asset Management Plan which will eventually create 21 local estate plans encompassing housing, commercial assets and the environment. It aims to incorporate an analysis of responsive repair costs, existing and anticipated demand levels, stock condition data and tenants aspirations. It will also:
- ◆ incorporate national priorities and link to the other plans of the council,
  - ◆ inform the stock options appraisal and identify the sustainability of the stock.
  - ◆ inform the council on how to maintain the physical and financial value of its council housing stock beyond 2010.
- 113 Six are currently being piloted. However the resources being put into this worthwhile project is insufficient considering the benefits it will produce and the fact that it will not inform the stock options appraisal.
- 114 In common with other authorities, the council has to choose the right approach to long term stock investment and management by 2005. They have therefore commissioned a stock options appraisal to evaluate and advise on the options available (that is, to consider small or large scale transfer, a Private Finance Initiative, an ALMO<sup>1</sup> or stock retention). Council's that do not use one, or a combination of these options, cannot expect increased investment in their stock, but will continue to get only what is allocated under Housing Investment Programme. The Council has put in place the mechanisms to involve tenants in this stock options appraisal, and they are represented on Stock Options Panel (which also includes staff and councillors). A 'Tenants Friend' offers tenants and residents independent advice regarding this process. This will help transparent decisions to be made about future investment options and prevent investment in unsustainable areas where the council owns stock. The results of the consultation is due at the end of the summer.
- 115 The council is good at involving its tenants and leaseholders in its monitoring and decision making processes concerning the stock and its services. For example, residents on the Housing Management Forum are involved in setting priorities for the planned and capital programmes. Consequently this has led to decisions about prioritising investment in the more sustainable stock (that is, where there is a demand for it) and targeting the 'worst first' properties. Tenants were also involved in the decision to introduce an appointment system for repairs and establishing a higher standard for decent homes.

<sup>1</sup> Arms Length Management Organisation

# DRAFT

- 116 The current 5 year programme of planned maintenance has been influenced by residents through consultation carried out by the council identified from a detailed status survey, Section 16 surveys and a series of estate based road shows. Their identified priorities have been for the replacement of kitchens and bathrooms, central heating systems and entrance doors for properties that are street facing and pose a high security risk. These works will be done as part of an annual rolling programme over the next five years.
- 117 The council has relied upon a good and relatively recent stock condition surveys to inform it about its compliance with the DHS. The surveys were carried out in 1998 and 2000 and further updated in 2002 to take account of the decent homes criteria. The original survey looked at 40 per cent of properties externally and 25 per cent of them internally. The sample was adequate because the Council have no system built properties and the majority of the stock is of a traditional build with cavity walls with no properties exceeding three storeys in height.
- 118 The results of these surveys were evaluated and stratified by the type of stock and by age and then the results extrapolated across the whole of the stock. The data was validated by desktop analysis and parameter checks as well as random on site sampling. This has provided sufficient information on the stock for the council to assess the number of homes likely not to meet the decent homes standard up to 2010.
- 119 However the stock condition data base has not yet been updated. Instead, information on the capital and planned maintenance programmes are held on other databases. This weakness will be corrected by a Property Inspector updating the stock condition database over the next 12 months by carrying out surveys of properties that had not previously been inspected (between 2000 and 2,500 properties). This will provide 100 per cent accurate information. This is a very challenging task for a single Property Inspector. Fortunately, the heating attributes following the statutory gas safety test and appliance servicing is already on the stock condition database.
- 120 The council has taken the positive step in investing in data warehousing software (COGNOS) which has enabled the council to use responsive repairs information to inform it planned programming. Data warehousing information is helping maximise the councils funds by quickly identifying recurring responsive repairs that can tackled in a planned way.
- 121 There is currently a review of the energy efficiency strategy and how this will inform the planned maintenance programme. But currently the average Standard Assessment Programme (SAP) rating for Barrow's property is 64 which place them in the top quartile nationally. There is a rolling programme to remove electric storage heating in larger properties (following consultation with tenants) and replace them with more energy efficient systems. This will improve energy efficiency ratings. Energy efficiency data is separately stored using a database.
- 122 The council do not have information relating to asbestos in terms of its condition, replacement cost and anticipated life span but they plan to collect this information during this year.
- 123 An externally commissioned survey of Housing Needs in 2000 has provided a solid basis to help inform future plans. It is being augmented by data from the

housing register and transfer waiting list. It broadly shows that the homelessness problem is being contained and that there is a high demand for specialist housing. Consequently in its enabling role it is working with local RSLs to provide more specialist housing. There is a clear understanding of the need to regenerate low demand areas and balance the housing market. It also recognises that there is lack of resources to regenerate certain areas and to stabilise the housing market within a reasonable timescale. The council is therefore supporting the North West Development Agency commissioning the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies to look at the causes, and possible solutions, of low demand in Barrow and elsewhere.

- 124 In the meantime as part of a number of strategies the council is employing, it has introduced an investment policy in low demand areas that assesses the sustainability of investment in their own stock. For example the council has changed its allocations and voids (empty homes) policies. It has relaxed the re-housing criteria for low demand areas to try to help maintain a balanced community and to stem the depopulation of these areas. It has amended its voids policy to take account of the sustainability of a property or groups of properties, and steps have been taken to dispose of and demolish potentially obsolete flats where further investment was deemed to be inappropriate. Also a trial project has begun, to manipulate future demand for stock by experimenting with the size of dwellings to increase demand based on the needs of an identified area.
- 125 The council's Housing Strategy is clear about the need to lever in funding from all sources and the Council is successfully doing this. However the GONW were critical of the Housing Strategy because it failed to clearly reflect the linkages with corporate objectives. It was also critical of the HRA business plan because it lacked sufficient detail on the demand for the various types of housing, particularly for those groups that are forming an increasing proportion of tenants (for example the elderly and those needing specialist accommodation) The Housing strategy also failed to identify the key priorities for the stock. The impact of not producing a good housing strategy is to not maximise opportunities for additional funding for the council's local priorities.
- 126 The Council acknowledges that business planning based on comprehensive data indicating future needs is in its infancy. It also acknowledges that the targets in the housing strategy are not SMART<sup>2</sup> and that the action plan in the strategy has not been monitored effectively in the past. The Council are currently working with the GONW to improve their ratings by December 2003.
- 127 The Housing department is cautious at implementing the government agenda and would rather wait to see the outcome of initiatives undertaken by others before embarking on it themselves, for example a Choice Based Lettings Scheme. As one officer put it:

*We are quick at applying good practice rather innovating it*

There is a lack of capacity to pursue things at a quicker pace.

There has been little change to the council's procurement strategy although standing orders have recently been reviewed to allow the letting of contracts that are not just based on price. Housing have however entered into 'negotiated arrangements' to deliver planned maintenance contracts for external decorations, central heating replacement and communal safety works. These contractual arrangements will be evaluated over the next 12 months to see if any of the contractors are suitable to progress towards partnering.

<sup>2</sup> Specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound

# DRAFT

- 128 The Council's response to diversity is poor and the housing department typifies this. They do not subscribe to the CRE code on social rented housing or the equalities standard. Nor is there a Race Equality Scheme in place. In addition there is no accurate knowledge of the number of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME), vulnerable or elderly residents on their estates. The housing offices are also not DDA compliant. Finally, its allocated budget for Aids and Adaptations has been underspent for the last three years.

## Is the council delivering its plans to meet the Decent Homes Standard?

- 129 The council is successfully delivering its plan to meet the decent homes standard. It has prioritised its resources in order to deliver the programme and has engaged residents and other stakeholders in its plans for the stock. However the delivery of the planned maintenance programme over a number of years has not been to schedule and has resulted in under spending of the budgets for three consecutive years. However we found that strengths outweigh the weaknesses and therefore there is a low priority for improvement focus
- 130 The Council has successfully utilised a range of funding sources including the Neighbourhood Renewal Funding and Single Regeneration Budget, to achieve their objectives in both the public and private housing sectors. Although with regard to the private sector, there is an acknowledgement that resources are still inadequate to fulfil their objectives in a meaningful timescale.
- 131 The council have reviewed their housing management and repair costs. This included reviewing its service charges and the cost of providing homeless person's hostel. A decision was made to close the hostel as a cost saving measure (without affecting the ability to provide temporary accommodation and avoiding the use bed breakfast hotels). They also reviewed and adjusted service charges which have helped to maximise monies available for investment. These actions led to a surplus of £850,000 on the HRA for 2002/03. These resources have been diverted to doing decent homes work and other related planned maintenance such as roof repairs as part of their 5 year planned maintenance programme. The Major Repairs Allowance funding of £1.875m which is a higher amount than the Council expected, will be used to install central heating and fund front door replacements, priorities identified by tenants. It will also be used to carry out damp proofing work and rendering.
- 132 As a result of analysing responsive repairs data, additional funding of £25,000 has been allocated in the 2003/04 planned maintenance budget to target and deal more effectively with recurring roof repairs on a particular estate.
- 133 In 2001/02, 65 percent of repairs carried out were planned compared to 35 percent that were responsive (the budget was £4.055 million). This is an improvement on the previous year and indicates that by reducing the number of response repairs they are saving money. In addition they have increased their income through improved rent collection performance from 96.7% percent in 2000/01 to 97.6 per cent in 2001/02. Further, the service has invested in Repairs finder system in order to improve services to residents.
- 134 Capacity building among staff and tenants to understand the decent homes standard and other government agendas (for example Stock Options appraisals)

is occurring. Capacity is being increased by the use of consultants to carry out the stock options appraisal, the stock condition and housing needs surveys, and to deliver the planned maintenance programme.

- 135 Contractors have been involved in discussions to deliver the programme and the housing service has a good relationship with the responsive repair contractor with whom they are working together to deliver service improvements.
- 136 Recruitment and retention of staff is an issue. To help retain staff and to improve their knowledge and skills in response to tenants concerns, the council funded the training for a number of staff at a local College. 13 staff now have Certificates in Housing.
- 137 There is no joint work on procurement (with neighbouring authorities of Registered Social Landlords (RSL) for example) even though there is a lack of capacity in this area. In addition the relationship with the County has been difficult in areas such as road resurfacing and the provision of street lighting to new build schemes. However there is also evidence of joint working in some areas with the County, for example, the Homelessness and Supporting People Strategies
- 138 No decent homes work is carried out to voids which currently meet the standard but will fail it before 2010. The council has decided to deal with them under the normal planned maintenance programme because they are few in number (two or three per annum). However this is a more costly option compared to when the property is empty.

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

- 139 The council has a well informed and realistic understanding of what it has achieved and what remains to be achieved with regard to the decent home standard. The risk of not meeting the DHS is minimal. It is aware of its weaknesses around its Housing strategy and Business plans and is taking action to improve them. It also has taken action to improve the performance of the planned maintenance programme. We found that strengths outweigh the weaknesses and therefore there is a low priority for improvement focus
- 140 There is no portfolio holder for housing. The head of housing reports directly to the Chief Executive. The Housing Management Forum monitors performance of the housing service and reports its finding directly to the Executive Committee of the council. Staff are kept informed of priorities and have regular team meetings to discuss them and their performance. The Repairs Manager meets regularly with contractors and the Design Services Group to discuss performance and progress. There is a good relationship between all parties involved.
- 141 Managers have easy access to performance information through a variety of tools and share this regularly with staff as part of the performance management system. They are well versed in performance management and appraisal and they are knowledgeable, competent and clear about their objectives and communicate them clearly to their staff. Budgets are well monitored and controlled and regularly reported to the council's senior management team.
- 142 The council carry out repairs satisfaction monitoring and use status survey information to inform service improvements. There has also been a series of team building workshops involving staff, residents and Members to participate and contribute in developing future service provision. The recent establishment of

# DRAFT

the Egan Steering Group is a further building block to aid learning from good practise elsewhere.

- 143 The council has shown some ability to learn from events and good practice from others, for example, they strengthened their health and safety systems following the outbreak of legionnaires disease which resulted in improvements in gas servicing. They also purchased data warehousing software after visiting another authority and seeing the benefits. Improvements are being made following external challenge. The service has taken on board weaknesses identified from external audits and inspection. For example they have carried out a second BVR of the repair service following criticism that the original review was scoped too narrowly. As a result a number of positive outcomes have been achieved. For example, a customer care code for contractors has been established. The Government's Construction Best Practice Unit have identified the councils' Contractors Customer Care Code as good practice and the repair service has recently received a Chartermark. These improvements have resulted in improved customer satisfaction ratings.
- 144 There is some information sharing and benchmarking with other stakeholders in Cumbria but there are no details of how this work has been used to improve services. Some of the learning from other organisations is recent and it is difficult to assess whether improvements have been made as a result.
- 145 Progress against targets in the Housing Strategy is reported to the GONW annually and results are published in the following years strategy. However we found that annual updates of the Housing Strategy have not been adequately linked to previous years targets to see if they were met. Where it was found they were not met, there is no explanation as to why. However the 2002/03 Housing Strategy introduced an action plan in the appendix to allow performance against targets to be tracked in future. A tenants and officer group has been established to improve performance information provided to tenants and stakeholders in recognition of this weakness.
- 146 There are a range of performance indicators to monitor quality, performance and delivery of investment programs. However, for the last three financial years the planned maintenance programme has not been delivered on time and the budgets were substantially under spent each year. This has been due to a combination of factors which has now been addressed by, employing external consultants as an additional resource to project manage the programmes, improving the timing of consultation with residents and producing specifications earlier. Despite these problems a recent survey has indicated that there is relatively high satisfaction levels among tenants with the work carried out. For example, 87.5 per cent of those surveyed said the workmen did a good job, and 93.8 per cent said they liked the improvements made.

# DRAFT

## Summary of decent homes standard diagnostic judgements and strengths / weaknesses

Area of focus	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
What is the council trying to achieve in relation to the standard? Does the council know the condition of their housing stock and their compliance with the Decent Homes Standard?	b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The stock has been well maintained so very few homes are non decent</li> <li>Majority of councils capital expenditure is on its housing stock</li> <li>Can meet decent homes standard</li> <li>Resident regularly consulted and are involved in the decision making</li> <li>Good stock condition survey</li> <li>Ongoing development of housing Asset management plan</li> <li>Responsive repairs informing planned maintenance programme</li> </ul>	<p>The Housing strategy and HRA Business plan do not fully illustrate links to corporate priorities and lack SMART targets.</p> <p>Stock condition survey database is not being updated.</p> <p>Not properly resourcing the work on the Asset Management Plan.</p> <p>Procurement strategy needs to be revised to take account of the government agenda.</p> <p>Lack of information on Asbestos.</p> <p>Poor response to diversity issues</p>
Is the council delivering its plans to meet the Decent Homes Standard?	b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Good access to funding.</li> <li>Have redirected savings towards decent homes work</li> <li>Good planned and responsive repair split at 65:35</li> <li>Good use of consultancies to help increase capacity.</li> <li>Contractors are involved in the key decisions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recruitment and retention is a problem</li> <li>No joint procurement strategies pursued with other districts or RSLs</li> <li>Voids not being made decent where the opportunity exists</li> </ul>
How well does the council monitor its progress and how effectively does this feed into future strategies and plans?	b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have learnt from others and events</li> <li>Adequate performance monitoring in most areas.</li> <li>Staff are clear about objectives. Appraisal system is applied consistently</li> <li>The Contractors Customer Care Code is good practice and the repair service has recently received a Chartermark</li> <li>High satisfaction levels for planned maintenance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No evidence that benchmarking with others in Cumbria has been used to improve the service.</li> <li>Performance on programmed maintenance completion not good over last 3 financial years</li> </ul>

# DRAFT

Area of focus	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
<b>Decent homes standard diagnostic assessment judgement</b>		B	

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

- a = very low
- b = low
- c = high
- d = very high

## Appendix 2 - Public Space diagnostic assessment

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

- 147 This is a low priority area for improvement. The council has redeveloped the town centre and used public art imaginatively. Streets are well maintained and safe and highway improvements have been made to help people with mobility problems get around. However, access to council building for people with mobility problems is a weakness. The longer term funding of services to maintain improvements is an issue.
- 148 The council's highest priority is regeneration, and a clean, attractive, well-maintained environment forms a key part of its regeneration strategy. Its position is summed up in a report it commissioned on public art: *'In response to a decline in traditional industries, Barrow in Furness is actively seeking to diversify; and to this end wants to create a quality environment that will attract investment, provide employment and training and improve the self-image of the town'*. The borough looks well-kept, and several regeneration programmes have made the street environment attractive and safe, though it is less clear that there are the resources in service departments to maintain this standard in the long term.
- 149 The Local Plan includes an environmental impact appraisal that covers global as well as local sustainability; it notes a potential conflict between environmental and development goals but argues that because of Barrow's economic situation, the need for regeneration is overwhelming. Nevertheless, the Plan does take environmental issues into account; for example, some designated employment land is on greenfield sites to attract outside investment, whilst being no more than 10 minutes' walk from a bus route for employees without access to a car. The borough also builds a high proportion of houses (over 70% in 2001/2002) on brownfield land. The council's efficiency in determining planning applications was average in 2001/2002, at 67% within eight weeks.
- 150 The council has been single-minded in using its own planning and land consolidation powers and obtaining regeneration funding to comprehensively redevelop Barrow town centre to a high visual standard. The new, largely pedestrianised, shopping centre is one of the achievements most recognised and praised by residents and council staff. More than half a sample of residents polled in July 2002 said they felt more pride in the town than three years previously.
- 151 The council promotes equality of access to the built environment; for example there are dropped kerbs and tactile paving in most urban parts of the borough and the shopping streets in the town centre are largely pedestrianised. Groups representing people with disabilities test new and refurbished buildings for ease of access. However, a recent survey has shown that it is still difficult for people with restricted mobility to get into many council buildings such as the town hall and the events venue, Forum 28.
- 152 Street scene services operate well at present; most streets look safe, attractive and well-kept, though there is some public concern about graffiti and vandalism. Services also have the capacity and systems to make short-term improvements, and there are many new and refurbished buildings funded by regeneration money or 'section 106' agreements with developers. However, it is not clear that

# DRAFT

services can maintain those improvements. Individual departments have business plans for their services for the first time this year, but these plans often lack long-term strategies and are vulnerable to the withdrawal of external funding at the end of its term. For example, the council employed a Public Art Officer for the duration of its £1.2M Arts Lottery-funded Public Art programme, but the programme (and the post) ceased in March 2003.

- 153 Some amenities are also suffering from a decade or more of poor maintenance. The council's maintenance budget, at approximately £180,000 per year, is an eighth of the annual sum estimated in its asset management plan as needed to bring its buildings back to an acceptable standard. Services do not always have access to specialist skills such as building conservation, and the efficiency of services such as environmental health and planning can be affected by staff vacancies or sickness. The council sometimes collaborates with neighbours to maintain services, but in general does not give high priority to maintaining delivery standards.
- 154 The council has identified health as a major issue in the borough because 11 of the 13 wards in the borough are in the 10% most health deprived in England. However, there is little current collaboration between the council and the local primary care trust to tackle health inequalities, though the LSP's Health task group includes a council representative. The council's air quality monitoring shows there are no significant air pollution problems in the borough, but the number of noise complaints has risen rapidly and is now over 1000 per year; staff maintain a 24-hour response service, but only for the most serious cases. The council is now using enforcement measures (approximately 3-4 antisocial behaviour orders per year) and supports the Resolve mediation service, a local charity that works with neighbours in dispute.

## Does the council help keep the locality clean?

- 155 This is an area with a low priority for improvement. The council gives a high priority to clean streets and the recycling service has been comprehensively redesigned to improve on poor performance in this area. Weaknesses include a slow response to waste minimisation and public satisfaction levels for street cleaning are low.
- 156 Until very recently, the council has given little attention to the rising volume of household waste, and has tended to regard recycling and reuse as 'add-ons' to the basic refuse collection service. It has now reversed that view and has expanded kerbside collections of recyclable materials in a way that is set to raise the recycling rate substantially. Clean streets, by contrast, are associated with the council's main aim of regeneration, and have been given high priority.
- 157 Reducing waste at source has not really begun in Barrow. The amount of household waste collected per head, at 429 kg per year in 2001/2002, is in the worst quartile of districts, as is the recycling rate (6% in 2001/2002 and 8% in 2002/2003).
- 158 However, the situation has begun to change in 2003. In its performance plan for 2002/2003, the council expressed its concern about these figures and recognised that to reach its government recycling target of 12% in 2003/2004 would require a radical change in the way it viewed waste. Two events coincided to bring about

that change: the contract covering the council's outsourced refuse collection was due for renewal, and the council won a waste minimisation grant from DEFRA. The council was thus able to agree a new contract that incorporated substantial recycling provision, and used the grant to pay for containers, vehicles and publicity for the new arrangements.

- 159 Until 2003, recycling facilities consisted of a network of 16 bring sites across the borough, supplemented by a voluntary fortnightly kerbside collection of paper. Under new arrangements, the council is collecting paper, glass, plastics, textiles and metal cans from all households in the borough and collecting green waste from most eligible households. As a result, the unaudited recycling figures for May and June 2003/2004 are 17%, well above its 2003/2004 target and almost at the 2005/2006 target of 18%. Improved recycling is one of the council achievements mentioned most often by council staff, and the substantial amount of publicity for the new arrangements has been an important factor in ensuring their success.
- 160 The council is working with Cumbria County Council and other districts to improve waste management arrangements in the county. However, the strategy agreed is broad and does not provide a clear framework within which to develop partnerships to meet Government recycling targets especially long term targets which are likely to need further investment.
- 161 The May 2003 cleansing contract monitoring report showed that over 95% of streets in Barrow reach acceptable standards of cleanliness, and this figure is supported by observation.
- 162 It contrasts with the results of public surveys, which show a third of respondents dissatisfied with the level of cleanliness. They cite dog fouling as the greatest concern, followed by litter and vandalism. The council last year spent £10,000 on a campaign to reduce dog fouling, but success has been limited and it picks up over 300 stray dogs a year. It is considering increasing enforcement and is looking at a scheme in neighbouring South Lakeland District Council for impounding stray dogs.
- 163 The cleansing contract requires fly tipped refuse notified to the council to be removed within 48 hours. Fly tipping is not a major problem in the borough, though domestic fly tipping has increased recently because the council has brought in a charge for bulky waste collections. The council is stepping up enforcement and is working with the Environment Agency on a joint campaign to discourage fly tipping.

#### **Does the council work with partners to improve community safety?**

- 164 This is an area with a low priority for improvement. There are good relations with partners and the crime and disorder strategy has clear priorities based on good data. There are several well – funded initiatives linked to the regeneration programme and violent crime and fear of crime have reduced. However, there are still fears about crime and mainstreaming and evaluation of community safety initiatives is a weakness.
- 165 Crime and disorder have a serious impact on residents. A citizens' panel survey in 2001 placed crime alongside jobs as top priority, though the overall crime rate in the borough is low. The Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP), in

# DRAFT

which the council plays a leading part, acts as a focus for action on crime and disorder in the borough. It is effective because it gets good data and analyses them thoroughly, maintains a productive working relationship among partners and has brought down levels of violent crime in the borough. Its weak points are evaluation of its programmes and their incorporation within the mainstream of the council's services, so that partners cannot build on past initiatives to improve their operation.

- 166 The CDRP is a working group of the Furness Partnership. It has a good range of members, including the county's youth offending team, community groups such as Neighbourhood Watch and tenants and residents' associations, voluntary organisations, charities such as Age Concern and the local newspaper. Through them, the partnership is linked to other districts in the county (through the Crime and Disorder Practitioners' Group) and to regeneration, employment and community development programmes in Barrow. Community safety is a significant component of many of those programmes.
- 167 The council generally is respected for its role in partnerships, and the CDRP is effective, though it is dominated by the council and the police. This was one of the findings of a 'health check' carried out on the CDRP by the charity Crime Concern in November 2000. It found a broad-ranging and committed partnership that had brought about a reduction in crime, had a good record of implementing schemes to reduce crime and made innovative use of electronic information sharing. It also identified a need for more community consultation and involvement, more public awareness and better mainstreaming within the council. The council is addressing these weaknesses, for example by increasing community consultation.
- 168 The CDRP carried out a comprehensive crime audit in the borough in 2002 and from it, developed its three-year strategy. The strategy focuses on five clear and cogently-argued priorities, reflecting some national issues such as burglary but mainly such as youth crime. A list of actions is attached to each one, though it does not specify which partners have responsibility for implementing the actions. In practice, partners often combine to implement projects: for example, Age Concern installs new doors, locks, security bolts and smoke alarms in the homes of vulnerable people over 60 as part of the Safety and Security at Home (SASH) project funded by the Single Regeneration Budget and the council's capital budget. **Age Concern, Victim Support and the police refer customers.**
- 169 The council relates action on the CDRP strategy to its 'quality of life' strategic priority, though its strategic plan does not mention crime and only monitors community safety through a target for the SASH project described above. The council's best value review of community safety describes mainstreaming of community safety issues within departments as ineffective, and it is unclear whether the council **has reallocated mainstream funding** to partnership activities. However, the Local Plan contains a chapter on designing new development to deter crime, and the council manages the Barrow Information Network, BIN, which facilitates information sharing between agencies using GIS technology, so that they can target resources more effectively.
- 170 Though the CDRP's data collection is good, and there is a range of funding sources, evaluation of initiatives is weak. It is impossible to determine whether they have been **cost-effective, or to assess** their impact on broader issues. **The strategy identifies some areas for improvement, but does not say what**

**has been done about them** or what the partnership will do next. The emerging Community Plan, however, does contain targets to reduce crime and reduce the gap between crime rates in regeneration areas and the borough average.

171 The CDRP has made a publicly important impact in two of its priority areas:

- ◆ Though crime levels in Barrow are generally lower than the national average and falling, violent crime has been an exception, and the CDRP made tackling it a priority. It targeted 'hot spots', mainly in Barrow town centre; police and council worked with pub and bar owners to reduce drink-related violent incidents through improved information and reporting together with targeted policing. As a consequence, violent crime dropped 45% from 27.8 cases per 1000 population in 1998/1999 to 15.4 per 1000 in 2000/2001. The rate has continued to fall, though by a less dramatic margin.
- ◆ **Fear of crime** - a public survey in **January 2001 found that people thought there were higher levels of crime that was the case**; 60% of them also thought crime was increasing **though crime rates had dropped in the previous 2 years. There was dissatisfaction with the way crime is dealt with (37% satisfaction, against a county average of 47%)**. The CDRP strategy therefore puts some emphasis on publicity and marketing, as well as introducing the measures to tackle violent and youth crime described elsewhere in this report. As a result, fear of crime fell by about 8% between 2000 and 2001, and the council reports a 15% fall between 2001 and 2002, though 60% of the respondents to a survey in regeneration areas still said in 2002 that they did not feel safer in the streets than three years previously.

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

172 This area has a high need for improvement. There is a range of activities for children and younger teenagers in Barrow, and some pockets of real innovation. Neglected play areas and sports grounds are gradually being refurbished and the council is beginning to incorporate the opinions of residents, including young people themselves, into its planning. These initiatives, however are not integrated into a council-wide strategy for services to young people, so that efforts are often uncoordinated and do not efficiently help their customers.

173 In surveys, Barrow's residents repeatedly emphasise two concerns about young people:

- ◆ youth crime and disorder. The borough's crime audit showed that youth crime, along with drugs, came top of the list of serious crime issues, with large numbers of people feeling intimidated by vandalism and gangs of youths; and
- ◆ job prospects. Almost two thirds of respondents in regeneration areas believe there is less of a future for young people than three years ago, and the age profile of Barrow's residents dips (relative to the UK average) in the age group 20-30, as young people leave the area.

174 Residents link their concerns to a lack of opportunities for teenagers and poor provision of play facilities; when asked what is missing in the town, the commonest answer (22%) is 'more for young people'.

# DRAFT

- 175 In response, the council works with a variety of partners in the public, private and voluntary sectors to provide a full programme of activities, though there is a tapering off in activities and facilities for teenagers over the age of 14. In the arts, for example, Forum 28, Barrow's events venue, houses a 'Dare to Dance' programme for young dancers from 18 months upwards, and organises Saturday workshops and summer arts programmes. The Ashton Group, a theatre company based in Barrow, runs two youth theatre groups that for more than ten years have put on original productions written by professional playwrights or by local young people through improvisation workshops.
- 176 Barrow is a Sports Action Zone, and there is a steadily improving provision of sports and leisure facilities, play areas and youth centres, particularly important for children from the high-density houses and streets in town centre wards. Young people themselves are beginning to be canvassed for their ideas and can influence decisions. For example a citizens' panel survey in 1999 had identified Ormsgill as the area most dissatisfied with facilities for teenagers; the local committee there has recently put £20 000 aside towards a youth centre after surveying local young people on the street and in schools.
- 177 The council is also engaged in refurbishing playgrounds and bringing them up to current standards of equipment provision and safety after several years of reduced maintenance and many playgrounds are now attractive, safe and clean. However, though the council's provision of play areas is higher than the average for boroughs, and it has recently opened three new ones, it has left some parts of the borough under-provided for several years. Public satisfaction with parks and open spaces is 55% (the median for councils is 63%).
- 178 In devising initiatives for young people, the council works through a number of regeneration and community safety programmes, several of which incorporate measures aimed specifically at young people. For example, the Heart of Barrow regeneration partnership has a youth development strand, and its 'Building Bridges' project aims to bring young and old people together to increase mutual understanding and tolerance.
- 179 However, the diffusion of projects for young people across several regeneration programmes means that the council has no integrated view of children and young people's issues. The lack of an explicit strategy for young people as a distinct group means that it is difficult for the council to coordinate its attack on problems such as antisocial behaviour, to compare different approaches or to find measures of how successful its work with young people is. For example, the council is increasing the provision of facilities, but it is not clear whether access to those facilities, especially by disadvantaged groups, is keeping pace. In some cases (for example at the Park Leisure Centre) attendance is decreasing, despite discounts for under-16s.

**Summary of public space diagnostic assessment judgements and strengths / weaknesses**

Area of focus	Grade	Strengths	Weaknesses
How well does the council contribute to the management of the physical environment?	b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• council regards quality of environment as an important aspect of regeneration</li> <li>• redeveloped town centre has given people more pride in the borough</li> <li>• most streets look safe and well-kept</li> <li>• highway improvements help people to get around</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• access to council buildings for people with restricted mobility is often difficult</li> <li>• not clear how the council or services are organised to maintain the quality of the environment over the long term</li> </ul>
Does the council help keep the locality clean?	b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• council gives high priority to clean streets</li> <li>• household recycling has been comprehensively redesigned in 2003; early results are encouraging</li> <li>• streets are free from litter</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• waste minimisation has not yet been tackled</li> <li>• public satisfaction is low, and dog fouling is still a problem</li> </ul>
Does the council work with partners to improve community safety?	b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• good relationships among partners in CDRP</li> <li>• crime &amp; disorder strategy has clear priorities coupled to good data and analysis</li> <li>• several well-funded initiatives, linked to regeneration programmes</li> <li>• violent crime &amp; fear of crime both reduced</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• most people don't feel safer</li> <li>• not clear what the council's role is – so mainstreaming within departments is not effective</li> <li>• evaluation of initiatives is weak</li> </ul>
Does the council contribute to activities to positively engage children and young people?	c	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a broad range of activities for children and younger teenagers, with some exciting options</li> <li>• neglected play areas and sports grounds are gradually being refurbished</li> <li>• the council is beginning to incorporate the opinions of residents, including young people themselves, into its planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• residents link youth disorder to lack of activities for young people</li> <li>• activities tail off after 14</li> <li>• initiatives are not part of a council-wide strategy for services to young people</li> <li>• projects often uncoordinated and not integrated into sustained improvement plans; hard to assess their impact</li> </ul>
<b>Public space diagnostic assessment judgement</b>	<b>B</b>		

**Scoring key**

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

- a = very low
- b = low
- c = high
- d = very high

# DRAFT

## Appendix 3 - Appointed auditor assessment

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

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

### Scoring key

1 = inadequate

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

3 = adequate

4 = good

## Appendix 4 - Benefit Fraud Inspectorate assessment

181 The Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) has undertaken the assessment in this appendix as part of the CPA process. The assessment covers two aspects, the current level of performance and the authority's proven capacity to improve. Each assessment is measured on a five point scale (poor, fair, fair to good, good and excellent).

### Current Performance

182 Barrow-in-Furness District Council has contracted out its benefits administration and has contractual arrangements with the external provider Liberata.

183 Liberata is a national organisation with standard policies and procedures in place across all its sites, including:

- ◆ recruitment
- ◆ health and safety
- ◆ equal opportunities
- ◆ harassment and bullying
- ◆ grievance procedures
- ◆ performance and attendance management
- ◆ data protection
- ◆ information and IT security.

184 Overall, we found that Barrow-in-Furness District Council's Housing Benefit/Council Tax Benefit service is currently providing a **Fair performance**. Barrow-in-Furness District Council's current performance demonstrates a number of strengths. These include:

- ◆ performance monitoring co-ordinated by the authority's Client Section
- ◆ consultation with the community
- ◆ use of a claim form that meets the standards of the BFI model
- ◆ achieving full compliance with the Verification Framework process from March 1999
- ◆ meeting landlords expectations through the introduction of a tenant passport scheme
- ◆ commitment to continuous improvement
- ◆ commitment and support from members.

# DRAFT

- 185 However there are some areas of weakness where Barrow-in-Furness District Council needs to develop further to fully meet the BFI/Department for Work and Pensions Performance Standards framework. These include:
- ◆ reviewing overarching strategies and policies to ensure that they fully cover all aspects of HB/CTB administration
  - ◆ allowing the Client Section to be more proactive in developing and directing the service provider in the provision of the benefit service
  - ◆ reviewing the policy and procedures for the recovery of overpayments.
- 186 Although performance targets are not all being met we recognise that workloads are monitored daily to avoid backlogs, and that the Client Section is working closely with Liberata to address performance in order to ultimately achieve and exceed clearance targets.

## Proven Capacity to Improve

- 187 We assessed Barrow-in-Furness District Council's proven capacity to improve as **Fair towards Good**. Barrow-in-Furness District Council is able to demonstrate the following positive aspects:
- ◆ a proven ability to take difficult decisions and implement change, as demonstrated by the contracting out of the benefits service and the introduction of the Verification Framework
  - ◆ the ability to monitor performance down to individual level
  - ◆ the willingness to learn from others, as demonstrated by the use of Liberata's shared database and quarterly meetings with the Cumbria Practitioners Networking Group
  - ◆ recognition from members that the benefits service is crucial to reducing disadvantage in the most deprived areas.
- 188 We would like to thank Barrow-in-Furness District Council staff, and those of Liberata, for their assistance and co-operation with the assessment process.
- 189 This report has been produced pursuant to powers contained in sections 10 and 11 of the Local Government Act 1999.

## **Appendix 5 - Framework for Comprehensive Performance Assessment**

- 190 This comprehensive performance assessment was carried out under the Local Government Act 1999. Local councils have a general duty under Section 3 of this Act to secure continuous improvement in the exercise of their functions. Section 10 gives the Audit Commission the power to inspect councils' performance of the general duty of improvement.
- 191 The main elements of the assessment were:
- ◆ a self-assessment completed by the council;
  - ◆ accredited peer challenge to inform the council's self-assessment;
  - ◆ a corporate assessment of the council's overall effectiveness in supporting services to deliver improvements;
  - ◆ an assessment of the council's service delivery performance through two diagnostic assessments on
    - ◆ management of public space; and
    - ◆ progress in meeting the decent homes standard
    - ◆ Benefit Fraud Inspectorate's (BFI) assessment of benefit services;
  - ◆ appointed auditor assessments of performance on each of the main elements of the code of audit practice and;
  - ◆ audited performance indicators, inspection reports and plan assessments.
- 192 The assessment for Barrow Borough Council was undertaken by a team from the Audit Commission and took place over the period from 16th June to 20th June 2003.
- 193 This report has been discussed with the council, which has been given the opportunity to examine the Audit Commission's assessment. This report will be used as the basis for improvement planning by the council.