

Deciding and Delivering Council Priorities

City of York Council

Audit 2006/2007

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Introduction

- 1 Community leadership is a key element of the approach to CPA 2005. Achievement is assessed by examining how well Councils are delivering local priorities and outcomes across five sub-themes. These are based on the 'shared priorities' which were agreed by the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister's central and local government partnership. The five sub-themes are:
 - sustainable communities and transport;
 - safer and stronger communities;
 - healthier communities;
 - older people; and
 - children and young people.
- 2 The community strategy is the natural vehicle for tackling these agendas in their local contexts and in the light of local priorities. The community leadership role of the Council is vital to make this happen.
- 3 The way that local priorities are determined and how they are balanced with other sometimes competing priorities is crucial to successful delivery. The Audit Commission research on performance breakthrough revealed three actions that successful public sector organisations do:
 - focus on what the organisation is about, prioritise and do something. This means considering competing priorities and making difficult judgements about which should come first;
 - get the right people involved in deciding what matters; and
 - put resources behind what matters.
- 4 This report sets out the findings of our recent review of how City of York Council (CYC) has developed and started to implement its approach to delivering against its new priorities.

Background

- 5 The justification for undertaking this review -originally included in the 2004/05 Audit and Inspection Plan and subsequently postponed - goes back to work carried out in 2003/04 which identified weaknesses in the Council's approach to prioritisation. By mutual agreement, we agreed to postpone the review until the Council had strengthened its prioritisation arrangements - work which ultimately took longer than the Council had originally anticipated.

- 6 Our 2005 Annual Audit and Inspection Letter (AAIL) noted that ‘Our 2004 AAIL Letter reported a mixed performance, and concluded that consistent corporate arrangements were needed to enable you to demonstrate value. These messages were reinforced by the peer review you commissioned this year, particularly the need to improve your approach to prioritisation, performance management and project management’. The Letter also referred to progress and improvement across a number of areas, together with some outstanding areas for action in relation to prioritisation.
- 7 The Council is already engaged in transforming some important aspects of the way it carries out its community leadership responsibilities. These include a revision of the Council's priorities to align them more closely to the objectives of the community plan. These changes are taking place within the context of increased cost pressures which has made the need for prioritisation more acute.
- 8 The Council has retained its eight corporate aims and agreed 13 new priorities (called improvement statements) within 7 of those aims. Nine of these are externally focused and four are internal efficiency priorities. These are as follows.

Improving Quality and Sustainability

- Decrease the tonnage of biodegradable waste and recyclable products going to landfill.
- Increase the use of public and other environmentally friendly modes of transport.
- Improve the actual and perceived condition and appearance of the city's streets, housing estates and publicly accessible spaces.

Creating a Safe City

- Reduce the actual and perceived impact of violent, aggressive and nuisance behaviour on people in York.

Opportunities for Education, Skills and Learning

- Increase people's skills and knowledge to improve future employment prospects.

Strengthening and Diversifying York's Economy

- Improve the contribution that Science City York makes to economic prosperity.

Improving Health and Well Being

- Improve the health and lifestyles of the people who live in York, in particular among groups whose levels of health are the poorest.

Ensuring Services Are Accessible And Inclusive

- Improve the life chances of the most disadvantaged and disaffected children, young people and families in the city.
- Improve the quality and availability of decent affordable homes in the city.

Improving Our Organisational Effectiveness

- Improve our focus on the needs of customers and residents in designing and providing services.
 - Improve leadership at all levels to provide clear, consistent direction to the organisation.
 - Improve the way the Council and its partners work together to deliver better services for the people who live in York.
 - Improve efficiency and reduce waste to free-up more resources.
- 9 There are no improvement statements specifically aligned to the corporate aim to 'work with others to develop opportunities for residents and visitors to experience York as a vibrant and eventful city'.

Audit approach

- 10 This review assessed how the Council is developing its new performance and financial planning arrangements, linked to the new priorities, and the extent to which these have been applied in practice. Two probe areas were used: the previous priority of 'York, the safer city'; and the new improvement statement 'Health and Lifestyle'.
- 11 The report findings and recommendations are based on the three key questions relating to prioritisation contained within the 2005 corporate assessment methodology.
- Are there clear and robust priorities within the ambitions for the area?
 - Is there a robust strategy to deliver the priorities?
 - Is robust action taken to deliver the strategy?

Main conclusions

- 12 The Council is at an early stage in the process of implementing its new priorities which were formally agreed by the Council in June 2006. It has a significant amount of work to do to ensure that these priorities are embedded within its service and financial planning systems in time for the budget allocation process, which begins in the autumn.

Are there clear and robust priorities within the ambitions for the area?

- 13 The Council's priorities are directly linked to its vision and eight aims, which are also reflected in the community strategy, 'Without Walls'. There is a good balance of national and local priorities; they are based on the identified needs of disadvantaged groups and communities and clearly seek to address inequalities. The four internal improvement priorities are to be integrated with Council's overall organisational improvement programme with the intention of delivering wider corporate improvements and efficiencies.
- 14 The new corporate priorities were developed internally through the Council's Corporate Leadership Group (CLG) of senior officers in consultation with the Leader, using a wide range of available data and local intelligence.
- 15 To date, this has been an internal process but there are emerging plans to integrate the new priorities within the restructured Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and associated partnership work to deliver Local Area Agreements and Local Public Service Agreements. Some priorities, such as for Safer York are already well established within a partnership framework, but others, such as Health and Lifestyle, are at a very early stage and so there is little evidence to indicate how new priorities relating to this area are being embedded.
- 16 Although the priorities are based on good intelligence, including community input, the Council's corporate strategy does not clearly demonstrate how local people's and partners' views have influenced them. This could result in a lost opportunity to gain ownership and support from local communities and partners.
- 17 The approach to developing the priorities through the CLG has generated a new sense of corporate ownership amongst the Council's senior management and a better understanding of their potential roles in delivering the Council's ambitions.
- 18 There is not yet a clear and agreed strategy for communicating the priorities. Because they have only been recently agreed, the Council is at a very early stage in communicating them internally and to the wider community. The approach used to formalise the arrangements will be critical to their early adoption. A successful launch, with early and consistent messages will help to promote ownership of the priorities and provide a clearer understanding of how individual members of staff and councillors can relate to them.

Is there a robust strategy to deliver the priorities?

- 19 The Council is at an early stage of developing strategies and robust delivery frameworks for the new priorities. It has appointed chief officer 'champions' to lead in each priority area; these offer the potential for greater focus and a higher profile for the priorities within the Council's working. It is intended that the priorities will be cross-cutting rather than owned by individual directorates.

- 20 Each champion is tasked with developing the second and third year detailed project plans for each priority, including expected outcomes and how partners will be involved. These are expected to be completed by September 2006 in time for the next round of service and financial planning. Year One actions have been agreed, based on existing budget allocations.
- 21 However, there are still some significant steps to be taken before the Council has a realistic and robust strategy to deliver against these priorities:
- the Council has a consistently applied service planning framework. However, detailed guidance on incorporating the improvement statements into service plans with sufficient emphasis on user focus has yet to be developed;
 - the Council is committed to developing 'better measures' to drive improvement in services, but the current measures to assess performance against the Year One actions are not sufficiently SMART and staff training to assist with this has not yet happened; and
 - currently, there is a lack of clarity about the way resources will be allocated to priorities and how value for money will be demonstrated. Strategies, such as those for procurement and the medium term financial plan, which was developed at the same time as the new priorities were being decided upon, have yet to be adapted to incorporate the improvement statements.

Is robust action taken to deliver the strategy?

- 22 The Council has not yet developed the mechanisms to help it stay focused on the new priorities. Its performance management framework has not been amended to incorporate the improvement statements and it has not been decided how the Council will report progress against the targeted outcomes for these cross-cutting improvements. However, there are plans to introduce a new structure to officer and council agendas, based on the new priorities; this will help to ensure that councillors focus on every council priority and not just an individual's particular areas of interest.
- 23 The arrangements to promote learning from the Council's own successes and failures are still to be developed. The Council has achieved some significant improvements in its previous Safer York priority, including substantial reductions in burglaries and vandalism. This has been achieved through increased focus and resourcing on problem areas and improved working through the ward committee structure to target issues at a local level. This provides an opportunity to analyse the lessons learned and apply them to future partnership working such as within the Health and Lifestyle agenda.
- 24 There is also insufficient clarity about the way that the work of the champions will be managed and monitored to avoid duplication and achieve greater efficiencies through improved, joined-up working.

- 25 The council is taking some steps to ensure the workforce can focus on the new priorities. It has established a leadership development programme based on key themes, including community leadership, member and officer development and partnership working. However, there is scope to extend the scheme further delivering improved outcomes and efficiencies by stimulating feedback from staff through initiatives such as suggestion schemes.

The way forward

- 26 These findings will be discussed with the senior officers in the CLG and action plan to address the recommendations will be agreed in due course.

Appendix 1 – Action plan

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
P8 para 21	<p>R1 Strengthen the service planning framework and guidance to include the new priorities, better target-setting and increased user focus. The expected benefits of this recommendation are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • better incorporation of the improvement statements into service plans; and • a clearer understanding of what outcomes could be achieved. <p>The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs.</p>	3				

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
P8 para 21	<p>R2 Clarify the way in which resources will be allocated to priorities and reflect this in all relevant plans and strategies. The expected benefits of this recommendation are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • better demonstration of value for money; • clearer decision making; and • an improved focus on priority outcomes. <p>The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs.</p>	3				

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
P8 para 21	<p>R3 Integrate the improvement statements into the performance management framework. The expected benefits of this recommendation are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • improved reporting of progress against targeted outcomes for cross-cutting improvements; and • an improved focus on all new priorities. <p>The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs.</p>	3				

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
P8 para 22	<p>R4 Introduce arrangements which promote systematic exchange of information about previous successes and failures in improving outcomes. The expected benefits of this recommendation are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less potential for duplicated effort; and • opportunities to learn from notable practice. <p>The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs.</p>	2				

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Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
P7 para 16	<p>R5 Make the reasons for focusing on the new priorities more explicit in Council communications. The expected benefits of this recommendation are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • greater ownership of the priorities by the public and by potential partners, based on a better understanding of the way in which they have shaped and can now help to deliver the new priorities. <p>The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs.</p>	2				

Page no.	Recommendation	Priority 1 = Low 2 = Med 3 = High	Responsibility	Agreed	Comments	Date
P7 para 16	<p>R6 Develop an internal communications strategy and implement it early. The expected benefits of this recommendation are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • that all staff and councillors understand their role in delivering improvements in the new priority areas. <p>The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs.</p>	2				