

Corporate Improvement Plan 2006 – 2009

Contents:	Page
Section One: Welcome and Introduction	
Section Two: Executive Summary	
Section Three: Our Ambitions – What Matters to Local People	
Section Four: Keeping Our Promises - Achievements in 2005/2006	
Section Five: 3 Year Goals – What Local People Can Expect To Get Better and By When	
Section Six: Corporate Risks	
Section Seven: The Council's Performance Management Framework	
Section Eight: Managing Our Resources To Deliver Our Priorities	
Section Nine: Corporate Governance Arrangements	
Section Ten: Partnership/Capacity Building Arrangements	
Section Eleven: Performance	
Translation etc	

Section One:

Welcome and Introduction to Rossendale BC's Corporate Improvement Plan

Welcome to our Corporate Improvement Plan for 2006-2009. This Plan sets out what our main goals are for the next three years. We have based it on those things local people, Councillors, staff and partners have told us are important to them.

*"Overall, good progress has been made in the last year"
Audit Commission, February 2006*

In this document we look forward as well as back. We set out what we have achieved from our first Plan published in 2005 as well as our ideas for the future so that local people, as well as other interested parties know where we are going and how we intend to get there.

*The Council is clear about its role in delivering ambitions for the local community
Audit Commission, February 2006*

We now have a track record of improvement we are proud of. This Plan shows how we intend to build on our successes. It also shows how the Council, through its Mission of '8x8 by 2008,' contributes to the District Vision – 'Rossendale Alive.' We are proud of being a key player in delivering this vision. In order to succeed it is important that Council staff and Elected Members understand how their individual contributions combine to make the aspirations of local people a reality.

The past year has been a good one for Rossendale. There are many examples of us delivering what we set out to. We would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Councillors and staff as it is their dedication, hard work and enthusiasm that has made the achievements of the past 12 months possible.

The real success for any local council is to serve local people well. Please take the opportunity to read this Plan and let us know what you think.

- Do the ambitions and key goals reflect what is important to you?
- Are we working on the right priorities?
- Are we providing the services you need?
- Do you think our services are of good quality?

Duncan Ruddick
Leader of the Council

Carolyn Wilkins
Chief Executive

Draft

Section Two: Executive Summary

To be inserted following consultation on draft

Draft

Section Three: Our Ambitions – what matters to local people?

Rossendale – Today and in the Future

Rossendale is defined by its environment – it is what makes us unique. The narrow urban valley of the Irwell, running between harsh Pennine uplands, is what shapes the borough's character and set it apart from other Lancashire districts. The development of Rossendale has been dictated by its geography, its natural resources and its response to commercial and industrial opportunities. Everyone lives close to the countryside and there is a strong sense that resident's quality of life is bound up with the landscape and with the heritage urban streetscape.

Rossendale is in South East Lancashire and has a slowly increasing population of just under 66,000 (3.5% from a minority ethnic background). The communities of Rossendale represent the gateways between the industrial towns of east Lancashire to the north and the city of Manchester only 29 kilometers (18 miles) to the south. The former mill towns – Bacup, Rawtenstall, Haslingden – run east-west along the narrow valley floor, the western end being connected to the motorway network via the M66 and the M65 in the north.

Together with its strategic location, Rossendale is an area of high landscape and recreational value and we have many programmes aimed at enhancing the cultural aspect of the natural environment such as the East Lancashire Regional Park and the Adrenalin gateway.

Rossendale's "golden valley" was built up from its textile heritage and through the manufacture and export of footwear. Rossendale's built environment is characterised by the remains of this industrial heritage – there are over 260 listed buildings and 8 conservation areas. English Heritage has described Bacup as one the best examples of a preserved mill town in the country.

The location of the borough makes it a great place to live, with many people then commuting to work in other boroughs. Despite this, local identity remains strong with affection for, and pride in, each local town.

This is the context in which we are working. We want to make the most of the borough's natural assets and industrial heritage. This means ensuring we care for our environment at the same time developing the borough as a tourist

destination. Major schemes such as the Adrenalin Gateway and the Transforming Pennine Lancashire programme are a large part of this.

We want the borough to be a cracking place to live. This means we want good quality housing in safe, clean neighbourhoods. The Council has transferred its housing stock to Green Vale Homes as part of achieving this. We are working in the Bacup and Stacksteads area through the Elevate Programme to improve housing and the environment. Feeling safe is important to people living, visiting and working in the borough. The Council and the police have a great partnership approach to tackling crime and disorder to make sure Rossendale is a place where people feel safe in their everyday lives. We also want people to work and shop within the borough. We are striving to secure a new shopping centre for Rawtenstall as part of a wider regeneration programme for the town.

Rossendale has challenges. Its geography, as well as being a strength, imposes limits on the transport infrastructure and means we don't have large sites to develop for employment opportunities. We have low unemployment in the borough, and manufacturing still employs a quarter of the borough's workforce. But wage rates are low so we are looking to secure quality jobs for local people, and ensure they have the necessary skills and qualifications to access them.

On the index of multiple deprivation, Rossendale ranks 92nd among English councils. Aspects of deprivation such as crime and employment show few extremes, but there is a high degree of health deprivation in the borough. We want good access to the necessary health services as well as promoting healthy life styles for local people.

We need to work together to build on what Rossendale has to offer to meet the challenges it faces.

Our Ambitions for the Borough: What Matters To Local People

“Rossendale – A Cracking Place To Live”

Both the Council and the Local Strategic Partnership have agreed a vision for the Borough’s future called ‘Rossendale Alive’.

It sets out a long term strategy to improve the quality of life in Rossendale which is contained in eight strategic themes:

- Community Safety – a place where people do not live in fear of crime
- Environment – a place which has attractive rural settings, a fantastic street scene and is easily accessible for all
- Community Network – a place where all opinions count and people respect and celebrate difference in gender, sexuality, race, culture and religion
- Health – a place where vulnerable people are looked after and all residents can look forward to a long and healthy life
- Housing – a place where people have a choice of high quality housing which is affordable for all
- Culture – a place which is a great place to live for people of all ages and is widely accepted as a major place to visit
- Education – a place where people of all ages will be well educated and capable of providing business with the human resource to compete in highly competitive global markets
- Economy – a place where job prospects and wages are high and the cost of living is low

To see the full document visit
www.rossendalealive.co.uk

Our Ambitions – what matters to local people?

Rossendale Borough Council – Vision and Mission

Rossendale BC is ambitious for the borough and for itself. The Council is committed to securing improved services for local people, whether these are provided directly by the Council or by other agencies. The Council has recognised that delivering the vision for the borough means championing local people together with the borough of Rossendale itself.

We recognise we do not have the capacity to deliver our ambitions alone. For some things we can put the system in place – but need others to do their share. Recycling is a great example of this – we work with local people to achieve our objectives. In other areas we don't provide the services directly – so need to work to influence the way they are provided to achieve what's important for us locally – Lancashire County Council and health services are some of those we work with on behalf of local people. In other areas we have traditionally been the service provider but there are now opportunities to bring greater investment or capacity in to the borough by providing these services in different ways. Rossendale Leisure Trust has improved the leisure offer for the borough, and more people now use their services. We are developing a 'Capacity building model' of local governance to take this approach forward.

Include diagram

This includes working with communities, partners and other providers of services. It also means developing and strengthening our skills so we can work in new ways. It is underpinned by a strong commitment to customer (user) focus, community engagement, communication, diversity and working with neighbourhoods.

The Mission for Rossendale Borough Council is 8x8 by 2008

Rossendale Borough Council's contribution to the Borough vision is defined by its overarching mission of 8 X 8 by 2008. This means that by 2008 the Council is determined to have 8 out of 10 customers satisfied with its services. In addition, the Council will seek to have 8 out of 10 of its corporate priority indicators meeting local targets and/or in the top quartile of performance by 2008.

Rossendale Borough Council – Corporate Objectives

Similar to the Community Strategy, the Council has eight corporate objectives – of which five are shared with the Local Strategic Partnership (i.e. Environment, Housing, Culture, Economy, Community Involvement). In addition to these shared objectives, the Council has three internal objectives which are:

- **Improvement** – the continuous provision of high quality public services built upon the foundation of Finance, Risk, Performance, Procurement and Human Resources management
- **Customers** – being responsive and proactive to meet the needs of all our customers
- **Partnerships** – increasing our capacity to deliver through effective partnerships

Rossendale Borough Council – Priorities for Improvement

Priorities have broad cross-party ownership, are supported by staff, and reflect local people's concerns.
Audit Commission February 2006

Across the eight RBC Strategic Objectives, local people and Elected members have identified priorities for improvement. The aim of the prioritisation process is to ensure that the Council's resources and business plans are focused on delivering the things that really matter to the well-being of Rossendale residents. These priorities have been updated since last year to reflect the fact we have progressed some things and fully achieved others. It also demonstrates new areas the Council wishes to take. The following is a list of priorities for improvement together with their associated Corporate Objective.

Priorities for Improvement

- Embedding our customer promise (Customers)
- Delivering Regeneration across the Borough (Economy)
- Streetscene and Liveability Strategic Partnership (Environment)
- Revenues and Benefits Strategic Partnership (Partnerships)
- Promoting Rossendale (Economy)

Enabled by:

- Financial (and Risk?) Management (Improvement)
- Implementing the Member Development Strategy (Community Network)
- Implementing the Human Resources Strategy (Improvement)

In addition to the priorities for improvement, Elected Members have also identified those priorities that will be delivered through existing Council resources and those that will be delivered through greater levels of external resources.

Existing Resources

- Improving performance across the 8x8 by 2008 indicators (Improvement)
- Delivering on the District Vision (Partnerships)
- ELEVATE – Housing Market Renewal Initiative (Economy)
- Equalities (Community Network)

External Resources

- Improving Leisure facilities in the Borough (Culture)
- Spatial Development and Building Control (Environment)

This chart shows a visual representation of how the objectives of the LSP and the Council are shared. It shows how the Mission and Vision are supported by both the shared objectives of the LSP and Council. It also demonstrates those LSP objectives where the lead is taken by another partner organisation such as Police (Community Safety); Social Services and Primary Care Trust (Health); Local Education Authority and Rossendale & Accrington College (Education).

Insert S Curve Diagram here

Draft

Section Four: Keeping Our Promises – Achievements in 2005/06

The following represents some of the highlights in terms of achievement against the Corporate Objectives set for 2005/2006. These are by no means all that we have achieved but provide a snap shot of how we have improved against our key priorities.

The last 12 months has seen a transformation in the way the Council operates. The Council has taken control of it's own destiny and the Council's Corporate Improvement Plan clearly sets out it's intended strategic focus and the achievements it intends to deliver on behalf of local people.

The process is one of securing the provision of new services designed to genuinely meet the needs of local people and provide demonstrably better value for taxpayers in terms of improved performance. The last three year's have seen a steady rise in the Council's performance against a wide range of Best Value Performance Indicators, with over 2/3rds of indicators continuing to show improvement.

As the way that we work as a council changes, our approach to our customers is changing and the adoption of a Customer Services Strategy during 2005 has seen a dramatic increase in customer satisfaction from 27% in 2003 to 65%. clearly demonstrating that customers are now a key priority for the Council and the approach is having a positive impact.

The past year has been a year of 'achievement' for Rossendale. There are many examples of us delivering what we set out to do – achievements that make real and meaningful differences to the community we serve – as can be seen by the examples of key achievements that are shown on the following pages.

It is the dedication, hard work and enthusiasm of Councillor's and staff that have made the achievements of the past 12 months possible - their efforts are worthy of both thanks, recognition and celebration.

1. THE ENVIRONMENT – a place which has attractive rural settings, a fantastic street scene and is easily accessible for all

The environment is perhaps the Council's highest profile issue. The vast majority of our customers identify it as a key issue and it is one of the council 8 corporate priorities.

Our Streetscene and Liveability Service takes the lead on delivering the council's environmental services.

Despite constantly heavy demands and the need for restructuring and reorganisation in many parts of the service progress has been very good over the last 12 months.

There is strong evidence that the Council's recycling services have improved. The recent Environmental Inspection indicated that the service had improved and the latest recycling figures show that almost 24% of the borough's waste is now being recycled.

Recycling collections have been extended by adding new cardboard and textiles collections, separate from mainstream waste. Garden waste recycling has also been extended to more properties and over the year another 1500 homes have taken up home composting. This together with the introduction of new, fully digitised, collection rounds in April 2006 will optimise service delivery, further reduce the number of 'missed bins' and enable the service to re-act more quickly to any complaints.

The last year has also seen the introduction of Neighbourhood Environmental Action Teams (NEATs) in Whitworth, Bacup, Haslingden, Rawtenstall and Edenfield. The NEAT teams take a 'hands on' approach to managing a full range environmental issues from fly tipping to cleaning up graffiti. The NEATs teams are being supplemented by 'Hit Squads' and traditional manual street cleaning barrows have been reintroduced. The NEAT teams are also taking the lead in the fight against dog fouling with powers to issue fines to inconsiderate dog owners and a new Super Dooper Pooper Scooper at their disposal.

Streetscene and Liveability also make a significant contribution the Community Safety agenda. Through supporting the borough's Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership and through joint working with the police crime is falling in the borough, with a significant reduction of the number of burglaries, robberies and vehicle crimes taking place within the borough.

2. HOUSING – a place where people have a choice of high quality housing which is affordable for all

Our Key Achievements

The successful conclusion of the Housing Stock Transfer Process (HST) at the end of March 2006 unlocked £40m of investment, meaning that over the next six years tenants' will benefit from a planned repair and improvement programme that includes the installation of new kitchens, bathrooms, double glazing and central heating in their homes.

The HST process, which was effectively completed in just 18 (?) months, saw 82.5% of the tenants who voted, voting in favour of transferring council homes to Green Vale Homes, a new, independent, not for profit housing organisation set up with the help of Rossendale Council.

The effective completion of this complex process in a relatively short time period, when compared with many other Council's, bears testimony to our ability not only to 'stick to' and effectively carry through tough decisions, but also: ***“stay focused on priority areas despite a number of significant projects”***, as was commented upon by the Audit Commission in their Progress Assessment Review of the Council in 2005.

The housing improvement programme is already underway with the commencement of the installation of new double-glazing and door replacements. The Council will work closely with Green Vale Homes, monitoring progress to ensure that the 'Customer Promises' made to tenants are delivered to the satisfaction of tenants.

Following closely on the heels of this success came the news that Green Vale had been successful in their bid for a grant of £670,000 to build 20 new affordable rent flats in Newchurch. Building work is expected start in February 2007. Green Vale will be working with the Council to bid for funding for more schemes like this within the Borough over the coming year, which help to alleviate some of the housing problems cause by continued increases in house prices within the Borough.

The Council continues to be an effective partner in the Elevate Housing Market Renewal Programme and has received a further allocation of £4million for housing and regeneration in Bacup, Stacksteads and Britannia over the next 2 years. This second phase of Elevate funding will allow the Area Action Plan to be completed and will continue to fund housing refurbishment works in Stacksteads, before moving on into other parts of Bacup and Britannia. Community and recreational facilities in the area are also benefiting, for example Elevate funding has helped with the refurbishment of the Gordon Street Play area.

Elevate funding will continue to be used for environmental improvements and to support Neighbourhood Management activities that focus upon the co-ordination and delivery of better services to local people.

Whilst the Council's housing stock has been transferred, we are developing a strong strategic housing service which will ensure that the promises of improved services to tenants are maintained by Green Vale and that services to the homeless are improved. Work is well underway for developing the Borough's first affordable housing strategy, which will look at new innovative ways of helping first time buyers and households with low income to be able to afford a property within Rossendale and stay within the Borough.

In a bid to help the owners of privately owned properties the Council has also developed an equity release scheme which helps homeowners to raise the capital needed to make necessary improvements to their own homes.

These key achievements, together with other Council involvement within the private and social housing sectors, clearly demonstrates the Council's ability to deliver real, sustainable improvement in areas of significant benefit to the lives of local people; as was commented upon in the Audit Commission's Progress Assessment: ***" The Master Planning exercise for Stacksteads and Bacup is resulting in visible improvements to private sector housing"***

3. CULTURE - A place which is a great place to live for people of all ages and is widely accepted as a major place to visit.

Our Key Achievements

Rossendale is alive with many exciting and varied events going on throughout the year that bring the local community together. These included the Bike Show, Firework Displays, Rossendale Carnival, the Alive! Festival and the Christmas Lights. All of these events add significantly to the culture and economy of the Borough and with the council's continued support have flourished.

We are also proud to have hosted the national launch of 'Jogathon 2006' an event aimed at encouraging the whole community, from couch potatoes to trained athletes, to take up jogging, running, or walking. Jogathon attracted extensive media coverage and helped raise money for Sports Aid to support the Olympians of the future.

Sports and leisure play an important part in community life in Rossendale and the Rossendale Leisure Trust is our key partner in delivering better opportunities for local people.

In 2005 the Council transferred the management & ownership of its five leisure & sporting facilities to the newly formed 'Rossendale Leisure Trust' and this has not only resulted in reduced costs to the Council, but just as importantly has seen an increase in attendances, with 54,000 extra visits taking place and a rise in customer satisfaction. The Rossendale Trust is continuing to work well and achieving the targets set within its Business Plan.

Exciting plans for an 'Adrenaline Gateway' have been developed by Rossendale Leisure Trust and the LSP's Economy Theme Group over the last year. The project has already been long listed for the Big Lottery Living Landmarks Programme and a decision on the £50m bid will come later this year. If successful, the project will bring a major boost to the borough's sporting, leisure and tourism facilities.

Tourism continues to be a major source of economic potential for the borough. A strategic review has been carried out to identify Tourism opportunities for Rossendale and to assess the best way to support tourism in the borough in the future. This has resulted in changes to the way that we provide visitor information and to the development of a new tourism marketing action plan which identifies what is needed to attract more visitors to the borough.

In developing the borough's cultural and leisure facilities it is important that young people in the borough are not left out. The Council is a key partner in the Borough's youth provision strategy, which aims to provide local youth focused leisure facilities. Its focus is on providing legitimate, safe gathering places for young people such as skate parks and youth shelters. This benefits the wider community, by reducing the nuisance that some young people cause, and are unfairly perceived to cause, to other residents when they congregate in large groups.

The youth provision strategy has so far delivered X new Multi User Games Areas, X skate parks and the Staghill's Youth Shelter. These improvements are being delivered within the context of an overall Open Spaces Strategy, which was approved in the last year.

4. ECONOMY – a place where job prospects and wages are high and the cost of living is low

Our Key Achievements

Getting the local economy right is vital for the long term future of Rossendale. Decisions taken now will still have an effect in 30 years time. That's why it is important that we get the borough's planning framework right and ensure that we continue to support economic development and regeneration within the borough.

The council has taken a lead on several vitally important projects including the Valley Centre redevelopment, a new Bus Station for Rawtenstall and Future's Park and Housing Market Renewal.

In the last 12 months we have reached agreement with Rossendale Transport for them to relocate their Bus Garage as part of the redevelopment of Rawtenstall Town Centre and the construction of a new bus station.

We are also pleased to be working constructively with a wide range of partners in the borough to support the local economy. We are pleased to have supported Tesco and ASDA in their search for new stores, we have supported redevelopment plans put forward by Hurstwoods for various sites in Rawtenstall and we have worked with Lancashire County Developments Limited to support local businesses through a new office in Bacup.

But the most exciting plans are for the redevelopment of the Valley Centre and the work being done to develop an Adrenaline Gateway.

Plans for a £33m redevelopment of the Valley centre have been agreed between the Council and CNC Developments. High profile retailers are being encouraged to come and the new centre will bring more shoppers into the centre of Rawtenstall. A planning application has been submitted and the developer is making arrangements to consult with various interested people. The centre will also be renamed.

Proposals for an Adrenaline gateway to be developed within the borough have also made excellent progress this year and the project has now been included in the long list to win £50m of Lottery money. If the bid is successful Rossendale will become a national centre for action orientated activities, adrenaline sports, and adventurous pastimes. (Place in Culture)

In order to ensure that the borough's economy develops in a sustainable way the Council has also made excellent progress with its Local Development Framework (LDF). All of the main building blocks for the LDF are now in place including the core

strategy and statement of community involvement. Area Action Plans for Rawtenstall and Bacup, Stacksteads and Britannia have also progressed well and will shortly be finalised. More people than ever before have been involved in drawing up the new plans which replace the borough's outdated local plan developed in 19XX. As a result of the progress that has been made the council has increased received more Planning Delivery Grant than expected from the Government.

5. COMMUNITY NETWORK – a place where all opinions count and people respect and celebrate differences in gender, sexuality, race, culture and religion.

Key Achievements

All of the partners in the Local Strategic Partnership are working hard to bring the community together and to give local people a genuine voice in the key decisions that will affect the borough for many years to come. The LSP is driving forward the delivery of the Community Strategy with the aim of improving the lives of those that live in the Borough.

This genuine willingness to work together towards the common aims set out in the Rossendale Alive Community Strategy has helped the LSP to achieve an amber/green rating from the Government. This is the best rating achieved by any LSP in the North West that is not receiving Neighbourhood Renewal Funding. The Local Strategic Partnership has improved beyond all recognition over the last few years and is a credit to all the various partners, including the Community Network of over 400 voluntary sector groups. There is a collective understanding that there is still much work to do particularly in the areas of Health and Housing but the appetite to deliver is strong.

The benefits of partnership working have clearly been demonstrated through the recent review of Youth Provision in the borough undertaken by the LSP's Assembly involving 70 local community leaders and representatives and several young people. The Assembly praised the joint working on implementing the Borough's Youth Provision Strategy, the extended schools programme and the healthy schools initiative. They also concluded that : ***“Young People in Rossendale are getting better services as a result of joint working co-ordinated by Rossendale's Strategic Partnership”.***

In order to ensure that the Council has a fit for purpose decision making structure for the future we have initiated widespread constitutional and administrative changes in the last 12 months and provided more opportunities for local people to have their say.

As a result the Council has formally adopted a Cabinet system of governance resulting in wide ranging changes to the constitution. Throughout the process elected Members have taken the lead in developing the Cabinet Model with Cabinet Portfolios clearly focused on the Council's priority areas and two Overview and Scrutiny Committees covering the key areas of Policy and Performance. The new system has been introduced following close collaboration with partners such as the Improvement Development Agency (I&DEA) and the Officer of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM),

The Council recognises that effective Members are the key to achieving further success and that members must rise to the challenge of providing a greater level of community leadership. Our highly successful Member Development Strategy underpins this key area of work, providing training and development opportunities for all members to enable them to carry out their work more effectively. Crucially, Members have been at the heart of developing their own developing programme with more than 90% of members identifying their own needs through a Personal Development Plan. The Improvement and Development Agency stated that “ ***The high participation rate was very positive, given that the process was ultimately a voluntary one***”.

Our Member Development programme also received a formal commendation from the Municipal Journal' s Annual Awards in recognition of the significant improvement journey that members have undertaken and their overall contribution to leading the Council's improvement. Indeed improved leadership was also highlighted in the recent Progress Assessment from the Audit Commission which said: “ ***Political and officer leadership is strong and characterised by a much more positive approach***”.

One of the changes resulting from the new constitution is an improved Overview and Scrutiny function. Over the last 12 months the Overview and Scrutiny Committees have been positively involved in reviews of services for both older and younger people in Rossendale.

This shows that Members are very much at the heart of the agenda for a new local government acting as community leaders; defining the services that the communities they represent require and looking beyond those services provide by the Council to those provided by partner agencies, and, going about securing them. This has been strongly demonstrated by the Council's involvement scrutinising the reform programme being proposed for various local health services. A special meeting of the full Council was held in January to scrutinise the effects of NHS re-organisation of the borough and members expressed strong concerns about the potential negative impacts the changes would have on access to 'health services' for local people.

6. PARTNERSHIPS – increasing our capacity to deliver through effective partnerships

Rossendale is a small Council that needs to work in partnership with other organisations in order to achieve its corporate priorities. By working with others we can bring in outside expertise and resources to generate additional capacity for the benefit of Rossendale and its people.

Our biggest success in the last 12 months has been the decision to transfer the council's housing stock to Green Vale Homes. This decision has already resulted in improvements to XX homes in the borough and over the next 6 years £40m will be spent to improve former council homes. One of the reasons why stock transfer was able to progress so smoothly and quickly (we believe it may have been one of the fastest stock transfers in the country) is that we already had experience from the establishment of Rossendale Leisure Trust 12 months earlier.

Without a doubt the Leisure Trust has been a great success, accessing additional funding and increasing visitor numbers to the various sports and recreation facilities managed by the Trust. Earlier this year we agreed to in-principal to underwrite £1.6m of borrowing by the Trust to improve leisure facilities in the borough.

The Council has also benefited from an agreement with Salford's Urban Vision to process 'major' planning applications on our behalf. Traditionally, the Council has performed poorly on determining 'Major' applications within the designated 13 week period, however since Urban Vision have been involved performance has vastly improved.

The Council also continues to work in partnership with Lancashire Audit Services, Sunguard Vivista for ICT services, and Lancashire County Development Ltd for economic regeneration and business support.

The last 12 months has seen good progress made on two very significant potential partnerships. The Customer Contact Project has been through a formal tendering process and a preferred bidder will be named imminently. Our intention is to have the new arrangements operational by Autumn 2006. This will lead to significant improvements in the Council revenues and benefits service and customer contact through the One Stop Shop and telephone enquiries.

Good progress has also been made with developing plans for a new way of delivering Streetscene services which will ensure that the council can benefit from the knowledge, expertise and investment that an external partner can bring.

7. CUSTOMERS – “ Customer First” - being responsive and proactive to meet the needs of all our customers

As the way that we work as a council changes, our approach to our customers is changing. It is fair to say that in the past Rossendale Council has not been as customer focused as it should have been. In 2003 our customer satisfaction rate was only 27%.

However, with the adoption of a Customer Services Strategy during 2005 and the appointment of a Head of Service for Customer Services and E-Government our satisfaction rate has risen dramatically to 65% clearly demonstrating that customers are now a key priority for the Council.

The most noticeable change has been in the way that we provide services to those customers who prefer face to face service. The new One Stop Shop is clean, bright and welcoming. Our customers receive a prompt and efficient service and are treated courteously and professionally. We are also now moving to being able to offer appointments in people's own homes if they have genuine mobility difficulties or other impediments.

Further customer service improvements have been brought about through the Customer Services Strategy and the introduction of Customer Service Standards for all council staff. For the first time the Council has set out clearly to all its staff what is expected of them in terms of customer service and have provided full training to all front-line staff in their application. Whilst there is still some way to go before we can claim that these are being consistently applied, there is no doubt that improvements have already resulted. As this any major change initiative of this type it will take time for the benefits of this to be fully realised.

One of the biggest improvements in the last 12 months has been the progress made by the Council's benefits service. The number of days taken to process a new claim has fallen from 69 days to 21 and the recent BFI inspection graded the service as being 'fair' with good prospects for improvement.

The council has also made a significant effort to improve its communication with residents and other stakeholders through traditional newsletters and to reach out to new customers and provide more services electronically.

The Council's new website, launched in August 2005 has already been rated as the best council website in Lancashire by an independent Internet consultancy. The website has also been instrumental in the council increasing its e-government performance indicator 47% to 100% at the end of 2005. We have had 162,107 individual visits by different customers to the web site and the number of transactions that can be completed online is increasing

Communication with residents has also been improved with the new Rossendale Alive newsletter being delivered to residents three times a year. The newsletter provides information to residents about council services and how to access them. A more proactive approach to the local media has also led to more information about council initiatives being printed in the local press.

8. IMPROVEMENT - The provision of high quality public services built upon the foundations of Finance, Risk, Performance, Procurement and Human Resource Management.

Our Key Achievements

The priorities that the Council have set itself for internal improvement were seen by the Audit Commission as “ ***a sensible approach, to enable a wider focus on improving service outcomes and much has been achieved in transforming the Council’s structures and processes in relation to this objective***”.

Improvement is still required across many parts of the council, but good progress is being made. Our focus is on those service areas that support the council as a whole, namely Finance, Risk, Performance, Procurement and Human Resource Management.

Financial management within the Council has improved greatly within the past three years and the council is in a better financial position than it has been for some time. From a position of having no reserves to call on in 2002 the authority is on course to replenish its reserves to the recommended prudential level of £500K ahead of schedule. Thanks to Housing Stock Transfer the Council has also now cleared its long-term debts as well as ensuring that housing investment can take place.

At the same time the Council has set one of the lowest Council Tax rises in Lancashire of ?? X%, whilst continuing to improve the services it delivers – more than 2/3rds of our Best Value Performance Indicators have improved in the last 12 months.

Value for money from the council has also improved noticeably. In the recent ‘Value for Money’ assessment undertaken by the Audit Commission in xx it was recognised that “***Members and senior managers have identified and pursued opportunities to reduce costs and improve VFM. There is evidence that improvement planning is now leading to service improvement and better VFM in some priority areas***”.

The improved financial position and continued good financial management and value for money will be embedded into the council's operations through the recently approved second Medium Term Financial Plan. This sets out the Council's Financial

Framework for the next three years linking to and supporting the corporate mission for the next three years. It has ensured that the 2006/07 budget setting process has been fully integrated with our corporate priorities.

We are particularly pleased that we have been able to involve the wider community in this year's budget setting process through consultation with Rossendale's Community Network, the LSP Executive and local people through the Council's internet website and media coverage in the local papers. As a result of this consultation process the local community were able to consider a number of budget priorities and options and Members were able to take these into account before finalising the budget.

Improvement within the Council is also being supported through a rigorous approach to performance management. Performance management is being used to maintain the pace of change across the council and focus on turning its priorities and plans for action into actual outcomes that are of benefit to local people.

The focus on performance over the last year has resulted in improvements in 2 out of 3 performance indicators. The introduction of the 'Covalent' performance management system is resulting in better quality and more timely management information being produced so that management action can be taken swiftly to respond to poor performance.

This improvement is recognised in the recent independent review of the Council's Performance Management Arrangements which concluded that: "***The building blocks of an effective performance management framework have been put in place within the Council and the introduction of the Covalent monitoring system is being extended across this framework***".

Improvement within the Council is also being sustained through a strong focus on effective Human Resource management.

A Human Resources Strategy is being implemented with the goal of building the Council's capacity to deliver by ensuring that the skills and competencies of the workforce are developed to deliver and maintain high performance and customer satisfaction.

The Council is on track to ensure that all staff participate in an annual performance development appraisal in the context of the Council's 'Golden Thread'. Training needs identified through the appraisal are then supported through a wide range of training opportunities from basic IT courses in Word and Excel to the Council's participation in the University of Central Lancashire's Management Diploma.

Over the last 12 months effective internal communication has been identified as a key component of an effective human resource strategy. Staff have been involved and consulted on a wide range of key corporate issues including the

accommodation relocations, the customer contact project and future partnership arrangements for Streetscene. Formal communication with staff throughout the organisation has been much improved with the introduction of a regular team briefing system, three editions of the Staff Newsletter Grapevine and the introduction of Daily message email.

The Council has also achieved level 1 of the Equality Standard and is now close to reaching level 2. All new policies and strategies are carefully evaluated prior to their introduction to ensure that the Council is acting in a fair and equitable manner to every section of the community that it serves by taking their differing needs into account.

(Insert details & explanation of the staff survey when available)

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