

East Renfrewshire Council

The Audit of Best Value and Community Planning

Prepared for the Accounts Commission

October 2005



[Audit Scotland](#) is a statutory body set up in April 2000 under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. It provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission. Together they ensure that the Scottish Executive and public sector bodies in Scotland are held to account for the proper, efficient and effective use of public funds.



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Commission findings

1. The Commission accepts this report on the performance of East Renfrewshire Council's statutory duty to secure Best Value and to initiate and facilitate the Community Planning process. The Commission recognises that the report gives a broad picture of the council's performance based on the work of Audit Scotland and the findings of other scrutiny bodies such as Inspectorates and that it does not attempt a comprehensive review of all service delivery. We acknowledge the co-operation and assistance given to the audit process by members and officers of the council.

2. The Commission recognises that East Renfrewshire is a successful council which has been enthusiastic in pursuing continuous improvement. It demonstrates many of the attributes of a council which achieves Best Value:
 - The council has a good understanding of the present and future needs of its area.
 - Councillors and officers provide strong corporate leadership for the council and the wider community.
 - Councillors and managers have helped to foster a culture of continuous improvement.
 - There is a sound system of corporate performance management.
 - There is evidence that the council provides a high, responsive and generally improving standard of service, particularly in the education service.
 - Through the Audit Committee, members provide an exemplary detailed and effective level of scrutiny on selected areas.

3. However Best Value is about a continuous drive for improvement and the report identifies areas for attention in the council. These include:
 - Greater emphasis on outcomes in the performance management and scrutiny arrangements.
 - An improved approach to option appraisal including working with other councils.
 - Further improvement in public reporting.
 - Improvement in some aspects of the housing service.

4. The Commission looks forward to receiving an Improvement Plan from the council which responds to the audit report and these findings.



The Audit of Best Value

The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 introduced new statutory duties relating to Best Value and Community Planning.

The scope of Best Value and Community Planning is very broad but in general terms a successful council will:

- work with its partners to identify a clear set of priorities that respond to the needs of the community in both the short and the longer term
- be organised to deliver those priorities
- meet and clearly demonstrate that it is meeting the community's needs.

The key objectives of this audit were to:

- assess the extent to which East Renfrewshire Council is meeting its duties under the Local Government in Scotland Act 2003, and
- agree planned improvements with the council. These will be reviewed by the council's external auditor over the next two years.

As Best Value and Community Planning encompass all the activities of a council it is not realistic to audit everything in depth, so we plan our detailed work in two ways:

- Where possible, we draw on the findings of other scrutiny processes, such as the work carried out by the council's external auditors and by inspectorates. These are incorporated into our report.
- We select certain aspects of the council's performance for detailed audit investigation. A wide range of sources, including a self-assessment by the council, reports issued by external audit and inspections, and national Statutory Performance Indicators, informs this selection.

The report reflects this selective approach, with detailed commentary on some areas and limited or no coverage in others. While we have made some comparisons with other councils, our overall approach has focused on performance trends and improvement within East Renfrewshire Council. The report also reflects the picture available at the time our main audit was conducted between March and May 2005.

We gratefully acknowledge the cooperation and assistance provided to the audit team by East Renfrewshire Council, particularly the councilors and officers contacted during the audit.



Overall conclusions

East Renfrewshire is an ambitious and successful council that has a culture of continuous improvement. Its strong leadership has been enthusiastic in establishing Best Value and the key elements are firmly in place. These include a systematic approach to corporate performance management, good staff management, effective joint working and scrutiny by elected members. There is evidence that these sound management arrangements are feeding into strong service performance, although this is not consistent in all areas.

East Renfrewshire now needs to move to a higher level, shifting the balance of its focus from internal processes to outcomes, and the measurable impact these have in achieving the objectives of the council and its communities.

Strategic direction

1. Councillors and officers at East Renfrewshire work well together and provide strong corporate leadership for the council and for the wider community. There is a marked emphasis on cross-party working, and councillors are able to put aside political differences and reach a consensus on the key priorities for the council and its communities. They are supported by a strong and effective Corporate Management Team (CMT).
2. The council has a good understanding of the needs of East Renfrewshire. Councillors are in touch with the views of local citizens through the democratic process. This is supplemented by a systematic approach to assessing the views of service users, community planning partners, and local businesses. The council has expanded on national arrangements for identifying areas of deprivation, by completing a Socio-Economic Profile of its area, helping to provide a more detailed picture of local pockets of deprivation and need. This has helped to develop a clear vision for the council and the wider East Renfrewshire community.
3. There has been a determination within East Renfrewshire Council since it was established in 1996 to create a clear identity for itself and to provide high quality services. Effective leadership has engaged staff throughout the organisation in its vision and its commitment to Best Value.
4. Councillors and managers have helped to foster a culture of continuous improvement. The council has been keen over the years to be seen as a progressive organisation. It was the first council in Scotland to replace its traditional service committees with a cabinet system. It was also the first to invite an IDeA (Improvement & Development Agency) peer review to be carried out. The council's 'Customer First' initiative helped pave the way for the national scheme of the same name.



Is the council organised to deliver better services?

5. Best Value was embraced with enthusiasm by the council well before it became a statutory duty. As a result, many of its core aspects are well established. There is a sound system of corporate performance management, with Performance Profiles regularly produced by each department, following a standard but flexible template, and monitored by the CMT and the Cabinet. It has two scrutiny forums, including a particularly active Audit Committee. Its approach to equal opportunities, an important issue for the East Renfrewshire community, is well developed and it has effective Human Resource management in place.
6. The council has continued to develop its approach. Over the past year, it has revamped its Policy Review Committee, introduced a cycle of departmental self-assessments to supplement its more traditional programme of reviews, and brought in new structures to support community planning. The Service Standards that were introduced in 2002, which set out what the public can expect from each department, were updated in April 2004.
7. The council has a mixed approach to service provision, with examples of consortia arrangements, partnership working and externalisation, as well as areas of direct service provision by council staff. There is no ideological preference for in-house provision, but there is some evidence of a concern amongst individual members and officers that sharing services with neighbouring authorities could undermine the clear identity of a smaller council.
8. East Renfrewshire seeks to focus on what is delivered for communities rather than who provides local services. However, there is a need to develop a more systematic and challenging approach to considering options for delivery of council services. This would increase the transparency of decisions being made and improve the council's ability to demonstrate Best Value in this area. The council has recognised this issue and plans to take a more challenging approach to option appraisal.

How do services perform?

9. There is evidence that the council provides a high standard of service. Statutory Performance Indicators suggest a general picture of strong, and improving performance. There is also great pride within the council in the performance of its Education Department. It accounts for over half of the council's expenditure and, with a key role in meeting objectives on social justice, has been a priority service for many years. This has resulted in high standards of performance, with a recent HMIE report giving the department the highest rating in all 11 quality indicators. High attainment levels are achieved for pupils, including those living in areas of deprivation.



10. There are aspects of service performance where improvements need to be made. A recent Communities Scotland inspection of the Housing service, for example, identified a number of areas for improvement. In common with many other local authorities, there is also a significant backlog in roads maintenance. These issues need to be seen within the context of an organisational culture and performance management system that is able to identify areas of under-performance and address them effectively.

What needs to improve?

11. East Renfrewshire Council has a culture of improvement. It has been enthusiastic in establishing many of the core aspects of Best Value. If it is to continue to be at the forefront it now needs to move on to a higher level. It has good performance management and scrutiny arrangements already in place, but these tend to focus on the progress of individual projects and activities, rather than assessing the wider picture of their effectiveness and impact. There needs to be a greater emphasis on outputs rather than inputs.
12. It has also acknowledged that its approach to option appraisal and considering other ways of delivering services, such as contracting out to the private sector or entering into consortia arrangements with other public bodies, needs to improve. It is expected that this will feature in its developing plans to meet the national efficient government agenda.
13. The council has developed an Improvement Plan demonstrating that it is aware of the key issues that need to be addressed. This represents quite an ambitious agenda but, with a track record of strong leadership from councillors and senior managers, it is well placed to meet these challenges.



Does the council have clear strategic direction?

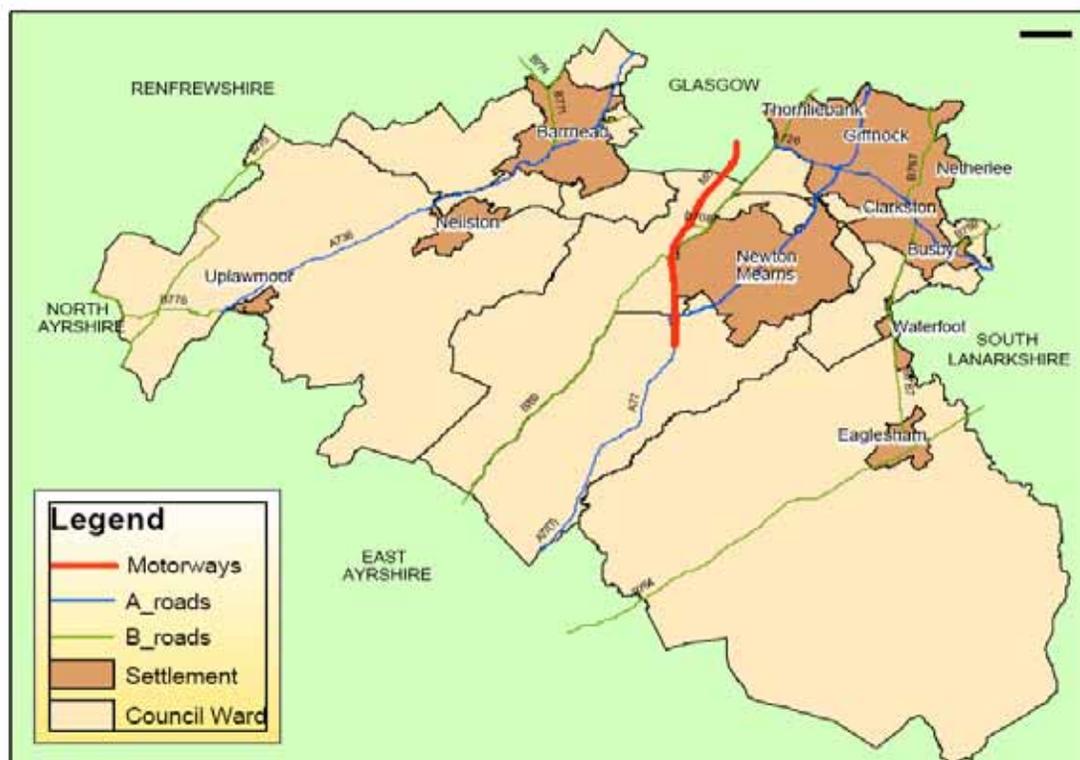
East Renfrewshire Council has a good understanding of its local communities and has a clear vision for meeting their needs. Effective cross-party working and strong corporate leadership has helped it over several years to take a proactive and innovative stance and to be seen as a progressive organisation. Its strategic direction is set out in the Community Plan and in its Corporate Strategy, but these are not clearly aligned and do not set out measurable targets.

Context

East Renfrewshire is one of the smaller and more affluent local authority areas in Scotland. However, there are pockets of significant deprivation. It also has one of the most ethnically diverse populations in Scotland.

Prosperity and diversity

14. East Renfrewshire lies to the south-west of Glasgow. It is one of the smaller local authority areas in Scotland, with a population of just under 90,000 occupying an area of around 67 square miles.



Source: East Renfrewshire Council



15. In general, the area is prosperous. The overall unemployment rate is 1.9%, well below the national average of 3.4%. Over two-thirds of the working population commute to jobs outside the area, mainly in Glasgow. The local economy is largely dominated by the retail, public sector, and financial services sectors.
16. It is one of the few areas in Scotland with a growing population, which is expected to rise by 2% over the next five years. The largest increases will be in the school age and elderly populations, putting pressure on council services such as education and social services.
17. There are pockets of significant deprivation in East Renfrewshire. For example, the Lovern Valley, with a population of 2,500 people, was designated as a Social Inclusion Partnership (SIP) area, reflecting its social and economic deprivation. Unemployment in parts of Barrhead is 6.1%, well above national levels.
18. East Renfrewshire has one of the most ethnically diverse populations in Scotland with up to 5% from minority ethnic communities – mainly Jewish and Muslim. This compares with 1.2% nationally.

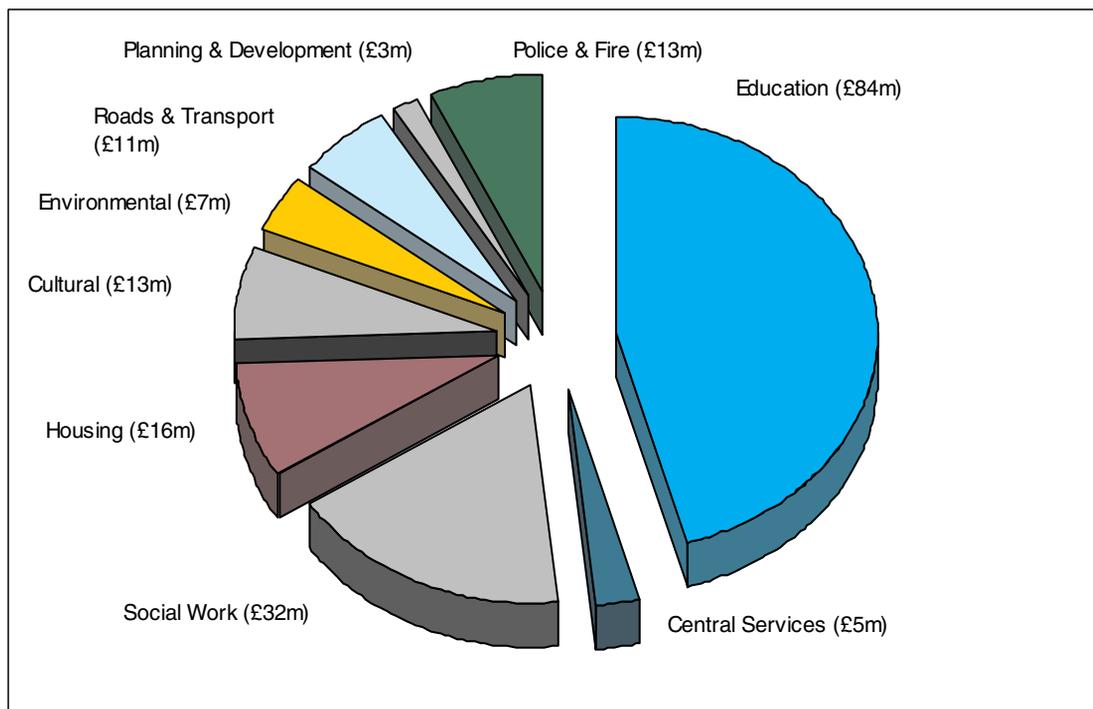
Finance

19. In 2003/04 the council's revenue expenditure was £184 million. Net expenditure per person is approximately £1,569, which means that East Renfrewshire is the third lowest spender among Scottish councils. The bulk of this is funded through central grants from the Scottish Executive, with around 26% funded from council tax. East Renfrewshire Council has set band 'D' council tax at £1,053 for 2005/06, which is slightly below the Scottish average. The share of the revenue budget spent on each service is shown in [Exhibit 1](#).



Exhibit 1

The council spent £185 million on providing services in 2003/04



Source: East Renfrewshire Council Audited Accounts 2003/04

Political arrangements

20. The council consists of 20 members. The Administration is an alliance between Labour (eight councillors) and the Liberal Democrats (three). The Conservatives have seven members and there are two Independent councillors. There is a marked emphasis on cross-party working within the council. While there are differences between the various political groupings, there is a clear desire to work together constructively for the good of East Renfrewshire.

21. Since 1999, the traditional system of Service committees has been replaced with a more streamlined arrangement of a Cabinet (made up of five members of the Administration). The key forums for monitoring and scrutinising performance (the Audit Committee and the Policy Review Committee) are both chaired by members of the Opposition.



Organisational culture and values

Councillors and senior managers provide strong leadership for the council and for the wider community of East Renfrewshire. There are good relations between the various political groupings and with officers, encouraging an emphasis on corporate working and a culture of continuous improvement in the standard of services being delivered.

22. East Renfrewshire Council was formed in 1996, bringing together Eastwood, Barrhead, Neilston and Uplawmoor. This was not a natural or traditional grouping of communities. Since that time, there has been a significant drive by the council to promote a clear identity for the authority at both an internal and an external level.
23. An emphasis on the need for corporate working is explicitly included in its set of five organisational values ([Exhibit 2](#)). At the political level there is effective cross-party working. There are good relations between councillors and officers, characterised by mutual trust and a good understanding of their respective roles. There is also effective corporate working by senior managers:
- The CMT meets weekly and is the cornerstone of corporate working within the council, regularly considering performance issues and coordinating advice to councillors.
 - There is a strong corporate representation on the CMT, with the chief executive and his assistant and deputy as full members, along with six departmental directors.
 - Individual directors take a lead role on cross-cutting corporate issues, such as equal opportunities and sustainable development.

Exhibit 2

East Renfrewshire Council's values

The council's 'Corporate Strategy' sets out five guiding principles for the way it carries out its work.

- Equality
- Openness and accountability
- Honesty and integrity
- A corporate approach
- A focus on outcomes.

Source: Corporate Strategy 2003-07, East Renfrewshire Council



24. Over the years the council has been keen to take an innovative stance and to be seen as a progressive organisation. It has regularly volunteered to pilot national initiatives, such as new HMIE inspection formats or audit arrangements. It was the first in Scotland to introduce a cabinet system of governance. It was also the first in Scotland to voluntarily participate in an IDeA peer review in 2000. Best Value was embraced by the council well before it became a statutory duty and the council's enthusiasm for it has continued. There is a great deal of pride within the council at the results of the recent HMIE inspection of the Education Department and the evidence that a small council can 'punch above its weight' and deliver high quality services.
25. The IDeA report identified the strain being put on employees and the need to "*draw breath and take stock*" and consolidate its achievements at a more considered pace. It also referred to 'high levels of energy and determination' and the council missing 'few opportunities to launch new initiatives or address innovation early'. These views are consistent with our impressions during the audit.
26. The council is prepared to enter into new approaches to service delivery and there are no ideological objections to contracting out services or entering into consortia arrangements with other councils. There are examples of services being reconfigured and of partnership working. The council needs to ensure that it meets the requirements of Best Value and clearly demonstrate through options appraisal that it takes decisions about service delivery on the basis of evidence and performance.

Community engagement

The council has a structured approach to understanding the needs of East Renfrewshire which has helped to shape its plans and priorities.

27. The council has a long-standing systematic approach to identifying the needs of East Renfrewshire. It set up a citizen's panel, of 1,000 local residents, in 1998. Two surveys a year are carried out through this panel, which is often used to set up focus groups on specific topics. In addition, there is a series of consultation exercises carried out by individual departments. In 2004, the council also set up a Business Panel to consult systematically with the local business community.
28. As part of its community planning framework, the council has completed a Socio-Economic Profile of the local area. This has gone beyond broadly-based national measures, to provide a much more detailed picture of pockets of deprivation in areas such as Barrhead, Neilston and Thornliebank, helping to inform its Regeneration Plan and other strategies.
29. The council is developing its approach further. A strategic review, *Listening to East Renfrewshire*, was carried out in 2004 and has led to a series of initiatives. For example, an annual East Renfrewshire Assembly is being established to help engage with community and voluntary representatives. In addition, a corporate strategy is being developed to help address issues such as the under-



representation of young people and ethnic minorities, and the coordination of the wide range of consultation exercises.

The Community Plan

The council has provided a clear lead for a local Community Planning Partnership, helping to coordinate the work of key public sector organisations. Following the integration of the Levern Valley SIP, revised structures are being introduced and measurable targets and performance monitoring are being developed.

30. The council has taken a leading role in developing local community planning, seeking to coordinate and enhance the work of the various local public sector and voluntary organisations. A Community Planning Partnership, chaired by the leader of the council, was established in 1999, bringing together key players, such as:

- East Renfrewshire Council
 - NHS Greater Glasgow
 - NHS Argyll & Clyde
 - Strathclyde Police and Fire Services
 - Scottish Enterprise Renfrewshire
 - Strathclyde Passenger Transport Authority
 - Voluntary Action East Renfrewshire
 - Scottish Water
- Together, this Community Planning Partnership has developed a shared vision for East Renfrewshire as ‘a socially inclusive community’ ... with ‘high quality’ and ‘integrated ... public services’. This is based on four themes ([Exhibit 3](#)).

Exhibit 3

Main themes of the community plan

	Main objectives
Caring & healthy communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tackling health inequalities • Promoting health awareness & healthier lifestyles • Modernising healthcare services • Developing care services in the community
Employment & lifelong learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning opportunities in our schools • Learning for employment • Lifelong learning • Business & enterprise development
Safe communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating safer communities • Tackling substance misuse • Taking action on accidents • Creating a safer environment • Tackling domestic violence • Child protection
Sustainable & high quality environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable development • Public awareness & involvement • Clean & safe environment • Transportation & access • Protection of environmental assets • Quality housing

Source: *All Together – A Community Plan for the people of East Renfrewshire, Community Planning Partnership*



31. *All Together*, the community plan for the area, was published in 2000. Since then, it has been reviewed and an updated version issued in 2002. Over the past year or so, priority has been given to integrating the Levern Valley SIP and developing a Regeneration Plan and, as a result, progress in developing other aspects of community planning has slowed. In recent months, however, the pace has picked up again, with an emphasis on revised structures. Four 'Policy Partnerships', each overseeing one of the four main themes of *All Together*, have been formed. Area Forums are to replace the old Area Committees, and will include representatives from the wider community. These developments will link with the introduction of the East Renfrewshire Assembly.
32. The council knows that it needs to move beyond this structural phase and develop performance targets and monitoring. While the original and revised community plans contain action plans, these tend to focus on putting in place the necessary structures and management processes. There is now a need to set measurable targets in order to help assess the impact of community planning in contributing to the well-being of East Renfrewshire. This will need to take into account national initiatives being taken on developing broad performance indicators.

Corporate Strategy 2003-07

Social Justice and Safeguarding and Improving the Environment are the two over-riding priorities in the Council's Corporate Strategy. These are supported by a series of specific commitments.

33. The overall priorities of the council are clearly contained in *Making a difference for East Renfrewshire*, its Corporate Strategy covering the term of the current Administration. This set out two over-riding priorities:

1. **Social justice** – helping to close the gap between those who enjoy good levels of income, health and educational attainment, and those who do not. The council's success in achieving this was to be met by using the 29 'social justice milestones' published by the Scottish Executive.
2. **Safeguarding and improving the environment** – ensuring that all communities enjoy a high quality environment, through tackling litter, graffiti and anti-social behaviour, and increasing the availability of jobs.



34. The Corporate Strategy also sets out a series of commitments. These are grouped by different sections of the community (children, young people, families, older people), general community issues (such as transport, housing, and economic regeneration), and internal organisational priorities. There are clear references to working with partners on specific commitments (such as working with the



police to minimise crime). However, the Corporate Strategy is not aligned to the four themes laid out in the Community Plan, making it difficult to see consistent priorities and clear and direct links between the two documents.

35. In addition, the commitments set out in the Corporate Strategy tend to be aspirational rather than measurable. There are frequent commitments to broad objectives – such as providing new job opportunities, minimising pollution, and providing a good supply of affordable housing – without setting specific and measurable targets. As a result, the annual monitoring report tends to list the progress being made on various projects and initiatives, without assessing their outcomes.

Policy and Financial Plan 2004-07

The Policy & Financial Plan translates the broad commitments of the Corporate Strategy into specific programmes for action.

36. *All Together* and the *Corporate Strategy* set out broad objectives. A programme of actions and some specific targets are contained within the *Policy & Financial Plan*. This was introduced in 2002/03 as an improved and streamlined form of service planning, bringing the key priorities of each department into a single document.
37. It is structured by department, with a series of objectives for each. This means that the *Community Plan*, the *Corporate Strategy* and the *Policy & Financial Plan* all follow different structures, making it difficult to see the high level themes translated into specific actions. There are links between these three core strategies, but their current alignment does not make it easy for councillors to monitor the effectiveness of policy decisions.
38. The *Policy & Financial Plan* provides a practical programme of action and meaningful output targets for departments. But there are differences in the approach taken by each department. The section dealing with Education, for example, contains a large volume of specific targets based on measurable outcomes (such as attainment levels and examination results). Others, including Social Work, focus largely on planned projects and activities and do not provide targets which can fully assess effectiveness.



Is the council organised to deliver better services?

The council embraced Best Value with some enthusiasm in the years before it became a statutory duty, and as a result, many of its core aspects are well established. However, the council has continued to develop its approach, with a number of important refinements introduced over the past year or so. It now needs to introduce a more systematic approach to option appraisal and to actively consider other forms of service delivery.

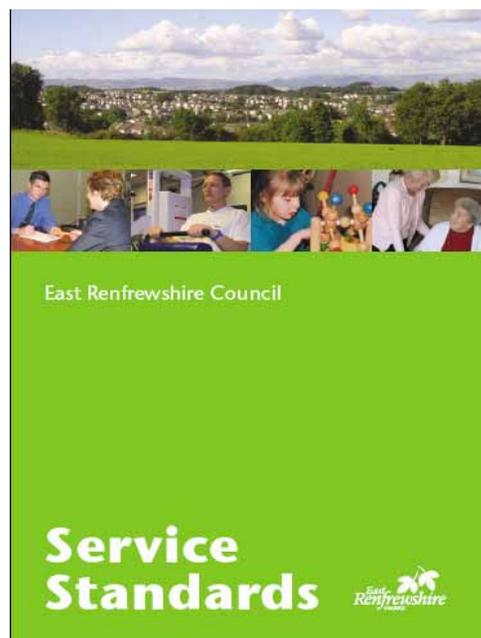
Customer care

The council has developed a customer-centred approach to delivering its services. A central 'Customer First' team has been introduced, running two contact centres and providing an accessible first line of advice for the public. A series of Service Standards has also been published, providing customer service pledges for each department.

39. The council has made significant progress in developing a customer-centred approach, through the introduction of its innovative 'Customer First' initiative. In 2002, a contact centre was opened, providing a central resource for dealing with telephone and email enquiries. This was closely followed by the opening of two service centres, at its offices in Barrhead and Eastwood, to provide accessible contact points for the public, with others now being developed. These deal with a wide range of queries, such as council tax, housing, planning applications, and benefits.
40. There is already evidence that this new approach has been successful. Departmental staff have been freed up to concentrate on core work and improve the processing of, for example, planning applications and benefits. There is scope for greater strategic impact in future with the potential to extend the arrangements to services provided by local community planning partners.
41. The Customer First team also coordinates the tracking and reporting of contacts and complaints through the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, which was resourced through the Modernising Government Fund (MGF). It is used to provide ward-based reports for councillors and monthly reports for each director.



42. The council published a set of Service Standards in 2002, setting out what the public can expect from each of its departments. There are 244 standards, with the most important published in an accessible booklet. Some of these are council-wide and deal with answering telephone calls or waiting times at reception areas. Others deal with the specific services delivered by individual departments. Some are couched as broad aspirations – such as *“we will promote positive attitudes to healthy eating and encourage positive attitudes to health and fitness”* and cannot be used to directly measure subsequent performance. However, there has clearly been an attempt to express many in specific, measurable terms, such as *‘we will remove graffiti from council properties within five working days’* and *‘we will provide a fortnightly household kerbside collection for garden waste from April to November’*.



43. Each department includes an update on performance against these standards in its quarterly Performance Profile, to the extent that they can be monitored. The Audit Committee also carries out an annual in-depth review of performance. In turn, the Service Standards are used as part of the council’s approach to Public Performance Reporting.

Financial management

The council has a history of sound financial management, matching resources to policy priorities and with no audit qualifications or budgetary overspends.

44. The council’s local external auditors have not raised any serious concerns about its financial management. It has consistently received a clear audit certificate on its annual accounts. Financial reserves are just under £7 million and are planned to increase by a further £0.75 million during the current year. This is equivalent to around 4.5% of the council’s annual revenue spend and, in line with good practice, has been built up to meet anticipated financial pressures in future years.

45. There is a sound budgetary control system in place, with no history of budget overspends. Within the overall framework of three-year budgeting, annual bids are prepared by departments, based on policy priorities. This process is overseen by the CMT and the Cabinet. Budgetary monitoring reports are submitted to the Cabinet five times during the year, providing information on current spending, anticipated under or over-spends, and recommended action where needed. More detailed budget monitoring is also carried out by the CMT and within departments.



Asset management

Council assets tend to be managed by individual departments, but a corporate approach is now being developed to prioritise expenditure on purchases and maintenance.

46. The council owns fixed assets valued at around £250 million. This is mostly land and buildings, including council houses, Information Technology infrastructure, and vehicles and equipment.
47. Some corporate procedures are in place to help manage these assets. For example, a comprehensive asset register is maintained. But the council has recognised the need to improve its corporate approach. The council has agreed that it needs to establish a Corporate Asset Management Plan, identifying broader priorities, and using this to develop a 'single pot' funding strategy for funding repairs and maintenance.
48. The council's Information and Communications Technology (ICT) infrastructure was in need of improvement. A lengthy market testing exercise was carried out by the council in 2004, with a view to contracting out the service. During this period there was limited investment in the infrastructure and the service operated on a maintenance basis. There was also limited monitoring and coordination of computer hardware across the council, leading to departments making their own purchasing decisions and increasing overall maintenance costs.
49. Following large increases in the costs of using the private sector and the subsequent decision to retain the service in house there has been significant investment in the ICT infrastructure. Departments are now required to purchase all IT hardware, with common specifications, through central arrangements. There is an ambitious investment programme, with a long list of projects which is continually being added to. The service recognises the need for a more corporate and formal project management approach, to help relieve pressure on staff.

Risk management

The council has made a start on developing its approach to risk management, but it does not yet have effective systems in place which feed into its corporate and service plans.

50. Councils should have robust systems for identifying and managing risks. East Renfrewshire Council has made some progress in this area. A Corporate Risk Management Group was set up in 2003 to coordinate its approach and a Corporate Risk register was developed.
51. However, a recent local external audit report found that the council's approach is at an early stage with key milestones being developed to help ensure ongoing progress. Further work is needed in establishing departmental risk registers. Without a structured approach to identifying these operational



risks, the content and effectiveness of the Corporate Risk register is limited. There is also a need to ensure that the results of risk management processes are regularly monitored and used to feed into the council's corporate and service plans.

Procurement

The council is developing a corporate approach to procurement. A Purchasing and Procurement Unit was set up in 2003 and has made progress in developing council-wide procedures and in making some savings.

52. Since 1996, the council has been a member of a consortium of 12 local authorities which purchases electricity and gas, along with other supplies and services. Despite this, however, it has had an underdeveloped approach to procurement, with a tendency for individual departments to make their own purchasing arrangements, rather than working together to achieve economies of scale. This has been recognised and a corporate Purchasing and Procurement Unit was established in 2003. There is already some evidence that this has made an impact with, for example, savings of £30,000 made from moving to a corporate contract for mobile phones.
53. Progress has also been made in developing a database of the purchases made by departments with a view to identifying potential savings. A Purchasing and Procurement Strategy has recently been developed, setting out broad principles and linking procurement to the promotion of broader council policies on, for example, sustainability and equality. Operational guidance is being developed that will provide more specific advice to departments on, for example, the weight to be given to non-financial factors.
54. The council has identified the need to develop its approach to e-procurement once a new computerised purchasing system is fully established. This would open up the potential for significant savings to be made in its purchasing costs and allow it to develop its participation in electronic auctions.

Managing staff

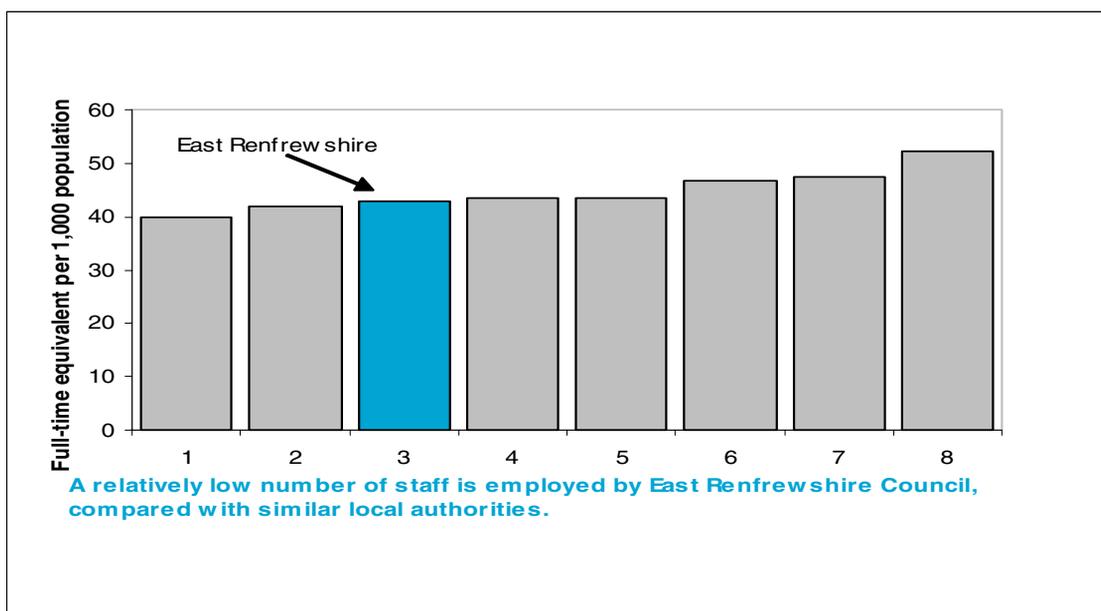
The council has a sound approach to staff management. Overall staff numbers are relatively low and a staff appraisal system has been fully established for several years.

55. The council employs around 4,500 staff at an annual cost of around £90 million. It is difficult to compare like with like, as different councils have varying priorities and methods of delivering services. However, the available evidence suggests that the council has a relatively lean staffing structure compared with other similarly-sized urban/rural local authorities ([Exhibit 4](#)).



Exhibit 4

Staff per 1,000 population



Source: Joint Staffing Watch Survey

56. There is a staff appraisal system for all groups of staff. The Performance Review and Development (PRD) system is fully implemented across all the council's departments. Annual appraisals are carried out for each employee. Between four and six priorities are set for each individual, based on departmental objectives.
57. There is also an emphasis on using the PRD system to identify development needs. A Senior Personnel Officer with specific responsibility for learning and development has been appointed and a three-year action plan is in place for monitoring PRD and training activity. This appointment and the development of the corporate training function took place as a result of concerns raised by the Policy and Review Committee about the council's approach. Significant steps forward have now been made in implementing and evolving training and development corporately. For example, over 60 of the council's senior and middle managers have completed its Management Development Programme, with a further Level 2 programme planned for this year.
58. The council also puts considerable effort into communicating with its staff. In addition to team briefings and meetings, there is a series of 'Insider' staff newsletters to help promote council policies and initiatives. Middle managers are also encouraged to take part in the *Principles for Change* network. There has been no full survey carried out to assess staff morale and identify areas of concern, although a staff communications survey is being carried out. However, there are other mechanisms in place to provide staff feedback. The council has a good relationship with the trades unions, governed

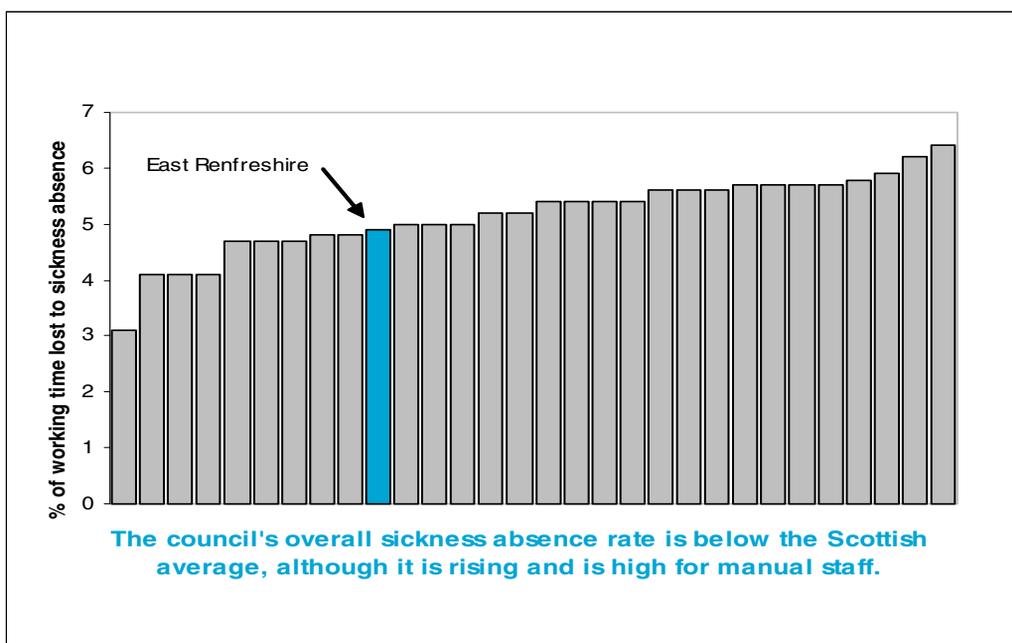


by a formal Partnership Working Agreement – one of the first of its type in Scotland. Our meetings with front-line staff confirmed evidence of good staff morale.

59. The council has a systematic approach to absence management. It has a series of formal procedures in place and absence rates are included in the quarterly Performance Profiles which are considered by the CMT. Its sickness absence rate is below the Scottish average (Exhibit 5). Within this overall rate, however, there are some concerns. The rate has increased from 4.3% to 4.9% over the past three years, and the absence rate for manual staff is 7.1%, well above the Scottish average of 6.3%. A working group, chaired by the deputy chief executive, is currently looking at this issue. The Policy Review Committee is also carrying out a broader review of the council's absence management policies.

Exhibit 5

Sickness absence



Source: SPIs 2003/04



Managing performance

There is a systematic approach to corporate performance management, with each service regularly producing a Performance Profile.

60. At a corporate level, the council has a well-established framework for monitoring its performance. The core element is the production of quarterly Performance Profiles by each department. These follow a standard format, pulling together a range of information such as Statutory Performance Indicators, progress in implementing action plans, and commentary on performance highs and lows. This provides a good blend of quantitative and qualitative information and gives a meaningful overview on departmental performance.

Performance Profiles

A core aspect of the council's corporate performance management system is the regular production of Performance Profiles by each service. These follow a standard format, which provides a structured and meaningful report on performance. Each Performance profile consists of seven main sections covering:

- Quarterly updates on national Statutory Performance Indicators
- Performance 'highs' and 'lows', generally covering progress with various projects
- Areas where Service Standards are not being met
- Progress in implementing relevant actions from the Policy and Financial Plan
- Progress in completing the planned programme of Best Value reviews
- High level summary of current and capital budget expenditure
- Staff absence and turnover figures.

The system is also flexible enough to include progress statements on current corporate priorities. At present, for example, each service reports its progress in developing its approach to risk management.

61. These Performance Profiles are used to direct discussions at Corporate Management Team meetings to identify emerging issues and remedial action. They are also used for separate meetings between the chief executive and individual directors and form part of the PRD appraisal process for directors. In addition, each Performance Profile is passed to Cabinet members and made available to all councillors.



Review and Option Appraisal

The council has carried out a comprehensive programme of Best Value reviews. This has recently been replaced by new arrangements involving departmental self-assessments. New approaches to service delivery have been introduced in the council although there are also more traditional forms in some areas. There is a need to develop a more systematic approach to Option Appraisal to ensure full compliance with Best Value.

62. A five-year programme of Best Value reviews has been completed, covering all of the council's services. The council has recently revamped its approach by introducing a self-assessment model. This aims to provide a less bureaucratic and a more efficient method for identifying areas in need of improvement. Essentially, these self-assessments are based on the ten Best Value criteria.
63. There is much to be commended in this common-sense approach. Reviews are completed quickly and lead to a timetable of planned improvements. They are welcomed by managers who see them as practical and, with the involvement of corporate staff, genuinely challenging. Their impact could be further enhanced by:
- Greater involvement from councillors, or managers from other departments, to provide a broader more customer-focused challenge.
 - Shifting the balance from reviewing internal management processes to a greater emphasis on the effectiveness of these processes in delivering cost-effective services by, for example, referring to measurable outputs or comparisons with the performance of other councils.
 - Ensuring that reviews focus the balance of their attention on fundamental performance issues that will have greatest impact, rather than relatively minor matters.
64. In addition, there is a programme of cross-cutting Best Value reviews which is overseen by the Policy Review Committee. These tend to cover areas of concern highlighted in performance monitoring reports, such as sickness absence, rent collection, and staff training and development. As the role of the Policy Review Committee develops, there is scope to base these wide-ranging reviews on the underlying themes within the Corporate Strategy, such as social justice and sustainable development.
65. Best Value reviews offer councils an important opportunity to consider alternative approaches to service delivery in the search for efficiency and high quality standards. A mixed economy of service provision has been established in East Renfrewshire with examples of consortia arrangements, partnership working and externalisation. There are also many areas of direct service provision by council staff. There is no ideological preference for in-house provision, but there is some evidence of a



concern amongst individual members and officers that sharing services with neighbouring authorities could undermine the clear identity of a smaller council.

66. East Renfrewshire seeks to focus on what is delivered for communities rather than who provides local services. However, there is a need to develop a more systematic and challenging approach to considering options for delivery of council services. This should also increase the transparency of decisions being made and improve the council's ability to demonstrate Best Value in this area. The council has fully recognised this issue and plans to take a more challenging approach to option appraisal. This will become pressing as it prepares to meet the Scottish Executive's Efficient Government agenda and generate the expected level of savings.

Scrutiny by councillors

There are appropriate structures in place to help councillors oversee and challenge departments and their performance, with an Audit Committee and a Policy Review Committee. These are reasonably effective, but there is scope to move up the level of scrutiny provided by councillors.

67. Scrutiny is an important part of the role of councillors. They are required to hold officers to account in delivering services to the public, meeting council objectives, and taking action to remedy any significant failings.
68. In 1999, the council introduced a cabinet system, doing away with its more traditional system of service committees. Instead, there are two main committees to support the scrutiny role of councillors: an Audit Committee and a Policy Review Committee.
69. The Audit Committee is chaired by the Leader of the Opposition, strengthening its independence, and has developed a strong proactive approach. It meets frequently, every four weeks, and in public. Unusually, members of the Committee carry out some of their own investigations and prepare reports on specific topics, rather than asking the council's internal auditors to carry out these exercises. This requires a significant commitment from members. However, there is little doubt that this approach does provide a detailed and effective level of scrutiny on selected areas.
70. The work of the Policy Review Committee is less well developed. In practice, its role has been less clearly defined than that of the Audit Committee and there has been the potential for some duplication of effort. This was recognised by the council in 2004 when the Committee membership and remit were revamped. One of the key roles of the Committee is to oversee the programme of strategic Best Value reviews and their results. A programme of reviews has been drawn up, and these changes are beginning to have an effect.



71. Some training has also been provided for councillors, although there is scope for a more systematic programme of training to be provided on their key scrutiny role. A quick guide has been produced as a prompt. This is a laminated card suggesting 15 generic questions which can be adapted by councillors to specific topics, such as: *'why do we provide this service?'*; *'how does the service compare with best practice and other councils'*; and *'is there scope for partnership or cross-departmental working to prevent duplication and take advantage of economies of scale'*.
72. The scrutiny arrangements work well but there is scope for improvement. There are clearly good relations between councillors and officers and this is an important factor in the council's success. But there is a risk of councillors relying too much on managers and not asking challenging questions on key priorities. They do receive monitoring information on the work of the council and its departments. For example, an annual monitoring report is provided to them on the implementation of the Corporate Strategy; this deals with the progress of various projects and initiatives, rather than their outcomes. Councillors also receive the quarterly Performance Profiles for each department. But there is little evidence that they have used them to ask probing questions.
73. As part of our audit, for example, we looked in some detail at the Roads and Transportation service. Much of its work relates directly to one of the council's over-riding priorities of safeguarding the environment. Councillors are regularly provided with updates on the various projects being carried out by the Department. However, there is limited monitoring of their effectiveness. We identified a series of high-level commitments made in the council's Transport Strategy and sought evidence on subsequent performance. For example:
- **Traffic reductions** – against a general tide of ever-increasing traffic levels, a net fall of car trips within East Renfrewshire of 1.1% is planned.
 - **Increases in public transport usage** – the planned reductions in car trips is partly based on projected increases in public transport with, for example, a 10% increase in bus trips.
 - **Road casualties** – the council has adopted national targets for reductions in road traffic accidents to be achieved by 2010.
 - **Air quality** – there is a broad commitment to reducing air pollution and monitoring air quality.
74. Managers were able to provide us with some information on these issues, including performance against national road accident targets. But across the strategy, much of it was incomplete or inconclusive and had not been reported to councillors. It was clear that managers are not used to being asked these types of questions about outcomes.



Sustainable development

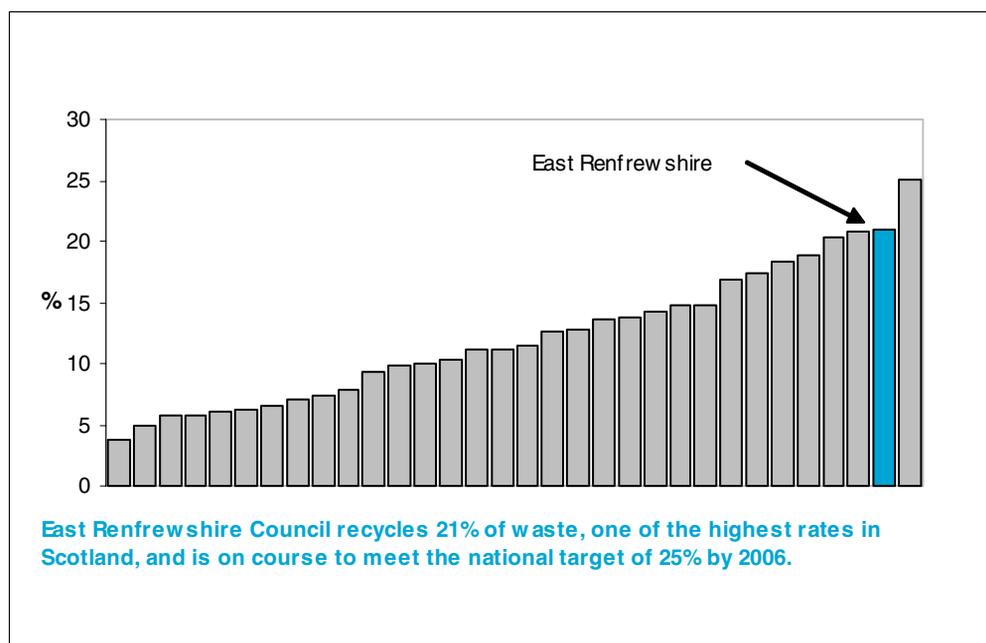
The council is starting to establish a systematic approach to sustainable development and recognises the next stage is to develop clear priorities and measurable targets, informed by national initiatives.

75. Sustainable development is a key issue for the council, with a growing population putting increasing pressure on services such as education and transport. Not surprisingly, therefore, there are strong links with the council's over-riding priorities of social justice and protecting the local environment. Sustainable development has only been a statutory duty since 2003, with national guidance still being developed. Given the breadth of the subject, covering social, economic and environmental issues, the council cannot yet be expected to have a fully developed approach.
76. The council is developing a systematic approach to sustainable development. The council's self-assessment model for departments helps to assess their approach and identify areas in need of improvement. The Director of Environment has a lead responsibility for developing the overall approach of the council. The council approved a Strategy in April 2005, setting out the broad principles it wishes to adopt, but it has not yet established clear priorities or targets. It recognises this and the need to develop high-level Quality of Life indicators, as required by statutory guidance.
77. At this early stage, it is clear that the council has some way to go in articulating the impact it has made in progressing sustainable development. Achievements tend to be expressed as activities and projects, such as publishing a Local Plan, agreeing a series of proposals for energy efficiency, and progressing a major programme of regeneration work in Barrhead. There is less evidence that measures improvement in performance or impact on the wider community.
78. This is not to say that there is no evidence of good performance. Significant work has been done in producing a *Social Justice Milestone Annual Report* which provides a number of high-level measures of social sustainability. The council also has a very good record in recycling household waste and is on course to meet national targets ([Exhibit 6](#)). Arrangements would be improved through structured monitoring of performance based on clear priorities and measurable targets.



Exhibit 6

Percentage of waste recycled



Source: SPIs 2003/04

Equal opportunities

The council has a good approach to equal opportunities, with a strong corporate lead and a systematic approach to raising staff awareness. It has also made an important start in monitoring the effectiveness of its policies, in terms of both staffing and access to services.

79. The council has a strong commitment to equal opportunities, in terms of gender, race, religion and disability. As well as a Corporate Equalities Unit, a great deal of effort is going into mainstreaming equalities, making it an integral part of service planning and performance management.
80. Equal Opportunities is one of the five organisational values listed in its Corporate Strategy and is clearly defined in terms of race and religion (both of particular relevance to the East Renfrewshire community) and gender and disability. It clearly applies both to the accessibility of its services to the public and to its workforce.
81. There is an appropriate range of policies and action plans underpinning this broad commitment. More importantly, there is a systematic approach to help ensure that these policies are implemented. The Director of Community & Leisure has a corporate responsibility for equalities, helping to mainstream the issue rather than treating it as a discrete add-on, and quarterly progress reports are discussed by the CMT. A small Corporate Equality Unit is responsible for raising awareness of equalities issues

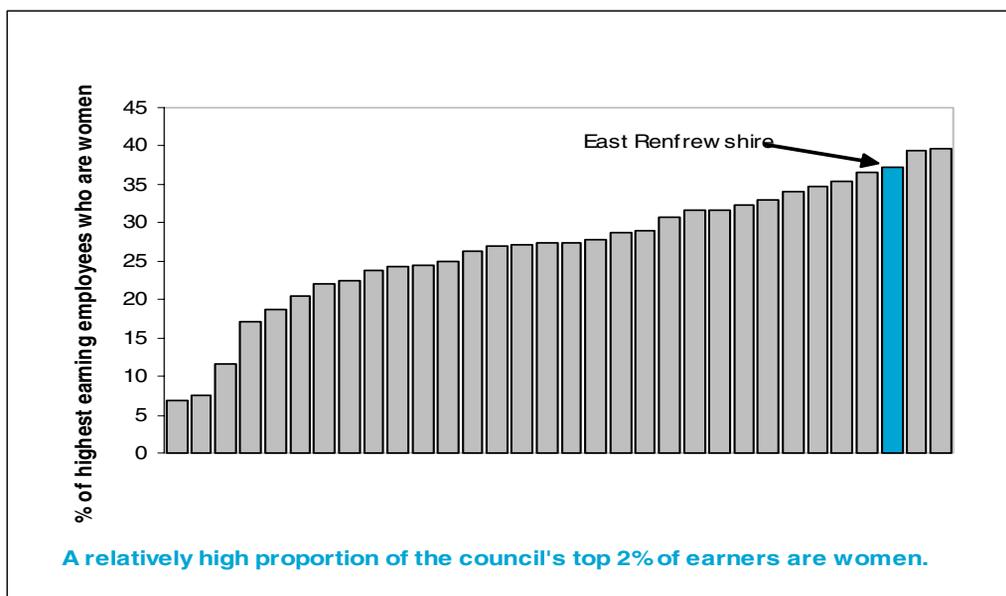


within the council and rolling out a programme of staff training. Currently, around 30% of staff have attended training specifically on equalities.

- 82. The council has established some monitoring arrangements to help assess the effectiveness of its efforts. Two surveys have recently been completed to establish the ethnic make-up of its workforce and to identify under-representation. In addition, national performance indicators show that a relatively high proportion of its senior managers are women, compared with other Scottish councils ([Exhibit 7](#)).

Exhibit 7

Senior managers who are women



Source: SPIs 2003/04

- 83. More work is needed in monitoring equal opportunities in terms of the take-up of services to the community. Equalities issues are incorporated within the council's self-assessment model and help to ensure that it is subjected to detailed assessments within each department. In addition, some monitoring information is produced by individual departments, such as Housing and Education. However, the council recognises the need to greatly improve its overall approach. The Community and Leisure Department is currently piloting an approach which is intended to help develop the monitoring of the take-up of services across the council.



Joint working

The council has a track record of effective joint working with other public sector and voluntary organisations. It has actively led the establishment and continued development of the community planning partnership and there are also examples of joint working by individual departments. The council has recently approved the creation of a Community Health Partnership, with a joint NHS and Social Work management structure and budget.

84. The council's main efforts at joint working are directed through community planning. The East Renfrewshire Partnership was set up in 1999 and includes all of the key public and voluntary organisations. Partners interviewed as part of our audit were enthusiastic about the council's approach to joint working and leading the Partnership.
85. A revised community plan was issued in 2002 but, over the past year or so, priority has been given to incorporating the Levern Valley SIP into the Partnership and developing a Regeneration Plan. This placed considerable demands on the council but additional support staff have been appointed and there are now signs of renewed progress in developing community planning.
86. A new community planning structure has been introduced, with a revamped Partnership Board chaired by the council leader and including the other four Cabinet members, along with senior representatives from partner organisations. This is supported by four Policy Partnerships, each overseeing one of the main themes of the community plan (Community Care & Health; Community Safety; Environment & Sustainability; and Enterprise, Employment & Lifelong Learning). Area Forums are also planned to replace the existing Area Committees, extending their membership to include community planning partners.
87. The council is aware that it now needs to move beyond this phase and demonstrate real improvements in local services as a result of these arrangements for joint working. A progress report was included as part of the updated 2002 plan This highlighted significant projects that had been successfully implemented, such as:
 - The establishment of a Small Business Gateway, by Scottish Enterprise Renfrewshire and the council, to provide advice and help business start-ups.
 - Community schools have been set up in Thornliebank and Neilston, bringing together health, social work, police and careers advice services to support pupils and help fulfil their potential.
 - The establishment of a CCTV Response Unit by Strathclyde Police, the Community Safety Partnership and the council.
88. However, there is now a need for clear measurable targets to be established in order to monitor progress in achieving the high level objectives for each of the community plan's four themes.



89. Some progress has been made in sharing information between the various partner organisations. For example, a major Socio-Economic Profile has recently been completed, helping to direct the priorities of the Regeneration Plan. These have highlighted a number of issues which need to be addressed, such as: a lack of data and systems compatibility, non-coterminous boundaries, and multiple data sources. A protocol for the sharing of data between community planning partners is currently being developed.
90. The council has also recently approved the creation of a Community Health Partnership with NHS Glasgow and NHS Argyll & Clyde. This aims to provide joint community care services, recognising the links between the work of the NHS and the Social Work Department. This is at an early stage, but the council has decided to go for a full integration of these services, with a common senior management structure and aligned budgets.

Reporting to local people

A great deal of effort is made by the council to communicate with the public in an accessible manner. There are examples of good practice and an emphasis on providing relevant information and good news stories. The council needs to develop its approach to public performance reporting, in line with recent statutory guidance, to provide a more systematic and balanced picture of how services are performing. It is well placed to meet these new and demanding requirements.

91. The council has put in a great deal of effort into communicating with the public in East Renfrewshire using a range of methods. Possibly the most familiar to local residents is the 'er' magazine which is delivered to every household in the area, four times a year. This is a highly professional publication, covering a wide range of topics. Some of these are general interest stories and do not necessarily have a direct connection with the council. Others promote council initiatives, such as waste recycling or welfare benefits, or provide updates on significant projects, such as the extension to the M77. Many however, provide explanations of important council decisions (such as a 'four page special' on its vote to block housing developments recommended by the reporter from the Scottish Executive) The *er* magazine provides some information on departmental performance, making use of Service Standards and Statutory Performance Indicators (SPIs) to provide feedback on an annual basis.





92. The council's annual *Performance Report* is a more structured approach to public performance reporting. This follows the layout of the Corporate Strategy. It provides some meaningful information on how the council and its departments are performing, for example, the proportion of household waste being recycled or the number of older people receiving home care. But, in general, it focuses on the progress of their activities, rather than providing detailed comparative information on their achievements and impact. For example, a list of road safety improvements is provided, but there is no information on their success or otherwise in reducing the level of road accidents. There is also a tendency to highlight good news stories, rather than areas that are council priorities. For example, the 2003/04 report features graphs on East Renfrewshire's high levels of breast-feeding and low levels of teenage pregnancies. These are important issues but, arguably, they have more to do with the underlying social structure within East Renfrewshire than with the work of the council.
93. Almost all of the council's public performance reporting is at a corporate level. Most of the information produced by individual departments provides only an outline of their work and key policies, together with contact details, and little performance information that is tailored for specific service users. The Education Department is one of the few that has produced some meaningful information on its performance. This is presented in an accessible format, with graphs and pictures, and contains useful information on attainment levels.
94. In broad terms, the council's approach to public performance reporting compares well with many other local authorities. However, within the range of public reports that it produces, it needs to present a more systematic analysis of performance against pre-set targets and the achievements of other councils. This would help to provide a more balanced picture of successes and areas in need of improvement and help to improve its accountability.



How are services performing?

There is evidence that the council generally provides a high standard of services, as shown in the Statutory Performance Indicators and the recent HMIE report on the Education Department. However, there are areas of underperformance. For example, a recent inspection of its Housing service found scope for improvement in a number of areas.

Statutory Performance Indicators

Statutory Performance Indicators suggest strong performance overall by East Renfrewshire Council.

- 95. Audit Scotland publishes a set of 75 statutory performance indicators (SPIs) for each Scottish local authority. While these do not give a comprehensive picture of performance across all services, they do allow some comparisons to be made between councils and over time. East Renfrewshire Council makes use of these SPIs, including them for example in the Quarterly Performance Profiles produced by each department.
- 96. Overall, East Renfrewshire Council's SPIs compare well with other Scottish local authorities (Exhibit 8). For 2003/04, the latest available year, it is ranked in the upper quartile (eighth or above out of 32 councils) for 30 performance measures. In addition, its performance has tended to improve, with improvements by at least 5% in 16 of these measures since 2001/02 and deteriorations by at least 5% in only 10 measures. Full details are available from Audit Scotland's website (www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/performance/index.htm).

Exhibit 8

Statutory Performance Indicators 2003/04

East Renfrewshire Council	Upper quartile	Middle quartiles	Lower quartile
Adult Social Work	4	9	1
Protective services	4	1	1
Development services	3	3	0
Cultural and community services	3	4	2
Waste Management	3	1	1
Children's Services	5	2	1
Benefits Administration	1	3	0
Corporate management	5	5	0
Housing	1	4	2
Roads and lighting	1	1	1
Totals	30	33	9

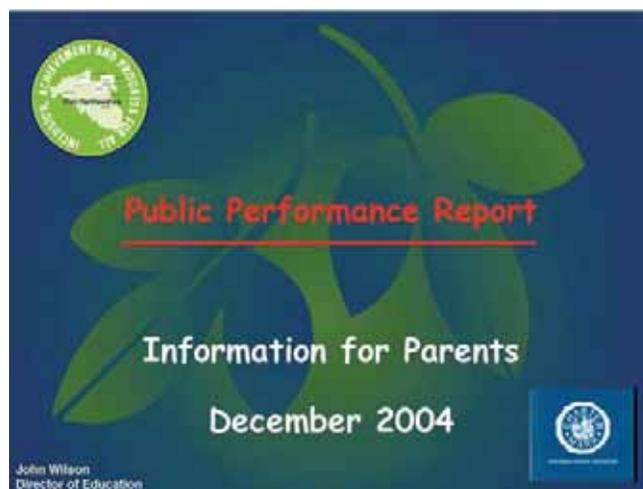
Taken together, the SPIs for East Renfrewshire Council's suggest a high level of performance, with 30 out of the 72 relevant indicators in the upper quartile compared with other Scottish local authorities.
Source: Audit Scotland



Education

The Education Department provides a high quality service. It has recently received an extremely positive report from HMIE, with the highest rating for all 11 quality indicators. Attainment levels are above national levels.

97. The Education Service is the largest department within the council, employing 1,830 staff and spending around £84 million each year. Staffing levels and expenditure reflect the council's explicit decision to give education a high priority.
98. A detailed inspection of East Renfrewshire's Education Department has been completed by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE). Their report was published in February 2005 and shows a very strong performance. HMIE use 11 quality indicators and the Department is rated as 'very good' (the highest rating) for all of them. This is the highest overall rating given for any Education service in Scotland. The report concluded that the council is 'adding considerable value to the work of schools and pre-school establishments' and that the work of the Education Department was making a significant contribution to one of the council's overarching aims of achieving social justice. A copy of the report can be found on HMIE's website: www.hmie.gov.uk
99. Schools within East Renfrewshire also perform well. Attendance levels have risen steadily over the past seven years. Attainment levels and examination results are well above national averages and have steadily improved. These successes are not limited to schools serving the more affluent areas but are also evident in the pockets of deprivation.
100. This has been achieved without devoting disproportionate financial resource to the Education Department. The average budgeted cost per pupil in East Renfrewshire in 2004/05 was £3,761, below the national average of £4,042.
101. More details on the performance of East Renfrewshire's schools can be found in the Education Department's public performance report, available from the council's website. This provides a wide range of information, from attainment levels and examination results to attendance levels and the percentage of school leavers going on to further education and employment. Much of this information is given for individual schools as well as for the area in general. The Education Department was awarded *Chartermark* status in 2004.





Social Work

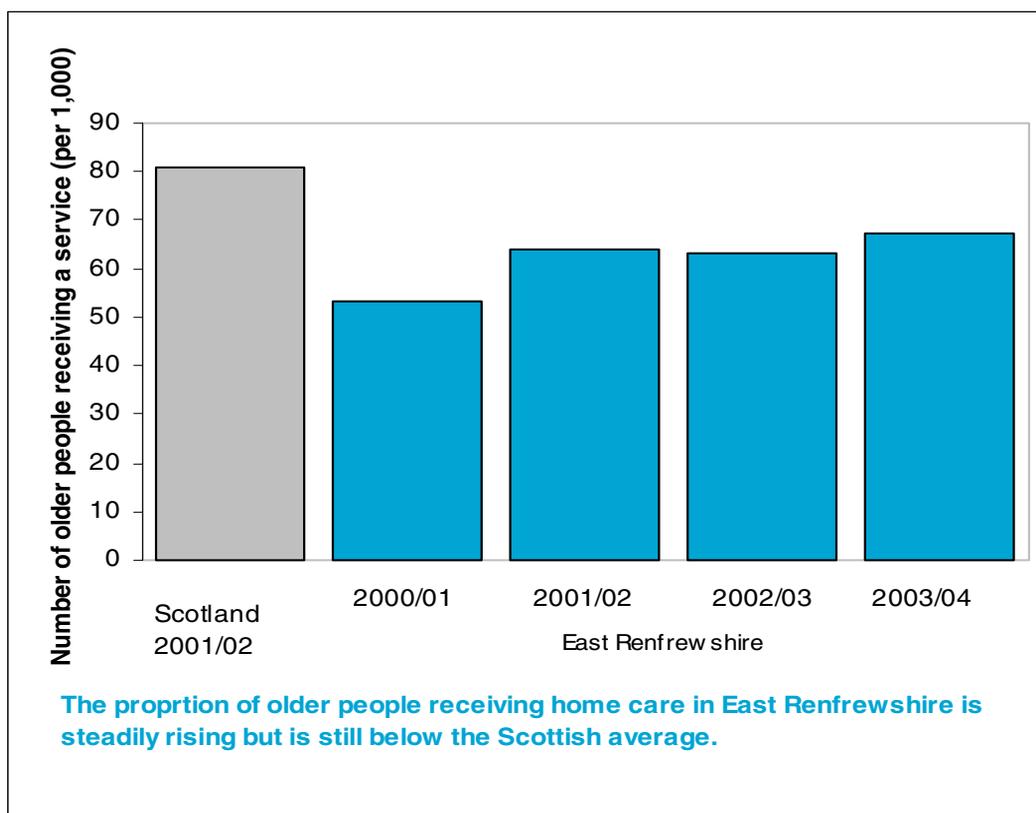
The Department has been successful in increasing the number of older people receiving home care and, in partnership with Education, in mainstreaming children with special educational needs. It also generally meets the Service Standards set by the council.

102. Social Work is the second largest department within the council, with the equivalent of 540 full-time staff, and spending around £32 million in 2003/04. The Social Work Services Inspectorate report for 2003 commented on the high quality of the social work services provided by the council.
103. The major challenge facing Social Work in East Renfrewshire over the next year or so is the planned creation of a local Community Health & Care Partnership (CHCP). This will be achieved through joint working with NHS Greater Glasgow and NHS Argyll & Clyde. It aims to remove the artificial institutional barriers between NHS community care services and local authority social work departments and provide more integrated services.
104. At this stage, the plans for creating the CHCP are still at a strategic level. The council has recently given formal approval to take this proposal forward, but many important operational issues still need to be resolved, such as financial liability, lines of reporting and accountability, and the involvement of councillors. However, the council has decided to go for a full integrated CHCP, rather than a more limited model followed in other parts of Scotland. This will involve setting up a CHCP Committee, the appointment of a single Director, common management, and an alignment of budgets.
105. The other broad challenge facing Social Work is East Renfrewshire's rising population and the growth in demand for its services.
106. There is a growing elderly population, placing significant demands on Community Care services. Consultation suggests that most elderly people prefer to remain in their own homes as long as possible, rather than be cared for in a residential home.
107. In response the council has recently completed a review of its Homecare service. The proportion of older people receiving home care in East Renfrewshire is below the Scottish average, but it has been rising over the past four years ([Exhibit 9](#)). The council has also taken steps to improve the quality of evening and weekend provision, previously identified as a performance weak spot by revising the terms & conditions for Homecare staff.



Exhibit 9

Home care for older people



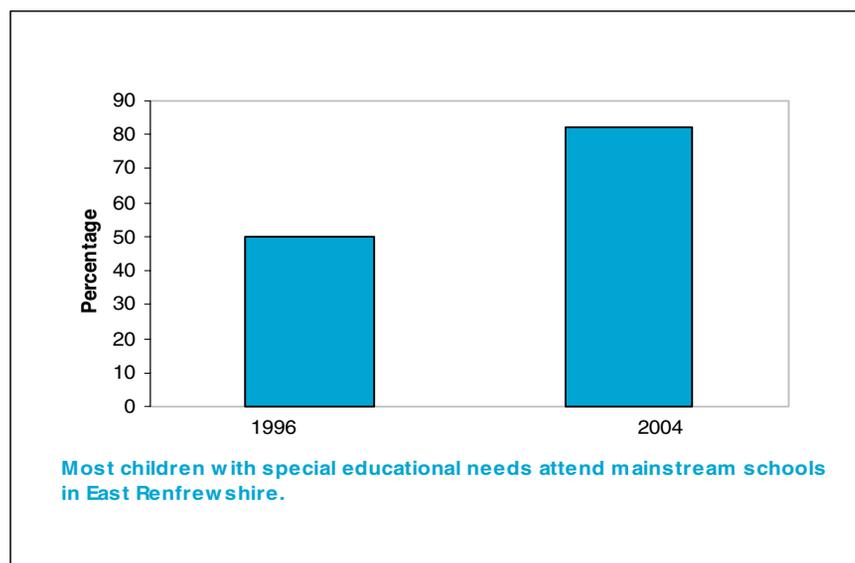
Source: East Renfrewshire Annual Performance Report 2003/04

108. There are also increasing numbers of families coming into the area attracted, to a large extent, by the high reputation of its schools. This influx of families with school aged children includes an increasing number of families with special educational needs. The council has had significant success in providing support to children with special educational needs in mainstream schools ([Exhibit 10](#)).



Exhibit 10

Children with special educational needs



Source: East Renfrewshire Annual Performance Report 2003/04

109. Social Work also performs well against the Service Standards set by the council. Typically, these are based on timescales for carrying out certain processes. For example, patients discharged from hospital should receive equipment to help with their daily living within two days, and requests for community care assessments should be acknowledged within five working days and a timescale given for the assessment to be completed. In all cases, random samples checked by the council, found that these standards are generally being met.

Environmental Department

110. Five main services are managed within the Environmental Department: Roads & Transportation, Planning & Regeneration, Housing, Protective Services, and Construction Services. Our audit looked at the performance of the first three of these, as they are most directly relevant to the Corporate Strategy's key priorities of sustainability and social justice.

Roads and Transportation

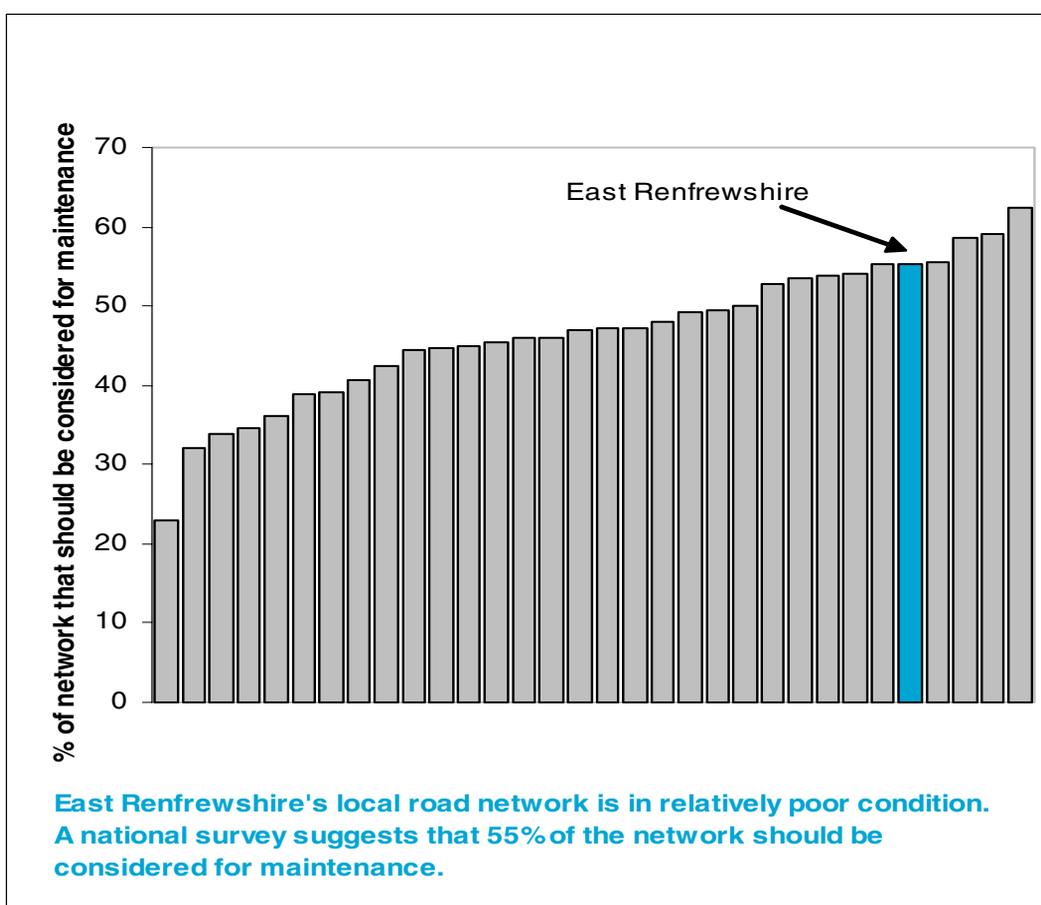
The performance of Roads and Transportation is mixed. The number of road accidents has fallen, ahead of national targets, but there is a significant backlog in the maintenance of the local road network.



111. In recent years, Roads and Transportation has successfully managed a major road infrastructure project, the M77 extension and Glasgow South Orbital, on behalf of the Scottish Executive, East Renfrewshire Council and South Lanarkshire Council. This has been a significant call on management resources.
112. Audit Scotland issued *Maintaining Scotland's Roads* in 2004. This was a national report looking at the work of Scotland's councils in maintaining their local road networks. National survey information, carried out at the time of the report, indicates that East Renfrewshire's road network is in relatively poor condition (Exhibit 11). These figures are based on a sample of roads and are not comprehensive, but there is no doubt that there is a significant backlog of roads maintenance.

Exhibit 11

Maintenance of road network



Source: SPIs 2003/04

113. This is a national issue, affecting most Scottish councils, and reflects a lack of funding going back many years. Currently, East Renfrewshire Council spends around £1.2 million each year on structural repairs. The council has calculated that it needs to spend a further £1.6 million annually to meet the



target suggested by Audit Scotland of repairing 8% of the road network each year. As a result of budgetary decisions, the department tends to carry out reactive rather than proactive repairs, leading to higher long-term costs. Decisions have been made to increase funding for future years.

114. About 40% of roads maintenance is contracted out to the private sector, with round 60% carried out by staff directly employed by the council. This Roads Contracting Unit operates as a trading operation. There are arrangements in place to subject it to competition, with competitive tenders submitted for up to 25% of its work each year. The Unit's payment rates are based on a benchmarking exercise, reflecting the rates paid by a group of seven local authorities to private contractors.
115. One of the department's objectives is to encourage a shift from private to public transport. There is some evidence of success in containing the increases in the number of car trips. But the information available relates to specific routes and does not clearly compare trends over time. We found no evidence, for example, to assess whether the council's target of reducing car journeys within East Renfrewshire by 1.1% has been achieved. Similarly, there is little information available on trends in the numbers of bus or train passengers.
116. The council has adopted national targets, put forward by the Scottish Executive, for reductions in road accidents. It has been active in putting in place a series of measures, such as speed cameras and 20 m.p.h. speed limits in some residential areas. Road accidents have fallen significantly. The number of adults killed or seriously injured, for example, has fallen from an annual average of 58 in 1994-98 to 30 last year, while the number of children has fallen from eleven to four. The national targets for 2010 are already being met. There is potential for the council to aim for further reductions.
117. As part of the council's response to the national Efficient Government agenda, the Department has started to think about potential options for joint working with other local authorities. Some of these are concerned with support functions, such as sharing asset management systems and information on contractors. Others deal with the delivery of front-line services, such as the maintenance of traffic infrastructure or linking with neighbouring councils to make a joint Public Private Partnership (PPP) bid viable.

Planning and Regeneration

There is evidence of good performance by Planning and Regeneration. Strategic plans are in place and are used to guide decisions, and individual planning applications are quickly processed. There is also effective partnership working to help stimulate the local economy.

118. The council was involved in developing the new partnership arrangement of the Glasgow and Clyde Valley Structure Plan, recognising that all of the neighbouring local authorities need to work together



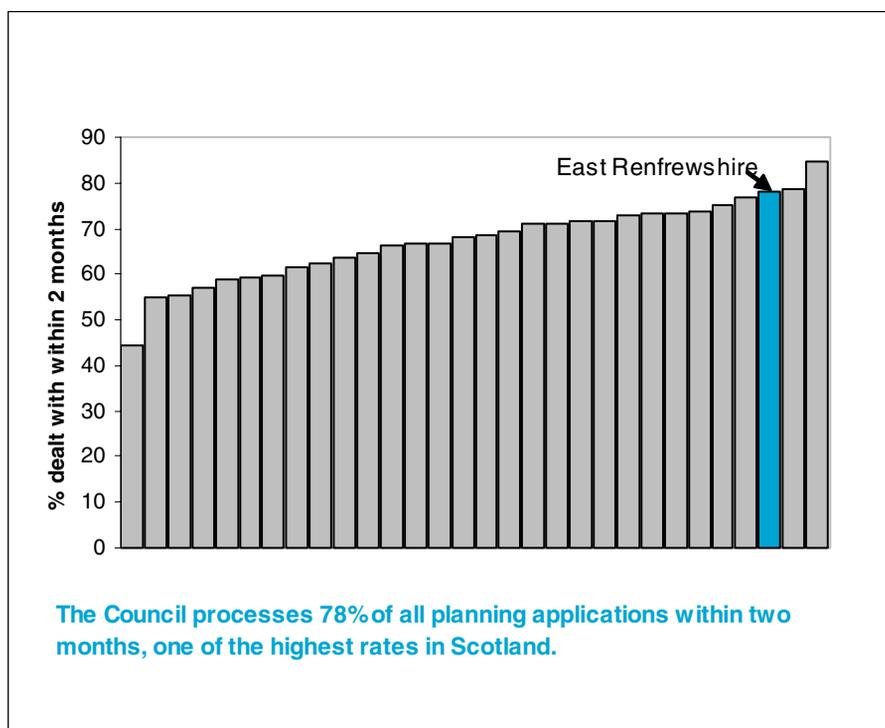
to coordinate regional development and transport infrastructure. This model of joint working has been identified by the Scottish Executive as an example of good practice.

119. An up-to-date strategic framework for East Renfrewshire is contained within the Local Plan, setting out the council's overall priorities and framework for housing and business developments and protecting the natural environment. East Renfrewshire's population is steadily growing as families are attracted into the area by the success of its schools and other quality of life issues. This has put increased pressure on the council, which is seeking to protect its green field sites, to release land for housing development. The council is now using a scoring system, based on pre-determined criteria, to help resolve these conflicting pressures.

120. Individual planning applications are processed quickly, despite an increase of 55% in the number of applications being made over the past four years. The department responded to this increased demand by streamlining its procedures, so that central Customer First staff deal with routine public queries, and it has maintained one of the shortest turnover rates in Scotland ([Exhibit 12](#)).

Exhibit 12

Planning applications



Source: SPIs 2003/04



121. Councillors have also been willing to make difficult decisions to protect the corporate policy priorities contained within the Local Plan. For example, they held their ground in the face of media criticism and public opposition surrounding a Public Enquiry following the release of land near Patterton for residential development
122. The council plays a role in helping to promote the economic development of the area, alongside Scottish Enterprise Renfrewshire. Councillors have previously questioned the need for both organisations to be involved. However, after a detailed investigation by the Audit Committee, the value of the council's role in helping to promote the specific local interests of East Renfrewshire has been recognised.
123. Over the past year or so, much of the department's efforts on economic regeneration have been taken up with developing a Regeneration Plan. This has included working with external consultants to produce a town centre master plan for Barrhead.
124. There is good joint working with Scottish Enterprise Renfrewshire. Resources are pooled to provide a Business Gateway advice centre in Barrhead, offering a single point of contact for people seeking advice on starting up a local business. Similarly, the council has worked closely with Scottish Enterprise Renfrewshire, the Careers Service and Job Centre Plus to form a Jobs Action Team. This is thought to have helped 300 local residents into employment and 313 into training since 2002.
125. A Business Panel has been established, seeking to gauge the views of a sample of local businesses on the services provided by the council. However, staff shortages have meant that the department has yet to address any of the issues raised in the first survey.

Housing Services

A recent inspection by Communities Scotland assesses the council's housing management service as 'good' but its property maintenance and homelessness services to be only 'fair'.

126. East Renfrewshire Council owns and manages around 3,700 houses. It has recently completed a Housing Option Appraisal, to look at the possibility of transferring ownership of its housing stock to a registered social landlord. The council has decided to retain ownership.
127. Communities Scotland has recently completed a detailed inspection of the Housing Service. Its report uses a scoring system, ranging from 'A' (excellent) to 'D' (poor). It assesses the council's housing management as 'B' (good), and its property maintenance and its homelessness service as 'C' (fair). The full report is available on Communities Scotland's website www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk
128. Aspects of the Housing service are praised by Communities Scotland, such as the council's approach to dealing with anti-social behaviour and its promotion of its homeless service. The report also highlights areas for improvement in the way that the council manages its housing service. The



approach to planning, monitoring and reporting housing performance is described as 'underdeveloped', particularly in its limited use of feedback from tenants and in monitoring the repairs service.

129. Specific issues covered in the report include:

- Tenants have low levels of satisfaction with the housing repairs service. The council's performance information on the speed of its repair service is unreliable and it is not properly using inspections to monitor the quality of repairs.
- It is not complying with its statutory duties on gas safety and asbestos (despite a council policy on the latter being approved in 1999).
- There is a lack of transparency in the awarding of contracts for repairs and maintenance work to the council's in-house DLO.
- The council is not meeting its statutory duties in giving access to its housing to applicants from outside the area.
- There is a high use of temporary bed & breakfast accommodation, much of it outside the area, for the homeless (60%, compared with 25% nationally).

130. There is little reference to the above issues in the council's public performance report for 2003/04, underlining Communities Scotland's comments about the 'underdeveloped' arrangements for monitoring and reporting on performance.

Community and Leisure Department

131. The Community and Leisure Department employs 433 staff and spent some £13 million in 2003/04. It manages a wide range of different services, such as Arts & Cultural Services, Sports & Recreation, Community Resources and Cleansing, Vehicle Management and Parks Services. Over the past year, the department has undergone some major restructuring, taking on responsibility for Cleansing, Protective Services, Vehicle Management and Parks Services at the same time as two of its four Heads of Service posts have been vacant.

Community resources

Although there is scope to develop the range of performance information, there is evidence to show that community resources is performing well.

132. Community resources provide a wide range of services from registration services and school letting through to community learning and development and support for community activity.



133. Performance information is variable across the service and requires development. There is, however, some evidence from customer satisfaction surveys and inspections of specific examples of good service. For example within the Registration Service, satisfaction levels have been close to 100% over the past three years. The service also received a very positive annual inspection report from the General Registrar's Service and gained a Chartermark in 2004.
134. HMIE published an inspection report in September 2004 for Adult Learning, at the time provided under service level agreement with Education. The report judged East Renfrewshire Adult Learning to be 'fair and improving', with a number of aspects indicated as very good. An earlier HMIE report on Community Learning in the Levern Valley Area found the service was 'good or very good' overall in 2001.
135. Senior officers within this service are heavily involved in the council's scheme of decentralisation and community engagement. The significant amount of work undertaken to-date in this area demonstrates a broad approach to consultation and joint working with other community planning partners and community representative groups.

Culture & Sport Services

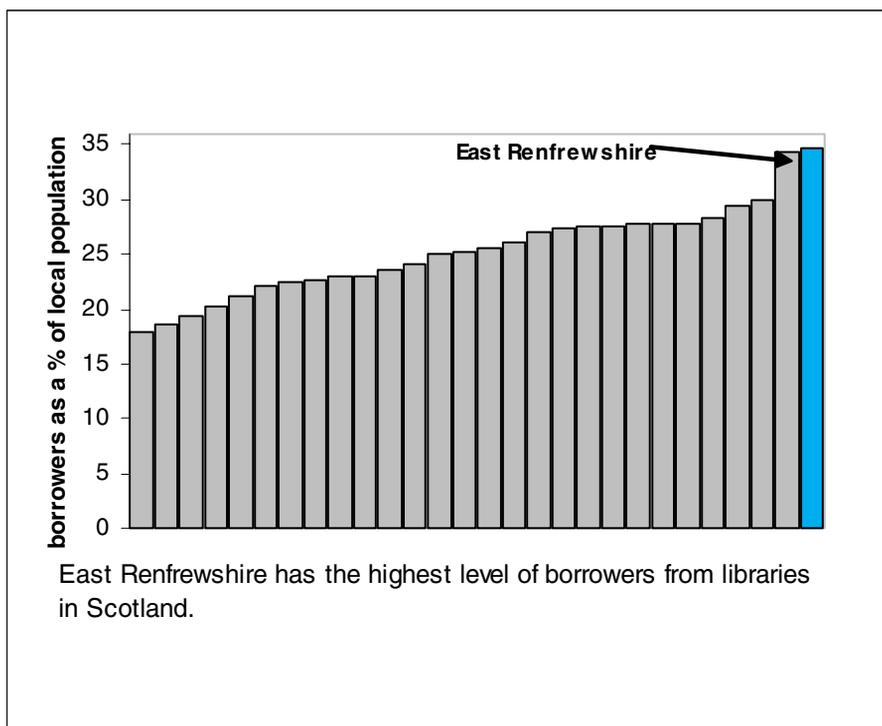
As with Community Resources, there is a need to develop the range of performance information, However, there is evidence from customer surveys to show high levels of service and high satisfaction rates.

136. The Library and Information Service provides a high level of service, with a high proportion of the local population borrowing from its libraries ([Exhibit 13](#)). In recent years the service has been overhauled. Following a Best Value review, the ICT infrastructure was modernised to provide a range of online services which balance both educational and recreational uses. Survey results show that libraries are seen by the public as the most improved council service, with 95.3% of users rating the service as 'good' or 'very good'.
137. There has also been a series of improvements in the sports and recreations facilities run by the council. Facilities have been modernised and operate as leisure centres offering a range of activities. Overall usage levels have fallen in the past year, due to the outbreak the cryptosporidium virus in the Eastwood Pool, but this has now been resolved.



Exhibit 13

Borrowers from libraries



Source: SPIs 2003/04

138. At present Sports & Recreation Services are provided directly by the council, but the service has shown a willingness to make difficult decisions and consider other means of service delivery. An early review of the Museums service led to the decision to close this service and reallocate resources. A Trust arrangement was previously rejected for the provision of Sports and Recreation services but in the light of subsequent changes in the financial guidelines, the council is reconsidering this option.

Refuse Collection & Street Cleansing

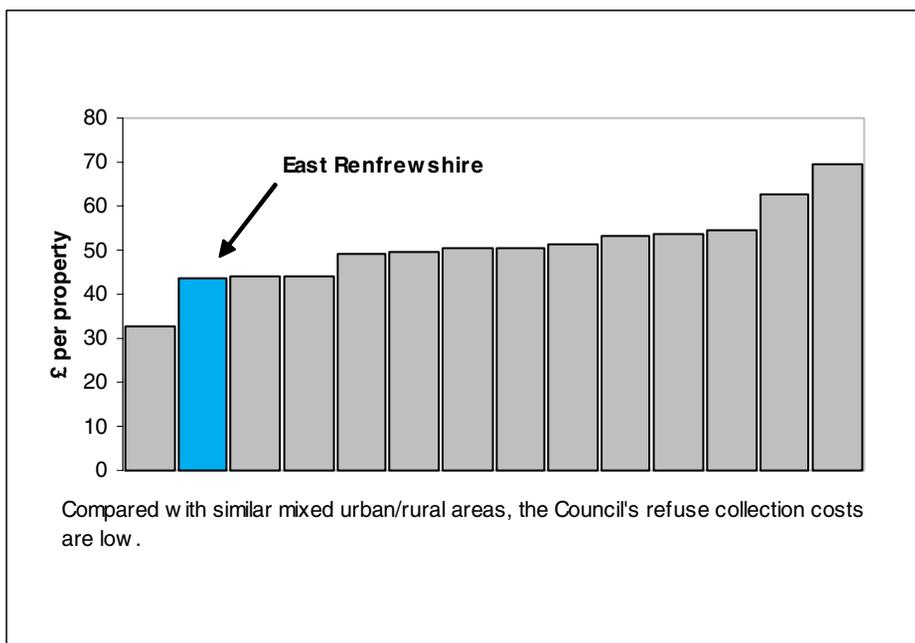
There is evidence of good performance, with relatively low refuse collection costs and increasing satisfaction levels.

139. Results from the council's Citizens' Panel surveys, carried over a number of years, show increasing satisfaction rates for the refuse collection service, rising from 61% in 1998 to 71%. At the same time, the unit costs of the service are relatively low (Exhibit 14). In conjunction with the Environmental Department, it has also contributed to the council's waste recycling rate increasing to 21%, one of the highest in Scotland.



Exhibit 14

Refuse Collection Costs



Source: SPIs 2003/04

140. There is also evidence to show a good standard of street cleansing service. The council has been part of a pilot group working with Keep Scotland Beautiful to develop a national performance measure. The council's score of 71 is above the recommended base score of 67.

141. Sickness absence rates are high. In recent years, between 7% and 8.5% of working days have been lost to sickness absence. This has recently increased to almost 11%. As mentioned earlier, the Policy Review Committee is currently overseeing a review of sickness absence management.



What needs to improve?

East Renfrewshire Council makes significant efforts to drive continuous improvement in the delivery of its services. While core aspects of Best Value are well established, these continue to be refined and further developed. The council has identified the key issues that now need to be tackled. These include further improvements in scrutiny and performance management and in its approach to option appraisal.

142. The concept of 'continuous improvement' lies at the heart of Best Value and Community Planning. Local authorities need to have an improvement culture across all areas of their activity. Councillors and managers must focus on key policy objectives and the needs of service users and the wider community, and be driven by a desire to achieve the highest standards in public services. This requires an environment where service performance is constructively challenged and areas in need of improvement are readily identified and addressed.
143. East Renfrewshire Council has achieved this culture of improvement. Even in areas which are relatively well developed, it has a drive to improve these further. Over the past year, for example, there has been significant progress in its approach to service reviews, scrutiny, and community planning.
144. The council has developed an Improvement Plan which shows that it is aware of the key issues which now need to be addressed. A summary is provided overleaf.
145. Much of the Improvement Plan is concerned with continuing to build on and refine existing systems, which are generally sound. Councillors provide a meaningful level of scrutiny, but the work of the Policy Review Committee and the involvement of councillors in monitoring service performance and overseeing service reviews can still be improved. There is a strong system of corporate performance management, but there is still a need to focus more on the output of services and the impact they are having in meeting the council's priorities. With good performance management systems already in place and a strong tradition of constructive cross-party working, the council is also well-placed to meet the new and demanding requirements of public performance reporting.
146. The council has acknowledged that it needs to improve its approach to option appraisal and consider other ways of delivering services, such as contracting out to the private sector or entering into consortia arrangements with other public bodies. This will need to feature in its developing plans to meet the national efficient government agenda.



Key issues in the Improvement Plan

- **Community involvement** – further develop the existing systematic approach through, for example, the introduction of Area Forums and an East Renfrewshire Assembly.
- **Performance management** – move the balance of target setting and performance monitoring from management processes and projects to assessing their impact in improving the delivery of services to the community.
- **Scrutiny** – further develop the level of constructive challenge provided by councillors to the work of the council and its departments through, for example, the work of the Policy Review Committee and greater councillor involvement in overseeing Best Value reviews.
- **Option appraisal** – develop a more challenging approach to option appraisal and considering other methods of delivering services.
- **Sustainable development** – develop clear priorities and measurable targets for the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of East Renfrewshire, together with a clear action plan for delivering them.
- **Accountability** – In the light of new national guidance, develop corporate and departmental approach to reporting performance to the public.

East Renfrewshire Council

The Audit of Best Value and Community Planning



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Audit Scotland
110 George Street
Edinburgh EH2 4LH

Telephone
0131 477 1234
Fax
0131 477 4567