

EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 HOURS, 30 MARCH 2006

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council gets a mixed report from watchdog

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council is making only limited progress in tackling the weaknesses found in the 2004 Comprehensive Progress Assessment (CPA) report, but the recent drive to improve by the leadership is encouraging. It is now implementing radical changes to structures and processes, which, although likely to cause short-term disruption, should secure benefits in the long term.

That's the verdict of a new report from the Audit Commission, published today. The major findings in the 2004 CPA report for Tunbridge Wells Council were the lack of strategic capacity and leadership, and lack of engagement with the community and key stakeholders. The Council has responded well to meet these needs and there is strong leadership to improve amongst councillors, the recently appointed chief executive, and a large body of middle managers. However, intentions continue to outweigh achievements and much activity represents work in progress.

Key partners are beginning to recognise some signs of changes in culture and a more inclusive approach. The Council is showing a strong commitment to engaging the community through its work with the West Kent Strategic Partnership on the current revision of the community plan and council stakeholder conferences. However, the picture of progress is not consistent and a number of challenges remain. Some services remain poor and the building blocks to support the delivery of future improvements are not embedded.

Stephen Mead, Audit Commission senior manager, said: 'Tunbridge Wells is now focusing on things that matter, to try to create better services, and the leadership team has carried out a fundamental review of the Council's ability to deliver improvement. However, the council's efforts are not yet being felt by the public and, although the early signs are encouraging, the Council knows that the public expects better services and recognises it must translate its capacity building into tangible benefit to the public.'

The inspectors found:

- The overall trend of improvements in services identified in CPA has continued in some, though not all, poorly performing services in 2004/05.
- The Council is self-aware, is listening to its residents and shows clear intentions to improve.

- Strategic capacity is improving, giving clarity and drive. Key weaknesses at a structural level are being resolved through an organisational change programme, with fewer posts, sharper lines of responsibility and new strategic posts being created.
- The picture of progress is not consistent. The required cultural change is not fully embedded and the strategic approach of some members remains underdeveloped.
- Services have improved overall since last year though some remain poor.

The Audit Commission's local audit and inspection programme will focus on monitoring, testing and reporting on the Council's progress during 2006.

Tunbridge Wells District Council was rated as a 'weak' council, following the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) in 2004. CPA measures how well councils are delivering services for local people and communities, while reducing the overall regulatory burden on them. It distils a complex set of judgements on local authority bodies and the services they provide into one easily understood rating.

Progress assessments are used as a way of monitoring progress in those councils judged to be 'poor' or 'weak' in the CPA.

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Copies of the progress assessment report are available from Tunbridge Wells District Council or from the Audit Commission website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

NOTES TO EDITORS

- *A progress assessment was issued in June 2005, reporting on the progress that the Council had made in the previous year.*

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As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we ensure that public services are good value for money and that public money is properly spent.

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For further information please contact:
Callum Collins, Communications Manager (Southern)
Tel: 0117 901 8883 Email : ca-collins@audit-commission.gov.uk