

Annual Plan 2006/07 – Part One

Introduction

This Plan sets out the major actions that the County Council intends to take in 2006/07 in order to improve services to the public and the detailed targets that we aim to achieve that will demonstrate those improvements. As such it meets the current requirements of the Government to produce an annual Best Value Performance Plan (BVPP).

The Plan is in two parts. Part One identifies the major issues which Departments intend to address in 2006/07. Part Two sets out our past performance and future targets against a range of Performance Indicators.

The Plan aims to provide a useful summary of the Councils' Plans for elected Members, council officers and interested members of the public. It is supported by more detailed plans for each service area and these are available on the Council's intranet, on our internet site, or in hard copy from the Department concerned.

If you have any comments or queries on the content of this Plan please contact David Armstrong, Resources Department, Leicestershire County Council, Glenfield, Leicestershire LE3 8RB. Telephone 0116 2657605 or e-mail darmstrong@leics.gov.uk

Contents

- 1. Our current performance and the basis of our plans for further improvements in services**
- 2. Improving the Quality of Life for People**
- 3. Improving the Quality of Life in Communities**
- 4. Improving Services to Deliver High Quality and Value for Money**

Current Performance and Medium Term Plans

The Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA)

In December each year the Audit Commission uses evidence gathered from various sources, such as service inspections and external auditors' reports, to judge the Council's overall performance. In December 2005 Leicestershire County Council maintained its achievement of the highest possible assessment as a "Four Star" council and its services were judged by the Commission to be "Improving Well". Achieving this rating required consistently high performance across all services and is a tribute to the efforts of employees across the Council in delivering high quality services. The detailed judgement is available on the Council's website and intranet.

We are conscious that maintaining this standard will require hard work to continue improving the services we deliver in the face of constant new challenges. However, if we can make significant progress during 2006/07 on the range of issues identified in this Plan it will be a big step in the right direction.

The Council's Medium Term Corporate Strategy (MTCS)

The Council has recently agreed a second Medium Term Corporate Strategy that sets out its priorities for improving services for the period up to May 2009. The MTCS forms the basis of annual plans for 2006/07 onwards.

The MTCS priorities address the overall aim of Improving Life in Leicestershire by focussing on three main themes:-

- Improving the Quality of Life for People
- Improving the Quality of Life in Communities
- Improving Services to deliver High Quality and Value for Money

The detailed aims and targets against these themes are set out in the MTCS which is available on the Council's website and intranet.

This Annual Plan summarises the major issues that will be addressed by the Council in 2006/07 to achieve those longer term aims and targets.

The Local Area Agreement (LAA)

In addition to its own priorities the Council and Leicestershire Together (the County Local Strategic Partnership) along with a number of partner agencies in the County, have recently signed an agreement with Government Departments to deliver improvements on a wide range of shared priorities over the 3 years from April 2006. This will encourage partnership working and enable all the agencies involved to address the major issues facing the community in Leicestershire in a more joined up way.

The shared priorities in the LAA are also reflected in the Council's own MTCS and some, but not all, of them are referred to in this Annual Plan. Full details of the LAA targets are available on the Council's website and intranet and at www.Leicestershiretogether.org

During 2006/07 the County Council will co-ordinate the implementation of the LAA. The initial Agreement will be reviewed and refreshed for 2007/08. We will ensure that arrangements, including an effective performance management framework, are in place to support the delivery of the service improvements in the LAA. These will include establishing neighbourhood management and community engagement arrangements.

The delivery of the LAA will be overseen by Leicestershire Together and seven supporting partnerships. The County Council will work with its partners to improve the effectiveness of these arrangements, including the implementation of an action plan addressing the findings of the Leicestershire Together peer review. This will ensure decisions are taken efficiently and effectively and that linkages between Leicestershire Together and the strategic oversight partnerships are improved.

Improving the Quality of Life for People

We aim to improve the quality of life for all sections of the local community. We will work with our partners in other public agencies and the voluntary sector to develop strong communities through improving health, educational opportunities and access to facilities by good local transport links. We will address the needs of particular groups in the community through the actions described below.

Children and Young People

Increase Academic Achievement

Standards in Leicestershire schools continue to rise and compare favourably with national outcomes and those of similar authorities. At Key Stage 2 80% of pupils achieved Level 4 in English and 75% achieved Level 4 in mathematics in 2005. These compare to the national averages of 78% for English and 75% for maths. At Key Stage 3 results place Leicestershire in the top 5 of all local authorities nationally with 83% achieving Level 5 English 82% in maths and 80% in science compared with the national average of 74% in English, 74% maths and 70% science. At Key Stage 4 (age 16) 57% achieved 5 A* - C which is equal to the national average.

The Council has deployed consultants and advisors to support schools and develop plans for improvement. The work of primary and secondary National Strategy Consultants in Leicestershire has been commended.

There are currently only 4 schools in special measures out of a total of 288, a significant reduction from last year and the lowest number for 5 years. This has been achieved by working closely with schools as they adapt to the new Ofsted framework for inspection and intervening at an early stage where there are signs of under achievement. The support given to schools in difficulty continues to be viewed positively by independent inspectors.

We will develop leadership and management in schools through a number of projects working with existing head teachers and by induction of new head teachers, as well as looking to develop future leaders in Leicestershire schools.

Work will be targeted specifically at Key Stage 2 in order to improve attainment further. This will focus on supporting schools in their approaches to writing and the development of personalised learning.

Integrate Children's Services

In April 2006 the Director of the Children and Young People's Service formally took up post and the new Service was launched. Work on disaggregating the central management services of Social Services and integrating them into the Children and Young People's Service and the new Adults Service will take place during 2006. During this period there will be a steady state until 1 April 2007 when full integration will be achieved. This work forms part of the Council's Strategic Change Programme described in the fourth section of this Plan.

Work will continue with our partners on the Children and Young People's Strategic Board during 2006 to foster a closer working relationship and to begin to develop a commissioning strategy to ensure that the move to a Children and Young People's Trust will be achieved by the statutory date of 2008.

Provide Local Placements for Looked After Children

We know some looked after children do not have placements that meet their needs, including placements that are local to them. We also know some children have too many changes of placement. We are committed to providing a range of family placements that address these issues and provide better placement stability and, where appropriate, placements local to their family.

Our aim is to increase the numbers of local foster and adoption placements, reduce the use of out of authority placements and reduce the number of placement changes experienced by looked after children. To achieve this we will monitor our recruitment and retention policies to ensure we have sufficient foster carers of the right type to meet our placement matching needs. We will also monitor enquiries about fostering to test the effectiveness of our promotion activity and encourage family and friends to become child specific foster carers where this is feasible. Placement choice to match with a child's needs linked to a strong support service will help achieve our objective of fewer than 16% of looked after children experiencing three or more placement changes in a single year.

Improve the Life Chances of Vulnerable Young People

We want to improve the opportunities for vulnerable young people to have the best start in life and, in particular, to avoid them needing the support or involvement of other services such as Social Services or the Youth Offending Service. We have agreed a specific detailed target to be achieved within the LAA that will measure our progress in reducing permanent exclusions from secondary schools; increased involvement / engagement in drug and alcohol treatment services; reduced risk of being made homeless for reason of family breakdown and increased numbers of young people prevented from further offending after receiving a reprimand.

In 2006 we will establish a new service to support vulnerable young people through intensive multi agency support and intervention. The service will operate as a virtual / multi agency network. It will be trialled in Melton and Charnwood and then rolled out across Leicestershire from 2007 to 2009. The programme will provide additional resources to tackle the issues in the LAA target. An interagency / partnership steering group to establish and oversee the project has already been set up.

Older People

Develop partnerships in health and social care

The Government's White Paper 'Our health, Our care, Our say' re-states the need for health and social care to be more closely integrated than they currently are, with closer working and proposals for joint commissioning and a joint inspection framework. Together with the NHS, we will continue to develop a range of integrated services for older people across health and social care, including intermediate care services, services for people with long term conditions and for older people with mental ill health. We will continue to work with the NHS to adopt an electronic shared Assessment Process across all teams.

Support older people to live at home

A key priority continues to be to support older people to live at home and avoid admission to long term residential care. We will do this through wider use of rehabilitation and respite services in our own homes and by working together with District Councils to increase the number of people assisted through the development of more extra care schemes and 'floating' support services. We will improve the response to older people who fall, and aim to reduce the risks of them falling again and prevent admissions to hospital and residential care.

We will increase the range and volume of leisure and recreational activities for older people through a review of day services and the greater use of direct payments. We will develop a 'single gateway' for cross agency referrals, so that when older people contact any key agencies for the first time, those agency staff are primed to pick up wider risks and pass these on as appropriate to the relevant agency.

We will also lead a group bringing together agencies to improve home safety and home security.

Improve engagement with older people

In developing new services, it is essential that we establish greater involvement of older people in the planning process. We will establish a countywide Older People's network which is consulted by the County Council on the development and planning of services.

Maximise older people's income

One of the key aspects of the Local Area Agreement for older people is to maximise the levels of income of older people and increase access to benefits. We will work with partners, including the Department for Work and Pensions, to increase the numbers of older people receiving key benefits, especially Attendance Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.

Vulnerable adults and carers

Increase take-up of direct payments

The number of people receiving Direct Payments increased significantly in 2005/06, with more than 280 on the scheme by March 2006. A new support service to assist users of the scheme has been introduced and we will evaluate its performance during its first year of operation.

We will continue to increase the use of Direct Payments in 2006, particularly for those who have experienced mental ill health.

Increase the employment of disabled people

We will continue to develop community employment schemes as part of the modernisation of learning disability day services, including setting up an aluminium collection scheme and a shredding service in NW Leicestershire.

We also aim to increase the number of people with a learning disability who work for the County Council, from 40 to 50.

We will work to increase the number of disabled people in open employment and permitted work and, through this, contribute to achieving the challenging targets that have been set within the Local Area Agreement

Modernise day services for people with learning disabilities

The Learning Disability Partnership Board has continued to lead on the implementation of the Valuing People agenda. This includes plans for the modernisation of day services. Developments have been progressed in Oadby, Wigston, Blaby and Melton, and work is now focussed on Charnwood. Proposals have been agreed for Market Harborough and Hinckley, together with outline proposals for North West Leicestershire.

Integrate learning disability services with health

Lead commissioning arrangements and a pooled budget were introduced in December 2005. The new integrated health and social care service for

Leicestershire and Rutland, hosted by the County Council, will be established from July 2006.

Public Health

Implement Joint Public Health Priorities

We will contribute towards improving the health of the local community and, as part of the Local Area Agreement, we have identified a number of priority issues on which we will work with our partner agencies in Leicestershire in 2006. These issues are increasing the numbers of people participating in physical activity; smoking prevention and cessation in deprived communities and in the schools serving them; improving domestic fire safety and reducing the injuries arising from fires in dwellings; promoting mental health and well being in workplaces and increasing the uptake of Chlamydia screening and improving access to sexual health services.

Improving the Quality of Life in Communities

We want to make Leicestershire a county that people feel proud of by strengthening the elements that contribute towards this. These include our culture and leisure facilities, local transport, environmental and waste management issues and safer communities. We will have particular regard to the rural communities in the county in improving these services and we will continue to lead the work of the Leicestershire Rural Partnership to achieve this.

Promote Economic Well-being

An important element in developing a strong community is the strength of the local economy. We will continue to work with our partners in the Leicester Shire Economic Partnership and Leicester Shire Promotions to achieve a diverse economy that attracts and enables businesses of all sizes to develop. We aim to attract investment into the county to support increased business and tourism activity. We will also work with the County and City Councils in the 3 Cities sub region (covering Leicester, Nottingham and Derby and their surrounding areas) to continue the growth and regeneration of the area.

Develop Neighbourhood and Community Engagement

We want to ensure that local views are properly taken into account by the Council and its partner agencies in shaping our plans and policies, and that County Councillors are at the heart of that process. We will implement effective engagement with communities through a range of measures including support for County Councillors' community champion role and by strengthened working arrangements with parish and local councils. We will also support neighbourhood management in the 20 priority neighbourhoods identified in the Local Area Agreement and develop community forums as a means of scrutinising the quality and effectiveness of local services.

Engage with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS)

The Council's relationship with the VCS is guided by the Compact which it agreed in 2003. During the last year the VCS played a prominent role in the development of the Local Area Agreement including lead responsibility for the preparation of the Stronger Communities block. The Council chaired the Funders' Panel of organisations that provide funding to the sector and worked closely with the local Voluntary Sector Consortium for Leicestershire and Leicester which secured over £725,000 of Government funding from the ChangeUp Programme to strengthen the VCS infrastructure in the City and County.

In 2006-07 we will continue to pursue the objective of strengthening the contribution of the VCS in the development of stronger communities and in public service delivery. This will include working with the sector to decide what further changes may be needed to the local infrastructure and how best to organise a strategic and co-ordinated approach to funding by public bodies.

Culture and Leisure

Improve Access to and Quality of Libraries

We have already made significant improvements to our library service and in 2006 further new library buildings will be opened in Markfield, Kirby Muxloe and Braunstone, and refurbishments will be completed at Hinckley, Birstall, Castle Donington and Thurmaston. These improvements should enable us to meet the National Standard on library customer satisfaction.

Enhance Museums and Tourist Sites

During 2006 we will open a Heritage Room at Bosworth Battlefield, which will provide a new facility for visitors, particularly school parties. The historic exhibition at the Visitor Centre will also be completely revitalised, and archaeological investigations on site will continue.

Preparatory work and fund raising effort will begin for the re-creation of the next stretch of the Ashby Canal, from Snarestone to Measham.

Transport

Reduce Road Casualties

In our first PSA we agreed to reach a stretching target of a 28% reduction in killed and seriously injured by 2005 compared with the average for 1994-98 (the benchmark used by Government). We actually achieved a 33% reduction. In 2005/06 the total number of people killed or seriously injured in Leicestershire was 26% below the 1994-98 average. This compares with a reduction of 25% for all 36 shire counties in England. Within this total there was a 70% reduction in child casualties which is significantly better than the average reduction of 44% for shire counties.

We need to take further steps to maintain progress, with a particular focus on motorcycle casualties. We will do this by using new investigation techniques and a mix of driver education, infrastructure measures and, in partnership with Leicestershire police, traffic law enforcement. These actions are designed to meet casualty reduction targets in our second Local Transport Plan (LTP).

Tackle Congestion and Improving Air Quality

There is a new focus on this work in our second LTP and we will begin a range of initiatives in 2006. These include planning for new park and ride provision, improving bus usage and user satisfaction in partnership with bus companies through investment in infrastructure and promotion, improving parking management through decriminalised parking enforcement in partnership with the district councils, and reducing car dependence through continued development of school and workplace travel plans and cycle route networks. We will also carry out a review of our actions to make the best use of the existing road network, for example by minimising delays due to roadworks and investment to reduce delays at congested junctions.

We have set targets for tackling congestion and improving air quality in our second LTP. These include increasing the number of schools with a school travel plan to 70% by April 2009 compared with 25% in April 2005. We are aiming for delivery of the Enderby park and ride scheme by summer 2010.

Reduce the Impact of Traffic

We will promote bypasses for Earl Shilton, Kegworth and Melton Mowbray and investigate bypasses for other communities badly affected by heavy goods vehicles. We are also working towards the completion of the Loughborough inner relief road.

We will maintain the emphasis on schemes to reduce inappropriate speeds in built up areas which cause such nuisance to residents. The focus is shifting towards “behavioural” measures such as village entry treatments, and away from the extensive use of speed tables. We are aiming for a 12% reduction in speed from such schemes by 2008/09.

Improve access to facilities for people in rural Leicestershire and for those countywide who do not have a car available

We are working to improve access to essential facilities particularly where analysis shows the greatest levels of deprivation. Our hourly bus service network (95% of Leicestershire people having an hourly or better daytime bus service) was achieved in November 2004. This, combined with the work we are carrying out in partnership to develop accessibility actions plans, provides us with a strong framework to improve. Furthermore, our new LTP details a series of action plans to achieve this.

Improve the condition of our roads, pavements, bridges and street lights

We are currently preparing our first Transport Asset Management Plan. This will allow us to maintain our highways assets (including roads, pavements, bridges and street lights) in an appropriate condition within the funds available. We have set targets in our new LTP which include the replacement of 1500 worn out street lights per year and to ensure that less than 10% of our principal road network suffers from structural defects.

Improve customer satisfaction with the highways and transportation service

We have recently carried out customer satisfaction surveys which showed high overall levels of satisfaction but also illustrated detailed areas where more needs to be done, in particular by improving satisfaction with how well roadworks are managed and the provision of information about Council roadworks. To address these concerns we will review our highway patrols, arrangements for minimising the impact of roadworks and methods of notifying local people of planned works.

The Environment and Waste Management

Adopt and implement a revised Waste Management Strategy

Over the next 15 years we need to reduce substantially the volume of waste disposed of in landfill. The Leicestershire Municipal Waste Management Strategy (LMWMS) sets out action plans to achieve this through a combination of waste minimisation and composting/recycling initiatives alongside procurement of alternative residual treatment facilities.

LMWMS is a joint strategy developed in partnership with the District/Borough Councils. A review of the LMWMS has recently been concluded and we need to implement the resulting action plans between now and 2020 to provide a more integrated waste management service in the future.

In maximising efficiencies around joint working the County Council, as a member of the Waste Management Partnership, will have to develop a new constitution to facilitate more streamlined decision making, as well as address how the delivery of the revised strategy is to be funded.

The overall aim of the strategy is to achieve national government waste targets and our obligations under the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme.

Increase recycling and composting, minimise waste arising and reduce waste going into landfill sites

As part of the LMWMS we need to take decisions during 2006 on waste reduction and recycling/composting initiatives as well as the most suitable technologies for treating and disposing of household waste in future. We must also identify locations for new waste facilities and begin the procurement process for these facilities.

We are working with District Councils to deliver ambitious plans for waste minimisation and re-use, including pilots to test some assumptions outlined in the Strategy. We need to procure new services for the joint collection and treatment of kitchen waste, as well as initiating procurement of residual waste treatment options in 2006/07 if we are to avoid earlier and heavier exposure to government fines under the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme.

We are aiming for an increase in recycling and composting performance from 32% of household waste in 2004/05 to 42% in 2008/09.

Improve Recycling and Household Waste sites (RHWS)

Current improvements to Recycling and Household Waste sites at Oadby, Sileby and Lount, and redevelopment of the Whetstone transfer and recycling bulking station will enable increased recycling and composting, improve standards of service and contribute towards meeting the County Council's Landfill Allowance Trading scheme targets as well as other key legislative requirements.

We have recently awarded a new management contract for 13 of the RHWS's in the County and we will be introducing new management/operational arrangements to improve standards of service delivery and customer satisfaction at those sites.

Meet the County Council's obligations resulting from legislative changes, including the Landfill Allowance Trading Scheme (LATs)

In continuing to meet our statutory obligations as a Waste Disposal Authority, new procedures and data management arrangements will have to be established in 2006/07 to ensure compliance with the revised Recycling Credits scheme, the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Directive, the Hazardous Waste regulations and the requirements of LATs.

Implement the County Environment Strategy

The Council recognises that all of its activities have the potential to affect the environment and wants to demonstrate and promote good practice in caring for the environment through sustainable development. We have made good progress on our original Environmental Strategy Action Plan of 2004 and will roll this forward and update it in 2006. This includes a range of measures to increase staff and public awareness of environmental issues such as recycling opportunities, reducing energy consumption and renewable energy, improved building standards and wildlife surveys.

Safer Communities

Reduce overall crime, particularly violent crime, domestic violence and hate crime

Preventing and reducing crime continues to be a high priority for us and our partner agencies. The priority areas identified jointly for the Safer Communities block of the Local Area Agreement are also our top priorities in the Medium Term Corporate Strategy and our new Community Safety Plan. Working through the Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland Community Safety Programme Board and our partner agencies, we will contribute to achieving positive outcomes against these priorities. In particular we aim to achieve a reduction in domestic violence by focussing on increased rural outreach, work with perpetrators and the development of multi-agency risk assessment. We will also continue to develop our racist incident common monitoring project and extend the project to include all hate crime.

Reduce offending by prolific and other priority offenders

We will contribute to local offender management panels through the Children and Young People Service, the Adult Social Care service and the Youth Offending Service.

Reduce levels of anti-social behaviour

50 Police Community Support Officers will be funded by the Council to work in Police Neighbourhood Teams. An expanded youth crime prevention strategy will deliver additional targeted work with young people involved in, or at risk of being involved in, anti-social behaviour through the Youth Inclusion and Support Panel team (YISP).

Reduce the harm caused by illegal drugs and misuse of alcohol

Through the work of the Drug and Alcohol Action Team we will increase the treatment services for problematic drugs users and continue to implement the Drugs Intervention Programme. An Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy will be developed and Trading Standards officers will continue to tackle under age sales of alcohol.

Prevent youth crime and improve the life chances of vulnerable young people

An expanded Youth Crime Prevention Strategy will be implemented with new funding from the Youth Justice Board. This will focus on young people identified as at risk of offending and deliver additional interventions and programmes through the YISP, including mentoring and parenting work. In addition we will develop a joint action plan with the Police to reduce the number of new entrants to the youth justice system and work with the Police to deliver an LAA reward target to increase the numbers of young people prevented from further offending after they receive a reprimand.

Improving Services To Deliver High Quality and Value for Money

The quality and value for money provided by the Council's services has already been recognised by the Audit Commission through the Comprehensive Performance Assessment. We will continue to seek more effective and efficient ways of delivering high quality services and to improve the ways in which services are delivered by using a mixture of public, private and voluntary sector options.

Strategic Change Programme

In order to maintain the high quality and cost effectiveness of services, and to deliver on a complex agenda of changing services and public demands, the Council is developing a radical new Strategic Change Programme bringing together a large number of individual projects into 4 major programmes - Customer First; Organisational Efficiency; People and Performance and Children's and Adult's Services;. Three of the programmes are described below. The Children and Adult Services programme is referred to in the section on Improving Quality of Life for People.

Customer First - Improving Customer Access

The new Customer First Programme will provide customers with improved web, telephone and in-person access to obtain information and request Council services. The aim is to improve the Council's provision and accessibility of customer services, through:

- Defining the Council's services in a way that customers understand, rather than using our internal departmental structure;
- Ensuring that the staff interacting with customers on a routine basis have the appropriate skills and competencies to meet customer expectations;
- Create a council-wide systems infrastructure to support customer-facing staff to efficiently handle customer enquiries and requests;
- Provide extended telephone operating hours to customers;
- Improve the usability and functionality of the Council's website to enable customers to be more self-sufficient in terms of both finding information and requesting services when convenient to them.

The programme will subsume a number of areas of work previously included in the Council's Better Access to Better Services Initiative and will be based on delivering improved customer service across all three access channels:

- Face to face contact, including but not limited to service shops;
- Website;

- Telephone and e-mail contact.

The programme and component projects will comprise three significant work streams:

- Migration of services to the new improved approach and systems;
- Technology implementation including the ICT infrastructure and customer relationship management software;
- Operational set-up of the new access channels and approaches.

Organisational Efficiency

The Organisational Efficiency Programme is intended to generate efficiency savings in order to be able to invest in priority services and reduce the pressure on Council Tax in future years. The Programme aims to ensure that efficiency savings do not impact unduly on front line services by generating savings wherever possible within support services. The Programme aims to generate cumulative cash efficiency savings of £13.5m. over the next three years.

A major element of the programme will aim to improve our procurement processes across the range of goods and services bought by the Council, including a specific investigation into the options for improving the procurement of highway services. We will also introduce a more corporate approach to the management of our property assets which will enable us to rationalise accommodation needs. A number of other support functions including the management of the Council's passenger vehicle fleet, ICT and property services will be examined, and a potential combined HR/payroll transaction service will be explored. A major project relating to the implementation of the Waste Management Strategy is also linked to this Programme. This will involve extending our recycling capacity and investigating options for new waste disposal facilities.

People and Performance

The aims of the People and Performance Programme are to create a culture and environment that recognises the vital contribution of staff to delivering excellent services and to ensure that the Council can compete with other organisations to recruit and retain the best people to provide services that meet the needs of the citizens of Leicestershire. We will investigate and implement new and improved ways of addressing succession planning, leadership and management competencies, training and development, equal pay, remuneration packages and options, benefits, rewards and incentives and attendance management.

Medium Term Financial Plan

The Council approved an annual budget and a medium term financial plan in February 2006 which set out how the priorities for service improvement contained in the MTCS and this Annual Plan will be funded.

Leicestershire has some of the lowest levels of government funding in the country. For example, schools are now all funded by a specific government grant and Leicestershire has the lowest funding per pupil of any Council in England. We will receive the minimum increase in general government grant for both 2006/07 and 2007/08. The increase for 2006/07 was 2% and the cash increase for 2007/08 is only 0.8%. These figures are much lower than the increase in costs needed to maintain services. Despite this the Council remains committed to minimising future Council Tax increases.

Against this background we will continue to develop our medium term financial plans in 2006 in order to identify ways of investing more in the priority services set out in the Medium Term Corporate Strategy and, at the same time restrict the size of future council tax increases. It is likely that this will require significant efficiency savings as well as some reductions in lower priority services.

Quality, Customers and Diversity

We will equip our employees with the skills to provide high quality services and we will take account of customer needs through regular and widespread consultation with the local community and partner organisations. We will promote equality in our workforce and in the delivery of our services, both directly and with our partners.

Deliver Our Commitments on Equalities and Diversity

Recent assessment of our progress against the Equality Standard for Local Government has concluded that we have achieved Level 2, our target for 2005-06. This assessment has been audited and validated by a group of external partners. We aim to achieve Level 3 of the Standard by the end of 2006-07 (there are five levels in total).

We will be responding to significant additional legal duties relating to equality in 2006. We will publish for consultation a draft Disability Equality Scheme and then a draft Gender Equality Scheme. We will be encouraging local people, partner organisations and our staff to let us know what they think so that the final documents cover the issues that are important to them. We will also develop policies and practices to promote equality and reduce discrimination in relation to age, sexual orientation and religion or belief.

The recommendations of the Citizens Jury for People from Black and Ethnic Minority Communities held in November 2005 have been incorporated into an action plan. This is designed to improve the responsiveness of services of the County Council and its partners to the diversity of local communities and individuals.

Consulting the Community

The Council continues to put consultation and engagement at the heart of its decision making. Over the past year we have consulted a range of service users, the public and other interested parties on issues including the service improvement priorities to be included in the Council's Corporate Strategy, the Budget, the Corporate Equality Plan, the Local Transport Plan, our highway services and our Waste Strategy. In addition we have enabled over 22,000 children and young people to have their say on our plans for children and young people's services.

In 2006 we will continue to apply our consultation standards to ensure we consult and involve people widely in the planning and delivery of services. We will be supplementing the Standards with a Code of Consultation and Policy Appraisal with the voluntary sector to improve our working arrangements. The Council recognises the value played by its Citizens Panel in acting as a sounding board for service development. During 2006/07 we will refresh the membership of the Panel to ensure that it better reflects the diversity of the county's population.

We will continue to develop and improve local e-consultation through further development of the "Have Your Say" webpages on the Council's website and the use of electronic survey devices and interactive voting handsets. We will also develop our webcasting technology to enhance local democracy through broadcasting Council and other meetings and improving feedback channels.

Survey of Public Satisfaction with the Council

In 2006 the Council will be asking 5000 county residents for their views on, and satisfaction with Council services as part of the Government's three yearly Council User Satisfaction Survey. We will be exploiting joint working opportunities with local district/borough councils to ensure co-ordinated survey arrangements where possible.

Contracts

We have taken full account of staff matters in contracts that have been placed with external providers and we comply, where applicable, with the requirements of the Code of Practice on Workforce Matters in Local Authority Service Contracts.

Member Contact details to be added