

Annual Audit and Inspection Letter

Salford City Council

Audit 2007/08

March 2009



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Status of our reports

The Statement of Responsibilities of Auditors and Audited Bodies issued by the Audit Commission explains the respective responsibilities of auditors and of the audited body. Reports prepared by appointed auditors are addressed to non-executive directors/ members or officers. They are prepared for the sole use of the audited body. Auditors accept no responsibility to:

- any director/member or officer in their individual capacity; or
 - any third party.
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Key messages

- 1 This report provides an overall summary of the Audit Commission's assessment of the Council. It draws on the findings and conclusions from the audit of the Council, inspections that have been undertaken in the last year and from a wider analysis of the Council's performance and its improvement over the last year, as measured through the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) framework. This is the final year of CPA, with it being replaced by a new performance assessment framework, the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA). CAA will provide the first holistic independent assessment of the prospects for local areas and the quality of life for people living there.
- 2 The key components of CAA will be a joint inspectorate annual area risk assessment and reporting performance on the new national indicator set, together with a joint inspectorate annual managing performance assessment and an annual use of resources assessment. The auditors' use of resources judgements will therefore continue, but their scope will be widened to cover issues such as commissioning and the use of natural resources.
- 3 The report is addressed to the Council, in particular it has been written for councillors, but is available as a public document for stakeholders, including members of the community served by the Council.
- 4 The main messages for the Council included in this report are as follows.
 - Salford City Council is improving well and remains as a three star Council under the CPA methodology.
 - Significant focus remains on improving residents' economic prosperity, skills and educational attainment. This includes developing pathways into employment within Media City and continuing progress to improve opportunities for employment, education and training. However, the economic downturn will challenge ambitions in this area.
 - Good partnership working with the Primary Care Trust (PCT) is helping to ensure a joined up approach to improving the health and well-being of local residents. Tackling health inequalities remains a major priority.
 - Education performance has improved with good results in 2008. All of Salford's schools now have at least 50 percent of pupils achieving at least 5 A* to C grades.
 - Services for children and young people are adequate. The Council continues to make good contributions to improving the achievement and well-being of children and young people, but challenges remain to build further upon the positive reduction in the number of looked after children and to help children stay safe.
 - Community safety performance is mixed and remains an area of continuing focus of Council and partnership resources. Overall crime reductions are broadly in line with the target set, although vehicle crime levels remain too high.
 - Adults and older people's services continue to be strong, with social care services for adults receiving the highest rating from CSCI.

- Improving environmental sustainability is an increasingly important priority for the Council and partners. Steady progress is being made to increase recycling and improve the cleanliness of public spaces.
- The Council remains committed to providing good quality housing for all. Strategic housing services are well regarded, but more remains to be done to balance Salford's housing market, address affordability issues, improve the housing stock and deliver good quality services to vulnerable people in the community.
- The Council has, and continues to, play a lead role in the development of the Greater Manchester city region agenda.
- The Council has again performed well across all five elements of use of resources, and performed particularly strongly on internal control.
- At the end of the 2007/08 financial year school deficits reported at 32 schools amounted to £5m, an increase from £4.2m the previous year.
- The Council plans to retain £0.362 million of reserves on the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) for 2008/09, which represents 1 percent of the HRA budget. Should unforeseen liabilities occur which exceed this balance, there is an increased risk during this period that the HRA could fall into deficit.
- Current monitoring indicates that council tax collection rates for 2008/09 are expected to deteriorate slightly compared with the previous year.

Action needed by the Council

- 5 The recommendations and priorities for improvement arising from our work have already been included in the reports which are referred to in this letter.
- 6 The key recommendations for Salford, in relation to these areas are as follows.
 - Work with partners to prepare for CAA and the new broader use of resources assessment. Both of these represent a new challenge and include a much stronger focus on partnership working and demonstrating clear outcomes.
 - Continue to ensure that it focuses on improving the quality of children's safeguarding arrangements and reducing the number of looked after children.
 - Work with partners to examine whether the current approach to reducing stubbornly high teenage conception rates will achieve the challenging targets.
 - Maintain the focus on providing good quality homes for all. In particular, work with housing partners to ensure that future housing improvement ambitions are delivered.
 - Ensure that, with partners it is proactively responding to the local impact of the global economic downturn.
 - Ensure plans to eradicate school budget deficits are robust and that these are being delivered in practice.
 - Carefully monitor and manage the HRA to ensure the Council meets its statutory financial responsibilities and maintains an appropriate level of balances in the future.

Key messages

- Review council tax collection arrangements to identify any scope for improvements in order to achieve the Council's target of 95 per cent by 2009/10.

Purpose, responsibilities and scope

- 7 This report provides an overall summary of the Audit Commission's assessment of the Council. It draws on the most recent Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), the findings and conclusions from the audit of the Council for 2007/08 and from any inspections undertaken since the last Annual Audit and Inspection Letter.
- 8 We have addressed this letter to members as it is the responsibility of the Council to ensure that proper arrangements are in place for the conduct of its business and that it safeguards and properly accounts for public money. We have made recommendations to assist the Council in meeting its responsibilities.
- 9 This letter also communicates the significant issues to key external stakeholders, including members of the public. We will publish this letter on the Audit Commission website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk. (In addition, the Council is planning to publish it on its website.)
- 10 Your appointed auditor is responsible for planning and carrying out an audit that meets the requirements of the Audit Commission's Code of Audit Practice (the Code). Under the Code, the appointed auditor reviews and reports on:
 - the Council's accounts;
 - whether the Council has made proper arrangements for securing economy, efficiency and effectiveness in its use of resources (value for money conclusion); and
 - whether the Council's best value performance plan has been prepared and published in line with legislation and statutory guidance.
- 11 This letter includes the latest assessment on the Council's performance under the CPA framework, including our Direction of Travel report and the results of any inspections carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999. It summarises the key issues arising from the CPA and any such inspections. Inspection reports are issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under section 13 of the 1999 Act.
- 12 We have listed the reports issued to the Council relating to 2007/08 audit and inspection work at the end of this letter.

How is Salford City Council performing?

13 The Audit Commission’s overall judgement is that Salford City Council is improving well and we have classified Salford City Council as three-star in its current level of performance under the Comprehensive Performance Assessment. These assessments have been completed in all single tier and county councils with the following results.

Figure 1 Overall performance of district councils in CPA



Percentage figures may not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding

Source: Audit Commission

Our overall assessment - the CPA scorecard

Table 1 CPA scorecard

Element	Assessment
Direction of Travel judgement	Improving well
Overall	Three stars
Corporate assessment/capacity to improve	3 out of 4
Current performance	
Children and young people*	2 out of 4
Social care (adults)*	4 out of 4
Use of resources*	3 out of 4
Housing	4 out of 4
Environment	3 out of 4
Culture	2 out of 4
Benefits	4 out of 4

(Note: * these aspects have a greater influence on the overall CPA score)

(1 = lowest, 4 = highest)

The improvement since last year - our Direction of Travel report

Direction of travel from the scorecard

- 14 Salford City Council is improving well. The Council has made improvements in many areas including providing better housing and reducing crime. Education results continue to improve, with pupils achieving their best ever GCSE results. Partnership working remains strong, helping to further improve adult social care performance. This includes strong support to allow people to live at home and programmes to help older people stay healthy and active.
- 15 Effective leadership supports the continued regeneration of the local economy, with jobs created as a direct result of the development of Media City. The Council is proactive in supporting local people into employment including those from deprived areas. Skill levels and employment rates have risen, although the economic downturn presents future challenges.
- 16 The Council is realistic about the scale of future challenges and that some service outcomes are below that of other similar areas. However, underperformance is proactively addressed and there are signs that this is leading to improvements to the safeguarding of children. Challenging yet realistic plans are in place to further tackle barriers to employment, improve residents' health and enhance the cleanliness of public spaces while at the same time delivering better value for money.

How is Salford City Council performing?

Direction of travel report

- 17 Priorities for Salford Council are clearly expressed within its own corporate plan and the emerging sustainable community strategy. The Council with partners has developed a new three year 'Salford plan' which sets out the priorities, ambitions and improvement areas for the Council and its key partners between 2008 and 2011. In order to deliver the 23 priorities identified the Council has developed a series of work plan 'Thinks'. The Council has made good progress on delivering improvements, particularly in relation to local priorities. Most notably the Council has delivered improvements within education, housing, young people and adult social care services.
- 18 The improvement rate within Salford, as measured by a basket of national indicators, suggests that challenges remain to improve performance across all service areas. Performance on a basket of performance indicators is improving, but not as fast as in other councils. In the last year 59 per cent of performance indicators improved, while the average for single tier authorities was 63 per cent. The Council has a comparably low number of performance indicators within the top quartile (21 per cent versus average for single tier authorities of 30 per cent). Specifically performance has declined against a number of indicators including: percentage of minor and other planning applications determined within 8 weeks, private sector homes vacant for more than six months and the time taken to respond to ombudsman complaints.
- 19 In terms of progress against the Council's seven pledges.

Creating prosperity in Salford

- 20 One of the Council's five key local area agreement (LAA) objectives is to improve economic prosperity, skills and educational attainment. This key objective includes the priority targets of worklessness, business and enterprise, education and training targets. The Council and its partners recognise that in order to reduce levels of deprivation and inequality across the City addressing worklessness is crucial. In support of this priority the Council has developed pathways for residents into employment within Media City and is increasing the overall skill levels of local residents by improving educational attainment. These initiatives have had a positive impact and Salford's employment rate is now 72.8 per cent, which exceeds the LAA target and has closed the gap between Salford and the regional national average. The recent global economic downturn will challenge the Council's ambitions around economic prosperity.
- 21 The Council has introduced new government initiatives which provide extra support and opportunities to people with health problems and disabilities, to access and help sustain work. This has been supplemented locally by the stepping stones project, focussed on supporting longer term incapacity benefit claimants. These projects have assisted the Council to achieve its targets for reducing incapacity benefits.
- 22 Further work is required to deliver the local priorities to reduce the number of lone parents on income support, to continue to improve further the reduction in the number of claimants from disadvantaged communities to the national average, and increasing the number of business start-ups.

Improving health in Salford

- 23** Improving health and reducing inequalities is an important community strategy objective for the Council and partners. The Council is working well with the Primary Care Trust (PCT) to deliver reductions in smoking; performance is broadly on track to deliver the LAA target. The target for pregnant smokers has also been met. The number of young people receiving an alcohol intervention from the young people's service was also exceeded. A funded alcohol specialist post significantly increased the number of young people receiving specialist alcohol intervention.
- 24** The Council needs to undertake additional work to successfully deliver its LAA targets for reducing teenage pregnancies, increasing breastfeeding initiation rates and the number of young people referred to a specialist service. Teenage conceptions remain below the 1998 baseline level.

Encouraging learning, leisure and creativity in Salford

- 25** Overall education performance has improved with good results this year. There has been a steady improvement in all stages in education results year on year. Using 2008 results, all of Salford's schools now have at least 50 percent of pupils achieving at least 5 A* to C grades, with an improvement in the number of pupils achieving A* to C grades in English and Maths. Attendance rates are improving, with good reductions in persistent absence rates in secondary schools and a reduction in the number of secondary schools targeted by the DCSF for low attendance, although persistent absence remains an issue in two secondary schools.

Reducing crime in Salford

- 26** There is a mixed picture in terms of improving community safety in Salford. Performance against LAA targets demonstrates that only a number of the targets were met. All crime fell by 22.4 per cent, which was broadly in line with the target set of a 22.5 per cent reduction. Theft from motor vehicles remains a significant issue for Salford, 3,983 offences were recorded compared to the target of 3,227. The Council with partners has used external challenge to reassess the approach to partnership working.
- 27** In support of reduced levels of overall crime across the City a programme of neighbourhood policing has been implemented. Each area is now supported by its own team of neighbourhood police officers and police community support officers. This has had a positive effect on perceptions of anti-social behaviour which have reduced by 18 percent compared to a target of 5 percent. Within other areas of community safety, performance was good with targets achieved in areas such as the reduction of primary vehicle fires and deliberate secondary fires.

How is Salford City Council performing?

Promoting inclusion in Salford

- 28 The Council has a good understanding of local communities and how they are changing and works in partnership to reach those who are most vulnerable and at greatest risk. The Council's performance in terms of adults and older people's services remains strong. The CSCI Annual Performance Assessment of social care services for adults judges that the Council overall delivers 'Excellent' outcomes with 'Excellent' capacity to improvement. There is a clear and ambitious vision of the future, with an emphasis on early intervention through use of preventive and universal services to maintain people's wellbeing and avert increased dependence on services wherever possible. Adult Social. Initiatives specifically targeted at engaging with older people include LinkAge Plus, which offers a range of preventative services to support older people to stay healthy and active.
- 29 Improving community engagement is an important priority objective for the Council and partners. At local level, neighbourhood management arrangements work well and help to ensure that local people actively influence the development of plans. Examples include work with the local employment partnership to support some of the most disadvantaged residents, including lone parents and ex-offenders.
- 30 Progress as measured by the Big Listening survey demonstrates that increased numbers of people are able to actively influence decisions. The Council's pro-active approach is highlighted in their response to increased levels of ombudsman complaints. The Council has taken on board comments and feedback received from local residents and has introduced streamlined systems to effectively tackle resident concerns.

Enhancing life in Salford

- 31 Improving environmental sustainability is an important priority for the Council and partners. The Council has made good progress in reducing the number of abandoned vehicles removed within the approved timeframe. However, performance against national indicators in respect of cleanliness of public spaces including graffiti, dog fouling, litter and fly tipping suggest that while some improvement has been made, further improvement is required. Local public opinion on the quality of public spaces provides further evidence of the need to improve. Recycling levels while improving are also low compared to similar authorities, with the rate for 2007/08 standing at 23.86 per cent compared to 20.37 per cent in 2006/07.
- 32 Housing remains an important priority for Salford. The Council achieved a 'good' inspection rating for its strategic housing service. The service is making a positive impact in a number of areas as it seeks to balance Salford's housing market, address affordability issues, improve private sector housing conditions and deliver services to vulnerable people in the community. The Council is working with Salix Homes to ensure it achieves required performance standards for an Arms Length Organisation, this is an important and challenging priority in the coming 12 months. The Council has recently undertaken a large scale voluntary transfer of 15,000 homes in West Salford and agreed significant investments to improve the housing stock within the most deprived areas of the City. 99 per cent of urgent repairs are completed in the required timescales and the Council has high and improving rates of tenant satisfaction.

Investing in young people in Salford

- 33** The OFSTED Annual Performance Assessment judges that Salford City Council delivers services for children and young people that are adequate overall. Children's services continue to make good contributions to improving the achievement and well-being of children and young people in the city, but challenges remain to build further upon the positive reduction in the number of looked after children and to help children stay safe. The Council has responded positively to the recommendations made by DCSF including: good leadership from senior officers and councillors, the establishment of the safeguarding children improvement board, new appointments to the safeguarding team and work with external experts. Internal and external monitoring of the plans suggests that the Council is on target to deliver all of the required actions to improve the service. However, this monitoring is still underway and will need to be kept under review over the coming months as the Council tries to shift the balance of services towards greater prevention and family support.
- 34** Good progress has also been made reducing the numbers of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET). From a low baseline, there is a steady improvement in the numbers and percentage of young people choosing to stay in education or training after 16. Linked to this is significant improvement in educational outcomes for 16 to 18 year olds.

Other areas

- 35** Partnership working is effective and this is helping the Council and others to deliver wider community outcomes. The Council is well represented on the Salford Partnership and its supporting groups as well as many other partnership projects. Partnership data sharing protocols have helped facilitate more effective joint work. The Council has led the development of the Salford Information Observatory, which provides a one-stop-shop for research and intelligence information for the City.
- 36** Overall, the Council has robust plans in place for improvement which are effectively implemented and clearly communicated to stakeholders. The Council has continued to develop and embed effective performance management arrangements and as a result good progress has been made against the corporate plan objectives. All objectives are SMART, cover the medium to long term and fully support the ambitions and priorities of the Salford plan. There are no significant weaknesses that would prevent the Council sustaining current improvement levels.
- 37** Leadership is effective and there is sufficient capability to deliver plans, although sickness absence levels are an area for improvement. In support of their improvement programme the Council has established the Portfolio Management Board. The board is made up of high level senior officers responsible for scrutinising and challenging decisions, particularly in the assignment of priorities and resources.

How is Salford City Council performing?

- 38 Reviews of key projects are routinely undertaken, for instance the review of the skills and work service led to the creation of the citywide information advice and guidance service. The service has helped to support residents into work and training and assist adults to overcome barriers which previously prevented them from accessing work. The Council has similarly led the development of the innovative Spotlight process, a way to help public services and communities deliver together on key issues such as worklessness and safe, clean and green.
- 39 Capacity is sufficient to deliver key organisational plans. The Council actively assesses its priorities to ensure that there is adequate capacity to deliver improvement. A review of the Strategic Partnership is planned to assess how well the partnership engages with neighbourhoods, and whether their work actively reflects the needs of local residents. Good use is made of partnership working to improve service delivery.
- 40 The Council has, and continues to, play a lead role in the development of the Greater Manchester city region agenda. Salford has a strong political and managerial presence in the newly formed AGMA Commissions and their executive support arrangements. The Leader and Chief Executive have both played lead roles in the development of the Greater Manchester Multi-Area Agreement (MAA) and are the lead Politician and Chief Executive for the Greater Manchester Challenge. The Council prioritises working at a city region level to enable direct benefits and positive outcomes for the people of Salford which could not necessarily be achieved at the smaller spatial level.

Service inspections

- 41 An important aspect of the role of the Comprehensive Area Assessment Lead (CAAL) is to work with other inspectorates and regulators who also review and report on the Council's performance. CAALs share information and seek to provide 'joined up' regulation to the Council. During the last year the Council has received the following assessments from other inspectorates.

Strategic housing inspection

- 42 The Audit Commission's Housing Inspectorate rated Salford City Council's strategic housing services as providing a 'good' service, with 'promising prospects' for improvement. Services that were covered by the inspection included homelessness and housing advice, private sector housing and work to deliver new affordable housing.
- 43 The service was rated as 'good' because the Council is achieving a positive impact in a number of areas as it seeks to balance its housing market, address affordability issues, improve private sector housing conditions and deliver services to vulnerable people in the community.
- 44 Partnering with the private sector has achieved success both in delivering new housing and value for money. Access to services for vulnerable people is easy and the historically high level of homelessness is starting to be addressed through embracing a prevention agenda.

- 45 There are still some areas that need further attention, notably that while the Council is rising to the new challenge of enabling an increased supply of affordable housing this approach is not yet delivering sufficient affordable housing units to the level required to meet need.

The audit of the accounts and value for money

- 46 Your appointed auditor has reported separately to the Audit and Accounts Committee on the issues arising from our 2007/08 audit and have issued:
- an audit report, providing an unqualified opinion on your accounts and a conclusion on your vfm arrangements to say that these arrangements are adequate on 30 September 2009, and
 - a report on the Best Value Performance Plan confirming that the Plan has been audited.
- 47 In our report to the Audit and Accounts Committee we drew attention to the increasing amount of school deficits. At the end of the 2007/08 financial year deficits were reported at 32 schools which amounted in total to £5m. These had increased from £4.2m the previous year and deficit school balances outweighed surpluses resulting in an overall net deficit at 31 March 2008 of £231k. The Council faces a major challenge in eradicating some of these deficits particularly at those schools where the deficits represent a high proportion of their annual budget.
- 48 Our report on the management of school balances, issued in October 2008, included several actions that we have agreed with the City Treasurer need to be taken to strengthen the Council's arrangements for managing its school deficits. The City Treasurer provided further detail on these actions and the progress that was being made to the Budget Scrutiny Committee in November 2008.

Use of Resources

- 49 The findings of the auditor are an important component of the CPA framework described above. In particular the Use of Resources score is derived from the assessments made by the auditor in the following areas.
- Financial reporting (including the preparation of the accounts of the Council and the way these are presented to the public).
 - Financial management (including how the financial management is integrated with strategy to support council priorities).
 - Financial standing (including the strength of the Council's financial position).
 - Internal control (including how effectively the Council maintains proper stewardship and control of its finances).
 - Value for money (including an assessment of how well the Council balances the costs and quality of its services).

- 50 For the purposes of the CPA we have assessed the Council's arrangements for use of resources in these five areas as follows.

Table 2

Element	Assessment
Financial reporting	3 out of 4
Financial management	3 out of 4
Financial standing	3 out of 4
Internal control	4 out of 4
Value for money	3 out of 4
Overall assessment of the Audit Commission	3 out of 4

Note: 1 – lowest, 4 = highest

The key issues arising from the audit

- 51 The Council has again been assessed as performing well overall and it is commendable that the theme score for 'internal control' improved compared with last year and has been assessed as performing strongly.
- 52 The Council's accounts were prepared on the whole to a good standard. There were some non-trivial errors that the Council agreed to correct, mainly relating to the requirements of financial reporting standards that were new for this year. The Council took steps to make sure that its accounts and financial information were clear and well explained, and were suitable for users' needs.
- 53 The Council has continued to strengthen its medium term financial strategy, and budget monitoring, and both kept within budget and maintained a prudent level of reserves. There were several examples of notable practice in the Council's financial management and internal control and risk management arrangements. In line with its aim of continuous improvement, the Council has agreed to take action to improve further its use of financial modelling and produce accounts earlier for scrutiny by members.
- 54 The Council is committed to ensuring sound governance and agreed to pilot the Audit Commission's good governance diagnostic tool to test out the Council's arrangements. The results showed that the governance arrangements in Salford are strong, with clearly defined roles and relationships both for Members and officers. The Council has agreed an action plan to strengthen its governance arrangements.

The audit of the accounts and value for money

- 55 One of the improvement opportunities we have referred to in previous Annual Letters is that council tax collection needs to significantly improve. Current monitoring indicates that collection rates for 2008/09 are expected to be around 89.3 per cent by 31 March 2009, which represents a slight deterioration compared with the previous year and may be due to the current economic climate. The Council will need to make significant improvements if it is going to achieve its target of 95 per cent by 2009/10.
- 56 Last year we also referred to the major changes the Council was taking on the management of its housing stock and the significant impact that this would have on the operation of the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). The Council planned to utilise the remaining HRA balance (estimated at £1.6 million) during 2008/09 which would have left no reserves to fall back on should any unforeseen liability occur.
- 57 The Council completed the transfer of around 15,000 of its stock to the City West Housing Trust in October 2008. The City Treasurer has advised us that the likely outturn for the HRA will be expenditure of £62.538 million, with estimated reserves of £0.362 million, or 1 per cent of the Council's proposed 2009/10 budget. The Council do not plan to use anything from reserves during the following year. The Council will therefore have £0.362 million of reserves to fall back on during this period should any unforeseen liability occur, but should such liabilities exceed the balance in reserves, the Council will be at an increased risk of not meeting its responsibility under the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 that the HRA should not fall into deficit. We note that the Council's 2009/10 budget recognises this risk and that there are some mitigating factors which could yet prove favourable. The Council will nevertheless need to carefully monitor and manage the HRA to ensure it meets its statutory responsibilities and restore an appropriate level of balances for future years.

Health Inequalities

- 58 As part of our work across Audit Commission and other audits of Greater Manchester PCTs, trusts and local government, we looked at partnership working across agencies to tackle health inequalities. This was a follow up review, which picked up on work we began in 2006.
- 59 We are pleased to report positive results against most of the improvement areas identified in 2006, which we have reported in more detail to the Greater Manchester partners.
- 60 There is much still to do to tackle inequalities relating to mental health, where much less real progress was in evidence. We have issued a separate report on mental health, and fed into the Strategic Health Authority's own mental health review, which supported the findings from our work.
- 61 We will continue to monitor progress in each of the main health economies. Many of the agreed actions to date are about creating the right conditions for affecting health outcomes. In the longer term we should start to see real improvements against some of the key inequalities indicators, including life expectancy, prevalence of major illnesses, and related indicators around worklessness and community safety.

Community safety

- 62 During the last twelve months, the Audit Commission has undertaken a comprehensive review of the effectiveness of community safety partnership arrangements across Greater Manchester. In previous years, we have tested the effectiveness of partnerships by looking at arrangements for children's placements, health inequality and social needs transport.
- 63 Our review focused on the successful delivery of community safety outcomes, and notably the impact of alcohol abuse. This area was receiving minimal coverage by other inspectorates and government departments, as opposed to regulatory activity around crime generally. We chose the impact of alcohol abuse as it has a significant and yet sometimes hidden cost and impact on individuals, communities and families.
- 64 Our approach was to focus on outcomes in the ten Greater Manchester local strategic partnerships and then bring together our findings in order to share good practice and highlight opportunities for improvement.
- 65 At a Greater Manchester level, the embryonic Public Protection Commission has considered the findings and will build key actions into the draft 2009 work plan expected to be agreed by the AGMA Commission in the coming weeks.
- 66 Across Greater Manchester, we found that there is a commitment to address the impact of alcohol abuse upon individuals and communities, and this is yielding some success. However, Greater Manchester wide roles and responsibilities for addressing alcohol misuse are unclear. As a result, there is confusion as to who is taking the lead on alcohol and how interrelated criminal justice and health agendas are being joined together. In addition, opportunities exist to develop a clearer approach for sharing and analysis of data and knowledge. Throughout the review, we found that there is scope to better define the activity that should be developed and/or delivered at a Greater Manchester level. This will help to add value to local partnership working by providing a better understanding of the scale of the problem; enhancing the ability to pilot or share good practice; and begin to move investment towards a more preventative approach to avoid escalating alcohol abuse.
- 67 Within Salford we found a number of strengths in community safety partnership working, including clear work with local Courts as part of the approach to reducing alcohol abuse. The Salford partnership is developing a range of interventions to target alcohol related antisocial behaviour and there have been successes in preventing young people purchasing alcohol through targeted activity.
- 68 We found that partners in Salford recognise and are acting upon a number of areas to further improve partnership working. This includes improving data sharing between partners and focusing attention on changing patterns of drinking in young people. Further scope exists to increase the emphasis on preventing alcohol abuse rather than responding to the consequences of it.

Advice and Assistance work

Commissioning

- 69 Using finite resources to improve the well-being of adults in Salford is a substantial challenge. Excellent commissioning skills are viewed nationally and locally as an important element of meeting this challenge. We worked with Salford to help enhance the capacity and skills of officers in the community services directorate to meet this challenge.
- 70 The advice and assistance work has enhanced learning and increased the confidence and skills of officers and managers in relation to their differing commissioning roles. Going forward, there is an increased expectation, in the Council and with partners, to demonstrate effective strategic commissioning. This will require on-going development and this work has provided a sound basis of good practice.

Looking ahead

- 71** The public service inspectorates have developed a new performance assessment framework, the Comprehensive Area Assessment (CAA). CAA will provide the first holistic independent assessment of the prospects for local areas and the quality of life for people living there. It will put the experience of citizens, people who use services and local tax payers at the centre of the new local assessment framework, with a particular focus on the needs of those whose circumstances make them vulnerable. It will recognise the importance of effective local partnership working, the enhanced role of Sustainable Communities Strategies and Local Area Agreements and the importance of councils in leading and shaping the communities they serve.
- 72** CAA will result in reduced levels of inspection and better coordination of inspection activity. The key components of CAA will be a joint inspectorate area assessment and reporting performance on the new national indicator set, together with an organisational assessment which will combine the external auditor's assessment of value for money in the use of resources with a joint inspectorate assessment of service performance.
- 73** The first results of our work on CAA will be published in the autumn of 2009. This will include the performance data from 2008/09, the first year of the new National Indicator Set and key aspects of each area's Local Area Agreement.

Closing remarks

- 74** This letter has been discussed and agreed with the Chief Executive and Strategic Director of Customer and Support Services. A copy of the letter will be presented at the Audit and Accounts Committee on 29th April 2009. Copies need to be provided to all Council members.
- 75** Further detailed findings, conclusions and recommendations on the areas covered by audit and inspection work are included in the reports issued to the Council during the year.

Table 3 Reports issued

Report	Date of issue
Audit and inspection plan	May 2007
Triennial review of internal audit	May 2008
Strategic Housing Services Inspection final report	June 2008
Annual Governance Report	September 2008
Opinion on financial statements	September 2008
Value for money conclusion	September 2008
Good Governance Standard Diagnostic (pilot)	September 2008
Greater Manchester Health Inequalities follow-up	September 2008
School balances - interim report	October 2008
Community Safety in Greater Manchester - Salford report	October 2008
Final accounts memorandum	November 2008
Data Quality report	December 2008
Use of Resources 2008	December 2008
Annual audit and inspection letter	March 2009

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- 76** The Council has taken a positive and constructive approach to audit and inspection work, and the District Auditor, Mick Waite and I wish to thank the Council's staff for their support and cooperation during the audit.

Availability of this letter

77 This letter will be published on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk, and also on the Council's website.

James Foster
Comprehensive Area Assessment Lead

March 2009

The Audit Commission

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

Our work across local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services means that we have a unique perspective. We promote value for money for taxpayers, covering the £180 billion spent by 11,000 local public bodies.

As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.

Copies of this report

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