Service Delivery Planning in Local Government

Planning the delivery of services is a complex, constantly evolving process which, at its best, should...

♦ balance competing service demands
♦ link closely with the council’s financial planning and performance management systems
♦ reflect the needs of users
♦ involve the community and other stakeholders

In Wales, the new unitary authorities were required by statute to consult upon and publish Service Delivery Plans (SDPs) as part of their preparations for unitary status. A good SDP can be a vital element as a council develops a synthesis for service delivery, provided it:

♦ is prepared early
♦ facilitates choice and review
♦ relates to the council’s overall mission and corporate objectives
♦ identifies service delivery standards
♦ integrates with other statutory plans prepared by the council
♦ closely links the level of service to financial and other available resources
♦ is responsive to external consultation
♦ includes key targets and measures which allow quality management and performance comparison

This paper provides a number of case studies based on the experiences of the new unitary councils and is intended to stimulate debate in what is a highly dynamic and evolving area. All authorities can improve service delivery planning by learning from the experience of others.

The issue of annual service delivery or community planning is being increasingly debated. Wales offers a recent British experience. It is early days, but many councils are embracing SDPs as a means of focusing debate and resources on key service delivery issues, and encouraging the participation of other organisations and local citizens.

Clearly, there are no universally applicable ‘right answers’ or ‘model’ SDPs, since each authority must find solutions consistent with its own local circumstances. But some general good practice principles, illustrated in this paper, should be of relevance to all, together with some interesting local initiatives that merit wider consideration.
Introduction

Why service delivery planning is vital

1. Juggling different service demands, against a backdrop of limited resources and a developing culture of performance monitoring and greater accountability to the public, is a way of life for local authorities. The need for a council to have a clear rationale about the levels and quality of services that it wishes to provide, and how and why resources are allocated, has never been greater. Service planning is complex and continually needs to develop; it involves bringing together all the internal and external processes of the council. But if it is effective, it can provide an essential framework for making decisions on all aspects of service delivery, tailored to reflect local circumstances and priorities. It can also provide an opportunity for actively involving communities, external organisations and other stakeholders in determining and influencing service delivery strategies and standards.

2. Service Delivery Plans (SDPs), re-evaluated and updated annually, are increasingly recognised within local and central government as an integral part of the planning process. Preparing SDPs can bring substantial benefits:
   - focusing debate on key service delivery issues;
   - providing an essential link with financial planning;
   - identifying major issues that cross service boundaries; and
   - providing a means of managing performance and making performance comparisons.

The purpose of this paper

3. Relationships between central and local government are not always conducive to long-term planning. Annual revenue settlements, bid-led capital funding and continuing changes in legislation weaken strategic planning. But they do not nullify it. Indeed, recognition of the importance of strategic service planning is growing. Local government as a whole will benefit; but only if it develops its capacity to plan, co-ordinate and implement, as local authorities subject to structural reorganisation have had to do.
4. Local government reorganisation in England and Wales has brought this issue to the fore, as it has required the newly-created unitary authorities to develop and implement their approach to service delivery. Reorganisation has also provided a valuable opportunity for 'continuing' unitary authorities,1 set up under reorganisation, radically to rethink how they deliver services, given the large increase in the scale and scope of their activities. Similarly, those county councils that are relinquishing parts of their area to new unitary councils must redefine service delivery as part of a philosophy of seeing the council as new, not merely downsized.

5. In Wales, a statutory requirement was placed upon all 22 shadow authorities to produce draft SDPs for consultation, and then revise and publish them in the weeks leading up to vesting day on 1 April 1996. This process in Wales (and in the new unitary councils in England, where there was no element of compulsion) has provided an opportunity for all authorities to learn from the experience. The purpose of this paper is to share the general lessons and good practices on:

♦ the content and focus of SDPs; and
♦ the service planning processes that should underpin their development.

6. Every local authority will be developing its own approaches to the planning of services. This paper is intended primarily to stimulate debate in a constantly changing (and demanding) challenge for councils, and provide some markers on progress to date. It cannot be a blueprint for a model approach; rather, its purpose is to record the learning experience of those authorities undergoing reorganisation.

7. While the paper will be of particular benefit to those authorities preparing for future unitary status in England, it will also benefit the unitary authorities in Wales which have endorsed the principle of preparing SDPs and have developed a second generation of plans (despite there being no continuing statutory requirement for them to do so). But all authorities face a similar challenge of optimising the balance between services and resources and can benefit from the experience of the new authorities.

8. The paper's intended audience is local authority members, chief executives and senior managers. It will also be of interest to health authorities, community councils and the numerous voluntary bodies that are an intrinsic part of service delivery planning and partnership in local government.

1 Most of the unitary authorities in England are technically termed 'continuing' rather than 'new' - because they had a prior existence in a two-tier structure, have inherited functions from the county council and are largely co-terminous with their predecessors. For the purposes of this paper, the expression 'new unitary' is used for all unitary authorities created as a result of the local government reorganisation.
The structure of the paper

9. The first section considers what makes a good SDP, and is based principally upon the experiences of the new unitary councils in Wales. It draws on the plans produced in Wales, and the good (and not so good) practices evident in their content, focus and presentation. Reference is also made to the approach to preparing SDPs seen at reorganising councils in England.

10. The second section examines the planning process itself, and what can be learnt from the experiences of the new unitary authorities.

11. The third section provides a number of practical case studies that illustrate how some councils are tackling SDPs. These demonstrate how different councils are integrating SDPs into their overall planning approach.

12. The final section attempts to draw together the challenges faced by councils in planning for services, and extends the debate into new areas, such as the move in some councils to more detailed community planning.

The research on which this paper is based

13. The paper is based on a number of strands of research:

- visits to several of the new unitary authorities in England and Wales;
- a survey of all 22 Welsh unitary authorities on their views and the outcomes of the planning process;
- a selective survey of community councils and voluntary and other organisations involved in the SDP consultation process in Wales;
- a comparative analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of all 22 final Welsh SDPs, and a small number prepared in England; and
- a survey of the shadow authorities elected in May 1995, to examine their preparedness for reorganisation.

14. For the research in Wales, the Audit Commission drew on the experience of an advisory group of chief executives, from a number of the Welsh unitary authorities,1 established in consultation with the Welsh Local Government Association.

15. Although the paper inevitably looks backwards at the experience of the last two or three years, it is not intended simply as a commentary on what happened in the past, particularly in the statutory context in Wales. Rather, past experience can draw out helpful lessons for future planning and delivery of services in local government.

---

1 Viv Sugar - Swansea; Clive Grace - Torfaen; Neil Pringle - Powys; Huw Vaughan Thomas - Denbighshire.
The merits of integrated planning are increasingly being recognised within local and central government. Councils are already obliged to prepare and consult upon a number of specific plans, such as social care, economic development, local management of schools and, with effect from this year, children’s services. The concept is likely to be extended into other service areas: for example, the Department of National Heritage has recently proposed that every library authority in England should produce a Public Library Plan. The plan is intended to be a charter, setting out the kind of library service that the authority will provide and will cover policies, services, targets and standards, and explain how they will be achieved. It will also review the previous year’s achievements against targets.

Lessons can also be learnt from the experience of local government elsewhere, notably in New Zealand where each council must publish and consult on an annual plan, and report upon locally selected performance indicators within these plans. And the principle is not unique to local government. The NHS Executive’s Code of Practice on Openness in the NHS requires trusts and health authorities to prepare and publish a range of reports and strategic plans covering the delivery of healthcare services.

18. In Wales, the requirement to produce draft and final SDPs, and to consult upon and publicise the plans, was a major task for shadow authorities, given the many other pressures that they faced. In cases where mergers took place, a common philosophy towards service delivery had to be formed from the different cultures of the predecessor councils. In all cases, service delivery planning took place without detailed knowledge of the eventual financial settlement for the first year of the new authority. In addition, it was a time of major upheaval and uncertainty for staff, when many of the councils were still making key appointments. And until the outgoing final accounts were closed and audited, the precise inheritance for the new authorities was not known.

But even so, councils have achieved much that was required under the legislation. The statutory requirement and the accompanying Welsh Office guidelines (Box A, overleaf) provided councils with an important initial framework for service planning and a springboard for developing the process further.

In response to the Audit Commission’s survey, a number of the Welsh authorities said that while the concept of a formal service plan was a good one, time and resource constraints prevented them from preparing one in the way that they would have liked. However, it is clear from the detail contained in their plans that the process did act as a discipline to explain how services would be organised in the new authorities. They had also provided a means for the Welsh Office and other government departments to comment on the proposed arrangements for delivery of services, and to advise on areas where they considered there to be weaknesses.

The majority of the councils that responded to the survey considered the process of preparing, consulting on and publishing SDPs useful to some extent.

### Box A
The statutory framework for preparing SDPs in Wales

Section 26 of the Local Government (Wales) Act 1994 required shadow councils to prepare and publish, by October 1995, a draft service delivery plan covering all services, and a final plan by the end of January 1996. These service delivery plans were to describe the manner in which new authorities proposed to perform their functions during the 1996/97 financial year. They were intended to:

- enable those organisations that work with local government and members of the public to see how local authority services were to be provided;
- provide a useful discipline for the shadow authorities (since the shadow authorities would need to consider how they plan to deliver services at a very early stage); and
- provide a mechanism to ensure that the shadow authorities took account of the needs and interests of local citizens.

The Welsh Office also produced supplementary guidance which advised that a plan should be prepared for each local authority service showing, as a minimum:

- internal management of the authority, including the committee and senior management structures;
- the key assets relevant to the service;
- the budgeted expenditure on the service for 1995/96 (ie, the last year of the predecessor council/s);
- the basic strategy for the service;
- service delivery implications - eg, the resources required to deliver the service plans;
- key performance indicators and standards for the service;
- location of service delivery points;
- proposals for consulting community councils, voluntary organisation and potential providers about the service; and
- named contact point/s where interested parties could obtain more information or send comments.

21. The majority of the councils that responded to the survey considered the process of preparing, consulting on and publishing SDPs useful to some extent. No authority thought the exercise to be of no use at all (Exhibit 1). In the dynamic environment of reorganisation, and especially in the last months leading up to vesting day, most councils believed that the act of preparing SDPs, using the Welsh Office guidelines, helped them to determine their vision, strategy and key objectives and to link corporate and service strategy (and to some degree, servicedelivery standards). However, a number of the SDPs were voluminous documents and, as a result, perhaps it is not surprising that some councils were less convinced that the benefits of preparing draft and final SDPs outweighed the cost of their production in terms of staff time and resources expended.

For this and similar questions, respondents were asked to record their views on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 indicating 'very' useful (significant, helpful, etc) and 5 'not at all' useful, etc.
What makes a good SDP?

22. There is no model for a 'good' plan. Nor is there a model approach to the process of planning services, of which SDPs are an integral part. An analysis and comparison of the 22 final Welsh SDPs highlighted a diversity in quality, focus and presentation. The comparison also gave an insight into the criteria which should be evident in an SDP that successfully links the different elements of the process (Box B).

23. These ingredients for developing a comprehensive SDP are analysed below under a series of related headings:

- laying the foundations;
- strategic options;
- service delivery standards and performance management;
- harmonising service standards;
- joint arrangements;
- the links to resources; and
- integration with other statutory plans.

Laying the foundations

24. All councils need to develop an overall vision or ethos for delivering services, and link it to corporate objectives and detailed methods of delivery and performance management (Exhibit 2, overleaf).

25. Laying these foundations was particularly pertinent for the new unitary authorities in England and Wales that faced the immediate challenge of delivering services from the changeover date. The success in achieving that 'seamless transfer' was heavily influenced by the progress made by the new shadow authorities in determining a vision for the
 Authorities need to develop a series of interlinked processes.

The Commission's review of the Welsh SDPs showed that nearly all laid down an overall mission for the council, supported by a comprehensive range of objectives for each service. Management and committee structures were also identified to facilitate the achievement of those objectives. The SDPs prepared by Bridgend, Swansea, the Vale of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire shadow councils were particularly good examples where strong links had been made between overall aims and service objectives. A more piecemeal approach was evident in some other plans, with little apparent consistency in structure or presentation between services.

**Strategic options**

26. The Commission's review of the Welsh SDPs showed that nearly all laid down an overall mission for the council, supported by a comprehensive range of objectives for each service. Management and committee structures were also identified to facilitate the achievement of those objectives. The SDPs prepared by Bridgend, Swansea, the Vale of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire shadow councils were particularly good examples where strong links had been made between overall aims and service objectives. A more piecemeal

27. Services should be designed to reflect the changes that have affected local government in recent years, not least the purchaser/provider relationship for social services, community care, local management of schools (LMS), the statutory local authority performance indicators, and compulsory competitive tendering for both manual and professional services. Many of the SDPs prepared in Wales reflect these changes, demonstrating that the opportunity for rethinking had been grasped; for example, adopting a client focus by thinking about services from the perspective of the recipient, not the provider.

**Service delivery standards and performance management**

28. The natural progression from the development of corporate objectives is the development of more detailed service plans and specifications. These provide the framework and the standards by which the service will be delivered, monitored and evaluated, to ensure that objectives for the service are achieved.¹

---

¹ The Audit Commission’s publication, *Improving Value for Money in Local Government: A Compendium of Good Practice* (June 1995), highlighted the good practice identified in its previous national VFM studies. Each summary in the compendium is intended as an aide memoire for members, chief executives and senior officers who are charged with delivering service strategies and achieving optimal service standards. The use of this compendium by new unitary authorities will be an important way of assessing service delivery.
29. The case studies later in this paper demonstrate that councils have different perceptions about what an SDP should include, whether it is in essence a strategic or operational document, and how it integrates with the rest of the planning process. The majority of the new Welsh councils produced SDPs that described the policy objectives and strategy statements for each service in general terms, but did not state specifically what actual service would be provided. There is very little in many of the documents that could be questioned in detail and hence the SDPs were not particularly useful as consultation documents. For example, an education plan makes a statement such as ‘we have a commitment to providing continuing adult education’. However, it does not go on to state exactly what services the council intends to provide in order to meet this policy objective. Failure to spell out the more detailed delivery proposals inevitably compromised the success of the consultation process, and makes subsequent performance management more difficult.

30. The effectiveness of consultation is influenced both by the detail in any proposals, and each side's understanding of the expectations from the consultation exercise. No education support group is likely to object to a commitment to adult education. But consultees might have been able to make more constructive comment and criticism had the plans set out how this was to be achieved.¹

31. As SDPs were not detailed, most did not specify how performance was to be managed. Most plans stated simply that they would manage performance using the statutory performance indicators (PIs). Councils were therefore no further on, in terms of performance assessment, than they were prior to the introduction of the SDPs. As performance management tools, most of the SDPs were not particularly useful. As a result, it is perhaps not surprising that one-third of the councils that responded to the Commission's survey indicated that they were not using their SDP for any form of service delivery performance review during the first year following vesting day.

32. Nevertheless, better plans could have improved consultation and performance review. The desire for greater accountability and the consequent increase in public awareness, together with the introduction of the PIs, have accelerated the development of performance management techniques in many local authorities. The setting and monitoring of the achievement of performance targets across all services and activities (often considerably more than the minimum required by the PIs) is increasing. Developing protocols for monitoring progress in implementing audit recommendations, and ensuring that the authority has its own internal arrangements for such monitoring, will be an integral part of the process.

¹The benefits that consultation can bring to the planning process are discussed in more detail in the next section of this paper.
The need for SDPs to demonstrate a clear link between service standards and resources is paramount.

33. Good plans also have the capability to be useful tools in the year after reorganisation. They can provide a vehicle for identifying all the numerous post-vesting day service delivery issues, and for explaining how they will be tackled within the corporate and service strategy objectives agreed by the authority (Exhibit 3).

Harmonising service standards

34. Where authorities of the same tier have merged as part of reorganisation, or where similar functions have previously been carried out by authorities of different tiers, service standards such as rent levels, inspection periods and discretionary benefit payments, must be harmonised. Some short-term differences can be tolerated. Occasionally, continuing diversity of standards may be appropriate. But there will usually be a need quickly to harmonise differences in standards in a new authority. However, the majority of SDPs prepared by the Welsh unitary councils did not make reference to the procedures or timetables laid down for harmonising service standards.

Joint arrangements

35. New unitary authorities may wish to be entirely independent and provide all their own services. But, particularly for some specialist or scarce resources - such as child protection staff or the educational psychology service - there can be a good case for entering into co-operative arrangements with other authorities. Early discussions are needed with neighbouring councils and other service providers, such as

Exhibit 3
The post-vesting day agenda

SDPs provide a vehicle for identifying post-vesting day issues.

Source: All Change: Managing Local Government Reorganisation and Beyond, Audit Commission 1996
Service Delivery Plans

the health bodies and the voluntary sector, on whether to enter into some sort of joint arrangements for delivering services.

36. In the main, SDPs in Wales included only limited reference to the type and extent of joint working arrangements set up for delivering services. This is not surprising. In many instances in England and Wales, finalising the details of the joint working arrangements between the new authorities was not completed until shortly before (or even after) vesting day.

The links to resources

37. In developing service plans and standards, authorities must ensure that they reflect their corporate objectives and match the likely resource allocation and spending limits. The need for SDPs to demonstrate a clear link between service standards and resources is paramount. In the Welsh process, the financial settlement information for 1996/97 was provided by the Welsh Office at the end of the 1995 calendar year only just before plans were to be finalised. Consequently, it is inevitable that the first SDPs did not demonstrate that link.

Integration with other statutory plans

38. Most of the SDPs in Wales included little reference to the other statutory service plans that councils need to prepare. SDPs clearly need to be linked to the corporate objectives and development plans of the council, and to overall resources, but they also need to integrate with the range of other plan documents which the council is obliged to prepare in order to secure central government funding. Liaison with health authorities in relation to community care planning (since health commissioning authorities prepare their own purchasing plans) is also an important link in the chain. These other statutory plans will not in themselves provide the whole of the council’s overall SDP, but should form an integral part of it (Exhibit 4, overleaf). Synchronising these inter-related processes with the timetable set for consultation on, and publication of, the various statutory plans is not straightforward, but authorities must set up mechanisms to ensure that effective liaison minimises any potential inconsistencies.

39. Nor is this integration unique to the council’s revenue resources and service planning. In 1996, the Government piloted a Capital Challenge Scheme in England to explore how the challenge bidding concept could be applied to local authorities’ capital spending. Councils were required to outline their strategy for local capital investment in order to demonstrate a clear, coherent and corporate approach to capital spending.

40. In the context of the dynamics of the shadow period for the councils in Wales, and the available time between finalising senior staff appointments and consultation on the SDP, it has been argued that detailed plans were not a realistic possibility. Nevertheless, there is much to commend in the efforts of the new authorities, and useful lessons on the process itself.
Exhibit 4
Integration with statutory plans

The statutory plans should form an integral part of the SDP.

Source: Audit Commission
CHAPTER 2

The Planning Process

41. The experiences of the new unitary councils in Wales and England suggest that to be successful, the planning process needs to demonstrate:

♦ early planning;
♦ member involvement;
♦ comprehensive and effective consultation; and
♦ well thought out arrangements for publishing and publicising the plans.

Early planning

42. It was evident at some new unitary authorities that service strategies were not prepared in any detail until final financial settlements were known. In some instances this compressed the planning process considerably and did not allow for adequate time for proper planning.

43. Where service planning started early and was carried out in conjunction with a robust budget forecast, a quicker and more realistic, integrated approach to overall planning was evident. All Change\(^1\) highlighted the case for presenting members with an initial overview of their council’s inherited spending pattern relative to its potential SSA and capping limit, so as to provide a financial framework for early decisions on service priorities. This was the approach adopted at the new Swansea Council. A number of other unitary authorities have built on this by planning for a worst-case scenario - on the basis that at budget time it will be easier ‘to build back rather than cut back’ - and agreed a detailed budget timetable with members.

Member involvement

44. At many of the new unitary authorities, members have been actively involved in all aspects of the planning process from determining overall strategic direction for the council’s services, to taking an active role in the consultation process. Chief executives have indicated how important this involvement has been in generating a sense of ownership in the process and giving greater credibility to the consultation effort.

Consultation

45. The guidance issued by the Welsh Office on preparing SDPs required unitary councils to ‘provide a mechanism to ensure that the shadow authorities take account of the needs and interests of local citizens’. Responses to the Audit Commission’s survey indicated that consultation was extensive, involving in total over 1,000 different national and local organisations, local councils and voluntary bodies (Exhibit 5, overleaf).

\(^1\) Audit Commission, All Change: Managing Local Government Reorganisation and Beyond, Audit Commission, 1996.
46. However, methods of consultation were relatively limited, involving mostly the despatch of draft plans to consultees, with a request for comments and observations by a set response date. A small number provided a much more proactive consultation process. For example, the shadow Monmouthshire County Council provided a range of useful initiatives that gave consultees greater access to enable them to express their views (Box C).

47. The councils’ own views about the usefulness of the consultation process in developing and refining the SDPs were inconclusive. A number believed that positive benefits accrued, while others felt that there was little or no positive benefits from the exercise (Exhibit 6).

48. There is perhaps an important lesson for those authorities that are continuing to develop SDPs and are trying to promote active consultation as part of that process: the six authorities that organised public meetings to discuss the draft plans were the same six that believed they had obtained most benefit from the requirement to consult.

49. There was only limited evidence that draft plans were changed or amended to any significant degree as a result of the consultation process, and the survey responses endorse that view (Exhibit 7).

Exhibit 5
Consultation on the Service Delivery Plans
Authorities consulted extensively with a wide range of organisations.

Box C
Consultation initiatives

Source: Monmouthshire County Council
50. As part of the Audit Commission’s review, a sample of organisations consulted about the draft SDPs were asked for their views about their ability to influence the council’s service strategies and direction. Consultees were generally satisfied that they had been given sufficient time to review the draft plans and allowed the opportunity to comment upon them, but almost all were concerned about their eventual ability to influence the council’s service delivery direction. Many felt that their comments and observations on the draft plans had not been taken into account in the final plans.

51. This feeling of dissatisfaction may be unavoidable. A number of consultees had a very narrow focus to their comments, reflecting their own particular identity and interests. Analysis of the submissions from consultees revealed that few commented on services across the board, or on the need to balance resources in order to satisfy competing demands.

52. A chief executive of a new unitary council commented that the process of service delivery planning, the preparation of other statutory plans and the timing of announcement of final financial settlements meant that much of the consultation took place between November and February, the very time of the year when it is usually most difficult to generate interest and enthusiasm for public meetings.
'...better services for the public demand that councillors and officers make renewed efforts to identify the changing views of customers and citizens.'

Neath Port Talbot Council

53. Although a small number of the consultees responding to the survey suggested that better feedback on the impact of the consultation process would have been welcomed, it is nevertheless encouraging to note that the majority of consultees indicated that they are building up effective working relationships with the new unitary councils and are being consulted on service delivery proposals and options as part of more formal local mechanisms. Pontypool Community Council, for example, stated that 'the current round of consultations [with the new Torfaen unitary council] is a marked effort to target areas of specific interest to the Pontypool community - it is a welcome new approach'. Cardiff and the Vale Association of Local Councils wanted a longer consultation period but indicated that 'the next 12 months will demonstrate whether the consultation process will really work. Consultation via a joint liaison committee established by the Vale of Glamorgan Council has had a positive effect'.

54. In addition, Neath Port Talbot Council is continuing to develop the Closer to the Public initiative of user surveys, questionnaires and market research started by one of its predecessor councils, Port Talbot, which recognised that 'better services for the public demand that councillors and officers make renewed efforts to identify the changing views of customers and citizens'.

Publishing and publicising the plans

55. Most of the authorities in Wales were proactive in reaching out to their stakeholders and did not seek simply to comply with the minimum statutory requirement to publish. Most sought to make their plans available to the public and interested parties in a variety of ways. The majority also used more than one medium to alert interested parties that the plans were available - for example, by publicising plans in the local press and advertising the availability of the plans in council offices (Exhibit 8). All of the respondent councils deposited copies of their plans both in the central council offices and public libraries for viewing by the public. All but three authorities deposited copies of the plans at council sub-offices as well. Nearly all authorities also produced and published their plans in both Welsh and English.
56. Preparing SDPs should never be a one-off exercise. For new unitary councils, reorganisation provides the stimulus to review service delivery options. But legislative reforms, the changing needs of consumers and stakeholders, and fluctuations and uncertainties in the resources available to finance the services, should prompt all councils to review and update their service strategies annually.

57. In Wales, most of the new councils have embraced the concept of SDPs and have prepared revised plans for the 1997/98 financial year, despite there being no statutory requirement to do so. A similar position is evident in England. However, most authorities wish to refine and improve the form and content of the initial SDP. The City and County of Swansea, for example, published its ‘second generation’ draft SDP, for the 1997/98 financial year, in December 1996. The Council has decided to continue to prepare an annual SDP. Swansea sees the SDP as an essential element of planning service delivery, but only as part of an integrated process which also links the resources available, the other statutory plans which need to be prepared, and performance management within the authority.

58. Using SDPs as a medium for reviewing a council’s strategic direction and financial priorities, and as an operational planning tool, is also evident in the approach at Flintshire County Council (Case Study 2, overleaf).
Result
The Council believes that the approach has brought a greater clarity and structure to the process of service delivery planning.

The approach at Swansea has allowed a clear link to be made between corporate service objectives, detailed targets and a performance management system which will ensure that the achievement of objectives can be monitored regularly. At Swansea, adjustments to either strategic objectives (in the SDP) or detailed service proposals and targets (in the departmental business plans) are made once the final financial settlement is known at the end of the calendar year.

The Leader of the Council was initially sceptical, but is now enthusiastic about the whole process and believes that, in particular, the public consultation exercise has benefited the whole community:

‘Service delivery planning and public consultation will, I am sure, reap long term benefits for the community. Improving service delivery and getting results means we need effective monitoring and a focus on the key strategic issues. Service delivery planning does just that.’

Good practice points
- member support for the process is needed, through their involvement in public meetings and the consultation process generally;
- SDPs and linked statutory plans need to be developed as early as possible;
- parallel planning with service deliverers in other sectors is essential;
- plans must be linked to early budget projections;
- detailed departmental business plans must flow from the SDP; and
- plans must link into a performance management and target setting system which allows achievement of corporate objectives to be assessed.
Background
Flintshire County Council took over responsibilities for part of the former Clwyd County Council, and the former district councils of Alyn and Deeside, and Delyn, abolished as part of the reorganisation of local government in Wales in April 1996.

Action
As part of the preparation for assuming responsibility for the functions of the new council, the shadow authority published its 1996/97 statutory Service Delivery Plan in February 1996, following extensive consultation, including the local voluntary sector, Town and Community Councils and the residents of Flintshire.

The plan set out the core values against which the council proposed to develop its policies, priorities and programmes. In addition, the plan set out the strategic aims, main policy objectives and service components for each of the Council’s 12 directorates responsible for the delivery of services.

As well as the production of the SDP, the council identified five key corporate initiatives to be developed during 1996/97:
- Community Development
- Environment
- Anti-Poverty
- Urban Regeneration
- Children and Young People

It is intended that the Council’s Policy Committee will direct and co-ordinate the work of service committees in the detailed development and subsequent implementation of the above policy initiatives.

The initiatives are currently at varying stages of development, but for each, a joint officer/member Task Group is charged with the responsibility for developing and implementing each initiative with reference to the relevant service committee.

Result
The SDP for the first year of the new authority, 1996/97, has played a central role in the council’s review of services and budget setting process for 1997/98. As part of that planning process (and achieving financial reductions), each directorate has conducted a review of its activities for 1996/97, using the SDP as a basis for that review, and re-identified and prioritised key tasks for 1997/98.

The Council also sees the development of its staff as an integral part of the development of service delivery. Consequently, it has committed itself to achieving the Investors in People (IIP) accreditation.
Case Study 2 (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good practice points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>♦ the initial SDP should provide a basis for future service delivery planning;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♦ a range of corporate initiatives, linked to service planning should be developed; and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♦ staff development should be an important part of the process of service development.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Council's corporate mission statement also recognises three important elements identified in this paper as vital in planning for service delivery:

**Member involvement**

'The council will be a local authority whose elected Members and work-force are pledged to delivering quality services through effective teamwork, innovation and a willingness to learn.'

**Performance management**

'These quality services will be established through the development, introduction and maintenance of comprehensive, effective Quality Management systems incorporating a structured approach to the training and development of employees.'

**Consultation**

'We will consult the people and encourage community participation to ensure the services we deliver meet people's needs and provide opportunities for a better quality of life.'

59. A similar approach has been adopted by at least some of the 13 new unitary councils created in England on 1 April 1996. The majority of these authorities either prepared and published plans which embodied their philosophy and approach to service delivery, or have stated their intention to do so. North Lincolnshire Council is progressing an integrated approach to planning services which links, but distinguishes between, development plans and SDPs (Case Study 3).
Case Study 3
A vision for service delivery planning at North Lincolnshire: ‘Together forging quality services that measurably improve the quality of life’

Background
The newly created unitary council of North Lincolnshire took over responsibility for its area of the former Humberside County Council comprising the former district councils of Grimsby, Scunthorpe and parts of Boothferry, abolished under local government reorganisation. As part of the process of planning for services, the Council also faced the additional challenge of harmonising the extensive range of different service delivery standards that were inherited from predecessor district councils.

Arrangements to harmonise different policies and procedures across a range of areas, including council house rent setting, refuse collection charges, use of leisure facilities and other services have been necessary. They were initiated during the shadow period through action plans for each of the Council’s seven directorates and departments.

Action
These action plans, together with position statements on the inherited services, were applied throughout the Council’s first full year, 1996/97. For 1997/98 and beyond, the Council has used these action plans to provide the foundations for a service planning approach that links overall objectives through to service outcomes, and develops an important distinction between development plans and SDPs.

The development plans contain the Council’s statement of the major changes and improvements that are to be managed in response to local circumstances - a sense of long-term vision and direction - and are being used as a tool for continuous improvement and effectiveness.

They operate at three levels:
- council-wide;
- directorate level; and
- service/business unit level.

Elected members are also key players in this process, through participation in special workshops and the setting of priorities through the committee system. All development plans are substantiated with action commitments and allocated responsibilities.

The more detailed service delivery plans are created directly from the development plans, reinforced by a wide-ranging consultation process. The SDPs identify:
- community needs;
- service objectives;
- planned levels of service;
- quality standards;
- resources and facilities;
- revenue budget; and
- service evaluation criteria.

These two distinct, but closely related processes, form part of the synthesis for service delivery planning at North Lincolnshire which also integrates the development of support systems (IT, finance and management information) and people systems (training, personnel targets, etc) (Exhibit 10, overleaf).

The Council has also provided Good Practice Guides on both development and service planning to assist officers and members in producing the plans.
Result
The Council believes that the use of development and service plans has provided the right framework for better service planning, enables consultation to be undertaken at the right strategic level, and allows the Council to react to the results of consultation and any change options that result from final financial settlements. This approach has been summed up by the Leader of the Council: 'effective political leadership means more than running an effective council. It means we have to enshrine in the very way we work, systems of evaluation and development that ensure services respond to changing needs in a democratic and flexible way, not by continual revolution but by continual evolution.'

The development planning process also allows the Council to initiate a series of cost/no cost development proposals which inform the consultation and decision-making process.

The Council has been innovative in its approach to promoting consultation on service planning, particularly with public meetings in the Scunthorpe Screen cinema.

Planning continues to be refined at North Lincolnshire, and the complementary processes of preparing development and service plans have been built around a structured timetable of events which are illustrated in terms of the forthcoming planning cycle for the 1998/99 financial year (Box D).

Good practice points
- the Council's overall vision and direction, and identified improvements, are embodied in a development plan;
- the development plan is adjusted and updated in response to consultation and changing local circumstances;
- SDPs are created directly from the development plan; and
- Good Practice Guides on development and service delivery planning have been prepared to assist officers and members.
Learning from the Experience

Case Study 3 (cont.)

Box D
Planning timetable for preparing 1998/99 plans at North Lincolnshire

Source: Good Practice Guides prepared by North Lincolnshire Council
In common with preparations for local government reorganisation, service delivery planning should embrace every internal and external process of a council. The benefits from such an interactive process come from each council’s continuing drive to improve service delivery. It is already clear that councils are experimenting with different approaches to planning service delivery and different ways of consulting on SDPs. Experience in Wales suggest that there are many options for authorities to explore.

Community planning

A number of authorities are developing the concept of community planning, in concert with their SDPs. Their intention is to provide a framework for debate and discussion with local stakeholders from a particular community. It is hoped that this will focus the development of service delivery on that community. The plans would nevertheless integrate with the overall SDP and the other statutory plans that councils need to prepare. This approach was embraced at Torfaen County Borough Council, for example, as part of its planning for 1997/98, where three separate but integrated community plans have been prepared (Case Study 4).

Case Study 4

‘Tomorrow’s Torfaen, People and Priorities - Putting People First’

Background

Torfaen County Borough Council took over responsibility for part of Gwent County Council and the former district of Torfaen, abolished under reorganisation in Wales.

On the premise that the needs of a community do not organise themselves along the traditional departmental boundaries, the Council is developing community planning based around the three distinct communities within the council’s area - ie, Cwmbran, Pontypool and Blaenavon - to sit alongside service plans covering the whole of Torfaen.

Action

Torfaen has published, in one document, three community plans and a series of defined plans for the major service areas. The community plans outline the key service issues affecting that community area such as housing, development, education, leisure and culture and social services, and ‘have been developed from a growing appreciation of the need to agree a shared agenda between the Council and its major communities on the issues which need to be tackled, and how to address them’. They conclude by highlighting what are felt to be the key issues for each of the three main communities which have been used to provoke discussion during consultation.

The service plans emphasise the development of a service strategy and set an agenda for key actions during the year and beyond. They relate largely to a particular departmental service area, although they focus predominately on service departments and are framed in terms of ‘Learning in Torfaen’ (Education Department), ‘Enjoying Life in Torfaen’ (Leisure and Culture Department), and so on.

The draft community and service plans were published in December 1996. Extensive community-based consultation with key organisations and individuals was undertaken during January and February 1997, by both officers and members, on the issues reflected in the plans. The importance of the consultation process was emphasised by the Leader of the Council who said: ‘Through these draft plans, and the consultation process, we are setting out our stall and our proposed agenda to the community, and inviting them to come back to us with their own views and priorities. We are emphasising to people in Torfaen that they are at the centre of our concerns. This is a message which we will need to project repeatedly and consistently, for it will take time for people to gain confidence in our sincerity and resolve. Overall, the process was very good for the organisation, helping to make it conscious
of what it is doing and why it is doing it and, overwhelmingly, the elected members feel positively about the process. It now needs to be built on in future years, and in the way we go about more detailed service delivery planning.'

**Results**

- The Council suggests that, while testing perceptions of the area and its needs with the community was to a certain extent experimental, it worked well as a pilot exercise. It generated much interest, sound debate, and probably most importantly, a will to continue with the process;
- Torfaen recognises that it will need to address a tension which will inevitably emerge between planning on a community basis and authority-wide service planning; and
- It has become apparent that, to be truly representative, community plans will need to be linked to the Council's budget and relate to the plans of other organisations such as the police and health authorities.

**Good practice points**

- The draft community plans must be backed up by thorough research. In Torfaen, the information which formed the community plans was obtained through a process of director/member Community Study Days, and by examining trends emerging from an authority-wide customer survey.
- Emphasis must be placed on securing effective consultation mechanisms. Care must be taken to ensure that all interested and affected parties are able to access consultation and, perhaps more importantly, have an opportunity to input into the process.
- The Council has made an equal commitment to reviewing the community and service delivery planning process as it did to the actual production of the plans. It feels that, if these are to be an important and integral part of the Council's business, then it needs to learn and adapt in the light of experience.

**The challenge**

62. Service delivery planning is a continuous, evolving process. Planning must recognise the competing and changing needs of client groups (such as elderly people and children), communities or localities, and the services themselves. Each authority faces its own circumstances, which are themselves constantly changing.

63. More relevant than the physical documents is the challenge of ensuring that a planning process is established where all contributors are aware of their role, and of the interaction with other elements in the overall planning cycle. Although planning is normally on an annual basis, each element has its own dynamic: the timing of the financial settlement, the timetable for agreeing statutory plans with central government, consultation with a wide range of other bodies, and so on. Some of these requirements are difficult to reconcile. Planning is more effective when there is greater certainty over finance. Councils therefore have to experiment with different service delivery scenarios because of the misalignment of planning with financial settlements.

64. This paper cannot provide model answers. All councils must find their own specific solutions to challenges such as:

- how to make best use of a consultation process which inevitably leaves some respondents dissatisfied?
- how to synchronise the service planning process with the different timescales and planning horizons required by central government and other organisations involved?
The role of planning in local government has been in recession for some years. This situation is changing. This paper makes many references to different sorts of plans and describes attempts to knit them into a coherent whole-authority approach. It does not matter that success so far has been, as best, only partial. Early attempts are more about learning than accomplishment. The fact that such attempts are in train and continue to be refined is important.

The Audit Commission intends to continue its contribution to this debate. Further papers planned include a review of the financial planning mechanism, and a review of the efforts made by many councils to improve working between the different tiers of local government (including community and parish councils).

The processes and good practices outlined in this paper provide a valuable statement of recent experience in local government. All local authorities can benefit from the stimulus provided by the reorganising authorities in Wales and England. A good SDP can be a vital element as a council develops a synthesis for service delivery, provided it:

- is prepared early;
- facilitates choice and review;
- relates to the council's overall mission and corporate objectives;
- identifies service delivery standards;
- integrates with other statutory plans prepared by the council;
- closely links the level of service to financial and other available resources;
- is responsive to external consultation; and
- includes key targets and measures which allow quality management and performance comparison.

Service delivery planning - a checklist for action

This checklist is designed to help members and officers to focus on the issues raised in this paper on service delivery planning (Box E). There are no universally applicable 'right answers' since the lessons from the good practice case studies will need to be adapted to match each council's culture, client needs, resources and capacity for innovation. The checklist can help to identify local priorities, and identify who might take the lead in carrying through the good practice.
**Box E**

**Service Delivery Planning - a checklist**

- Have plans been reviewed and approved by members and has a formal review mechanism been put in place?  
  - [ ] Yes  
  - [ ] No  
  - Lead person

- Is the SDP consistent with the council’s mission statement and its corporate strategies?  
  - [ ] Yes  
  - [ ] No  
  - Lead person

- Does the SDP integrate with the other statutory plans prepared by the authority (e.g., LMS, Social Care, Children’s Plans)?  
  - [ ] Yes  
  - [ ] No  
  - Lead person

- Do the plans contain detailed proposals for the manner in which services will be provided?  
  - [ ] Yes  
  - [ ] No  
  - Lead person

- Do the plans link closely the level of service provision with the financial and other resources available?  
  - [ ] Yes  
  - [ ] No  
  - Lead person

- Do the plans contain key performance indicators and standards for the service, to facilitate regular performance management?  
  - [ ] Yes  
  - [ ] No  
  - Lead person

- Has a mechanism been set up to ensure that the achievement of the targets laid out in the SDPs is monitored on a regular basis?  
  - [ ] Yes  
  - [ ] No  
  - Lead person

- Do the final plans take account of consultation with outside agencies and other interested bodies?  
  - [ ] Yes  
  - [ ] No  
  - Lead person

- Has proper provision been made for the plans to be available for public inspection or comment?  
  - [ ] Yes  
  - [ ] No  
  - Lead person

*Source: Audit Commission*