

## Executive summary

- 5 Harrow Council is performing adequately overall, meeting minimum standards.
- 6 Its ambition is for the borough to be 'loved by its residents offering the best of capital and country'. It has a good understanding of its communities and local need and shares this intelligence with partners. It has developed a shared medium term vision for the future but a longer term strategic vision reflecting the distinctive nature of the borough is not clearly articulated. The Council is tackling the immediate financial pressures it faces and developing more sustainable spending plans over the medium term led purposefully by senior councillors. This involves some difficult choices which impacts on plans with partners, some of whom have similar resource problems. The net result is a focus on short term and medium term improvements which are not always challenging or clear.
- 7 The Council is adopting a stronger user focus through the redesign of service delivery such as Access Harrow, its one-stop shop and call centre. It uses a wide range of user surveys to gauge satisfaction at a high level and consults on policy change, though how the Council uses this information in service planning is not always clear. The Council has structures in place to involve users at a strategic level, including for older people, sustainable development and enterprise work; but not all of these are sufficiently representative of the local population. There are fewer examples of users being involved in service monitoring and in reviewing the performance of services.
- 8 Harrow understands the diversity within its communities and has responded with effective changes in some but not all services. The Council has good systems to keep it updated on the profile and diversity of its communities, and regularly monitors local opinion on priorities and levels of satisfaction, including by different ethnic groups. It understands the changing nature of its communities such as the increase in the Somali and Eastern European population. The borough enjoys positive community cohesion and recent projects seek to strengthen this, such as third-party reporting of racial incidents. The Council's service responses to diversity are strongest in its work with schools and children's services. Council staffing figures show a reasonable reflection of the local community though the Council wants to do more. Good work with the voluntary sector and in projects such as Rayners Lane regeneration are also providing for diverse needs. But the Council does not routinely use its data to develop services, and some areas such as leisure do not yet offer mainstream services which respond to new needs.

- 9 The political leadership team provides clear direction but gaps in senior managerial leadership have meant they are more occupied with short term issues than long term strategic direction. It has a clear view of the need to achieve a stable financial position and has taken swift action on plans to achieve this. Portfolio leads bring some useful professional backgrounds but they do not yet provide sound strategic direction in some areas, such as children and young people (CYP) and housing. Managerial leadership is not consistent throughout the Council. The executive management team has suffered significant gaps over the last year, creating additional workloads and delays in organisational change. Leadership is clearest in Children's Services and these provide some of the best examples of using systems such as performance management to drive improvement. Organisational change has not always been effectively led in Harrow, though the Council has learned from previous experience and recent changes have been more successful. Capacity of staff is stretched due to small establishments, rising sickness levels and reduction of posts in some services.
- 10 Current financial capacity is weak. For two years the Council has not met the minimum level of reserves defined by its own policy, and there is little prospect of it doing so in 2007/08. Improving value for money is a top priority for the Council, but the auditor's latest assessment shows that current work to improve the cost and performance relationship has not yet produced an overall improvement. Harrow's recent business partnering exercises have resulted in improved systems and expertise and it is using these to address previous areas of weakness such as procurement. For example, a partnership with Accord MP for highways services is bringing additional expertise for town centre scheme design and planning.
- 11 Overall achievement and outcomes for local people in Harrow are adequate. The contribution of the Council to outcomes for children and young people is adequate overall, with some areas of high achievement such as education attainment. It has shown an ability to target resources on meeting the needs of different areas, for example responding to neighbourhood issues in South Harrow and co-ordinated work to regenerate Rayners Lane. Service improvement is, however, often related to one aspect of service and it can be difficult to see the overall impact the Council wants. For example, performance on the environment is mixed and stretching targets for improvement are not always in place. There remain key challenges in transport congestion and housing in Harrow and in the Council's ability to balance the economic, social and environmental needs of the area. Harrow enjoys low crime rates and has worked with partners to reduce the fear of crime and provide more assurance and support to those most at risk of disadvantage. In other areas of the national shared priorities, older people and health, the Council's work to broaden its approach and refocus its services to contribute to these shared aims is at an early stage.