

19 December 2005

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 HOURS, TUESDAY 20 DECEMBER 2005**

## **COUNCIL WELCOMES RECOGNITION OF ITS PROGRESS**

The Council has welcomed its very positive progress assessment by the Audit Commission.

A report by independent inspectors states that the Council is progressing well in addressing the issues raised in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004.

A number of local organisations are helping the Council to improve by contributing their time to the North Dorset Improvement Board.

The Board, whose members include representatives from local community partnerships, the voluntary sector, Signpost Housing Association and North Dorset Primary Care Trust, regularly reviews the Council's progress in delivering its improvement plan.

Council Leader Cllr David Whitehead, said: "The Council is grateful to its partners for their contribution and feedback. It's good to know that the changes we are making at the Council are bringing real benefits for service users.

"These would not have been possible without the huge efforts of all the staff at the Council who have played such a major part in these improvements.

"We are particularly pleased that the Audit Commission has recognised good work by the Council and local communities to build a bottom-up approach to community planning."

Large numbers of volunteers have responded to this challenge in North Dorset, working hard within local communities to develop plans and deliver projects.

Cllr Whitehead added: "We are delighted that the Audit Commission has recognised we are travelling in the right direction. We have many challenges ahead so there is no room for complacency."

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**COUNCIL WELCOMES RECOGNITION OF ITS PROGRESS (cont...)**

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Other achievements recognised recently include:

- Improvements in development control performance as reported by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister;
- Improvements in our benefits service following an inspection by the Department of Work and Pensions, with our rating rising from 'fair to good' to 'good';
- Jumping from 10% to 99.54% in just over two years towards the government's target for electronic access to Council services.

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**NOTE TO EDITORS**

**Please find attached the Audit Commission's press release relating to the Council's progress assessment.**

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## North Dorset District Council is progressing well

North Dorset District Council is progressing well in addressing the weaknesses identified last year. That's the verdict of a new report published today by the Audit Commission.

The progress report looks at how the Council has moved on since last year's comprehensive performance assessment (CPA), when it was rated as 'weak'. The recent assessment found that the council has a better understanding of what it aims to achieve, and continues to give effective community leadership. Through a robust improvement plan, it has invested in improved ways of working. However, this was not in time to have a significant impact on outcomes in the year 2004/05, and it remains worse than the average for district councils on the performance of a number of its services.

Key improvements over the past year include:

- further development of the innovative approach to partnership working, based around the district's market towns;
- new computer systems which make services easier for the public to access and enable staff to use their time more effectively;
- a more open and participative culture, more staff training and better sharing of learning; and
- a reduction in the time taken to make planning decisions.

But the assessment also found areas for improvement:

- The Council's ambitions and priorities are not articulated clearly.
- Links between service plans and corporate priorities are not always clear.
- There has been little overall improvement in the benefits service.

**Martin Robinson, Audit Commission senior manager, said:** "Since the North Dorset District Council CPA report was published in June 2004, the council has decided how it needs to change and is making good progress with a three year plan to improve performance.

"We will continue to track the council's progress and future assessments will focus on how the changes the council is making bring measurable improvement for local people. Where the council has weaknesses it should use this assessment to help it move forward. The end result should be better services for the people of North Dorset."

The Audit Commission bases its latest report on a progress assessment it carried out in September 2005. This is part of a national programme covering all poor and weak councils.

Copies of the progress assessment are available on the Audit Commission website at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk).

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**NOTES TO EDITORS**

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

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