

FOREWORD by Cllr Terry Halliwell Cabinet Member with responsibilities for the Finance and IT Department

I am very pleased to introduce the statement of accounts produced by Wigan Council. The statement is an important way of demonstrating the Council's accountability for public funds and shows local people what services have cost and how they have been funded. When we set the budget for 2004/05 the Council made hard choices to match the increasing demands for services with its financial resources and potential increases in Council Tax. Our essential priority remained unchanged. The Council wants to deliver services that represent good value for money to all our citizens. Our view is that improved services are what matter to local people.

The Council has a mission statement which states "within the resources available to it, Wigan Council commits itself to secure quality services, delivered fairly, courteously and responsively by well-informed employees who take pride in what they do." Accordingly we continuously review all our services and try to make sure wherever possible that the needs of our local people are met. We have established a network of townships across the borough to strengthen our engagement with local communities and these are valuable in giving feedback and views as to how we prioritise services and spending.

For 3 years the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) results have graded Wigan Council in the top 'Excellent' category. An important element of that assessment scrutinises the Council's management of its resources. In 2006 the assessment will be carried out again and will require higher standards of evidence to satisfy the Audit Commission's judgement. We are currently looking at the new assessment criteria and reviewing our practices to ensure they meet the new standards required. The CPA provides an independent and documented assessment that the Council spends over £700m of public money effectively.

The performance of the Council is continually reviewed both internally and by its external auditors who have consistently highlighted the cost efficient and prudent way in which the financial affairs of the Council are managed. The Council can further demonstrate good overall performance against a range of national Performance Indicators.

In addition to the CPA all Councils are required to identify efficiencies to meet the 2.5% year on year target set by the Government. This initiative is designed to demonstrate and confirm that we do have action plans to secure continuous improvement and that we do consistently look for and measure efficiency savings.

The Council's budget strategy focuses on the review of service priorities and opportunities to redirect such efficiencies. Alongside the investment in services it is also a fact that Wigan householders still have one of the lowest council taxes in the region. This is further confirmation that Wigan remains an efficient, low spending Council. These accounts include a Statement of Internal Control to assure you of the care and attention that is given to spending your money. In that context I must pay tribute to the work of my colleague Cllr. Kevin Anderson who has held the Performance portfolio for the last 3 years and has played a major role in the financial management of the Council's affairs.

Finally as always I would like to end by thanking the Director of Finance and IT and all the staff of his department for their hard work and dedication throughout the year. The production of the statement of accounts as quickly as possible after the 31 March each year demonstrates the Wigan Council commitment to the full and proper stewardship of public funds. This is the second year that the deadline for publishing the accounts has reduced by a month. Next year will complete the new timetable for publishing audited accounts by 30 September.

Councillor Terry Halliwell