

Access to Services

St Albans City and District Council

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.

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Service Inspection

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. These principles embody the objectives of our Strategic Plan and Strategic Regulation. They also reflect the principles from *The Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services (July 2003)*.

Audit Commission service inspections should:

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater coordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

This report is issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under section 13 of the 1999 Act.

Summary

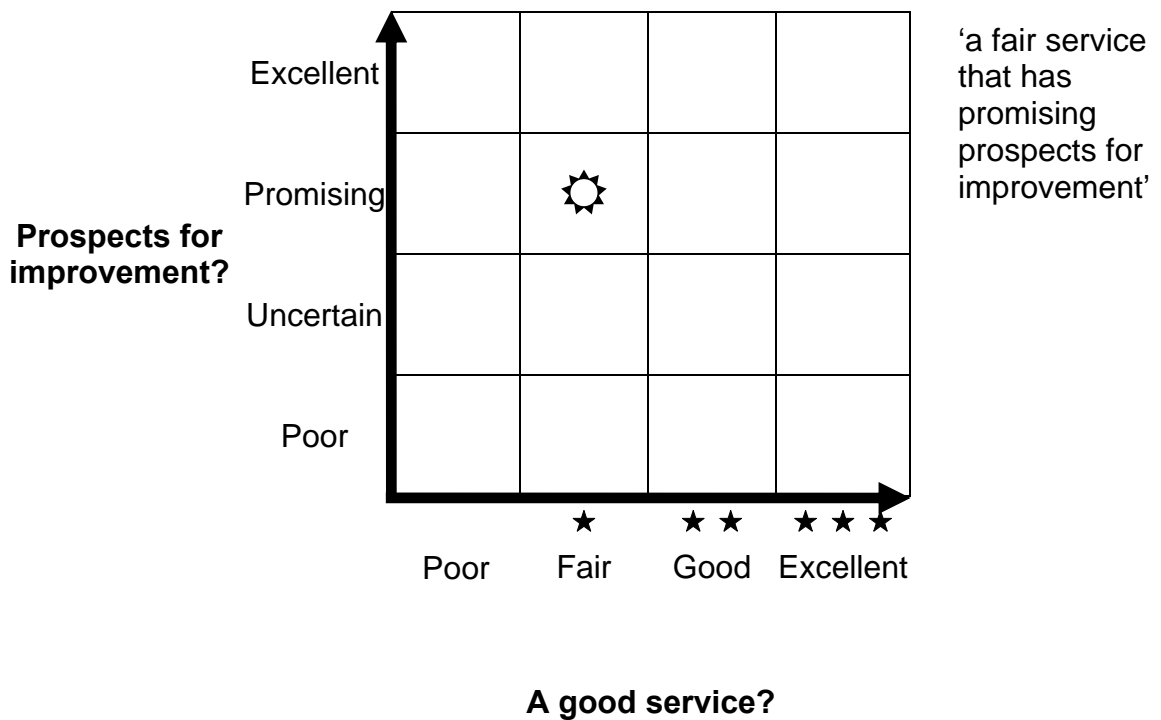
- 1 St Alban's district lies in the heart of Hertfordshire and is only 20 miles from the centre of London. Covering 161 square metres, main settlements include St Albans, Harpenden, Wheathampstead, London Colney, Redbourn, Park Street Chiswell green and Bricket Wood. The total population is 131,500 with 61.3 per cent of the population of working age, which is below the national average. People from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities represent 6.9 per cent of the population and St Albans has a higher than average population of people aged 0 to 14 and a lower than average proportion of people aged 15 to 29.
- 2 Access to services (the service) is a cross-cutting theme applicable to all councils and council services. It covers four broad areas: ease of access to services; using e-government to support access to services; reaching all parts of the community; and partnership working. For customers, this means that they should be able to contact councils in a range of accessible and DDA compliant physical localities. They should also be able to contact councils through a range of other remote methods. This includes a website, which is fully accessible and easy to navigate with appropriate arrangements for electronic transactions, electronic communication and consultation.
- 3 Accessibility means that Council services, and access to those services, should be focused on the needs of the whole community. They should ensure equality of access and take proper account of equality and the diversity of all service users. There should be appropriate arrangements for consulting, engaging and communicating with users and non-users of services. Councils should use partnership working with neighbouring councils, organisations and businesses to provide seamless and high quality access to services wherever this possible. Councils should also have an e-government programme informed by citizen/user needs and aspirations.
- 4 St Albans approach to service access is fair because there is a clear and consistent focus on improving access for the public including those who are deprived. Services can be accessed through an effective Customer Service Centre, the Harpenden Information Centre and the web site. Physical access to council buildings is good. Local engagement in some service areas such as housing is good and complaints are dealt with well. However, there is no overarching assessment of needs to inform access developments and consultation is inconsistent. Customer care/service standards are not embedded and engagement with minority and vulnerable groups is variable. Partnership working with contractors and some voluntary organisations is contributing to improved access but less so with other public sector bodies. Whilst efficiencies are being delivered through business transformation, value for money is not fully integrated into access developments.

- 5 The Council's prospects for improvement are promising because there is a consistent track record of the Council improving access to its services with good performance in key service areas. The Council has robust plans for future development of access and resources identified to support their delivery. Improving procurement practice is enabling the Council to extend access to services. The Council has a corporate performance management framework in place, which is used effectively to drive up performance in many services. However, there is not a consistent awareness or understanding of the Council's vision for access amongst stakeholders. Needs based service planning is not fully embedded. Performance systems and the use of benchmarking which enable an organisation wide evaluation of access are not yet fully developed.

Scoring the service

- 6 We have assessed St Albans City and District Council as providing a ‘fair’ one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹:



Source: Audit Commission

- 7 The service is a fair, one-star because:
- Council services can be accessed effectively through the Customer Service Centre including Saturday mornings, the Harpenden Information Centre, improving online access; translation services are available and physical access is good;
 - there is a clear corporate focus on improving access to services for the public which takes into account the impact of deprivation;
 - engagement with individual services is good in some areas;

¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

8 St Albans Access to Services Inspection | Scoring the service

- complaints are managed well with high levels of public satisfaction;
- the voluntary sector and contractors are making a positive contribution to improving access to services; and
- transformation initiatives and procurement are delivering corporate efficiencies.

8 However:

- there is no overarching assessment of need to inform access planning;
- consultation and engagement with the public and some minority groups is inconsistent;
- the Council's website has significant limitations;
- customer service and care standards are not embedded;
- opportunities to develop improved access through closer working with other public sector partners have not been fully explored;
- there is not equal access to all services for local residents; and
- there is not a consistent focus on value for money in the development of cross cutting services such as access.

9 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- the Council's performance indicators show a favourable trend overall;
- there is a consistent track record of changes which has led to improved access;
- the Council has clear aims and future plans for service access, which are co-ordinated, robust and deliverable;
- the Council has a corporate performance management framework in place, which is used effectively to drive up performance in many services;
- the Council is investing resources in its proposals for access including improvements to its website and capacity to deliver is good; and
- effective procurement is improving the capacity of the Council to improve access.

10 However:

- the overarching vision for access is not consistently understood amongst stakeholders and there are no targets which reflect the overall aims;
- the Council has based its proposals on a partial knowledge of customer need; and
- performance monitoring arrangements, including the use of benchmarking data, for the Council's access to services priority is not fully developed.

Recommendations

- 11 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, Councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the council. In addition we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that the council should do the following.

Recommendation

R1 Improve the customer experience of services by:

- *establishing with partners a vision of access excellence for every service, identify gaps in service delivery against the vision and put plans in place to close any gaps in delivery;*
- *viewing with the public and partners the fitness for purpose of your customer care standards; utilise information from complaints;*
- *embedding access and customer care standards throughout the organisation; and*
- *developing a system to track, review, report performance against the customer care standards internally and to the public.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- easier and improved access and improved customer satisfaction;
- improved cost-effectiveness of services and value for money; and
- partnership focus on public access and value for money.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact medium costs. This should be implemented by end of December 2008.

² Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 percent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendation

R2 Extend the Council's knowledge and understanding of the specific needs and preferences of all community groups and stakeholders in the district by:

- *engaging with users, non-users and all BME communities;*
- *conducting ward and district profiling; and*
- *utilising information from complaints.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- Council services may be better informed by an accurate and complete assessment of needs; and
- an inclusive service which is informed by all residents and users.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by December 2008.

Recommendation

R3 Ensure that there is equity of access to services for the public by:

- *ensuring that customer data is segmented to ensure that analysis identifies issues for specific groups;*
- *ensuring that equality impact assessments are applied consistently across the organisation and deliver improvements; and*
- *monitoring equity of access to services across the district.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- easier and improved access to services across the district; and
- a consistent approach and improvements to equalities throughout the organisation.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact medium costs. This should be implemented by end of December 2008.

Recommendation

R4 Demonstrate and improve service efficiency and value for money in the service by:

- *developing a clear approach to achieving VfM through cross cutting initiatives such as access;*
- *implementing opportunities to develop strategic partnerships that will achieve more efficient and effective services for users;*
- *using technology and business process re-engineering to reduce administration and overhead costs; and*
- *using benchmarking data – including human resources and unit costs - to challenge the current service and identify how competitive the service is, and implementing identified and improvement needs.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more efficient services and reduced costs;
- a clear understanding that the service is being delivered in an efficient and effective way; and
- give confidence to the public in the Council's ability to resource its plans.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by December 2008.

Report

Context

The locality

- 12 St Albans District covers an area of 161 square kilometres with a population density of 821 persons per square kilometre. The district lies in the heart of Hertfordshire and is only 20 miles from the centre of London. The city of St Albans grew out of the Roman town Verulamium and the area has many important sites of historic interest. The population is mainly based in the areas of St Albans, Harpenden, Wheathampstead, London Colney, Redbourn, Park Street Chiswell green and Bricket Wood.
- 13 Mid-year population estimates (2006) report that there are 131,500 living in the district and 61.3 per cent of the population is of working age. This is below the national average (62.2 per cent). Figures also indicate that St Albans has a higher than average population of people aged 0 to 14 and a lower than average proportion of people aged 15 to 29. The district has a Black Minority Ethnic (BME) population of 6.9 per cent (Office of National Statistics 2004). The Bangladeshis form the largest minority group. The Asian community is largely concentrated in St Peters, Sopwell, Park Street, London Colney, and Ashley wards. There is a well-established Italian community and a less well established and increasing community from Eastern Europe in particular from Poland.
- 14 A relatively affluent area, St Albans is ranked 317 out of 354 when compared to other local authorities, with a rank of one being the most deprived. No super output areas (SOAs) fall within the 10 per cent most deprived nationally but one area in the Batchwood ward does fall in the 11 to 25 per cent most deprived areas. At 0.8 per cent, the latest claimant count rate (November 2007) is less than half the national average at 2.1 per cent. Gross weekly earnings by residence are approximately £620 which is significantly above the All England and East of England averages. These earnings are also above those for the adjoining Hertfordshire Districts.
- 15 The proximity of London is important with more than half (51 per cent) of the population commuting out of the district to work whilst 42 per cent of local jobs are taken by people commuting in. Average house prices are a third higher than the region and nationally at an average cost of £402,027 (January to March 2008). There is a high level of owner occupation at 77 per cent, well above the England average of 68.5 per cent. The Council manages its own housing stock of approximately 5,400 properties.

- 16 The district is under pressure to deliver growth due to its strategic location in relation to main transport routes and its proximity to London. For example, a number of strategic transport routes pass through the district including the M1/M10 to the midlands and the north of England; the M25 and the A414 running east to west; the mainline railway to St Pancras and the 'Thamesline link' from Bedford through to London and Brighton. The A1(M) and the Kings Cross to Edinburgh train lines lie to the east of the district. Luton Airport is three miles from the edge of Harpenden.
- 17 St Albans is a major tourist centre. The Council is responsible for the delivery of a range of leisure and cultural facilities. This includes five sports facilities, the Verulamium Museum and Hypocaust Mosaic, the Museum of St Albans, the Alban Arena, Maltings Arts Theatre, Harpenden Public halls, parks and open spaces, play, tourism, events and the development activities of sports and arts. Leisure centres are currently managed by Leisure Connection Ltd. *Leisure and the arts facilities of the Alban Arena and Harpenden Public Halls*. *Maltings Arts Theatre is managed directly by the Council through the Culture and Community Development Department*. Sport England data for 2005/06 stated that 50.87 per cent of the population is within 20 minutes of a range of three different sports facility types above the national average (31.64 per cent) and the highest among its geographical neighbours.

The Council

- 18 The Council is led by a Liberal Democrat administration (May 2008). The Liberal Democrats hold 30 seats, Conservative party 22, Labour 5 and Independents 1. General spending by the Council for 2007/08 was £17.4m (net) and housing revenues gross £21.8m with a planned spend for 2008/09 of £18m (net) plus housing revenues gross 23.4m. There is a capital budget for 2008/09 of £11.8m. The Council has 304 full time and 88 part time employees.
- 19 The Local Strategic Partnership's sustainable communities strategy 'Shaping Our District Together for 2021' identifies a vision for St Albans: 'We want to continue to be a progressive, unique and vibrant district, which values its heritage and cares for the future: an outstanding place to live where everyone can flourish'. Three priorities underpin the vision;
- ensuring the district is a great place to be;
 - keeping the district healthy; and
 - supporting an active community that takes pride in itself.
- A common theme throughout these priorities is, 'delivering the best outcome for every single member of the community'.
- 20 The Council's Corporate Plan adopted in 2008 also identifies a vision for St Albans: 'To preserve and enhance the distinctive character of St Albans City and District, making it an outstanding place in which to live and work and visit, where everyone enjoys a range of quality and efficient services in a progressive, caring and environmentally concerned community'.

- 21 The Corporate Plan sets out how the council will contribute to the delivery of the sustainable communities' strategy. The vision is underpinned by five key aims:
- to build a community, which is open, fair and inclusive;
 - to work in partnership for the health and well-being of the community;
 - to cherish and promote our heritage, arts and culture, to safeguard the environment; and
 - to ensure that the district is a desirable place in which to live and work.

National context

- 22 The Government sees customer access as important and in its 'Strong Leadership – Quality Public Services' white paper it identified seven key tests for local government (joined up, accessible, delivered or supported electronically, delivered jointly, delivered seamlessly, open and accountable, and used by e-citizens). In Local Government Act 2000, new reforms and targets required local authorities to move towards electronic delivery in their services to the local community. The intention was that 100 per cent of dealings with Government, including local government and the NHS, should be capable of being conducted electronically by the public by December 2005. BVPI 157 required local authorities to review all of their services over a five year period and to challenge the existing methods of service delivery. Other national drivers include the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, Human Rights Act 1998; Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 and the white paper, 'Modern Local Government – In Touch With the People' which sought to put local government in touch with local communities by improving local democracy, increasing financial accountability and improving local services. Councils should have plans to meet the impending legislative requirements to actively promote disability, gender and age equality as well as meeting the current requirements to promote race equality.
- 23 Access to services is a cross-cutting theme applicable to all councils and council services. It covers four broad areas: ease of access to services; using e-government to support access to services; reaching all parts of the community; and partnership working. For customers, it means that they should be able to contact councils in a range of accessible and DDA compliant physical localities. They should also be able to contact councils through a range of other remote methods. This includes through a fully accessible, easy-to-navigate website. There should be appropriate arrangements for electronic transactions, electronic communication and consultation.

- 24 Accessibility means that Council services, and access to those services, should be focused on the needs of the whole community. They should ensure equality of access and take proper account of equality and the diversity of all service users. There should be appropriate arrangements for consulting, engaging and communicating with users and non-users of services. Councils should use partnership working with neighbouring councils, organisations and businesses to provide seamless and high quality access to services wherever this possible. Councils should also have an e-government programme informed by citizen/user needs and aspirations.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 25 The Corporate Plan and the Community Strategy form the framework within which the Council is delivering its priorities and improving access to services. The Local Strategic partnership has incorporated a customer focus into the Community Strategy with an aim to decrease inequality and increase access to services. Key to the Corporate Plan are the enhancement of communications with local residents, greater involvement of residents in decision making, meeting the needs of young people and making services overall more accessible to everyone in the community. The Council seeks to achieve a balance between customer needs, the quality of services provided and value for money. The Council and its partners are prioritising improved access to services for the public.
- 26 The Council is clear that improving customer access is important to them. A best value review of customer access in 2003 recommended that the Council improve the customer interface and management of customers. The Council has already improved its customer focus by consolidating a number of separate service based reception areas into a single customer service centre (CSC). It has established self-help points both within the Council offices and in Harpenden Town Hall. The Customer Access to Services (CATs) programme is focusing on the needs of the customer in the provision of a more responsive service at a reduced cost. It is designed to harness advances in technology and information management that will create a more efficient and effective operating environment. The Council is managing the initiative well particularly with regard to communicating the benefits of the approach to both public and staff.
- 27 The Council is prioritising equality of access to services through plans and strategies. It aims to build a community, which is, open fair and inclusive. It is seeking to meet the needs of all members of the community by providing a wide range of services. This focus is delivered through the key corporate objective that 'the Council engages with and ensures that services are easily accessible to all, paying particular attention to all minority groups, and other groups with specific need'. The Council is prioritising inclusiveness and equalities through its plans.
- 28 The Council is effectively prioritising improvements to customer access through the CATs initiative. The Chief Executive Officer chairs the CATs group, which also includes the portfolio holder for resources. It has three strands - Customer Contact Centre and Telephone centre, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and Business Process Improvement (BPI), and the development of corporate information and communication standards such as an 80 per cent target for a single source of authority service information.
- 29 The Council's aspirations and plans fully embrace the established national agenda for improving satisfaction with local authorities.

Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?

Customer and community focus

- 30 Needs based service design is under-developed and not comprehensive. The Council is aware that it needs to undertake more demographic analysis particularly in ward profiling which is not yet in place. It lacks an overarching needs analysis including the young, the old, more rural areas and ethnicity. Little data is captured regarding the profile of people accessing the Council and its services, for example those registering to vote or making complaints. The preferred method of contacting the Council for local residents is the telephone, 60 per cent of all contacts in 2006/07. Weaknesses with the telephone system have been identified and there are comprehensive plans in place to improve it. The Council does not have sufficient understanding of what local people need to access services effectively.
- 31 Customer focus across the Council is inconsistent. Developments in customer services are primarily internally generated. Neither the public nor partner organisations feel that they have been consulted or engaged in the process. For example, the main driver for the establishment of the CSC was an internal needs analysis which addressed the issue of multiple reception centres and the proportion of calls which were directed to the back office. Public engagement in setting customer services targets such as waiting times is limited with most being established internally based on existing resource. The public are not consistently able to influence Council and service developments, which detracts from customer focus.
- 32 The Council is taking positive and effective action to identify areas of deprivation in the district with their partners. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Community Service) undertook an extensive review of deprivation in 2006/07. A report of the outcomes, 'Tackling Deprivation: More Help Where Help Is Needed' was published in February 2007 which included 71 recommendations to address local deprivation issues and 9 organisational recommendations to improve the corporate focus on deprivation issues. Progress with the action plans is mixed but tangible outcomes include the development of an Asian women's support group and improved leisure and play facilities for children and young people. By doing this work, the Council is achieving improved inclusion and reducing the impact of deprivation.

Ease of access for all

- 33** Access to Council services is adequate and improving. Access to Council services is available by telephone, fax, minicom, letter, email and face-to-face during normal working hours of 8.45am to 5.15pm Monday to Thursday, 8.45am to 4.45pm on Fridays and Saturday 9.30am to 12.30pm. The public can also access services through the Harpenden Town Council Information Point, which is open Monday to Friday 10am to 4pm. Saturday opening is in place in response to public demand and helps to improve access, for example for those who commute out of St Albans during the week. The Council also trialled evening opening but demand was insufficient to make it cost effective. An out-of-hour's emergency service is delivered by an external provider, the number is well publicised in Council literature and results in an effective, service based response. The Council is improving access to services through extended opening times and the development of an information centre in Harpenden.
- 34** Information Technology is improving access to services. The Council has achieved full compliance with e-government targets. There are opportunities to make some online payments for example council tax, to log a request for a housing repair and to report issues such as anti-social behaviour and fly tipping. Planning applications can be reviewed online through the planning portal and there is an innovative use of web casting of planning committee and appeals meetings. An A to Z index of Council services is published and can be accessed through the website. Use of new technologies is improving access to services for the public.
- 35** The Council's website has significant limitations. The Council has identified significant weaknesses with its website. The Society of Information Technology Managers (SOCITM) evaluates the current web site as standard and not fully transactional. Navigation of the website is not intuitive, and does not follow the local government menu. Information on accessibility is incomplete. Currently there is no online access to past and current committee agendas reports and minutes. The Council is aware of these difficulties and is planning a new site but current arrangements do not make it easy for customers.
- 36** Physical access to public buildings is good but signage requires improvement. Ninety-two per cent of all Council buildings were Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant in 2006/07 with un-audited figures indicating that this has increased further to 94 per cent in 2007/08. The reception area and customer service centre are fully DDA compliant, fitted with induction loops and have access to language line, and interpreters to meet the needs of people whose first language is not English. The Council promotes the Disabled-Go website, which provides information on accessibility to buildings within the district. However, signage in St Albans is limited and residents confirmed that although signage at the front of the Council building had recently improved signage in general was poor, for example signage within the customer service centre is limited and only in English. The Council is ensuring that the public can access most of its buildings but has not yet made it clear how to find them.

- 37** Access for some minority and vulnerable groups is variable. The Council provides a range of publications, which targets specific groups. Publications for older people are wide ranging and informative however those aimed at children and young people are limited. The Council will provide information in other formats and languages although no leaflets in other languages are displayed. This option is publicised in most of the Council's publications but this would usually mean that a customer would have to pick up a leaflet in English to discover this option. Other than the museum service, the use of other languages for example in signage is very limited. Translation services are in place such as language line but they are used infrequently. Staff feel that the service is expensive, but the Council has not reviewed its options. Some staff members provide translation for Asian clients but the availability of such a service is limited, which may deter certain groups from accessing Council services.
- 38** The Council's knowledge of customer need is under developed. The proposals are based on the imperative to avoid duplication at several reception areas within the Council, and on a general customer preference to use the telephone. The Council has not carried out a detailed analysis in terms of demographics, geography or segmented its information on customer preference by user type. Consequently, it risks limiting access for groups of customers who do not fall within its broad assumptions.

Standards

- 39** A set of generic corporate customer care standards exist but these are not completely embedded. They are primarily descriptive and not used consistently across the organisation. Measurable standards, which will enable performance to be evaluated, are limited to response times for example to complaints, telephone calls, letters, emails and visits to the Council. The Customer Service Centre has developed a customer charter, which identifies a commitment to good customer care and inclusiveness. It is displayed in the centre however it is difficult to see and read and it is only presented in English. The Council cannot demonstrate a consistent approach to customer care.
- 40** There is not a corporate approach to the development and use of service standards. Some services do publish standards for example the benefits service and the development control service through its charter. The housing service has just agreed estate level agreements with tenants. Some service plans also contain standards for example environmental health, but others do not. Contractors have service standards but these are not directly linked to the Council's customer care standards and focus on achieving contract targets. Services are not consistently making it clear what users can expect from them.
- 41** Standards are not driven by customers. The standards that exist outside the CSC have not necessarily used customer views as the starting point and are instead mainly descriptions of good professional practice. The public are not engaged in setting and monitoring the standards and they are not readily accessible to service users. The Council lacks a consistent corporate approach to the way standards are set, monitored and reported back to users. This means it is not effectively using standards to communicate what customers can expect or to drive the kinds of improvements that customers would like to see.

Engagement

- 42 The Council is not engaging effectively and consistently with the public. The BVPI survey for 2006/07 showed that 43 per cent of residents felt the Council kept them very or fairly well informed which is below the district Council average. The Council plans to improve this to sixty per cent by the end of 2008. The Council publishes 'Community News', which is circulated with the Hertfordshire Advertiser five times a year. It provides a range of information about Council services and events. Local people feel it is useful. However not all residents, particularly those in rural areas, receive the Advertiser and are unclear how the information it contains can be accessed. Thirty-six per cent of local residents surveyed said that they relied on the local press for information about the Council. Most but not all local people understand what the Council is trying to do.
- 43 There are some good examples of specific service consultation and engagement. Corporate experts also advise on appropriate consultation channels. The housing service engages well with the majority of its residents. Housing Times is a high quality and informative publication. There is a special Housing and Community Advisory Officer, who works with BME groups to maximise their access to services. An annual housing conference attracts high profile speakers, is well attended and provides an opportunity for tenants to influence future developments in housing such as choice based letting. There was extensive communication with young people over the development of Verulamium Park. The Council offers home visits, which are increasingly being used to improve accessibility for example, in the benefits service and housing support for young people. These improvements are recognised and praised by local residents. A youth council is also in place and there are formal contacts with minority groups such as the Asian Women's Group.
- 44 The impact of consultation on corporate and service developments is variable. A citizen's panel is used effectively to determine corporate priorities and inform budget setting. Consultation on major regeneration initiatives is good. However, consultation on service developments, for example in leisure and around the local development framework lacks consistency. Consultation with residents who do not use services is limited and consultation with partner agencies is limited, for example the LSP partners described consultation as often about information 'after the event' and despite some concerns the developers forum was not effectively consulted on the introduction of the customer service centre. There is a consultation database but the sharing of consultation outcomes across the Council is inconsistent. Consultation therefore does not consistently inform corporate and service planning or outcomes for customers.

- 45 The Council is not managing its external communications strategically. The Council has developed a communications strategy but it is not yet delivering a consistent approach to communications across the organisation, for example there is not a consistent approach to branding of Council information. Whilst there is an extensive range of leaflets available, their supply is ad hoc in part because individual services produce their own leaflets and there is little central co-ordination of the process. The supply of leaflets to other centres in the district is inconsistent and this means that some are out of date. Links with Parish Council's and residents associations are also inconsistent. In general, opportunities to work with partners to improve engagement with local people are not being used effectively. This limits the extent to which the Council can plan its management of messages. There is not a consistent strategic approach to the way that the Council communicates with the public and its partners.

Diversity

- 46 Performance with respect to equalities and diversity is mixed. The Council is among the best performing Councils for its duty to promote race equality; employment of staff with disabilities and the number of racial incidents reported to the council that resulted in further action. The Council has recently received a regional equalities award for its work in developing a sensory garden in Clarence Park. However, women are under-represented in the Council's top 5 per cent earners. Historically, the Council has self-assessed itself at level three of the Equalities Standard for Local Government however this has not been subject to external validation. Plans to achieve level four of the equality standard are not yet in place.
- 47 The Council is taking positive action to improve equalities but outcomes are inconsistent. It carries out equality impact assessments, which in some areas are leading to change, for example the development of a policy for specialist housing for those with disability. However, there are inconsistencies in the progress of implementation particularly whilst the equalities officer post has been vacant. There are effective employee monitoring mechanisms in place for recruitment and selection. Most managers, staff and councillors have now undergone specific equalities and diversity training. All reports submitted to Councillors identify equality issues linked to the report although the rigour with which this is completed is variable. All contractors are required to have policies on equality and diversity but they are not engaged in the completion of equality impact assessments. The Council has not yet addressed the need to build intelligence about different sections of the community and their needs by segmenting different types of customer feedback by user group. For example, it estimates that it has low numbers of Eastern European migrants community but has not carried out any research or shared data with other public sector organisations to establish whether this is this case. The Council is taking effective action to address the needs of most but not all of its diverse communities.

- 48 The Council has a good approach to adhering to Diversity legislation. The Council, in 2004, extended its Equality Scheme to incorporate the six equality strands - Race, Disability, Gender, Age, Sexuality and Religion. Service policies and practices are effectively reviewed to ensure adherence to equalities and human rights legislation. For example in service plans and committee papers.

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 49 The Council's performance in customer facing services is mixed. Using audited data from 2006/07, benefits performance is improving and the time taken to process new claims is in line with best performing councils (top 25 per cent of councils). Cleanliness of the district, for example low levels of graffiti, was also amongst the top 25 per cent of councils. However, determination times for planning applications are variable and a concern for local residents. The Council has good performance for other applications but poor performance for major applications. The percentage of invoices paid on time was below average and declining although unaudited data for 2008/09 suggests this downward trend may have been reversed. The main concerns for local residents are traffic congestion and the state of the highways. They perceive that the Council is not delivering the leadership required to address them. The public experience variable levels of service from the Council.
- 50 Outcomes for vulnerable groups are mixed. The benefits service is working with partners such as registered social landlords to assess the needs of vulnerable groups. The joint appointment of a disability officer with Hertfordshire County Council has resulted in an uptake of claims by elderly residents over the last two years. Work with residents of the St Albans 'Open Door' Hostel is allowing the turn round of benefit claims in two days. Engagement with young, physically disabled people and their mothers with housing and the County Council has led to suitable accommodation being designed. In contrast, the average length of stay in hostel accommodation is high at 14 weeks although in 2007/08 homeless applicants only have to wait four weeks until they are offered self contained accommodation. The number of affordable homes is low for example in 2006/07 only 14 affordable housing units were produced, less than 46 for the previous year although this rose to 39 in 2007/08. Vulnerable groups experience variable levels of service from the Council.
- 51 Complaints to the council are managed effectively but learning from complaints is inconsistent. The Council is among the top 25 per cent of councils for percentage of users satisfied with complaint handling. A complaints and compliments guide has been produced and is accessible through the website. Corporate standards for complaints handling are in place. Corporate management team and overview and scrutiny committees monitor complaints on a six-monthly basis. The complaints database is subject to revision as part of the introduction of a customer relationship management system, however, there is limited systematic analysis of complaints data at a corporate level, and as such corporate learning from complaints is limited.

- 52 The Council works effectively with voluntary groups to deliver improved outcomes for specific access needs. For example, the Council is working in partnership with the Citizen's Advice Bureau, which has representatives in the Customer Service centre each Thursday. Shelter holds drop in centres for homelessness advice in the centre each Tuesday. Together they provide a broad range of information and referral services to customers. The voluntary sector is enhancing the capacity of the Council to provide targeted customer services.
- 53 Contractors and the Council work well together on service access. The Council has included customer care and equalities in its specifications. Housing contractors are proactive in their involvement with residents for example, offering more choice in windows, kitchens and bathrooms to tenants. Leisure Connections, the contractor for leisure services, has introduced initiatives to increase and widen leisure usage for example, swimming sessions for Asian women and older people and free swimming lessons for those under 18. It has developed crèche facilities in leisure centres so that parents of small children can exercise. Contractors are effectively engaged in delivering improved services to customers.

User experience

- 54 Resident satisfaction with the Council and the services it delivers is mixed. It is comparable to other district Councils in England. Fifty-six per cent of local residents were satisfied with the Council in 2006/07, which was equivalent to the District Council average. The average satisfaction with service delivery was 66 per cent compared to the district average of 68 per cent. Satisfaction with the cleanliness of public space in the district and recycling is above average. The level of satisfaction with museums, theatres and parks is increasing significantly and amongst the best performers. However, satisfaction with housing overall and with waste collection was below average and satisfaction with planning services was amongst the worst 25 per cent of councils. Most local residents feel that the Council is easy to contact. Seventy per cent are satisfied with contact with the Council for example, ease of finding the right person and helpfulness of staff. Survey outcomes identify that customers are most positive about the Council treating everyone fairly and making the place a better one to live. However, they are least positive about the Council's ability to deliver value for money.

- 55 The Customer service centre is performing strongly. Residents report that the customer service centre is excellent; staff are helpful and give an impression of a caring Council. This is confirmed by mystery shopping exercises, which identified that staff were helpful, knowledgeable and responsive. User experience of the CSC is good - in January 2008, 86 per cent of users were very satisfied with the service they had received; 97 per cent said the advisor was able to deal with their enquiry fully. Eighty-eight per cent of customers felt that the quality of service had improved over the last 12 months. Visitors to the Council use a Q-matic system, which enables customer service centre staff to identify their needs quickly and to monitor waiting times. Whilst this works well for regular visitors to the Council it is not always, clear to new visitors how the system works and can lead to confusion. The service provided by the centre is evolving and improving through the multi-skilling of staff through training and work shadowing. This ensures users to access essential services. A more professional approach to customer service has led to a better customer experience and better access.
- 56 However, there is unequal access to some services across the district. The quality and accessibility of parks and leisure facilities across the district is variable. Local residents are concerned that the closure of public conveniences has not been carried out on the basis of robust needs analysis and appears to be reactive. Rural access is a barrier for some people for example poor public transport but short term plans to develop service access mainly focus on St Albans and Harpenden. The public's experience of the Council and its services is affected by where they live.
- 57 Despite the success of the CSC, the range of advice it offers is not comprehensive. The customer service centre staff can provide advice in key areas such as benefits but other front facing services such as leisure have not yet been migrated into the centre. Although staff are willing to work flexibly the management of peaks and troughs in workload remains a challenge. Interaction between reception and back office staff in dealing with customer enquiries is increasingly effective although there are no formal standards such as internal service level agreements in place. This means that the public cannot access all information effectively from a single point of contact.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 58** Whilst corporate value for money (VfM) is good, the efficiency and effectiveness of cross cutting activities such as access to services are not evaluated. The 2006/07 Use of Resources judgment scored VfM as good. The medium term financial strategy effectively underpins corporate planning. The Council has made good progress in delivering Government set efficiency targets (Gershon savings) Service costs are median or below whilst service performance is generally above median and continues to improve. VfM is not consistently integrated into service or business planning. For example, the customer services plan focuses on establishing standards to meet customer needs but does not link this to cost or value for money. Plans and targets to deliver efficiency savings in service plans are not always completed. Predicted savings from Business Improvement Programme (BIP) are not linked to specific actions or cost savings. Plans are not fully costed. The Council does not know whether its approach to access to services is delivering value for money.
- 59** The Council is not consistently analysing cost data to drive improvements in value for money. Opportunities to deliver and measure value for money through the CSC are not used effectively. Transaction costs are measured by the Customer Service Centre but are not being used effectively to inform service planning and development. Transaction costs are not benchmarked with other public and private agencies. Cost savings emerging from the movement of functions from 'back office' services are not yet measured to enable redistribution of resources. In contrast, the benefits service measures transactional costs and benchmark them against other East of England authorities. There is not a consistent approach to assessing the cost effectiveness of services.
- 60** The transformational agenda prioritises the improvement of VfM but this is at an early stage and impact is limited. Customer need and cost reductions are the key drivers for the transformation agenda. The BIP is designed to use advances in technology to create a more efficient and effective operating environment. Project priorities include; services designed around the user, freeing resources by reducing duplication and delivering efficiencies through reducing duplication of work by consolidation of administrative functions. The Council is prioritising improvements to value for money through its transformation programme.
- 61** The Council's approach to procurement is delivering efficiencies and improving value for money in service areas. The Council has a comprehensive procurement strategy designed to deliver VfM. It is delivering some efficiencies for example a five-year agreement with a private company to develop the Council's IT infrastructure with a share in the potential savings generated and the procurement of consultation through Hertfordshire's procurement framework leading to 25 per cent on its last consultation contract. The Council is saving money through the way it buys services.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 62 Overall, recent performance is above average. In the last three years, 60 per cent of performance indicators have improved, above the national average. In the last year, the rate of improvement has slowed and 50 per cent of the performance indicators improved, below the national average. However, as 44 per cent of indicators are among the best performers, this is still a positive picture. Amongst these, key access to service indicators have improved, such as average time to process new benefits claims, percentage of local authority homes which were non decent and percentage of household with access to kerbside recycling collections. Some diversity performance indicators such as the duty to promote race equality, racial incidents requiring further action, staff ratios of ethnic or disabled people compared with the local population have consistently performed well compared to other councils over the last three years. The Council is improving services that are important to local people.
- 63 The Council has consistently improved physical access to its services over recent years. It created the customer service centre from three reception areas and staff are now multiskilled. This has led to a better customer experience, which is monitored by a suite of performance indicators. In addition to enhancing telephone and face-to-face customer response, improvements include a better layout of its reception area, which gives more customer points. It also has electronic kiosks for access to its website. The customer service desk at Harpenden has also brought service closer to customers in the north of the district. The Council has taken action to meet the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and has provided hearing loops, better access to reception counters and automatic doors. This means it is easier for local people to access services.
- 64 The Council can evidence a track record of implementing changes which have made a positive difference to access. Customers have noticed access improvements in Council buildings. According to a recent (January 2008) Council survey, 88 per cent of customers felt that the quality of service had improved over the last 12 months. The Council has refurbished the historic Town Hall, which has brought its function rooms into public use and added the historic courtroom to the town's attractions. The building now houses the tourist information centre, to providing better and more central access. It has also revised its arrangements with its grounds maintenance contractor, and this has led to better grass cutting in areas of council housing in response to tenant feedback, more attention to environmental considerations and the introduction of park rangers in three of the district's parks. Individual services have improved access; including widening access to museums through doing visits to groups within a 30-minute radius and organising bespoke tours for groups of special needs children. Sustained improvements to access have been delivered over a number of years.

- 65 Outcomes for diverse groups within the community have improved in some services. The Council has increased outreach work, for example, for benefits customers. The LSP work in Sopwell ward has had a number of outcomes including ladies only swim times for Asian ladies, and enabling elderly residents to benefit from Tai Chi, subsidised health services and a community minibus. The Council has also funded a disability sports officer, who delivers sport and lifelong learning opportunities for people with disabilities with activities such as Boccia. The Council has a highly regarded Special Olympics programme. Therefore, the Council has a track record in widening access for all sections of the community.
- 66 The Council can demonstrate a track record of improvement in value for money. Combining the Council's reception areas into one customer centre led to savings although the total is unclear, which have been used to fund Saturday morning opening, providing customers with greater access. The Council has also delivered cashable savings at service level, for example, on the grounds maintenance contract, which saved £250,000, and in the benefits service by jointly designing and printing benefits forms with other Hertfordshire councils. The Council is improving the efficiency and effectiveness of its services.
- 67 The Council's track record on customer satisfaction is mostly improving. According to BVPI satisfaction indicators, over the last three years, satisfaction with the Council overall has remained above average. Over the same period satisfaction with complaints handling has remained at top level in comparison to other councils. And satisfaction with museums, galleries, theatres and concert halls has remained at the level of the top 25 per cent of councils. Satisfaction with parks and open spaces has improved to the level of the best performers over the last three years. Satisfaction with street cleanliness has also improved, but to below average level. Satisfaction with recycling has improved to above average level. However, the average number of days to respond to ombudsman complaints has deteriorated, and satisfaction with waste collection has fallen to below average level. Tenant satisfaction with the overall service has remained the same at below average level, but tenant satisfaction with participation has improved to below average level over the last three years. This shows that customers have noticed improvement in many Council services.
- 68 The Council has a track record of learning from and responding to external challenge. For example, the planning service has combined actions on Audit Commission Planning Inspection recommendations within its departmental work programme. It has implemented measures such as undertaking promotional activity and webcasting, although some of the work is still ongoing. The Council also has a comprehensive plan monitored by the Chief Executive's Board which encompasses recommendations from its Peer Challenge, Annual Audit and Inspection Letter, Investors in People and Planning Advisory Board. Therefore the Council ensures at service and senior management level that learning from external challenge is implemented.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 69 The Council has aims and future plans which are co-ordinated, robust and deliverable. It has a programme of linked improvements which aim to improve access to services. This includes updating the Council's ICT, developing a customer contact centre, corporate website, arrangements for corporate payments, home working, mobile working, unified enforcement and business process re-engineering arrangements around the projects. Project management and plans for the transformation of customer services are comprehensive and supported by councillors and managers. The Council has a 'reputation management' programme designed to improve customer satisfaction with the Council overall, co-ordinate information provision, improve external communications, branding and the website, which runs alongside its access improvement work. The business improvement programme is also supported by a communications strategy. The Council has started to communicate its access aims to staff, in order to ensure a smooth implementation. The range of plans is stretching and aspires to make the organisation flexible and customer responsive.
- 70 There is clear corporate commitment to improve access to services. There is clear leadership from the Chief Executive and other senior managers. The Council has a business improvement project board which ensures that managers and councillors monitor transformation plans on a weekly basis, ensuring that they stay on track and any problems are addressed straight away. Day to day working arrangements are also supported by a working group chaired by the Head of ICT. As a result, project management timelines are met.
- 71 The Council has a corporate performance management framework in place, which is used effectively to drive up performance in many services. Within this framework, performance indicators are monitored quarterly. Services have developed or retained local performance indicators to reflect issues, which are important to access to services, such as missed refuse bins. Good examples of target setting exist in the customer services centre such as time taken to resolve an issue, and are in line with best practice guidelines. These are reflected in staff appraisal targets, for example targets for responding to people and accuracy. Performance in the customer service centre is monitored by managers and by overview and scrutiny. The Council also monitors contractor's performance effectively. It has systems in place to ensure that improvements in access to services are delivered.

- 72 The Council has a culture which supports continuous improvement. Learning from within and outside the Council is used effectively to improve access to services. It has learnt from customers through the complaints process and this has led to changes such as simplified guidance on the planning process, improved design of the penalty charge notice for parking and more availability of home visits in the benefits service. The Council also learns from benchmarking costs and quality, for example in the benefits service but there is scope for the Council to extend its search for best practice outside these areas. The Council has learnt from its own experience, for example, in underestimating demand after the waste contract implementation, and is currently piloting new telephony and a call centre approach. In response to this, further changes to waste and recycling services are now being communicated extensively, for example through a new recycling website and a range of publications. Additional temporary staff are being recruited to deal with an anticipated increase in calls when alternate week collections are introduced in the Autumn. The Council has learnt from mistakes and taken action to rectify them.
- 73 An overarching vision for access is not consistently understood amongst stakeholders. As yet there are no firm joint plans for access to services developed with public sector partner organisations. The transformation plans cover the short to medium term, and not the long term. The Council is exploring this and recognises that it needs to improve communication of its access aims to the public and to other stakeholders. Its project plans are supported by communications plans but its external communication is limited to events and marketing around the launch. As a result it is potentially missing an opportunity to promote positive messages before go live date(s).
- 74 The plans are designed to increase service quality and decrease costs, but require further development. For example, the Council will have a better quality website and more responsive customer service for lower costs. Plans to improve the web site include easier navigation and an increased number of transactions to be available on line. It is also aiming for a corporate and integrated approach to regulation and predicts that that this will reduce staffing costs. However, the plans do not consistently contain targets for value for money or cost savings related to access to services or the transformation project, which means that progress at this level is difficult to monitor. Transformation plans are designed to improve access and reduce costs but lack targets which will allow progress to be evaluated easily.

- 75 Performance monitoring arrangements for the Council's access to services priority are not fully developed. Although some good examples of target setting exist in the customer service centre, the Council has not developed a basket of indicators to measure its progress on improving the customer experience across the range of its activities, including joint working with the town council at Harpenden. Work on customer standards is inconsistent as it does not always make the customer the starting point, and lacks regular monitoring and reporting. Up until now, the Council has focused on quantitative data from customers and could learn more from qualitative data. In addition, some of the linkages between the transformation projects and service level activity are not yet in place. For example, as the Council has not updated some of its 2007-2010 service plans since 2007, some service plans do not include actions or SMART targets which reflect their role in the business improvement project.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 76 The Council is investing resources in its proposals for access. Its arrangements with its new ICT contractor are based on a five year costing plan and the costs are built in as part of the contract. Resourcing of the transformation project is partly through vacant posts and part through planned savings. It has assumed that global savings from business process reengineering are over £300,000 on top of the current proposals, which yield about £250k on an annualised basis. This is based on preliminary business process reengineering in services such as abandoned vehicles but it is not linked into specific actions and cost savings. The Council has a contingency plan of freezing more posts in the case that savings will be made at a slower pace than anticipated. However, this will be limited to two additional posts. The transformation project has a three year budget linked to a medium term financial strategy. Costs for the new customer relationship management were already set aside in 2006 when it looked at an earlier feasibility study. The new solution will not exceed the pre-agreed budget. These measures have ensured that the necessary resources are in place.
- 77 Staff capacity is being redirected to support the delivery of the transformation project but is constraining aspects of service delivery. In addition to the expertise of its ICT contract staff, it has two of its own staff who are trained in hands-on business process re-engineering. There is also a growing focus on training for customer care and equalities. Managers are in place who have previous experience of similar projects and who are familiar with ICT project management. The Council is also working on a new set of management competencies for the future and is delivering additional management training. Sickness absence does not detract from staff capacity, and in 2006/07, the Council was amongst the top 25 per cent of councils for low levels of sickness absence. However, in seeking to create capacity for its business improvement project, the Council has constrained access to some services in the short term. It has held back recruitment on some posts in order to create savings, and in some cases this has had an effect on staff. This could make it difficult to deliver a high level of service. The Council plans for this to change and will realign service expertise to its access plans. The Council is investing its staff resource in transformation but this is leading to the capacity of staff delivering services being stretched.

- 78 Improved internal communication systems are having a positive effect on capacity. The Chief Executive has created a senior management meeting, which discusses a range of issues and plans jointly, puts more focus on management leadership. He is also delivering regular team briefings to all staff. The Council has recently produced a 'we are changing' leaflet which describes the business improvement programme, so that staff are fully informed. Better communication is increasing the understanding amongst staff of the transformation agenda and how they can contribute to it.
- 79 Procurement practices are extending the capacity of the Council to improve access to its services. The Council has appointed a lead officer for procurement and has a comprehensive procurement strategy. The strategy includes modern procurement practices and seeks to deliver efficiencies through partnership working for example with the County Council. It aims for equality of access through a range of measures such as putting tender contracts in plain English and on the website, considering how to package tender contracts, and ensuring consistency of approach across the Council. It is applying its procurement strategy to its partnership agreement with a private company which is aiming to deliver improved ICT and the technology needed for the business improvement project. Both partners will have a share in the project's savings, therefore they both have an incentive to achieve the Council's access to service aims.
- 80 The Council is investing to improve its knowledge of the local area. The Council has recognised that it needs to address deficiencies in its demographic knowledge and has acquired specific software to be able to carry out this kind of analysis. In July 2007, Overview and Scrutiny submitted a report on deprivation, identifying pockets of deprivation across the district and recommending a corporate approach, with specific actions for super output areas (ward level deprivation). It has also started work to analyse need at service level. With neighbouring councils, it has received a grant to carry out a strategic housing market assessment, which give a strategic picture of housing needs and help to support future access for all groups. As a result the Council will be better able to target its services to meet local needs.
- 81 Workforce planning is not aligned to the Council's plans for developing access to services. Knowledge of project management is limited and the Council does not have a differentiated or proportionate approach to projects of varying sizes. The Council its training needs on appraisal outputs and the delivery of corporate priorities such as customer care and equalities awareness. The Council's workforce plan covers the period 2003-2008. Whilst there is a strategic approach to developing human resources beyond this period it is not clear how this will ensure that the training and new skills to deliver the new approaches to access are in place. The Council is not effectively developing its staff to support its access agenda.

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- 82** Although the Council's approach to external funding is improving it requires further development. The Council has had funding successes such as £239,000 from the Big Lottery Fund for Children's Play. This will benefit access to facilities for children and young people over the next three years. There are also pockets of good practice such as a newly established post in Leisure, which has already been successful in attracting £10,000 in the first two months. However, the Council lacks a corporate strategy which would maximise its potential to attract external funding. This lack of an overall approach means that the Council is mostly dependent on its own resources or on savings for its corporate customer care and access to services initiatives.