

Access to Services

Rochford District Council

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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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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 co-ordination 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

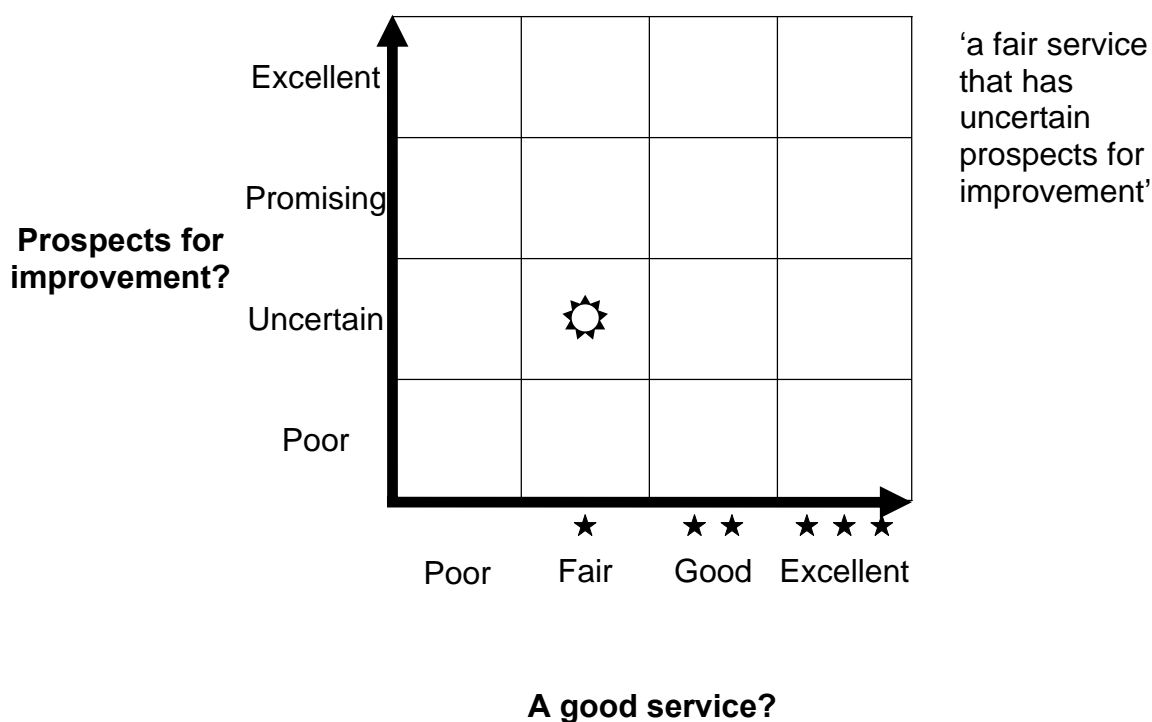
- 1 Rochford District Council is a small district located in South East Essex. It has three towns, Rayleigh, Rochford and Hockley and a number of small, rural settlements poorly served by public transport. The district has a population of 79,700 people which is predicted to rise to 80,300 by 2011, with a forecasted large increase of those over the age of 85 years. People from black and minority ethnic communities represent 1.7 per cent of the population.
- 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 Rochford District Council's approach to accessing its services is 'fair' because access arrangements are improving and the majority of Council services can be accessed through a single direct telephone number, at two reception areas and via the website. The Council has invested resources to significantly improve physical access to its two main reception areas. The quality of information promoting Council services is good and many services can be accessed electronically. However, consultation and engagement with some marginalised and traditionally hard to reach groups is limited thereby restricting the Council's understanding of their access needs and preferences. Service standards and local performance targets are not consistently informed by users to ensure their needs are met and satisfaction with the way complaints are handled is poor. There is some poor quality of service when enquiries are passed from the first point of contact to individual departments.

- 5 Prospects for improvement are uncertain. Corporately, the Council has improved poorly performing services and made progress against key priorities including improving accessibility. An access to services working group has been formed to develop accessibility. However, key areas remain to be addressed and the Council's approach to improvement planning is not fully effective. Access to services is not clearly understood or supported by a clear vision and leadership. Whilst there is commitment to improve further, capacity is already stretched and no analysis has been undertaken of the skills and resources available and required to deliver accessibility improvements.
- 6 In order to assist the Council to improve accessibility the Audit Commission has made four recommendations. These are to:
- develop and implement a customer access strategy supported by robust action plan to ensure delivery;
 - extend the Council's knowledge and understanding of community access need;
 - establish a systematic approach to managing and improving value for money to ensure services are effective, efficient and economic; and
 - increase the Council's knowledge and understanding of accessibility.

Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed Rochford District Council as providing a 'fair' one-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 8 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- access arrangements for local people are improving including an assessment of customer preferences, for example physical access to buildings is good with 88 per cent of Council public buildings fully DDA² compliant;
 - the majority of Council services can be accessed through the single Council direct telephone number, two main reception areas and through the Council's website; and if required, there is access to signers, translators and interpreters;
 - 90.5 per cent of enquiries are resolved at the first point of contact;

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.

² DDA - Disability Discrimination Act

8 Access to Services | Scoring the service

- all 2004/05 e-government targets have been met, such as benefit forms available 24 hours on-line;
- publicity to promote Council services is effective. There is high resident awareness of the Council and of the services they provide;
- there is consistent application of equalities and diversity considerations in practice;
- there is generally a range of high quality information in appropriate locations and formats informing local people of the services available to them. Positive examples include LSVT offer information;
- there is some evidence of learning from complaints to improve access to services; and performance for complaint handling is now meeting targets;
- the Council is assessing the impact of policies on all communities to ensure that specific access needs are addressed;
- the council are investing in ICT services according to its priority to improve access; and
- there has been effective use of procurement and partnership activities to support access to service improvements.

9 However:

- consultation and engagement activities are not comprehensive and engagement with some marginalised and traditionally hard to reach groups is limited in terms of understanding their access needs and preferences;
- access to online services is variable and is not meeting the needs of all users;
- limited evidence of recent community involvement or Citizens' panel engagement on access to service preferences;
- the Council has only achieved level one of the Equality Standard for Local Government;
- corporate service standards and local performance targets for customer services are not consistently informed by users to ensure their needs are met;
- the Council is in the worst of 25 per cent of councils nationally for complaints handling. Processes for complaint handling and learning from complaints are variable in their effectiveness. The Council does not have a comprehensive understanding of how complaints relate to different sections of the community in order to improve access to services; and
- there is a poor level of service quality for some aspects of particular services. For example, mystery shopping exercises revealed poor responses from reception and back office staff when dealing with some enquiries, for example some environmental services.

10 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- access to services is not underpinned by a clear vision and priorities for the future informed by an analysis of user needs and actions to address them. There is no consistent understanding within the Council about what accessibility means;
- there is no comprehensive framework or plan in place to consult and engage users, non-users and marginalised groups to inform and improve council services and service delivery;
- there is no clear political or officer leadership to promote and drive access to services in the future;
- the Council's approach to improvement planning is not fully effective;
 - preparation of plans is piecemeal and uncoordinated with some of the key strategies and plans either very new or still in draft form;
 - strategies and plans are descriptive; and
 - they are not supported by outcome, user focussed and SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and timely) action plans;
- there is no robust analysis of the human and financial resources required to deliver access to services plans and strategies to ensure there are the skills and resources to deliver plans;
- Council response to external reviews has been mixed with key weaknesses such as engagement with the public to inform priorities and service delivery and underpinning plans with robust, outcome, user focussed action plans still not addressed;
- there is an expectation that an improved website will deliver improvements to accessibility without any robust plans to address non IT issues which will disadvantage those unable to use IT or are unable to travel to an office;
- whilst Council's performance has improved a significant number of targets are still not being met;
- performance management, whilst improved, is still not embedded and performance against cost is not analysed to demonstrate value for money; and
- whilst mechanisms to share information and learning across the council are place, they are not fully effective.

11 However:

- an access to services working group has been formed to address accessibility issues;
- physical access to Council buildings and electronic service delivery has improved;
- overall satisfaction with Council services remains high, albeit satisfaction with individual services is more mixed;

10 Access to Services | Scoring the service

- approach to delivering value for money has improved; and
- corporately, there is effective human resource planning with considerations to future skills requirements. However, with regard to accessibility, the council has not undertaken an analysis of the skills it has and requires to improve accessibility.

Recommendations

- 12 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 costs³ 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 Develop and implement a Customer Access Strategy supported by a robust and SMART action plan with clear outward facing targets to:

- *define what accessibility means;*
- *identify users needs;*
- *prepare actions to address and improve accessibility especially those needs identified by users;*
- *identify user focussed and measurable targets to ensure successful delivery of improvements to users;*
- *identify and allocate human and financial resources required to implement improvements; and*
- *clarify roles and responsibilities, including lead officer and political champion.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved understanding within Council about what accessibility means to ensure key issues are addressed;
- engagement with users to inform and improve future service delivery;
- identification and provision of resources to deliver improvements; and
- enhanced co-ordination and focus on accessibility to ensure issues are addressed by all sections of the Council.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2007.

³ Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent 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 by building on the work undertaken to date and engaging with:

- *users and non-users;*
- *marginalised groups;*
- *local community groups; and*
- *utilise 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 2007.

Recommendation

R3 Establish a systematic approach to managing and improving value for money for access to services' functions by:

- *using comparative data already collected, supplemented where necessary, to identify areas where performance is low and/or high cost compared to that achieved by other councils; and challenging the reasons for this;*
- *establishing robust cost and efficiency indicators; and*
- *maximising opportunities for benchmarking to improve understanding of the relative quality and effectiveness of the revenues and benefits contact centre, and to learn from the experiences of other councils.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved cost effectiveness of the service;
- raised awareness of value for money within the service and externally; and
- enhanced capacity to target priorities and deliver benefits for users.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2007.

Recommendation

R4 Increase Council knowledge and understanding of the Access to Services agenda by:

- *working jointly with other Councils and partner organisations to share information and expertise;*
- *improve accessibility to partner organisation sites to enhance accessibility to public services;*
- *identify resources and skills to progress this agenda;*
- *access appropriate training to address identified skill gaps; and*
- *clarify Officer and Councillor leadership regarding 'Access to Services'*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased knowledge and skills of Officers and Councillors; and
- better use of learning from other Councils and partner organisations.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2007.

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 Rochford is a small district located in south east Essex. It is bounded by the River Crouch to the north and the urban areas of Southend and Castle Point to the south. The district has three towns, Rayleigh, Rochford and Hockley. Much of the remaining area is green belt with a large area around Foulness, largely under Ministry of Defence control. Southend Airport straddles the district's southern boundary with Southend.
- 14 The district has a population of 79,700 people, living in 33,700 households. This is predicted to rise to 80,300 by 2011, with a forecasted large increase of those over the age of 85 years. People from black and minority ethnic communities represent 1.7 per cent of the population.
- 15 The area is relatively affluent, ranking 316 out of 354 most deprived authorities nationally. The most deprived ward, Foulness and Great Wakering East, ranks 2,680 of 8,414. Owner occupied homes constitute 86 per cent of households. This is the fourth highest in the country. Private renting accounts for 15.4 per cent. The Council's housing stock is currently 1,755 dwellings, of which 658 are elderly and sheltered units. House prices are higher than the average for England and Wales.
- 16 Unemployment levels are below regional and national averages at 1 per cent. Sixty eight per cent of the workforce commutes out of the area. Only five local businesses employ more than 250 staff. A small part of the district around Rochford and the airport falls within the Thames Gateway regeneration area (TGSE). TGSE has developed an ambitious sub-regional agenda for growth, development and regeneration, and is delivering its vision through the TGSE partnership which Rochford has signed up to.

The Council

- 17 Rochford has been under a Conservative administration since May 2002, which holds 34 of the 39 seats. Prior to this, there were minority administrations in place involving the Liberal Democrats, Labour and Independents. A new Leader was appointed in May 2004 and a new Deputy Leader appointed in May 2005. Since May 2006, the Council has operated a Committee system based on five Policy Committees, a single Review Committee, with Development Control, Standards, Audit, Appeals and Licensing Committees.

- 18 The Council has a Senior Management Team (SMT) comprising the Chief Executive, two corporate directors and six heads of service. A new organisational structure is in the process of being implemented which sees the separation of external, front line services, from back office support services, including the creation of a Customer and Member Services Division. The Council employs 238 full-time equivalent staff. Many of the frontline services are externalised. The revenue budget for 2006/07 is £8,468,800 (estimate), with low reserves and a capital budget of around £3 million.
- 19 The Council is aiming to make Rochford 'the place of choice in the county to live, work and visit'. This is to be delivered through collaborative working with partners and communities and is underpinned by six principal aims, to:
- provide quality, cost effective services;
 - work towards a safer and more caring community;
 - provide a green and sustainable environment;
 - encourage a thriving local economy;
 - improve the quality of life for people in the district; and
 - maintain and enhance the local heritage.
- 20 Rochford's Community Plan was produced in 2004 by the Local Strategic Partnership which included representatives of statutory agencies, local businesses and the community and voluntary sectors. The Strategy sets out a long, medium and short term vision for the district to cover 20 years.
- 21 The key themes of Rochford's Community Strategy were developed from public consultation and agreed in partnership with other agencies and the business and voluntary sector. They are:
- feeling safe;
 - looking after our environment;
 - a good education, good skills and good jobs;
 - healthy living;
 - getting around; and
 - an inclusive community.

A major review of the Community Strategy is currently taking place (December 2006).

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 1999 the white paper, 'Modernising Government', 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. BVPI157 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 Council has a corporate approach to improving customer services and access. There is a clear link between access and customer service aims and priorities detailed within Community Strategy 2004 and the Council's strategies. The Council's key commitment for customer access within the Community Strategy is '*an inclusive community*'. The Council's corporate strategy strengthens this commitment.
- 26** The Community Strategy recognises the District's location relative to the Thames Gateway South Essex. The Council's long term ambition is to be the 'green part' of the Gateway, developing the District as an area for leisure, recreation and tourism. The Essex Local Area Agreement has the theme of 'Health and Opportunities for All'. As a result of this, Rochford's partnership arrangements have been revised with an emphasis on developing community involvement through a newly established specific sub-group of the Local Strategic Partnership.
- 27** The Council works with a number of partners on access. For example:
- Capita - extended hours for Revenues and Benefits at the one-stop contact centre;
 - Star Partnership - there are a range of community-based projects targeted at a variety of sectors of the community, eg Football Foundation Trust project;
 - Virgin Active - developing improved access to leisure facilities;
 - Serviceteam and Green Recycling - improving access to refuse and recycling services;
 - Wyvern Community Transport - providing improvement access to transport facilities; and
 - Libraries - signposting people to Rochford services via the website.

- 28 The Council is beginning to achieve its ambitions for improved access to services. Customer access is delivered corporately through a central switchboard with direct line numbers, two public reception points in the District's main areas of population – Rochford and Rayleigh, and a separate Planning Services Reception in Rochford. There is an outsourced partnership arrangement to provide a one-stop extended hours telephone service for revenue and benefits service users. It is the Council's intention to move to a corporate 'one-stop' approach to customer access implementing a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) solution by development of their electronic records management system. Opportunities are being explored with the County Council and other providers as to how this can best be utilised to maximise value for money.
- 29 The Council's customer access work is addressing Government requirements. The Council is working to support national cross-cutting priorities associated with e-Government, disability and equalities legislation. It is addressing the Gershon Review 2004 towards improving levels of accessibility, efficiency, and performance.
- 30 Currently, the Council does not have an adopted Access to Services strategy. Access to services is integrated into the work of each specific service area. An inter-departmental access to services working group has been established to develop and implement this strategy and action plan, which will be improved as a result of what the Council learns from this inspection.

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

Customer and community focus

- 31 The Council does not have a comprehensive understanding of the needs of all its communities to inform the design and delivery of access to services. Although service delivery is informed by national and best practice research and identified needs of residents, citizens and service users; this is not wholly inclusive as there are marginalised groups that the Council is not reaching, for example young people. The Council uses the citizens' panel to inform service planning and improvement and standard consultation methods to inform service delivery and design.
- 32 The Council has redesigned some services to respond to customer needs and consultation. These include the merger of council tax and benefits service and the introduction of a one stop, extended hours contact centre as a result of a customer survey; the extensive refurbishment of Clements Hall and the creation of a new leisure centre at Rayleigh following consultation on the leisure contract; and the return to the weekly collection of household waste across the District following a consultation exercise in relation to recycling services. The take-up of these services has improved as result of the Council's actions.

- 33 However, the Council does not have a comprehensive understanding of the needs of all of its communities and there is a lack of engagement with some minority groups. For example, there are gaps in needs' assessments for young people. The Council is now addressing this issue through engagement with the Youth Assembly.
- 34 The Council has used complaints to inform service design and delivery. Customers who lived in flats had complained to the Council that they were unable to recycle. The Council have taken action to address this issue through the introduction of a different mix of bins introduced in November 2006 with a completion date due in March 2007. This will ensure that these residents receive an inclusive service.
- 35 The Council has made good use of national, local and best practice research for an improved understanding of general access preferences. Research has been used to inform planning, prioritisation and delivery of the Council's Revenues and Benefit's Contact Centre. It has recognised the need to maximise access to these services through ensuring they are accessible by pedestrians, public or private transport.

Ease of access for all

- 36 The Council has made good progress in improving remote and physical access to services and information but it is not yet consistent across all services and does not currently meet all local needs.
- 37 The majority of Council services can be accessed through telephone contact. This is available from 8.00am - 5.30pm (5.00pm on Fridays) with the addition of the extended hours service for revenues and benefits from 8.00am – 8.00pm Monday to Friday and 9.00am - 12 noon on Saturdays. The out-of-hours emergency service number is clearly publicised and well used, particularly by housing tenants.
- 38 There are good examples of increasing access to services and information through the website, including the targeting of specific groups. However, provision is not yet consistent and does not currently meet all users' needs. Online provision currently allows payments and balances, enquiries, reporting of environmental problems, planning and building control applications, comments/complaints about Council services, and application for jobs within the Council. The website is speech enabled and has a text only option and is linked to 'Essex online,' a county-wide portal providing comprehensive information and links to facilitate access to local services.

- 39 However, the Council's website is classified as 'content plus' rather than 'fully transactional'. Whilst online provision enables a number of transactions, services including benefit applications are not available on line. Links to external sites and accessing partners' services using web links are not always clear and not easily accessible. The website does not meet the needs of disabled users, and with only standard translation tools available, other community languages in the district are not covered. Whilst the Council is increasing access to services for certain groups, eg business community and homelessness applicants the website is not inclusive to all residents.
- 40 Overall, physical access to Council buildings, including disabled access is good. The Rochford and Rayleigh reception areas, which provide access to a range of Council services including direct access to revenues and benefits services, are accessible for all users, being located in areas of greatest demand. They provide a good example of how the Council has developed a front line service taking full consideration of disabled people's needs. The reception areas are fully DDA compliant, are fitted with induction loops and provide access to signers, translators and interpreters to meet the needs of people with hearing impairments and those whose first language is not English. Opening hours are based on consultation with the residents' panel.
- 41 Physical access to other public buildings is good. Eighty eight per cent of Council's buildings are currently fully DDA compliant. The only Council building that does not fully comply with the DDA is the upstairs room at the Great Wakering Leisure Centre and the cost effectiveness of pursuing this in the context of usage is a key factor for the Council. Leisure centres are in accessible locations and easily accessible by public transport, all centres are fully DDA compliant and this has ensured access to programmes by vulnerable users such as those with physical and mental disabilities.
- 42 Community information is generally of a high quality and widely available from a variety of locations and in a range of formats. Examples include information LSVT offer information, services relating to adult education, older peoples' services, and environmental services. Copies of publications can be ordered in large print, audio and Braille and a publication translation service is available for the main community languages. Libraries provide up-to-date community information and act as an additional contact point. Reception areas have a broad range of information in several formats and can arrange translations of information leaflets. The Council is increasing access to services through this broad-based approach to information distribution.
- 43 The Council targets information to hard-to-reach groups. For example, the LSVT information process to tenants included door to door contact of 1,806 of 2,018 tenants, eight drop-in sessions, use of a mobile unit at Rochford and Rayleigh markets, and individual contact with 313 of 366 sheltered tenants. By targeting information, the Council ensures all residents can access their services.

Standards

- 44 There are corporate customer care standards and local performance targets for customer services. These include contact by telephone, face-to-face, email, the website, correspondence and complaints. However, these have not been informed by users so the council do not know if their needs are being met.
- 45 The Council does have corporate service standards and local performance targets for customer services but these have not consistently been informed by users to ensure their needs are met. Corporate service standards are in place for visitors in all public reception areas, replying to letters, e-mails, complaints and answering telephone calls. All standards are available on request and are published on the Council's website. However, these standards and targets are not detailed within any service information leaflets, therefore local people are not aware of what they can expect from the Council and its services.
- 46 Customer care standards are reinforced in contract procedures and services provided by key partners such as Capita (the contact centre contractor), Hammond's (the bailiffs), Springboard HA (handyman and gardening service). Method statements on customer care are included in leisure, refuse and grounds maintenance contracts.
- 47 External reviews are being used effectively to improve service standards. The Council commissioned an external review of the revenues standards in 2005 and the consultant recommended changes leading to a new bailiff contract which meets industry best practice levels. The BFI review identified in-work residents found it difficult to access the service which led to the introduction of the extended weekday and Saturday benefits service.

Engagement

- 48 The Council uses a range of mechanisms to consult, engage and communicate with users and non-users, but its approach is not yet comprehensive or inclusive of all minority groups. The citizens' panel includes representation across the age groups, including people from minority communities and disabled people. However, there is little evidence of recent community involvement or Citizens' panel engagement on access to service preferences.
- 49 The Council uses a range of mechanisms to consult, engage and communicate with users and non-users, but its approach is not yet comprehensive or inclusive of all minority groups. The Citizens' panel and individual service consultations provide corporate and service-based opportunities to influence service design and delivery. The Citizens' panel includes representation across the age groups, including people from minority communities and disabled people.

- 50** There are some good examples of specific service consultation and engagement activities targeting vulnerable and specific groups of people. These activities are informing service improvements and supporting vulnerable users to access mainstream services. For example, outreach visits to homeless people. The Council uses the BME Citizens' panel (formed by Essex Housing Officers group) to consult formally on housing issues but also uses this panel for corporate consultation to ensure this community avoids consultation overload as there is only a small number of BME residents dispersed across the County. Through proactive engagement the Council is improving specific services based on informed needs, which are benefiting citizens.
- 51** Whilst mechanisms are in place, there is limited community involvement or Citizens' panel engagement on access to service preferences. For example, other than an online survey, users, non-users and the Citizens Panel have not been asked for their views on the design of the website and other user-facing ICT services. In addition, it is not clear how the results of service engagement initiatives are assessed corporately so that implications for overall access arrangements and corporate standards can be determined. Without corporately considering more explicit consultation on access to service preferences, opportunities for service improvement may be missed.
- 52** The use of publicity to promote access to services is effective. There is high resident awareness of the existence of the Revenues and Benefits contact centre and the Rayleigh and Rochford reception areas and what services they provide, through a wide range of publicity to promote them, including roadshows, 'Rochford District Matters' - the Council's paper, flyers, community visits, e-mail/website, joint work with libraries and other voluntary groups, and advertising in the local press. Feedback from staff and voluntary groups highlights adequate promotion of services particularly to hard-to-reach groups and BME communities. Effective promotion can impact on communities accessing these services.
- 53** A range of feedback mechanisms are used to inform service improvements. These include feedback forms for sports and arts activities, regular telephone surveys on housing repairs, use of focus groups to deliver the planning service, and evaluation forms from users of translation and interpretation services.
- 54** Processes for handling complaints and learning from complaints are ineffective. Satisfaction with complaints handling is in the worst of 25 per cent of councils nationally. To address this, the Council has expanded the corporate complaints and comments system to provide an online reporting facility. Complaints are now discussed in divisional management teams to identify areas of service improvement. For example, complaints about refuse collection and missed bins led to a review of systems and closer working with the contractor resulting in a significant reduction in the number of complaints. The Council is now listening to its citizens through handling all complaints effectively.

- 55 The Council is starting to develop equality monitoring to inform service improvements. Currently, equalities information is not included in the complaints form therefore the Council is unable to measure satisfaction levels across all sections of the community. The Council recognises this as a service failure and envisages that this will improve as the CRM system is populated and future consultation exercises are conducted.

Diversity

- 56 There are some equalities considerations in policy developments but the Council cannot yet fully demonstrate that equalities monitoring is effectively used to inform service improvements. There is effective implementation of equalities considerations in contracts, access to services for disabled people is good and there is a consistent application of equalities and diversity considerations in practice. However, there is no effective strategy to address ICT inequalities.
- 57 The Council has achieved level one of the Equality Standard for Local Government, and has a framework to improve consistency of equalities monitoring. Preparation of Equalities Impact Assessments (EIAs) has been prioritised in terms of risk of potential discrimination and its impact and training for managers is currently taking place. The Council is working jointly with Maldon and Castle Point Council using the 'Building Capacity East' funding, to achieve level 2 by the end of March 2007.
- 58 Equality issues are effectively considered in contracts. The Council includes an equality clause in all contracts. It monitors performance regularly against this clause and against key equalities indicators within its contract management arrangements. For example, the leisure contract requires all sections of the community to be catered for, provides for outreach work and services for under-represented groups. In addition, Contractors' and suppliers' diversity policies are monitored annually. Under contract they are required to set targets for workforces to work towards diversity profiles for the communities they serve.
- 59 Access to services for people with disabilities is good. For example, the reception areas have been completely refurbished to ensure they are fully DDA compliant. This includes on-site parking for people with disabilities, disabled toilet facilities, a hearing loop, lowered desks, improved signage and use of colour to enhance access for people with sight impairment. A PC for public internet access is available, as is a translation service on request. In addition, outreach workers carry out home visits providing access to housing benefit assessments and there is good consideration of disabled people's needs in developing leisure services, eg a play scheme for disabled children. This work has resulted in disabled people having equitable levels of access to services.

- 60 There is not an effective strategy to address ICT inequalities. The website action plan prepared in September 2006 refers to the need to engage with local disability groups to ensure their accessibility needs are met. However, there is no detail about how this will be done and the new revised website will be launched in early 2007 with minimal user input into its design. There are some developments taking place. The website meets AA level of accessibility and the Council is using the Youth Assembly to identify and meet the needs of young. The absence of a strategic plan directing these and other developments means the Council risks increasing exclusion across disadvantaged groups.
- 61 The Council's workforce is reflective of its diverse population. Top quartile performance is demonstrated in the percentage of the workforce from minority groups. The Council is proactive in its recruitment practices. It encourages applications from disabled people, and has adopted procedures. A range of media is also used, eg the 'Careers in Essex' recruitment portal. Monitoring systems are now in place to ensure the council are adhering to statutory ethnic monitoring duties, eg Age, Disability and Gender.
- 62 There is a consistent application of equalities and diversity considerations in practice. There are effective employee monitoring mechanisms in place and equalities issues are integrated in key training courses, such as customer service training, service planning preparation, performance development reviews and recruitment and selection. Most managers, staff and councillors have now undergone specific equalities and diversity training. Reception teams have undergone sign language training and know how to operate type talk to enable them to communicate with people with a hearing impairment.

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 63 Overall performance is mixed and service responsiveness is improving in many service areas.
- 64 There are good levels of performance against targets within the reception areas and the revenues and benefits contact centre. These are meeting targets for both waiting times and resolution at the first point of contact. All e-government targets have been met and 92 per cent of Freedom of Information Act requests were responded to within the 20-day target during 2005/06.
- 65 Service responsiveness is improving in many service areas. Unaudited BVPIs for 2005/06 show improvements in, for example, providing direct payments and processing of new benefits claims. This demonstrates improved access outcomes particularly for vulnerable groups through reduced waiting times to receive a service.
- 66 Satisfaction with the way complaints are handled was in the worst quartile (2003 data). There has not been a significant reduction in complaints received in line with improvements to services. However, performance in complaint handling is now meeting target levels in all areas but this has only been achieved recently.

- 67 There are good partnership arrangements which are delivering real improvements for users in accessing services. Capita for the extended hours revenues and benefits one-stop contact centre, the STAR partnership for a range of community based projects and Virgin Active for improved leisure facilities. The Council also has partnerships with the Citizen's Advice Bureaux (CAB), and community groups. Together they provide a broad range of information, advice and referral services to customers.
- 68 The Council is innovative in its use of service provision for specific access needs. The Council provides a number of services which address the particular needs of individuals within its diverse community. The Wyvern Community Transport and innovative taxi scheme enable people who do not have their own transport or cannot access public transport to access Council services. The assisted pull out bin service has been introduced for less able residents and the Rayleigh Windmill has been refurbished with a camera system to give disabled visitors the opportunity to explore the upper floors and adjacent sensory garden.

User experience

- 69 Overall, users' satisfaction levels with services have improved. However, there is some variation in the quality of service experienced through the mystery shopping exercises.
- 70 There has been improvement in resident satisfaction with the overall performance of the Council in the last three years, including its efficiency, and value for money provided. Results from the residents' survey 2005/06 show that 69 per cent of respondents who contacted the Council were satisfied with the service received, with higher satisfaction in black and ethnic minority groups at 75 per cent. Satisfaction with key services where access is a significant component has improved significantly. For example in street cleaning, council tax collection, cultural and recreational facilities, housing benefit and Council housing services. The Council is well placed to deliver further improvements based on successes achieved in satisfaction levels.
- 71 There are good levels of service at frontline access points. Mystery shopping exercises revealed that frontline staff are generally helpful, polite and well-informed. There are welcoming and user friendly environments, in most of the service receptions we visited, including play facilities for children in reception areas. There is a good physical environment at the Rochford and Rayleigh reception points, including disabled access.
- 72 However, there is a poor level of service quality for some aspects of particular services. For example, mystery shopping exercises revealed poor responses from reception and back office staff when dealing with some enquiries. For example environmental service related telephone enquiries not listened to and being transferred to inappropriate recorded messages and the failure to respond to email enquiries. Other examples included inability of members of staff to provide adequate information and support at the first point of contact; no appropriate referrals to the correct department; and being directed to a number of departments before queries were addressed. There is a potential risk that the Council is excluding its most vulnerable users from accessing essential services.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 73** The Council provides adequate value for money for 'access to services'. The broad economy and efficiency of the Rochford one-stop contact centre compares favourably with other Essex authorities albeit that the assessment of quality/effectiveness of service provision is limited. ICT and capital investment in Rochford services are aligned to policy decision over a five-year period. Spending levels are monitored effectively and procurement decisions are taken to increase the likelihood of future efficiency savings.
- 74** Service provision through the Rochford one-stop contact centre compares favourably with other Essex authorities albeit that the assessment of quality/effectiveness of service provision and benchmarking data is limited. Total expenditure on services is lowest quartile nationally (£9,764,000 in 2005/06) and expenditure per head compared to other Essex authorities is second lowest (£124.06 in 2005/06).
- 75** ICT and capital investment in Rochford services are aligned to policy decisions over a five-year period. ICT and capital investments are aligned to an assessment of customers' needs and preferences, for example refurbishment of playschemes and recycling expansion, the HRA spend programme, and the Leisure Contract was developed following consultation with residents.
- 76** Spending levels are monitored effectively. The Council has a robust process to ensure that high spending is identified and addressed as detailed in Member scrutiny arrangements. Any in-year policy changes are fully assessed for resource implications and spending levels are monitored on a monthly basis. Managers are required to resolve overspends in service departments as quickly as possible.
- 77** Procurement decisions are taken to increase the likelihood of future efficiency savings. The green waste contract was let on a comparatively short-term basis up to March 2008, to coincide with the end date of other key contracts. This places the Council in a good position to tender a wide range of services together, therefore, making further efficiency savings. This timescale has also been set in order to dovetail into the Essex Waste Management Procurement process and therefore increase the possibility of entering into future integrated contracts either horizontally or vertically.
- 78** There is effective use of procurement to deliver value for money. Direct expenditure, including salaries, on the Revenues and Benefits service has reduced from 2004/05 to 2005/06, producing a cashable efficiency saving of £80,822 whilst at the same time providing enhanced customer access via the out-sourced contact centre and improved service delivery. In addition, the review of leisure drove the new 20-year contract that delivered cost savings, has a profit share arrangement, funded Sports and Arts Development Officers, funded a substantial part of 'Rochford District Matters' - the Council's quarterly residents' newspaper and provided new and improved facilities.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 79** The Council's prospects for improving are uncertain. Corporately it has improved poorly performing services and made progress against key priorities including improving accessibility. However, key areas remain to be addressed and the Council's approach to improvement planning is not fully effective. Access to services is not clearly understood or supported by a clear vision and leadership. Whilst there is commitment to improve further, capacity is already stretched and no analysis has been undertaken of the skills and resources available and required to deliver accessibility improvements.

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 80** The service has made changes to deliver accessibility improvements but key areas remain to be tackled. Improvement against some access related performance indicators (PIs) is slow. Since 2003/04 the Council has made poor progress in promoting racial equality and improving the handling of complaints. Consultation and engagement with all sectors of the community to inform service delivery remains a key weakness. Without a good understanding of community needs and an effective use of complaints the Council can not be sure that its actions and services will meet the accessibility needs of customers.
- 81** Access to Council buildings and electronic service delivery has improved. Access to council buildings for people with disabilities has improved - the 2005/06 data indicates above average performance. This has been achieved by the provision of a new DDA compliant contact centre in Rochford and a range of accessibility enhancements to the Civic Suite at Rayleigh. E-enabled transactions have improved recently - 2005/06 data indicates that 100 per cent of interaction with the public can now be delivered electronically and key forms are now on the website.
- 82** The Council's response to external reviews is mixed and some key weaknesses have not been addressed. For example the quality of some improvement plans and user engagement to inform actions and plans remains poor. Other improvements, such as the very recent introduction of public speaking at planning committee, only brings the Council's performance to a level that has been in place many years in the majority of councils. Following the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) in 2004 and the progress assessment in December 2005 the Council has improved services that were identified as underperforming and impact on vulnerable sections of the population - for example benefits. Internal mechanisms to manage performance and risk have improved from a low base but are not yet fully embedded or effective.

- 83 Improvement tends to be reactive and slow. Key access related weaknesses such as engagement with residents to inform priorities and service delivery, systematic sharing of learning and underpinning plans with robust, outcome, user focussed action plans have not been addressed despite being identified in 2004. There are a number of very recent action plans and draft strategies and most are not supported by robust delivery plans. The Council acknowledged that the access to services strategy and action plan had been triggered by this inspection.
- 84 Accessibility has improved for some but not for the most disadvantaged. Delivery of services by means other than electronic is limited and has not improved. The district contains a number of small rural settlements which are not served by public transport and the number of elderly persons is high and expected to increase significantly. Whilst some services, such as housing and planning, do offer transport or go out and visit customers these are not well publicised. There is a taxi voucher scheme and Wyvern Community Transport which serves the district's rural community. However, the Council does not operate regular surgeries and customers are expected to visit the Council offices in Rochford or Rayleigh. There is a strong belief within the Council that the proposed new website will deliver improvements to accessibility without the need to address non IT issues. For those without transport or the ability to use IT this will severely restrict their access to services and, in particular, will affect those most in need.
- 85 The Council's overall track record of improvement is mixed. Key performance indicators have improved between 2002/03 and 2005/06. Audited performance data for 2005/06 indicates 63 per cent of the Audit Commission basket of indicators improved since 2004/05 which is just above the average of 61 per cent for all district councils.
- 86 The Council has improved previously poor performing services and made progress against key priorities. The homelessness service has improved the speed of responding to applications and reduced the use of bed and breakfast accommodation. Benefit claims are now dealt with more quickly. Recycling has also improved but remains in the worst quartile compared to other councils.
- 87 The pace of performance improvement between 2004/05 and 2005/06 was marginally better than the national average. More recent data up to September 2006 shows performance continues to improve but almost half of targets were not met. Of the 57 national BVPIs 33 per cent had improved, 48 per cent had been maintained and 19 per cent had declined compared with this time last year. Of the 57 BVPIs 52 per cent were better than, or meeting targets with 48 per cent below target - albeit some, such as achieving race equality 1, have now been met. Six BVPIs that are not meeting the targets are identified by councillors as key indicators - for example speed of processing new benefit claims and amount and percentage of household waste recycled.

- 88 In terms of local priority indicators, 67 per cent of local PIs have improved or been maintained when compared to this time last year. These include targets relating to percentage availability of IT systems, attendance at housing schemes occupiers surgeries and percentage of customer correspondence dealt with in five days. Performance achieved by 30 September 2006 against local PI 2006/07 targets shows 69 per cent are meeting or above target. Included in the 31 per cent not meeting targets are payment of rent allowances within seven days of decision, percentage of revised benefit applications actioned in four weeks and percentage of customer paying council tax by direct debit. Continued poor performance in this service adversely affects those most in need.
- 89 Satisfaction with the overall services provided by the Council remains high. The latest audited data available for 2003/04 shows 66 per cent of residents were satisfied. General satisfaction levels have fallen slightly since the previous survey in 2000/01 but remain in the best quartile. Satisfaction with individual services and facilities is more mixed. The housing benefit service and parks and open spaces have improved and are in the top quartile but satisfaction with some other services has fallen and is below the average provided by other councils. Satisfaction with recycling facilities and waste collection is below average and not improving. There is little information specifically about accessibility satisfaction. More recent unaudited satisfaction data for 2006 suggests satisfaction is improving.
- 90 The Council has not sought to update its knowledge of satisfaction in any co-ordinated manner. A number of ad hoc exit surveys and questionnaires have been used by individual services but responses are often low, do not obtain the views of non-users and do not permit a more detailed discussion about underlying issues. A customer satisfaction survey in 2005 in relation to telephone enquiries to the council tax and housing benefits had 130 responses which indicated a good overall level of satisfaction but provides little detailed information about the quality of services. The corporate consultation strategy prepared in 2000 does not provide comprehensive framework or plan to consult and engage users, non-users and marginalised groups to inform and improve council services and service delivery. Without a co-ordinated plan to engage all sections of the community the Council cannot ensure that resources are effectively utilised to improve services and accessibility so that community needs are met.

- 91** The Council has improved its approach to value for money. Councillors are now giving greater focus to value for money and there is an understanding that cost must be balanced against quality. The procurement strategy 2004/06 refers to the need to balance quality against reduced costs and address equal opportunities but there is no specific mention of ensuring equality of access. There are examples where decisions to secure services and supplies have included quality - for example the playground equipment contract was based on what could be provided for a set sum rather than on the cheapest tender. Officers' understanding of value for money is not consistent and there is no mechanism in place to ensure information is shared throughout the Council. To date performance reporting does not include a cost analysis. The Council recognises that further work is necessary to demonstrate value for money and new draft value for money strategy and profile reports were in the course of preparation at the time of the inspection.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 92** The Council's approach to improvement planning is not fully effective. Many of the key strategies and plans are either new, still in draft form, descriptive and not supported by clear action plans to ensure delivery. The criticism regarding action plans was first made in the 2004 corporate assessment but to date the Council has not improved the quality of its plans. The absence of robust strategies and plans to ensure delivery of priorities and improvements is a significant weakness which creates serious doubts regarding the pace and deliverability of improvement.
- 93** Access to services is not underpinned by a clear vision and priorities for the future. The inter-departmental access to services working party established in 2006 developed a draft access to services strategy but this is mainly a repeat of the Council's priorities, vision, values and list of services and facilities provided. It does not contain a clear understanding about what accessibility means or analysis of user needs and actions needed to address them. Within the Council officers and councillors hold a variety of views about what accessibility means to both the community and the Council. This, together with lack of understanding about the community needs means that clear aims and priorities are not in place to drive improvement.
- 94** Corporate and service aims and future plans are not co-ordinated, robust and deliverable. Preparation of plans is piecemeal with no robust linkages. For example, the Council acknowledges that the access to services strategy should be linked to the communication, consultation and equalities strategies but there are no plans in place to ensure this happens. Divisional plans are prepared within separate departments and at present there is no mechanism in place to ensure accessibility matters are co-ordinated, managed or improved. The Council intends that the access to services working group will co-ordinate such work in the future but to date there are no clear means to do so. The absence of co-ordinated plans means that the Council can not be sure it is using all its resources in an effective and efficient way to improve and address accessibility issues.

- 95 Many strategies are not supported by user focussed and SMART action plans. There is an absence of robust actions plans and where action plans exist, such as the draft access to services action plan, they are not user focussed or SMART. The plans fail to set outward, user focussed targets and actions are often to launch or review without a clear outcome that users would recognise and against which the Council can measure itself to ensure improvement to users is delivered.
- 96 The draft access to services action plan includes actions to address three areas: understanding our community/customer base; customer contact and access and service improvement. Each is underpinned by a number of actions but none have clear user focussed outcomes against which the Council can measure delivery. For example one action is to consider options around a single point of access and CRM implementation but this is not linked to specific expected customer improvements that the action can be judged against. Some key weaknesses such as ongoing user engagement to improve service design and delivery are not covered. The financial or staff resources needed to deliver elements of the plans are not specified so that it is unclear whether the Council has the capacity to deliver improvements. Without SMART action plans the council can not be sure that it is focussing its resources on the right issues and delivering improvements that users will notice.
- 97 There are no clear or robust proposals in place for the service to address or meet efficiency targets. The service is in the very early stages of development with no robust aims or strategies to underpin it. Accessibility linked to value for money and efficiency savings have not been examined and there are no explicit plans in place at this time to show how this will be covered. Corporately, a draft value for money strategy and profile reports are in the early stages of preparation which improve the information available to councillors and officers.
- 98 There is no clear leadership for access to services. There is no designated political leadership for accessibility and officer responsibility has recently been given to a head of service but they have no clear remit and questionable capacity given their existing duties. The Council has established an access to services working party however this is new and there is little evidence of impact to date. Effective political and officer leadership is important since accessibility should underpin all services and activities of the Council.

- 99** Performance management has improved but is still not fully embedded. A new corporate performance management framework was launched in September 2006 but the framework itself is not yet fully implemented. It acknowledges the need to link and co-ordinate plans and to set targets to deliver priorities but contains no specific proposals to do so. However, priorities identified in the corporate plan are now referred to in some new divisional (service) plans prepared in late 2006 - for example the waste management, recycling and grounds maintenance divisional plan. Key actions are identified but specific user focussed outcomes are not. In terms of accessibility, some standards that are set and monitored result in adverse impacts elsewhere. For example the Council's receptionists are required to answer telephone calls within a specific number of rings even when they may already be dealing with a customer face to face. Such a target means the public who take the effort and time to visit the Council in person may receive a substandard service.
- 100** Reporting of performance information has improved but still lacks a clear analysis of cost in order to demonstrate value for money. A new officer group has improved the clarity of performance reporting with the use of a traffic light system introduced in mid 2006. Performance is reported quarterly to councillors against key objectives and projects linked to one or more of the six corporate aims. However, the information presented does not include any cost analysis of performance against which value for money can be demonstrated. The absence of performance information linked to cost means the Council can not be sure that it is utilising its resources in the most effective and efficient manner to deliver services that meet the needs of local residents in the most economic way.
- 101** A performance culture is developing but not yet fully effective. Training workshops have been held for senior managers to promote a performance culture but this is not yet embedded throughout the whole council. The Council does not have a software package to enable information to be easily collected, analysed and shared corporately on a daily basis. The use of complaints is piecemeal and not used systematically to inform and improve services. However there are some examples where they have been used to deliver improvement - for example missed bin collections.
- 102** Scrutiny is not yet fully effective. The Council has taken action to improve scrutiny. The political structure has been reorganised to provide one scrutiny (the Review Committee) and five policy committees. Councillors are now starting to question performance information presented but the overall approach has not yet shifted from performance monitoring to management and constructive challenge of policy remains under developed. Without robust and constructive challenge of policy and performance the council can not be sure that priorities are delivered and policies address need.
- 103** Monitoring arrangements are in place for partners. Partners, such as Virgin Active (Leisure providers), are monitored daily with regular reporting to officers and councillors. Partnership guidance was prepared in July 2006 which sets out how the Council will set up, review and monitor partnership working in the future.

- 104** Learning from others is ad hoc and not shared systematically. Individual services have learnt from other councils but good practice within the Council is not shared effectively. As a consequence the Council is not making effective use of its knowledge or skills to improve other parts of the Council.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 105** There is a strong commitment to improve but this is not underpinned by a robust analysis of resources required. Councillors and officers all express the desire to improve services and, as referred to above, some poorly performing services have been improved. However, not all improvements are supported by a robust analysis and provision of resources necessary. For example, the Council is currently undertaking a major redesign of its website to improve accessibility. A web services development manager has been employed to redesign the site which is due to be re-launched in early 2007. This work has involved minimal input from users so that the Council can not be sure that the new site will meet user needs and therefore further work may be required. Furthermore the site will only be effective if kept up to date and there is no agreed budget for site maintenance and update. The website action plan prepared in September 2006 contains a list of intended actions but no analysis of resources required to deliver them.
- 106** Capacity is stretched and there is evidence of this resulting in some falling performance. The quarterly members' performance reports include reference to staffing shortages causing performance to fall - for example processing times for new benefits claims. The development of corporate plans and strategies to drive improvement is an additional demand on resources since the Council does not have an officer whose key function is to develop and co-ordinate corporate policy.
- 107** There is no clear or consistent understanding about what accessibility means or the resources and skills required to deliver improvement. The draft access to services strategy and working party are new and the action plan contains no analysis of resources in terms of skills, officer time or funding required. Officer capacity is already stretched and further development of accessibility will place additional demands on officers. Furthermore, despite the enthusiasm of the Council it is questionable whether it has the skills necessary to put in place some of the building blocks which will underpin future improvements. For example, action planning has been criticised in the past but the Council shows a lack of understanding of what a robust, user focussed and SMART action plan should look like.
- 108** There is effective corporate financial planning. The budget process is linked to priorities with a five-year rolling programme. Resources have been directed at priorities or areas in need of improvement - for example it has invested an additional £25,000 to improve the housing benefit service which has eliminated the backlog of benefit claims and £70,000 in environmental projects. In relation to accessibility resources were directed to improving the Council reception areas.

- 109** Corporate human resource planning is effective. There is a comprehensive workforce development plan and the Council was awarded Investors in People accreditation in March 2005. Training needs are identified through appraisals and officers and councillors attend a variety of internal and external training. For example, the Leader and some other councillors have undertaken the IDeA leadership course and there is a comprehensive training programme offered to all councillors but it is not mandatory so the Council can not be sure those in most need attend. With regard to accessibility, the Council has not undertaken an analysis of the skills it has and those it requires to improve accessibility. As a consequence it does not know if it has the appropriate skills so that it can take action to acquire or develop them.
- 110** Procurement is used to secure some efficiencies. The Council has an on-line procurement system and is a member of the Procurement Agency for Essex. It also belongs to the Kent County Council energy purchasing consortium and has secured significant savings.
- 111** The Council has attracted inward investment but long term resource provision is not always in place. Thames Gateway and waste efficiency funding has been secured. A joint bid with Maldon and Castle Point council has secured £61,000 in regional capacity funding to help the Council attain CRE Level 2 by March 2007. However, future funding after this time is not identified and so any further progression is questionable. There are no clear plans in place to attract inward invest to deliver improvements to accessibility.