

Environment

Inspection

Hart District Council

October 2008



Contents

Service Inspection	3
Summary	4
Scoring the service	6
Recommendations	8
Report	11
How good is the service?	13
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	19

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 web site 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 Hart District Council has suffered from a considerable period of political and managerial turbulence. This has now stabilised and the Council is making steady progress. There is clear leadership both from politicians and managers. The Council has a clear vision expressed in the adopted corporate plan and this is supported by a robust and realistic medium term financial strategy. The Council has had to make difficult decisions to reduce the range of services it provides to match its limited financial resources. It is aiming to deliver customer centred services of a higher quality focused on the management and protection of the local environment and the delivery of affordable homes for local people.
- 2 Some fundamental foundations are in place which will allow the Council to deliver more steady improvement into the future. For example, improved financial control, a service-planning framework and an improved performance management framework. However, there is much more to do, the quality of information and data used to guide decision-making is in some cases flawed and misleading. The Council's lack of robust data and weak benchmarking mean that there is little understanding of how the council performs in relation to others. Opportunities to drive improvement are therefore missed and the Council's pace of improvement is slow compared to others.
- 3 There are some good performing services and some significant service improvements. The environmental quality of Hart is high, with well-maintained public and green spaces. The speed of deciding planning applications, recycling and the waste collection services are much improved. Housing services are performing well and the countryside service offers good, targeted service delivery resulting in high levels of satisfaction. However, other services are improving slowly from a very low base, the planning service has not made good progress in developing the Local Development Framework (LDF), the speed of making planning decisions has improved but appeal performance is weak. Overall satisfaction with the Council declined between 2003/04 and 2006/07 and is now in the worst quartile.
- 4 The Council's approach to value for money is under developed. Some services show clearly how their limited resources are stretched to provide good quality targeted services. Others have yet to develop efficient systems and processes to drive improved services within limited budgets. Cost and performance data is not always accurate and inhibits the Council's understanding of the value it delivers within the budget available. The Council recognises these weaknesses and has begun to develop more robust cost data and comparisons with other similar councils to inform service design and improved delivery.
- 5 The Council is small and has limited financial and staff capacity. Opportunities to develop additional capacity are not maximised. Limited knowledge of communities, under developed partnership working and poor human resources information all limit the Council's capacity. However, the Council is aware of these weaknesses and has begun to address them through recruitment of additional management capacity, increased shared working with other councils and increasing opportunities for learning with other better performing councils.


Summary

- 6 The Council's leadership is strong and focused on developing high quality services centred around the customer. It has put in place frameworks and policies to support the drive for improvement. However, although the Council is setting the right direction, changes are too recent to have had a significant impact on service delivery.

Scoring the service

7 We have assessed Hart 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.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹:

Prospects for improvement?	Excellent					‘a fair service that has uncertain prospects for improvement’
	Promising					
	Uncertain					
	Poor					
		Poor	Fair ★	Good ★★	Excellent ★★★	
A good service?						

Audit Commission

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.

Scoring the service

8 The service is a fair, one-star service because:

- customer satisfaction with the Council's activities is low;
- customer focused service delivery is under developed, and levels of service delivery to customers are inconsistent;
- service performance is mixed: while the speed of deciding planning applications is satisfactory, the robustness of decision making reflected in appeal performance is weak, and while recycling levels are above target levels, missed bins are still an issue and affordable housing delivery has slowed;
- there is a lack of clear understanding of whole communities needs;
- value for money is not well understood; and
- quality of data used to guide decisions is not robust;

9 However,

- Hart has a good quality environment;
- public and green spaces are well maintained;
- some services are customer focused particularly in countryside services;
- waste collection and recycling services are improved;
- speed of deciding planning applications is above government target levels; and
- street cleanliness is in the best 25 per cent of councils.

10 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- human and financial capacity is limited;
- community engagement is not extensive;
- compliance with processes is weak;
- performance and data is not effectively challenged;
- staff morale is low in some areas;
- procurement is under developed; and
- client side capacity is weak.

11 However strengths include:

- clear leadership and vision;
- self awareness of strengths and weaknesses;
- improved performance management arrangements;
- improved financial management;
- services focused on improvement with clear direction;
- improved managerial and political stability; and
- track record of steady improvement.

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 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 Council services by:

- sustaining recent improvements is service quality;
- using a wide range of consultation, engagement and feedback mechanisms to understand the customer experience;
- providing clear feedback on actions taken following consultation;
- developing a clear organisational change strategy setting out how the vision and culture for customer focus will be delivered;
- setting outcome measures focusing on the customer that can be monitored;
- actively learning from good practice within the council and across other organisations in the public, private and voluntary sectors; and
- celebrating successes.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved customer satisfaction;
- better understanding of community needs;
- improved culture of customer care;
- better ways of measuring improvement; and
- sustained improvement.

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

Recommendations

Recommendation

- R2** Improve the quality of data used to inform decision making and council activity by:
- introducing quality assurance checks through out data collection processes;
 - giving clear guidance to all involved in the collection of data;
 - engaging all staff to own and challenge performance and financial data;
 - measure, monitor, publish and manage information that is meaningful to local people, service users and providers; and
 - report information internally and externally, that is clear, easy to understand, shows trends and comparisons.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- public credibility for the Councils work;
- belief in the performance delivered internally and externally;
- better information on which to make decisions leading to better decisions;
- build improved reputation;
- better understanding of value for money assessments; and
- improved management of performance and delivery of services for local people.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by June 2009.

Recommendation

- R3** Improve the efficiency of service delivery by:
- using technology and processes to drive organisational change;, improved value for money and increased efficiency by:
 - maximising the capability of ICT systems;
 - re-engineering administrative process to reduce duplication;
 - improving sharing of information across services and with partners using automated processes;
 - reducing the demands for manual input and retrieval of information;
 - increasing the interactive capability of the web site internally and for customers; and
 - engage all staff to develop and deliver improvement.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased capacity within the Council;
- improved levels of efficient working with partner and customers; and
- improved service delivered to customers within existing resources.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by June 2009.

Recommendation

R4 Improve prioritisation within services by:

- setting clear priorities within service plans;
- linking priorities to budgets and costs;
- continuing to explore alternatives to direct service delivery; and
- identifying clear cross service benefits.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved quality of service within existing budget limits;
- increased value for money;
- improved customer satisfaction;
- increased efficiencies; and
- improved engagement with partners.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by June 2009.

Report

Context

The locality

- 13** Hart District Council is located in the North East of Hampshire in the South East of England. The Southampton to London Waterloo train passes through the district stopping at the mainline stations of Fleet, Hook and Winchfield. The M3 and a number of major roads pass through the centre of the district. Fleet is the district's main settlement and centre of administration.
- 14** The district has an estimated population of 88,807 which has increased by over 6 per cent since 2001 (compared to the South East region of nearly 3 per cent). The population is projected to increase to over 100,000 by 2016. The proportion of people from ethnic groups other than 'White British' is 8.6 per cent (compared to 11.5 per cent for the South East and 15.3 per cent for England).
- 15** Hart is an affluent area. Hart is ranked the least deprived district in the country in terms of the national indices of deprivation. There is low unemployment, and average weekly pay is high at £673.50 compared to the national average of £459. The Service Industry accounts for nearly 90 per cent of employment. The area has high levels of educational attainment, good health and an active population.
- 16** The district covers an area of 215 km² with some of the district being within a Special Protection Area, relating to the conservation of heath land, classified in accordance with the EC Directive for the conservation of wild birds. There are also 32 conservation areas and around 1,000 listed buildings within the area.

The Council

- 17** The Council comprises 35 councillors, of which 17 are Conservative, 10 Liberal Democrats, 6 Community Campaign Hart and 2 Independent. The Conservative party gained effective political control in May 2008, with the support of one Independent councillor. The Council is governed by a leader and cabinet of 6 portfolio holders and is held to account by Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- 18** The Council employs approximately 259 full time equivalent staff. In 2007/08, the overall budget of Hart was £13.2 million. The average Band D council tax for the authority is £135.
- 19** The Chief Executive has been in post for two years. A new Corporate Director has recently been recruited adding additional capacity to the senior management team.

- 20** Local people at a variety of locations can access the Council's services across the district. There is a neighbourhood centre in Hook, the Council's own civic centre in Fleet and the Harlington Centre which houses a number of organisations including the local library service, also in Fleet.
- 21** This inspection is a review of generic services and not a detailed service inspection. It involved an assessment of the Councils' environmental services including, waste collection and recycling, street cleansing, grounds maintenance, countryside service, planning, and affordable housing delivery. This reflects the Council's corporate priorities.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 22** The environment is the Council's highest policy priority, based on customer consultation, as set out in both the Sustainable Community Strategy and in the Corporate Plan. The Council has identified five main categories to focus on within the environment. These are:
- strengthening the planning policy framework for the district to protect and enhance the district's high environmental quality;
 - maintaining clean green and safe streets and public spaces;
 - managing waste and encouraging waste minimisation and recycling;
 - managing the impact the people of the district have on the environment and educating them about climate change; and
 - conserving and enhancing the natural environment.
- 23** The Council is committed to placing the customer at the centre of service design and delivery. It aims to ensure the culture of the organisation faces outwards towards the customer and is not inwardly focused on administrative convenience. It is also developing a role which means it aims to be not solely a provider of services, but a Council which increasingly works in partnership with others to meet the needs of its local communities.
- 24** The Council is developing its community leadership role. Under previous administrations it did not participate in the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), but this has changed and the LSP is currently chaired by the Leader of the Council.
- 25** The Council has recently emerged from a long period of political and managerial instability. From 2001 to 2008, the Council had a different Leader in almost every year and in the same period there were nine different Chief Executives or Acting Chief Executives. The current Chief Executive has been in post for nearly two years and while the political administration has changed, political leaders have remained committed to corporate priorities as set out in the corporate plan.

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

Customer access

- 26** Customers accessing the Council's environmental services receive a varied level of service. Some poor quality customer service was observed and customers told us that while some staff are very helpful, others are not. Customers complained that they were unable to get through to officers on the phone, they were 'put on hold' or their calls were 'cut off'. This is supported by the Council's monitoring of performance in the customer contact centre which shows a decline in performance, although only speed of answering calls is measured and not the quality of service given.
- 27** The reception area at the civic centre is not welcoming and reception staff were not always able to be proactive in helping callers. Some reception areas were not staffed during specific times when public notices said staff would be available. This makes it difficult for customers to access the Council and will positively inhibit many from trying to access Council services.
- 28** The Council does not have consistent, published service standards in place. We found service standards on display in the Harlington Centre reception which clearly expressed the level of service people could expect. This is not replicated in the Civic Centre. Therefore, customers cannot know what level of service to expect and the Council cannot monitor or manage the performance of its staff and the customer service they give.
- 29** The Council does not have a joined up approach to access to services. The reception areas are divided by services so customers need to know which service they need before they can access the right reception area. Services do not join up within the council or across partners delivering services. For example, if residents ask waste crews about service details such as recycling garden waste they are asked to phone the Council rather than the crews taking the details of the customer so that staff can contact them later. Customers complaining about unclean streets are expected to know if the land in question is pavement or gully and therefore, whether it is the County Council's responsibility or the District Council resulting in neither council taking responsibility and the customer is left frustrated.
- 30** The Council invites customers to give feedback though the use of a complaints form. It is available online but cannot be completed or submitted on line. Complaints forms are available in reception areas but there is a variety of forms with different formats and in the Civic Centre the collection box is behind the reception counter and not accessible. The form inhibits customer making positive comments or suggestions for improvement encouraging negative complaints rather than feedback. The process is not user friendly and the Council is unlikely to gain valuable feedback. There are no publicly visible signs indicating what action the Council has taken in response to feedback. In addition, the confusion between a formal complaints process and requesting feedback caused by calling both forms 'complaints forms' further inhibits customer participation.

How good is the service?

- 31** Learning from examples of customer focused services that the Council currently delivers are not maximised. In particular, the Countryside service are considered to be easily accessible, helpful and of great value to local people. They offer a responsive service, encouraging local people to create on-line communities, encouraging feedback and through proactive interaction with customers deliver a high quality service. This demonstrates that accessibility with customers can help services to target their activities, show that they are listening to feedback and deliver levels of service customers want.
- 32** The Council is beginning to ask internal and external customers about the quality of services they deliver. There is an enthusiastic and growing Citizens' Panel. The Council has begun to frequently survey and meet with the Citizens Panel representatives to gain information from local people. Service reviews engaged staff in assessing the quality of the services. It has yet to show clearly how this engagement is shaping services. Despite a well-designed feedback letter, feedback is not fully effective, participants complain that they are unaware of how their involvement has influenced change. Feedback does not include comparative information about how well local services compare to national benchmarks and this is leading to some frustration with consultees and demoralising staff who are keen to improve services.

Diversity

- 33** The Council does not have a clear understanding of its customers. It does not carry out any customer profiling, such as identifying groups or patterns of customer contact to help refine service design or quality of information. For example, the customer contact centre does not use its customer management system to identify common issues or repeat callers, it does not analyse callers to see patterns of issues, such as types of people (age, race, religion, sexual orientation etc...), services needed, time of the day, week or year when calling. Therefore, services are unable to understand the people accessing their services or to respond to common or repeated issues effectively when planning improvements. Some regular customers become increasingly frustrated and others feel excluded.
- 34** The Council does not have a robust approach to assessing the equality of access to its services. The Council achieved level 1 of the Equalities Standard in 2007 and has failed to progress further. The Council's target to reach Level 2 of the standard by April 2009 is unlikely to be achieved and there is a low level of commitment to this target. All services have recently completed Equality Impact Assessments but it is too early for evidence of the impact of this work.
- 35** The Council is not consistently engaging with different groups within the community. There is limited engagement with local interest groups. The Countryside service has high levels of engagement with local people using their services, and through the LSP the Council is working with young people and some minority groups to improve engagement and develop more effective plans for improved services for these groups. However, the overall understanding of the needs of different communities across the district is poor and many groups are not represented at all.

Service quality

- 36** Hart has a high quality environment and the Council is working well to maintain this quality. Formal parks and informal green spaces are well managed and maintained and are highly valued by local people. The town centre of Fleet is clean and litter free. There is no evidence of graffiti or fly posting being an unresolved issue. The waste service is much improved with fewer missed bins under the new fortnightly collection service and recycling is above the Council's ambitious target of 30 per cent.
- 37** The Council is beginning to put strategic plans in place to provide a framework for service delivery. The new corporate plan and sustainable community strategy set out the Council's priorities and these are supported through the development of a climate change strategy. However, there is no up to date action plan accompanying this strategy with clear targets, milestones, allocation of responsibilities and resources to secure implementation of actions to secure adaptation and mitigation of the climate change as set out in the strategy.
- 38** The Council has not been able to deliver its key planning policy document the Core Strategy of the Local Development Framework³ in accordance with the time table it set. The plan will be delayed in part due to a lack of staff and in part because the Council waited for updated guidance. The Core strategy process will now re-commence and fresh consultation will take place. In the mean time, the Council has continued to gather the evidence base needed to support the Core Strategy. This will aid the formulation and adoption of policies.
- 39** The failure to develop planning policies in a timely manner has resulted in a decline in the delivery of housing developments and in particular affordable housing, with only 17 homes delivered in 2007/08 against a target of 80. The lack of a robust policy means that the Council has been unable to manage the impact housing development on the heathland and so has had to refuse most housing developments. This has also left the Council vulnerable at appeal as the tension between the protection of the heath and the demand for housing has been resolved on a case-by-case, ad hoc basis. In addition, the Council is unable to maximise to opportunities development offers the local community not only in terms of affordable housing but also other benefits through the Section 106⁴ process.
- 40** The Development Control service has improved its speed in deciding planning applications. It decides all three categories of planning applications within the time periods set by the government. However, the Council receives more appeals against its decisions than other similar councils and loses above the national average. This means that its decisions are often challenged successfully. The Council has lost some high profile cases recently which have been very costly to the Council. Weak appeal performance encourages more appeals and leads to increased workloads for staff. This adds to the pressures on staff, increases costs and reduces the quality of the overall service.

³ The Local Development Framework (LDF) is the strategic spatial planning document, replacing the Local Plan, and guides the planning decision making process.

⁴ Section 106 of the Planning Act, is the mechanism that allows the Council to secure additional benefits that mitigate the impact of a development such as financial contributions made by developers for local education, health and community facilities.

How good is the service?

- 41 The Council is not working well with partners to identify community needs and secure shared delivery of facilities for local people. For example, the LSP as a partnership is not engaged in the development of the Core Strategy or the policy guiding section 106 negotiations. This has resulted in the delivery of unwanted, poorly designed and underused facilities, such as the youth shelter and football pitch at Elvetham Heath.
- 42 Cross service working is under developed. The Council's ground maintenance contract does not include litter picking. Therefore, the lack of consistent co-ordination of the Council's in-house litter picking team with the grass cutting schedules results in litter being mown and spread across large areas. This gives the false impression of high levels of littering. The Council is working hard to ensure that the district is clean and has recently increased the street cleaning activity in Fleet High Street. However, satisfaction with cleanliness remains low when compared to other councils.
- 43 The existing grounds maintenance contract is not fit for purpose. For example, the litter picking prior to grass cutting elements have been removed, resulting in the shredding of litter when cutting verges. The contract is not based on good reliable information and is over complex. The Council does not hold accurate records of the land to be maintained within the contract and is not consistent in its demands for services. For example, the contract sets minimum standards of service, these are interpreted by the contractor, however, service quality expectations differ between residents, contractor and Council staff leading to complaints from local people and confusion between contractor and Council resulting in further changes in instructions and additional costs to the Council.
- 44 The Council has invested in and improved the bin collection and recycling service. New, more reliable vehicles have helped the Council to provide a more reliable alternate weekly collection of residual waste and recyclables. The numbers of missed collections has fallen. The amount of waste recycled instead of going to landfill is now at 33 per cent and compares well with other councils. However, in the first five months of 2008, the numbers of missed bins has begun to climb and sustained focus is needed to ensure that improvements are maintained.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 45 A high-level analysis based on the best available data shows that the Council's services deliver inconsistent value for money. The new waste service while more expensive than in 2005/06 is performing much better with improved reliability, increased recycling levels and improved customer satisfaction at an average cost when compared with other similar councils. The street cleansing has above average levels of performance but low customer satisfaction and costs the Council less than other similar services. Therefore, without clear service standards customers' expectations are not managed and recognition of service performance is not realistic.

- 46** The Council is unable to draw any realistic conclusions on value for money. The data on which the Council assess the delivery of value for money is flawed. Both performance and cost data is not robust and accurate. For example, the basis of collecting performance data is regularly altered limiting the ability to compare performance over time. The recording of staff profile data is inaccurate and cost data for development control included costs for the revenues service and emergency planning.
- 47** The Council is reluctant to analyse conflicting data, particularly, where performance data and satisfaction information seems to conflict the Council's response tends to support the more positive information. For example, cleanliness data and customer satisfaction. There has been no analysis of why the community are dissatisfied when the performance information would indicate that cleanliness of Hart is the third best in the country. Therefore, the community's view is not given satisfactory weight.
- 48** The Council is beginning to investigate its true costs by each service. Last year the Council conducted its own in house service reviews. These highlighted many anomalies and now the Council is examining each service units' costs in detail starting with development control where high level analysis indicates that costs are rising rapidly while service performance is stable and appeal performance declines. This work will inform the process re-engineering work planned for later this year which will drive further improvements in service quality and value for money.
- 49** The Council's understanding of other councils' performance is under developed. Benchmarking activity is weak and much of the Council performance reporting looks at the Council's performance in isolation. Therefore, councillors, staff and members of the public cannot monitor performance against other similar councils or establish whether performance is satisfactory.
- 50** The Council has worked hard to gain financial control, managing spending and getting revenue budgets under control. However, most services do not have clear plans to deliver efficiencies, to maintain service spending constraints and to develop further the needs for prioritisation in terms of managing service delivering into the future. A long-term sustained approach to securing a stable financial standing is essential if the council is to address service weaknesses.
- 51** The Council can demonstrate areas where services have designed improvement that have lead to improved value for money. For example, the investment in homelessness prevention has reduced the demands for emergency housing, reduced the stress experience by those in housing need and improved the quality of housing for those in housing needs as private sector landlords are actively involved in providing secure accommodation. In the countryside service, rangers are working with local people to provide a responsive service targeting their limited resources to deal with issues as they arise rather than providing a lower level of service spread over a wide area. This proactive approach leads to better service delivery where and when it is needed in response to people's needs.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 52** The Council has showed considerable improvement in front line service delivery over the past three years, in some cases from a very low base. The greatest levels of improvement are in housing services where all performance indicators show improvement with 60 per cent of indicators in the best quartile. Managing the local environment which includes waste collection and grounds maintenance also performs well with 45 per cent of indicators in the best quartile, with 57 per cent of indicators improving in 2006/07. However, this is below average when compared with the improvement of other similar councils.
- 53** The countryside and leisure services show a track record of improvement reflected in the high levels of customer satisfaction. These services are responsive to customers, engage well with service users, and offer a welcoming approach to visitors. The service is using innovative ways to identify customer needs including development of interactive online web sites. These services demonstrate through their activities that they are listening to customers and this has led to increased levels of satisfaction.
- 54** Performance in the planning service is mixed. The Council's planning service has improved the speed with which it decides planning applications and this service is no longer identified as a 'Planning Standards Authority'⁵. However, appeal performance is poor and declining, and the number of affordable homes delivered through the planning process has declined from 87 in 2006/07 to 17 in 2007/08 against an annual target of 80. Therefore, the outcomes delivered by the planning service are not in line with the Council's own priorities.
- 55** The pace of improvement has slowed in the past year. This is in part due to the focus on developing greater financial security, also the need to implement some fundamental internal process improvements, such as improved corporate prioritisation, improved service planning and better financial controls. In services where improvements have been delivered, such as the new waste collection and recycling scheme, there is a period of consolidation. Services are now beginning to focus on service improvement with improved clarity of direction and a more secure financial context.
- 56** The lack of robust performance information and weak benchmarking creates a risk that the Council will believe issues are resolved and not continue to seek further improvements. For example, an inaccurate performance information relating to the costs and level of service within waste collection impacts on decisions relating to the scale, affordability and value for money of planned service improvements. Continuous improvement is not yet a principle widely embedded within the Council services.

⁵ A Planning Standards Authority is one where performance is so poor that the Government have identified the need for special support. The Council have to produce an improvement plan which has to obtain approval for the Department for Communities and Local Government.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 57** The Council now has visible and effective senior management and leadership following long periods of managerial and political instability. Leadership has set the vision, aims and key priorities in the corporate plan and communicated these to staff and partners. The Council is self aware of the challenges it faces, as demonstrated in its self assessment and in its document called 'Facing the Future' which was a comprehensive and realistic analysis of the Council's current situation and future options. Political and managerial leadership recognises that changing the culture of the organisation to be more outward facing and customer focused is its largest challenge.
- 58** The Council's role as community leader is improving. In recent years, it was not a corporate priority and as a result the Council did not participate in the Local Strategic Partnership for two years. This meant it had no influence or leading role and a low profile. Currently, the Leader of the Council chairs the LSP and this will enable the Council to take a more strategic and significant role. However, the Council recognises there is much more to be done before Hart's profile within the county and the region is improved.
- 59** The Council is improving its performance management arrangements although compliance is not yet consistent. A new performance management framework, new performance indicators and a programme of service reviews are supporting improvement. The revised service planning framework encourages managers to consider value for money and equality impact assessments, involve staff and consider how the service links to corporate priorities. However, compliance with service planning is variable. Actions within service plans are not prioritised, some plans are not fully completed and some targets are not challenging. Poor data quality makes it difficult to target where improvements need to be made and to measure the rate of improvement. Managing individual poor performance is an area of historical weakness but this is now a high priority for the Council and a capability procedure has been introduced.
- 60** Performance reporting is improving but is still not sufficiently clear. The format of reports is sometimes complex and difficult to understand. Comparisons with other councils are not clearly shown in either internal or external reporting, with the result that customers do not know how the council is performing compared to others as well as against its own targets. In addition, there is a focus on measuring the things that are easier rather than measuring the quality of customer experience. For example, answering calls within 15 seconds is important, but reports do not show whether the query was resolved, whether the call was passed to someone else or whether the customer was cut off.
- 61** The Council is beginning to learn from others through benchmarking and service reviews. This has been an area of weakness and the Council is now actively seeking out other councils to learn from them. Each of the service reviews in 2007 included a visit to another council which was performing well in relation to that service, However, although lessons were learned, too many actions are to do further reviews. Tangible improvements for residents as a result of benchmarking are not easily visible.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 62** Learning from complaints and customer feedback is underdeveloped. The Council does not make it easy for customers to give feedback as outlined in paragraph 29 and feedback to customers about actions taken is not consistent. There are good examples, such as in the Harlington Centre, where making comments is easy and visible and there are visible signs about actions taken in response to comments. The Council has developed a good mechanism for reporting back to the Citizens Panel about actions taken via the clearly written Hart to Hart newsletter. Despite this, some citizens' panel members still feel that their views are not heard or acted upon. This requires an ongoing dialogue to understand why some panel members either do not remember the newsletter or do not feel it responds to their views. Reporting back to consultees and staff about what improvements have been made, or why they haven't been made, is an area of weakness despite a corporate commitment and causes frustration and reluctance to engage.
- 63** The Council's approach to equalities is improving but remains weak. A new communication strategy outlines the principles of engagement and in particular with those who are more vulnerable or whose voices are least heard. It advocates the use of proxy organisations where numbers are small in order to avoid over consultation and in recognition that other agencies are often closer to the communities they work with. However, the Council is not at the stage of implementing these strategies effectively. There are some good examples of engagement, such as in Housing, where comprehensive research has been undertaken about BME residents. The citizens' panel is well engaged and articulate, and a new sports forum enables the Council to hear the concerns of some local sports organisations. However, this is a long way from having a comprehensive view of the needs of local communities which inform service design and lead to tangible improvements in service delivery. The citizens' panel is not sufficiently representative of the community, engagement with minority groups is weak and the Council relies too much on questionnaires for consultation rather than a wide range of methods of engagement to suit different groups of people.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 64** The Council is beginning to maximise its capacity by working in partnership with others. Legal services are provided on a shared basis with a neighbouring council and Revenues and Benefits are outsourced to a private company. Payroll is provided by the County Council and further services such as Planning, Waste and Street Cleaning are under consideration. However, the Council does not have a clear plan to ensure there is continued client side capacity to provide accountability for future outsourced and shared services. The new shared provision is so far leading to more reliable and higher quality services and the shared approach has the potential to lead to better quality for services within the scope of this inspection.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 65** There are good examples of using communities to generate capacity for service delivery particularly in Countryside. For example, the development of web-based forums to identify issues that the countryside rangers then target their activity results in proactive, responsive and efficient management of these informal green spaces. However, the Council is generally not making enough use of the high levels of expertise within an affluent and articulate community. This includes the voluntary sector and parish councils who are sometimes involved too little and too late to influence decision making. It is important that both parishes and district councils work together with a focus on what is important to the customer.
- 66** The Council's capacity to deliver improvements remains limited. It has no organisational development strategy setting out how it will deliver the customer focus vision and subsequent change in culture. For example, the individual appraisal process does not set targets for how everyone will support this objective and management development activities do not centre on the customer. As the Council recognises that changing the culture to be more outward facing is its biggest challenge, the lack of a comprehensive strategy to achieve it is limiting progress.
- 67** Staff resources are limited. Staff morale is low due to issues such as the impact of budget cuts, cynicism following high levels of instability and a belief that staff consultations and reviews do not lead to change. This is reflected in high levels of sickness absence which is in the worst 25 per cent of all district councils and deteriorating. The Council does not have enough information about the levels of staff satisfaction under the current leadership and a staff attitude survey is planned in the autumn. The survey combined with improved internal feedback and communication systems can help the Council to target improvement actions.
- 68** Technological and administrative systems are reducing the Council's capacity to improve service delivery. Current systems are leading to duplication of effort. For example administrators spend time moving data out of one ICT system into another, leading to greater likelihood of inaccuracy and a waste of the Council's human resources. The Council's reputation of over stretched staff due to lack of budget underestimates the impact of inefficient systems and processes on the ability of staff to respond quickly and efficiently.
- 69** Financial planning is improving. A medium term financial strategy is now in place, aligned with corporate priorities, financial training is given, expenditure is within budgets and accounts are signed off and audited within statutory timescales. However actions within service plans are not yet prioritised.
- 70** Procurement is under developed and there is no approved procurement strategy in place although work has begun. Without pro-active procurement, the Council is unable to secure value for money consistently in service delivery.
- 71** The strategic and operational roles and responsibilities of councillors and officers are clear in principle. The Council has moved from being member controlled to one of partnership between officers and councillors. However, councillors tend to become operationally involved rather than strategically focused and clearer communication about the rationale for enquiry is necessary. Scrutiny is improving and the function is now attached to each service rather than all committees looking at all services. This has the potential to enable a more thorough challenge to areas of poor performance.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 72** The customer contact centre is a missed opportunity to free capacity across the Council. Currently it only deals with waste and garden waste calls directly while other calls are redirected to individual specific services much like a switchboard. There is little capacity to prepare other services for the roll out of the customer contact centre. Therefore, progress with the roll out is slow and staff capacity within services is not enhanced.
- 73** The Council is not building capacity through recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce. The website does not deliberately attract people from different backgrounds and the internal culture is one where differences such as sexual orientation are not consistently respected. The numbers of disabled people and ethnic minorities employed do not reflect the local population and it is important that there is a culture that welcomes minorities before targeted recruitment takes place.
- 74** The Council is making slow progress in encouraging the consideration of equalities and human rights. Guidance for completing equality and diversity impact assessments is available and all services have recently completed the assessments. However, these are of variable quality with gaps in information and in some cases a lack of research and understanding about the communities Hart serves. The template is long and complex and some service heads have constructive ideas about how it could be improved and simplified. The guidance includes reminders to consult without recommending co-ordinating with other services and agencies in order to avoid over consultation with minority groups. The process is at an early stage of development and is not yet leading to improvements in services for minority or disadvantaged communities. The Council does not have a clear commitment to an achievable timescale for reaching higher levels of the equality standard from its current level 1. Progress in developing a disability equality scheme has been slow compared to other councils.

The Audit Commission

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.

Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0844 798 7070.

© Audit Commission 2008

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 0844 798 1212 Fax: 0844 798 2945 Textphone (minicom): 0844 798 2946

www.audit-commission.gov.uk
