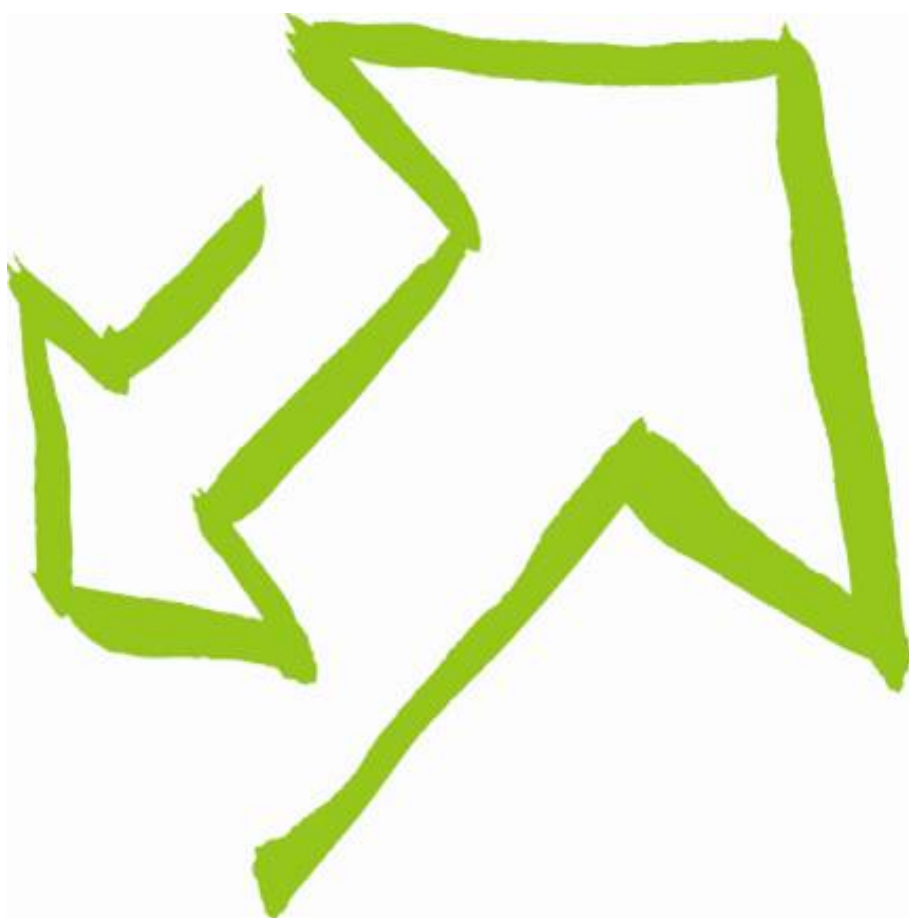


Access to Services

Hart District Council

June 2009



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Service Inspections

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

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

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

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

Summary

- 1 Overall, the Council has made progress in improving access to services since the last inspection of this area of work in 2005. Improvements for service users include: faster call answering, a well designed website, better physical access to the majority of council buildings and council officers being more visible in the community - for example, through road shows, the work of the community support officers and countryside officers, and home visits by planners. The Council responded positively to the 2005 inspection by setting up the customer satisfaction programme in 2005/06 and completed a range of actions. These included establishing the contact centre, implementing a new telephone system and developing customer access and communications strategies. However, the longer term benefits for customers of these developments are not being fully achieved. For example, the contact centre is only partly operational, supporting the waste management service but operating mainly as a switchboard for others.
- 2 The Council does not have a clearly stated vision or set of aims for what it is trying to achieve in relation to access to services. Expectations are not being clearly communicated to stakeholders, including local people, councillors, staff, partners and contractors. This is resulting in an inconsistent view across the organisation of what the priorities for improvement are. However, in 2008 the Council did agree a new communications and consultation policy which includes specific actions for improvement in these aspects of customer access. The current leadership, both political and managerial, is also providing a stronger sense of direction following several years of instability and change. The Council Leader and the corporate management team are well aware of the issues to be addressed.
- 3 The Council's knowledge and understanding of its local communities is not well coordinated. Information is available from a variety of sources, but it is not drawn together in one place. As a result, there is duplication of effort and inefficient use of data to inform improvement planning across different services and projects. Consultation has been much improved through the citizens' panel and regular road shows out in the community. But many of the consultation and customer satisfaction surveys are service-based and are not coordinated at the corporate level. As a result, opportunities for learning and building up a comprehensive information base are not being fully exploited, and services may not be meeting all customer requirements.
- 4 Customer focus has improved in corporate systems and in some services but there is room for further change. Service plans do not all include objectives and targets that are focused on achieving better outcomes for users. Some services have set standards for customer service, but these are not well publicised. Performance management has been strengthened and a clear framework, IT system and reporting arrangements are in place. However, monitoring tends to focus on quantitative factors such as speed of call handling or the number of complaints, rather than the quality of the response.

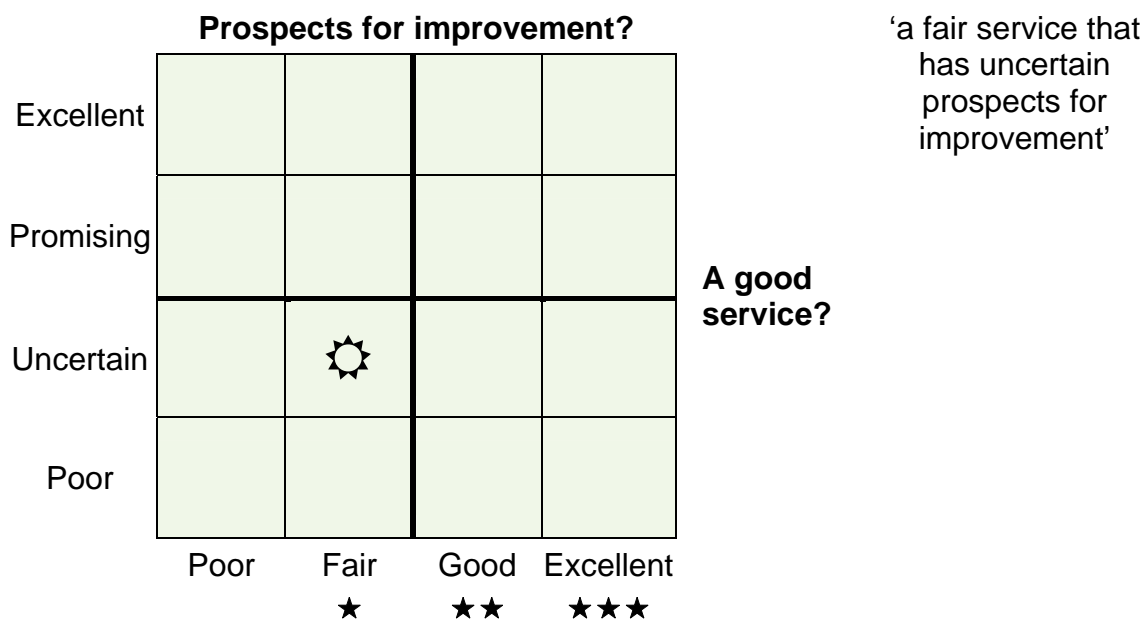
Summary

- 5 After a slow start and from a low base, the Council is now making steady progress in diversity and equality. It is on track to reach Level 2 of the Equality Standard in April 2009. An active corporate equality group, with partner engagement, has been in place for a number of years and is driving this work forward. A new forum for black and minority ethnic (BME) people, workshops for older people and new programmes aimed at young people are helping the Council to engage with different members of its community. The Council is also working effectively with the voluntary sector to establish links with particular groups, such as, the Nepalese community and with travellers and gypsies who live in the district, in order to ensure they can access services.
- 6 The Council is improving the value for money it achieves from its limited resources. The Audit Commission's 2008 use of resources assessment increased the score from level 1 to 2, judging it to be adequate. Costs of individual services are generally low, compared with other councils, although low customer satisfaction is a continuing issue for a number of areas. The Council has little useful information with which to assess the value for money of its various channels of communication with the public. For example, it is not able to assess the costs of its contact centre against any resulting efficiencies in back-office functions. Comparative transaction costs are not available, so it does not know how its customer contact costs compare with others or the relative costs of the different channels.
- 7 The Council has very limited financial capacity. This has resulted in some short term forward planning, with a tendency for decisions to be driven by money rather than by customer focus or policy. The lack of money has impacted on staff morale and reduced investment in information technology (IT). However, the Council is now taking a more strategic approach to its investment in shared and outsourced services, and these are starting to deliver improvements for service users, such as longer opening hours for telephone enquiry services. Outsourced services are also adding to capacity through, for example, the use of external expertise in client management. The Council has strengthened its input to the local strategic partnership and to partnership working in general, and this is paying dividends in terms of a more joined up approach to local service provision, for example, for specific age groups. In this way, the Council is demonstrating that it can improve access to services despite its difficult financial situation.

Scoring the service

- 8 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.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 9 The service is a fair, one star service because:
- knowledge and understanding of the local population, including access needs, is limited and not pulled together in one place;
 - consultation is service based and not coordinated at corporate level;
 - user experience of contacting the Council by phone, letter or email is variable and the reception area is not user friendly;
 - current information on customer satisfaction is not readily available;
 - service standards are not in place or communicated well for all services; and
 - the contact centre is limited in the services it provides; and has not given value for money.

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

However,

- e-access to the Council has increased significantly via a well designed web-site;
- telephone calls are answered more quickly;
- buildings are more accessible;
- community support officers work effectively in the more disadvantaged areas of the district;
- consultation has improved through the development of the citizen's panel and survey results are being used to improve services;
- road shows and exhibitions out in the community have assisted communication between council officers and local people ;
- good links have been developed with voluntary groups and access groups;
- new town and parish councils have been established by the Council and are helping to support local services, particularly in rural areas;
- some service provision is targeted at particular groups such as people with disabilities or young people at risk of offending;
- steady progress is being made on raising the profile of equality and diversity; and
- investments in shared and outsourced services are starting to deliver better value for money and improvements for service users.

10 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- corporate aims for improving customer focus and access are not clearly stated;
- very limited financial capacity has resulted in some short term planning and a tendency for some decisions to be driven by money rather than customer focus or policy;
- staff morale is adversely affected by uncertainties over job security, and by on-going budget pressures and service reductions;
- lack of capacity and limited investment in IT has resulted in inefficient work practices and slow responses to customers;
- some plans do not include SMART¹ targets and lack clearly specified outcomes for service users; and
- performance monitoring concentrates on quantitative data, with insufficient attention given to qualitative assessments of people's experience when they contact the Council.

However:

- improvements in service delivery are being achieved;
- performance management is being strengthened;
- a new, comprehensive communication and consultation policy and action plan has been in place since March 2008;

¹ SMART = specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely

- effective service review programme carried out in 2007, is being followed up by more in-depth reviews of key services;
- active engagement in partnerships is adding value and capacity;
- shared and outsourced services are beginning to add capacity; and
- the leadership team are open and aware of the issues to be addressed.

Recommendations

- 11 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the Council. In addition, we identify the approximate costs¹ 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 Council's knowledge and understanding of its local community by
- developing a knowledge hub that brings together in one place all available research information about Hart and its wards;
 - strengthening engagement with citizen panel members through giving them clear feedback on service improvements resulting from surveys and consultation;
 - coordinating consultation exercises across service areas; and
 - encouraging front line staff to act as ambassadors for the Council by collecting information on the concerns of local people and identifying areas for service improvement.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more efficient use of data and knowledge to inform improvement planning;
- better targeting of services to needs; and
- improved communication and consultation with local people.

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

¹ 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 Improve customer care by:

- setting out a strategic vision and aims for access to services which ensure that services meet the needs of customers;
- identifying a corporate level manager to lead and monitor performance in access to services;
- ensuring that all service plans include objectives and targets that are focused on improved outcomes for service users;
- setting service standards that are well advertised to the public; and
- setting individual objectives that encourage staff to be outward looking and to put the customer first.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- customers receiving services better suited to their needs;
- improved customer satisfaction; and
- continuous service improvement.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2010.

Recommendation

R3 Improve value for money by:

- assessing the impact on customer focus and user experience when evaluating different approaches to service delivery;
- developing measures to assess the costs of different forms of contact and transactions with the public; and
- exploring ways of improving customer focus and access that require little financial investment, such as developing service standards and making them more prominent on the website.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more efficient and effective use of limited financial and staff resources.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 12 Hart is a small district council in the north-east of Hampshire. It covers an area of 21,500 hectares and includes Fleet as the main town, a number of smaller settlements and a large rural area. The district has a population of 89,000 (2008 estimate), of which over 30 per cent live in rural areas. The total population is expected to rise by 1 per cent by 2015, with increasing numbers of older people aged over 65. Hart has a large working-age population, mostly made up of those in the mid to latter half of their working lives. The overall proportion of children and young people is forecast to decline.
- 13 Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures for 2006 show that an estimated 90.8 per cent of Hart's resident population are 'White British'. Other ethnic groups include small numbers of Chinese, Asian/Asian British and Black/Black British people. The district includes a sizeable gypsy and traveller population of approximately 300 people - most of whom are settled in the Yateley area, to the north of the district. There are two permanent sites, each with 20 caravan pitches. In addition, there is a site at Hook for travelling show and fairground people.
- 14 Hart is an affluent area. It is ranked as the least deprived district in England as defined by the national indices of deprivation. In 2008, the gross weekly pay for full-time workers resident in Hart was £637 compared with £523 for the South East and £479 for Great Britain. Over 70 per cent of the working population commute outside the area to work and over 90 per cent of jobs within the district are in the service industry. Unemployment has been relatively low; in 2007/08, unemployment in Hart was 2.8 per cent, compared with 4.2 per cent in the South East and 5.2 per cent in Great Britain. The area has high levels of educational attainment, good health and an active population. Crime levels are low. However, in the district as a whole there are a few pockets of deprivation and occasional problems of crime and anti-social behaviour.
- 15 The district has good road and rail links to London and Southampton, with some bus services around Fleet. Elsewhere in the district, transport into the main centres is difficult and most people living in rural areas rely on cars or community transport schemes.

The Council

- 16 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 six portfolio holders and is held to account by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

- 17 The Council employs 279 full time equivalent staff. The officer structure is headed up by the chief executive, who has been in post since mid 2006, and by two corporate directors - one of whom joined the Council mid way through 2008.
- 18 In 2008/09, the net budget for the Council was £10.2 million. The average Band D council tax for the authority was £140. Hart's relative affluence means that it receives the lowest level of Revenue Support Grant per head of population of any district in England. In order to balance its budget over recent years and to keep council tax increases within government limits, the Council has set high levels of fees and charges, and reduced spending on discretionary services. Over the last three years, the Council has made savings of £1.5 million for each of those years. To achieve this saving for the 2009/10 budget, the Council is reducing arts and leisure programmes, increasing fees and charges, reducing the frequency of some recycling collections, withholding cost of living pay increases for staff and making a number of posts redundant. Reductions in services will inevitably reduce customer access to some services. Increases in charges, such as car parking fees, may make it more difficult for some to access the services that remain.

Access to services

- 19 Local people can access the Council's services across the district at a variety of locations. These include the neighbourhood centre in Hook, the Council's own civic centre in Fleet and the Harlington Centre in Fleet, which houses a number of organisations including the local library service. In 2006, the Council established a contact centre in the civic centre which acts mainly as a single point of contact for queries about the waste management service. The contact centre also handles general telephone enquiries, transferring calls on to other departments as necessary. Most services other than waste management advertise direct lines for customer queries. At the time of setting up the contact centre, the Council invested in a new telephony system and also a customer relationship management (CRM) system. However, the Council has not had the money to purchase all the software necessary for the contact centre to link properly with back office systems.

Scope of the inspection

- 20 Access to services is a cross-cutting theme. Inspectors agreed with the Council that the focus for this inspection would be:
- to follow up on progress made since the 2005 inspection of access to services at Hart District Council; and
 - to assess:
 - ease of access to council services for diverse communities of the district;
 - engagement with the community in designing, delivering and assessing services, including vulnerable and minority groups; and
 - how effectively and successfully the Council uses its partnerships to increase access and quality of service, and how well it works with partners to deliver seamless services to residents and users.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 21 Hart's new Sustainable Community Strategy, agreed in November 2008, sets out the local strategic partnership's (LSP) vision and priorities for the area. The vision for Hart is: 'to improve, sustain and promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of the communities of Hart district'. The strategy identifies six strategic priorities which are to be the means of delivering specific outcomes for the long term benefit of residents. Detailed priorities and objectives are set out under each of these strategic themes. The LSP is chaired by the Leader of the Council, and the Council is active in the working groups and partnerships that are supporting each of the strategic themes.
- 22 The community strategy includes a number of detailed priorities that focus on meeting the different needs of local people. For example, housing provision must meet the independence and mobility needs of older people, as well as be affordable for younger people. Accessibility by improved public transport, community transport and infrastructure developments are also identified as priorities. The particular needs of rural communities are covered through engagement with rural parishes and by partners checking their policies to ensure they meet the needs of those in rural areas.
- 23 The Council's corporate plan supports the community strategy and identifies two key priorities - enhancing the environment and ensuring an adequate supply of affordable housing. The corporate plan also emphasises the values that guide the Council in its work. These four values highlight the importance of engaging and communicating with local people:
 - 'efficient - using the public resources we control as effectively as possible;
 - communicative and consultative - keeping people informed about what we are doing and listening to their responses;
 - honest - telling the truth, admitting our mistakes, and informing people of their rights; and
 - open - welcoming comment and criticism, and constantly looking for opportunities to improve.'
- 24 The Council's aspirations to improve access, communication and engagement are followed through into some other corporate policies and plans. In March 2008, the Council agreed a new communications and consultation policy and action plan to replace an earlier customer access strategy and a communications policy that had been drawn up following the 2005 access to services inspection. This new policy emphasises the importance of two-way communication, the role that councillors and staff play, and how communication and consultation are central to the council's role in serving the public. It points out that to access services, the public needs to know what is available and also those services need to be accessible in ways that are suitable to the public's varying needs.

- 25 More recently, Council leaders have emphasised the need for 'responsiveness' and this theme is to be taken forward in April 2009 via a project called Hart Promise. This theme has already been picked up in the updated Comprehensive Equality Policy and Corporate Equality Scheme (November 2008). For example, the first objective of the equality policy is stated as 'our long term aim is to be a responsive authority in every aspect of our service activities; providing appropriate, accessible and effective services and facilities to meet the diverse needs of our community'.
- 26 As described above, general intentions concerning access to services are included in key council documents. However, there is no single statement of aims that brings all these intentions together. Objectives and actions to improve customer access and engagement are not articulated clearly in the majority of service plans and there is no shared understanding across the organisation of what the Council's vision and aims are for improving access to services. These issues are explored later on in this report in the section on managing performance.

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

Customer focus and engagement:

- 27 Engagement with the community is improving. There is now an effective range of activities intended to capture the views of a wider cross section of the community and to use this information to improve service design and delivery. For example there is a citizens' panel, specific consultation groups such as a housing black and minority ethnic (BME) group, outreach activities and road shows, and partnership working with voluntary groups relating to the travelling community. The Council is also working more closely with the town and parish councils both to understand community needs and to deliver services such as the community transport scheme. Some services, such as housing, are more aware of the need to ensure that all sections of the community are consulted, and are looking at ways of doing this more effectively - for example, with young people.
- 28 Understanding of local community needs, including access needs, is variable. A wealth of information is available about local communities in Hart, for example, from the County Council, but this is not brought together into one place. Much of this information is at district rather than ward level, and currently the Council does not have a good statistical understanding of its local population. This makes it difficult when, for example, bidding for external funds for particular projects with different groups or deciding where to locate local services. Decisions relating to the design and delivery of services may not be based on the current and future needs of the community.

How good is the service?

- 29 The Council is aware that its detailed knowledge of its community, especially vulnerable groups and the BME communities, is limited and there is a willingness to engage with partners such as Hart Voluntary Action, with its BME and traveller workers, and to pool knowledge. With these and other partners, it is engaging with gypsies and travellers and is setting up a forum for BME communities. It is also organising a range of events to target different groups such as a disability awareness day, older people's events and, with the Children and Young People's Partnership (CYPP), stakeholder and youth events. Understanding of the needs of disabled people is being enhanced through the involvement of the Hart Access Group in equality impact assessments.
- 30 The Council has a clear corporate approach to communicating with hard to reach groups. The 2008 Communication and Consultation Policy and action plan includes a section on communicating with hard to reach groups which includes using equality impact assessments to identify the communication and consultation needs of target groups, working with proxy consultees such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and Race Equality Council, working with young people, ethnic minorities, disabled people and people lacking numeracy and literacy skills. However, there has been limited progress in implementing the overall action plan. Plans for an improved corporate approach to marketing and communications, through the appointment of a full time officer, may be put back because of budget limitations. This means that the impact of the policy is limited and communications with hard to reach groups may not be implemented as intended.
- 31 Coordination of consultation across the Council is poor. There is no overall plan for consultation exercises across service areas, apart from through the citizens' panel, and no consultation log, although results of consultation surveys are reported on the web site. Therefore, opportunities to maximise the effectiveness of consultation may be lost.
- 32 Involvement of local people in the development of key plans and strategies is increasing. Although the Corporate Plan 2007-11 was developed internally, the new Sustainable Community Strategy for 2008-2018 was based on research and consultation. The strategy was produced following consultation with residents, partners and stakeholders, and used information built up from a major MORI survey in 2001 and the general satisfaction survey in 2006. The local strategic partnership (LSP) plans to continue engaging with stakeholders by holding an annual conference to help plan the next steps for the following year.
- 33 The Council makes good use of its citizens' panel to consult on a wide range of issues. People were invited to join via a leaflet sent out with election information, items in Hart News and on the website. Membership, currently about 800, is monitored to see how well it matches the demographic profile of the district. The response rate to surveys, which are all electronic and therefore cheap to run, is good at 50-60 per cent. A wide range of services are using the panel to run customer satisfaction and consultation surveys, and partners are also engaged. For example, in late 2008 and early 2009, the Council carried out surveys on the usage and future needs of Fleet town centre and disabled access, an assessment of interest in an affordable housing event, an annual survey on the ease of use and awareness of electoral materials and services, service choice and budget consultations and several surveys for the Safer Hart Partnership.

The Council publishes the results of these surveys on its website, with an overview of the exercises it has carried out in recent months. However, there is a lack of direct feedback to citizens' panel members on the results of consultations and this may dissuade members from responding to future ones. The outcomes from these consultations are used to improve services. For example, the results of the budget consultation were used to inform the 2009/10 budget priorities and feedback on an older persons' housing information pack was used to update and revise the pack. In this way the Council is engaging well with local people and ensuring their views are identified.

- 34** As well as electronic-based communication, the Council also engages well in face to face consultation with the public. A wide range of outreach events, requiring good inter-agency and cross-service working are used to engage with different sections of the community. For example the Hart Exhibition and Advice Road shows (HEAR) and Crime Reduction and Environment Weeks for young people (CREW), housing forums and rural housing road shows as well as stands at village fetes are all used to communicate and engage with local people on a variety of issues.
- 35** The housing service engages effectively with partners and other stakeholders to inform service delivery taking into account the changing demographics of the district and linking its plans to other strategies. The housing strategy links to the County Council's updated older people's well-being strategy and one outcome is that the housing service is planning to increase local housing provision for elderly people by working in partnership with its leading local housing association. The service has also undertaken a survey of BME people and housing needs which indicated that local people are being treated fairly, with different communities having fair access to services.

Ease of access for users, communities and partners

- 36** Information about, and access to, Council services can now be obtained through a good variety of channels. These include face to face contact at the Council offices in Fleet, telephone access, either via the contact centre or a number of service specific direct lines, and the web site which allows users to carry out a limited number of online transactions. Online booking of leisure facilities is also available. The Council provides some online access to its services via kiosks in Yateley and the Hart Neighbourhood Centre in Hook. However, the availability and whereabouts of these kiosks are not well publicised and they are hard to find. In addition, the Council is missing opportunities to maximise access, for example, by providing access to other services at the leisure centres, which are open outside normal office hours, or using parking officers to identify non parking issues requiring action by other services.
- 37** The majority of the Council's buildings are accessible and plans are in place for further improvement. Over the past two years, the Council has spent £400,000 on improvements, including a lift in the Harlington Centre and refurbishment and ramps in the leisure centres. A recent external assessment shows that 69 per cent of the Council's buildings can now be assessed as being compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). A further £174,000 has been allocated for improvements in the 2009/10 capital programme, although further improvements were put on hold in mid 2008 as some buildings may pass out of council control, particularly if corporate services are outsourced.

How good is the service?

- 38 Voluntary sector partners find the Council accessible and focused on customers. There is good communication with, for example, both Hart Voluntary Action and the Citizen's Advice Bureau and housing partners consider housing officers to be open and responsive and ready to engage with them to provide services for vulnerable people.
- 39 Customers also view the Council as generally accessible. Feedback suggests that access to information via the contact centre, web site, the Council's newspaper - Hart News - and councillors are good. Reception staff are friendly and officers are willing to come to the ground floor to talk to customers. However, the ground floor layout is confusing and may deter some visitors from trying to access services.
- 40 Services are being made more accessible to the wider community. Documents can be provided in different languages (using Language Line) and in different formats. Services such as planning will make home visits if service users are unable to get to council offices. Every household now receives a kerbside glass collection and disabled people can apply for an annual token allowance which can be used for taxis instead of the normal public transport. Improvements have been made to car parks, through the addition of more disabled parking bays and new machines that accept debit/credit card payments. Leisure centres offer free access for disabled people and a 365 discount card for those on low incomes.
- 41 The Council is working with parish councils to improve community transport in the longer term. Meanwhile it provides support to community transport schemes such as the Yellabus in Yately and the Call and Go service in Fleet. These services make it easier for those in the rural areas to visit the Council's facilities. In October 2008, the Council carried out a survey via the citizens' panel to assess the needs of disabled people in Hart and how they are accessing services. The results indicate that although a minority of disabled people use council facilities such as the leisure centres, only 7 per cent said the lack of accessible transport was the reason for this. For the types of transport available, most respondents said that each type was fully or fairly accessible. This suggests that the availability of transport is not a major factor determining the take-up of these council services by disabled people.
- 42 Telephone access to the Council has been improved through the implementation of the contact centre and a new telephone system. Average telephone queuing time has reduced from over a minute in 2006 to four seconds in November 2008, with 83 per cent of calls answered without queuing. The proportion of calls answered within 15 seconds has increased from 44 per cent to 82 per cent over the same period. As well as improved response times, the new systems have resulted in most calls about waste and recycling being dealt with directly by the contact centre staff, giving those callers a one-stop service.

- 43 E-access has improved. A new website was developed as part of the customer satisfaction (CuSP) project in 2005/06 and further improvements have been made in the last year. The website was runner up for the Best Public Services Website in the Hantsweb Awards 2008 and usage has been steadily increasing. There are now about 30,000 unique users a month, of which 24,000 are new users. This compares with 27,000 unique visitors in Nov 2007 and 16,500 in Nov 2006. The public are able to undertake a good range of transactions on line. These include paying council tax, business rates and parking fines, making planning applications and booking leisure activities. Training courses have been arranged for staff and services have been improving the design of their web pages to make them more interesting and accessible. The Council has improved the accessibility of the website for visually impaired people, for example, by seeing that text is spaced sufficiently, that fonts can be changed to suit the individual user, and avoiding coloured backgrounds. But it does not have the resources to implement a screen speech facility and is dependent to an extent on the County Council who hosts the system. Translation services provided by the Council are not mentioned on the website's home page. As a result, an opportunity has been lost for raising awareness of these translation services, particularly with the BME community.
- 44 Council workers who are out and about in the district are helping to increase the accessibility and visibility of the Council. For example, the community warden service, recently re-branded as community support officers, provides access to a range of services, particularly in the more deprived parts of the district. Councillors are supportive of the service and have recently agreed the appointment of an additional officer. Countryside officers will also report instances of fly tipping. However, some officers are more customer-focused than others so customer experience is not uniformly good. Similar opportunities for using front-line staff as a means of enabling two-way communication between the Council and the public are not currently being fully exploited
- 45 Council buildings are used for a wide variety of community and partner-led activities. For example, conversational English lessons for women from different ethnic backgrounds take place in the Harlington Centre and the leisure centres are used for evening activities. Through the Community Safety Partnership, the Council has worked with partners to establish and run a neighbourhood centre in Hook to service the rural parishes and make some of its services and community support functions more accessible to its rural population. The Council is also working closely with town and parish councils to ensure effective use of facilities. In this way, the Council and its partners are using property and buildings to improve access and value for money.

How good is the service?

Diversity and equality

- 46 The Council is starting to make progress in improving its approach to equality and diversity, but from a slow start. It is only at Level 1 of the Equality Standard for local government, although on track to achieve Level 2 in April 2009. It has completed equality impact assessments of all outward-facing services and is starting to assess inward-facing services and new strategies and policies. The Council's service planning process requires a consideration of equality and diversity issues through the completion of equality impact assessments and the setting of objectives, and this has helped raise awareness amongst staff. Staff induction training includes a module on equality and a new equality and diversity e-learning package is being rolled out in April 2009, building on an earlier corporate equality training programme held in 2005/06. There is an active Corporate Equality Group, with strong corporate support, which has been in place for a number of years and is driving the work on the Equality Standard. Good partner engagement includes representatives of disabled groups and the travelling community. This approach is providing an effective basis for driving future improvements in addressing equality and diversity issues.
- 47 The Council has a comprehensive and clearly stated equality policy and corporate equality scheme. The objectives of the policy set a sound framework for improving access to services in Hart district. However, some service managers have been slow to agree specific actions in support of the policy and some targeted provision may be lost owing to financial pressures. For example, the drive to deliver maximum income from the leisure centres could mean that free swimming sessions for the disabled and their carers will be replaced by income generating sessions.
- 48 The Council has been working effectively with Community Action Hampshire on ways to make contact with the district's dispersed BME population. As a result, a BME forum was launched in March. It is intended that this meeting will lead to the creation of a forum which can be used to examine Council policy and procedure, providing feedback and highlighting issues being faced by the different communities - including their access needs.
- 49 The Council works well with Hart Voluntary Action (HVA) in reaching some harder to reach groups. The Council contributes to the core funding of HVA and its externally funded project workers work directly with the BME and traveller communities. For example a travellers' and gypsies' road show was held in Yateley to gain an understanding of the needs of this community and discover any issues they had with accessing services and to provide information on housing related services.
- 50 Political leadership on diversity and equality is not clearly defined. The Corporate Equality Group has good support from the deputy leader but the Cabinet does not include a councillor with particular responsibility for diversity and equality. There is a general lack of clarity on political responsibility for diversity and equality, which can make it difficult to effect change.
- 51 The Council's workforce does not represent the community it serves. BME communities and women at the top earner level are under represented, although people with disabilities are better represented in the workforce.

User experience

- 52** User experience of contacting the Council is variable. Although reception and contact centre staff are generally seen as approachable and friendly, the contact centre does not work well for all callers and the reception area layout is confusing. The policy on telephone contact is unclear; many services give out their direct numbers in leaflets and in the phone book but many calls to these services continue to be made to the contact centre. The Council is unable to assess the quality of the service it is providing as it only measures speed of response.
- 53** The Council still suffers from some poor customer perceptions due to the poor start made by the contact centre in October 2006. When the contact centre started, it struggled to cope with the influx of calls caused by the Council's new refuse collection arrangements. However, Council survey results show some improvement. For example a survey in 2007 showed that 62 per cent were satisfied with the way their phone query was dealt with.
- 54** Call handling via the contact centre is not consistent and, in some cases, is inefficient. Approximately 90 per cent of calls related to waste and recycling are dealt with directly by contact centre staff, giving those callers a one-stop, efficient service. However, on occasions, staff may need to access several systems during a call, especially for a bulk collection or a green waste enquiry. Calls can sometimes take several minutes while the operator notes the issues down manually and then transfers them into the computer system. Calls relating to other services are meant to be transferred direct to that service but operators frequently try to be helpful and spend some time talking to the caller before finally transferring the call. Callers then become frustrated at the time taken - particularly if they have to explain their query twice over. Some services do not respond well to transfers from the contact centre, while others may not have enough lines at peak times, for example, when council tax bills go out. Contact centre staff are not proactive in ensuring that they have up to date information on services and who to contact about what. Queries are frequently referred to the wrong teams, which is frustrating for customers and a waste of staff time.
- 55** The contact centre is taking a more proactive approach to managing peaks and troughs. For example, staff were given a year's notice that they would not be able to take leave in March because of the expected surge in queries about council tax. However, because the relevant department does not have as many lines as the contact centre, calls cannot always be transferred, leaving callers frustrated. The impact of special promotions on call centre work is not always considered in forward planning, resulting in a potential overload.
- 56** Staff and customers feel that that reception staff are welcoming and try to be helpful. However, opening hours are limited and the cash office is occasionally closed during its published opening hours owing to staff shortages. For example, over a recent seven-week period, the cash office was closed for 11 of the published 280 opening hours, including four hours at lunchtimes. Limited opening hours mean that visitors may not be able to make payments at times most convenient to them. If the cash office is closed unexpectedly, visitors are unable to make payments when they expect to and they may become frustrated and deterred from using the facility in future.

How good is the service?

- 57** The reception area is not user friendly. It has confusing signage on entry and no waiting area near the reception desk, which results in a large spread of visitors around the area. Leaflet and poster displays are haphazard, disorganised and not clearly signed. This means that users of the reception area are more likely to be confused on entry and the less confident callers may abandon their visit. It is also difficult for the reception staff to ensure an efficient flow of visitors through the building.
- 58** The Council does not have an up-to-date overview of customer satisfaction. The last best value general survey was undertaken in 2006 and there is no more recent information available. Satisfaction surveys are conducted in some individual services, for example a survey by the pest control service found between 80 and 90 per cent satisfaction against various measures. Housing also undertakes regular satisfaction surveys and consultation exercises and results are reported on the Council's website. However, without a good overview of customer satisfaction across all its services the Council is less able to target areas of least satisfaction or report back to the public on the action it has taken.
- 59** The Council does not have a corporate approach to service standards which would give a better focus to customer needs. Service standards are in place for some services but are not well publicised. The exception is the housing service which has a set of standards, developed in consultation with partners and service users that are set out in public leaflets and are on the website. Although there are some key performance indicators on response rates for the outsourced revenues and benefits service, these are not publicised and not all can be measured currently.
- 60** The availability and currency of Council leaflets is poor. Many public locations did not have the expected range of leaflets and some of those that were available had not been updated for several years. For example, leaflets relating to planning, environment and housing were sparse and many had not been updated since June 2000 while a copy of the Environmental Services noise complaint policy guidelines found at Fleet Library dated back to September 1997. Consequently, residents of Hart cannot reliably obtain up-to-date information from public locations around the district.
- 61** A new complaints/comments procedure has recently been agreed and is available on the Council's website. The Complaints and Compliments procedure leaflet clearly sets out the standards that should be expected in terms of receiving acknowledgements and a full reply. This makes it easier for customers to understand the level of response they can expect. However, the leaflets and forms are not widely available, except at the Council offices. No leaflets were found at any of the alternative public locations visited and while the leisure centres had a comments form, this was service specific. Members of the public may therefore be unaware of how to make a complaint or comment on a service.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 62** Overall, the Council is now achieving adequate value for money. Compared to similar councils, its costs remain low overall. Higher cost services are generally performing well, with the exception of the planning service where performance is mixed. The Council has started to reduce costs, including the transaction costs of its highest cost services, through, for example, the use of business process mapping in planning, and by outsourcing the revenues and benefits service. Investment in the priority waste service has resulted in improved outcomes including increased recycling levels. The Council is taking steps to ensure that capital investment is linked to corporate priorities and is starting to evaluate the outcomes of its capital projects. But its approach to assessing outcomes for local people is under developed.
- 63** The full potential of the contact centre is not being realised and as a result its impact on the customer experience is limited. The associated investment in the customer relationship management system (CRM) has, therefore, not delivered value for money. The original aspirations for the 2005/06 customer satisfaction programme (CuSP), under which both were implemented, were to improve customer focus and service, rather than to achieve cost savings. However, these aims for the contact centre and CRM system were unrealistic and not matched by appropriate resources, either financial or technical. Lack of resources for scripting and integrating the CRM with back office systems has meant that its use has not been extended to services other than waste and recycling. This means that the contact centre acts mainly as a switchboard for calls relating to other service areas. Staff will often try and help callers if they have some knowledge of the relevant service area, but if the call is still referred to the relevant department, the call becomes unnecessarily long and callers become frustrated at having to explain their queries twice over.
- 64** The Council has little useful information with which to assess the value for money of its channels for communication with the public. Comparative transaction costs are not available so it does not know how its customer contact costs compare with others or the relative costs of the different channels. The information it does collect about the performance of the contact centre and other channels, such as the web site, is only quantitative so it cannot assess their effectiveness or easily identify areas for improvement.
- 65** Some service managers have been reluctant to embark on customer access programmes due to concerns about budget implications and the need to cut costs. However, there is scope to improve customer service for minimum additional resource. For example, the service reviews were low cost and were a significant step in starting to change attitudes across the organisation and develop a more customer focused culture.

How good is the service?

- 66 The Council understands the procurement benefits that can be delivered through effective partnership working. However, until recently it has tended to take a reactive and opportunistic approach to alternative means of delivery, such as outsourcing, mainly as a means to address financial issues. But the Council is now starting to take a more strategic approach to partnering in service delivery and has recently agreed a Policy for Partnerships in Service Delivery. This sets out clear objectives, including expectations for customer focus, and priorities for partnering and how this sits within the wider procurement framework. Opportunities for outsourcing and sharing services, such as waste management, with other councils are being actively pursued. However, the lack of a clear statement of aims for customer access and focus weakens the Council's position in negotiating contracts with new service providers and means that opportunities for improving customer focus and outcomes may not be fully exploited.
- 67 Investments in some shared and outsourced services are starting to deliver improvements for both service users and internal customers. For example, the outsourced revenues and benefits service has recently implemented an out of hours phone service. This service has also successfully reduced the number of wrong payments made and is on target to receive an increased subsidy to the Council. Following a tender exercise, payroll services, which had relied on a single officer, were outsourced to the County Council. While this has delivered improved resilience and a better service for internal customers, the anticipated savings have not yet materialised; the amount of work involved was under estimated, resulting in the need to fund the post for an additional 12 months.
- 68 The arrangement with Havant Borough Council to provide the client side management of the outsourced revenues and benefits contract is improving value for money as well as providing an improved service for users. Hart is benefiting from the experience and skills of the staff that the larger council is able to employ, and the service is improving as a result. However, while the Council indicated that it was looking for service improvement, it was not very clear about its long term objectives. Thus, while the partnership arrangement is adding capacity, Hart Council may have lost an opportunity to specify very clearly its expectations in terms of improved customer access and focus.
- 69 Value for money assessments of services have been used to improve officers' and councillors' understanding of cost levels and trends, how these compare with other councils and relate to the outcomes for users. The Council recognises that the planning service is delivering poor value for money and is implementing plans to reduce costs and improve the service for customers from April 2009 by setting challenging targets for 2009/10. Quarterly reporting to councillors on value for money has started but is limited as it does not integrate cost and performance reporting, explain variances or make sufficient use of benchmarking information.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 70** Overall, the Council has improved its performance over the last year. In 2007/8, 53 per cent of BVPIs improved, but this was below average when compared with other district councils. It is delivering environmental improvements and has improved value for money. Council data shows that benefits performance is improving, with new claims and changes in circumstances being dealt with more quickly. Since the homelessness service was brought back in house in 2006 it has made significant improvements. The Council is making adequate progress on the delivery of its high level 2008/09 corporate action plan, although it is making slower progress on planning policies and it has delivered very few affordable homes, despite this being a corporate priority. Only 56 per cent of performance plan targets were achieved in 2007/08 including those for waste collection and recycling, although this was an improvement on the 44 per cent achieved in the previous year. One of the key targets not delivered on time was the equality action plan.
- 71** In terms of customer access, some improvements have been achieved since the last inspection in 2005. The CuSP project delivered a number of improvements for those contacting the Council. These include a much improved web site, a contact centre with CRM and a new telephone system, online leisure booking and a limited e-payments facility. However, insufficient resources have been available to deliver the maximum benefit from these systems. This means that the benefits from the investment are not being maximised and the contact centre is not operating efficiently. With a limited range of services being handled by the contact centre and on line payments only possible with an invoice, the impact on the customer experience is limited.
- 72** The contact centre response rate is improving. In November 2008, 81 per cent of all calls were answered within 15 seconds with 91 per cent answered within 30 seconds. Average queuing time was down to 4 seconds from over a minute in 2006 with 83 per cent of calls answered without queuing. However, because the Council does not have any qualitative measures in place, it is not possible to assess how effectively callers are being dealt with.
- 73** Outsourcing the revenues and benefits service has delivered a number of improvements for service users. An out of hours phone service has recently been implemented, providing access between 1700 and 1830 on weekdays and 0900 and 1300 on Saturdays. In addition, all council tax correspondence is now responded to within 10 days. The service is also on target to be on the right side of the 'wrong payments threshold' for the first time in three years; this should result in an increased subsidy to the Council.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 74 Complaints handling has improved. The number of complaints to the Ombudsman has reduced and response times have improved significantly. There is a quicker response to initial customer complaints to the Council, although only 70 per cent are replied to within the target time of ten days.
- 75 Some of the Council's services that deal directly with the public have been recognised for their customer focus. The Councils' leisure centres are increasingly customer focused. In the last year all three leisure centres achieved the QUEST accreditation at the first attempt. The recently refurbished Frogmore Leisure Centre achieved a 'highly commended' rating and which placed it within the top five per cent of leisure centres nationwide. The countryside service is highly regarded by local people and was commented on positively in the 2008 environment inspection.
- 76 Increased use is being made of e-access. Between November 2006 and November 2008 the percentage of payments, leisure bookings and planning applications made online all increased significantly, the latter from 6 to 35 per cent, delivering increased value for money for the Council. However, as no effort is being made to encourage customers to carry out more transactions via the Council's web site, an opportunity to further improve value for money is being missed.
- 77 In recent years, the Council has improved value for money in some of its priority areas including waste collection and recycling and has significantly improved the collection of business rates income. It has exceeded its three-year Gershon efficiency savings target, although monitoring of this needs strengthening. Some procurement savings have been achieved but it is difficult to assess the full impact of the Council's recent outsourcing contracts in terms of value for money at this stage.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 78 The Council's strategic aims for access to services are not clearly articulated in a single, accessible document. Values and intentions for improving responsiveness and access are set out in a number of corporate policies and plans but are not brought together in one document. The new communications and consultation policy, agreed in March 2008, goes some way to expressing overall goals and explaining the context for improvement. This policy sets out clear actions, timescales and responsibilities but it does not explain what the intended, long term outcomes are for local communities and service users. This lack of a clear corporate message means that there is not a shared understanding across the organisation of what the Council is aiming to achieve.
- 79 Top level responsibility for leading, promoting and monitoring access to services across the organisation is not clearly specified or communicated. Both the Leader of the Council and the corporate leadership team are supportive of, and committed to, improving access and to changing the organisational culture to be more customer focused. They are also well aware of the issues to be addressed. But, on the officer side, responsibilities for particular aspects such as the contact centre and equality and diversity, lie with different service managers, and responsibility for monitoring access to services overall is not clear at the corporate level. This lack of clarity means that customer focus is not given a high enough profile and it is more difficult to achieve the cultural change needed to ensure that the customer is at the centre of improvement planning in all services.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 80** Performance management arrangements are improving with corporate systems in place to assist with planning and monitoring. An established performance management framework shows the link between the community strategy, corporate plan, service plans and individual team or staff member objectives. Officers are active members of a number of benchmarking groups. An IT system for monitoring performance against indicators (PIs) and identified risks is used effectively to produce regular reports. Service plans are written using a standard template, which include prompts to evaluate value for money and to undertake equality impact assessments. Service plans were moved into the performance IT system in 2008/09 and the first report on progress against service plan targets was produced in October 2008. However, service plans are variable in quality, targets are often not SMART¹ and most do not include objectives and actions to improve customer access and engagement. Therefore, it is not clear how the Council's values will be implemented across all service areas.
- 81** Performance monitoring in the contact centre is concentrating on quantitative data, with insufficient attention being given to qualitative assessments of user experience. A mystery shopping exercise carried out by an external contractor allowed for comparison with nearly 40 other council contact centres. But there is no evidence that the Council has used this data to inform improvement in service delivery, wider access issues or value for money.
- 82** Linking performance and financial planning and monitoring has started but is not fully developed. The corporate plan and medium term financial strategy have been brought together into one document, but they are written in very different styles and the links between the two sections are unclear. Reporting of cost and performance information is not integrated and the financial management IT system is not yet fully implemented, resulting in poor quality and delayed financial management information. This means that the Council is not able to make the best use of available data when evaluating the value for money of its services and the ways they are accessed by the public.
- 83** A corporate complaints process is in place and some, but not all, individual services have set their own service standards. For example, standards have been set for housing services, car parking and waste collection. Some service standards are said to be listed on the Council website but are not easy to find. This means it is difficult for service users to know what levels of service they can expect and whether or not they have reason to complain. Complaints monitoring is a regular item on some team agendas but the corporate complaints monitoring focuses on numbers and speed of handling. As a result, opportunities for analysis and sharing learning across the organisation are currently not fully exploited. The Council is planning to purchase the new release of a complaints management module, to add to its performance monitoring system. This will help the Council to take a more structured approach to monitoring and learning from complaints.

¹ Specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

84 The Council is using learning effectively to improve some services and there is good awareness at the corporate leadership level of the strengths and weaknesses to be addressed. In 2007, all services were involved in a programme of 22 one-week intensive service reviews. The aim of these reviews was to make the organisation more focused on the needs and views of service users. These reviews were carried out by teams of staff and councillors and included focus groups with both internal and external users, visits to other councils and analysis of benchmarking information. Action plans were drawn up and progress reviewed at three and six-monthly intervals. On-going actions were subsequently incorporated into annual service plans. In 2008/09 the Council has been undertaking further, more detailed reviews of selected services, including planning, waste management and environmental health. The planning review took six months and focused on both customer service and value for money. It has resulted in a re-structured service and more efficient, stream-lined services that are beginning to show improvements in performance. This example demonstrates how the Council can actively use learning to improve services.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 85** Financial capacity is very limited and this has resulted in the Council not being able to invest in its plans to improve access to services. For example, it has not had the money to buy the software needed to make full use of the contact centre's CRM system and achieve the associated efficiencies or service improvements. Limited investment in IT in general, over several years, is resulting in inefficient work practices and slow responses to customers, for example, through the leisure centre booking systems. The Council has also not been able to appoint, as planned, a full-time media and communications officer to support the implementation of the consultation and communication policy. The need to cut the budget by £1.5 million each year for the last three years, together with having to find 15 per cent savings for the 2009/10 budget means that discretionary services, in particular, have been cut and that fees and charges, such as car parking have been raised. These actions will inevitably impact on service users and may reduce access to town centre facilities and services - particularly for those living in rural areas who rely on their cars to get about.
- 86** The Council is working hard to mitigate against the difficult financial situation by pursuing alternative ways of delivering services. Its successful outsourcing of the revenues and benefits service is resulting in improved performance as well as better access through extended hours for telephone queries on council tax and benefits. Shared legal services with a neighbouring council are giving Hart Council access to more specialised legal knowledge. For a number of months, the Council has been actively pursuing further outsourcing opportunities for its contact centre, together with other corporate services such as finance and human resource management. It is currently working with a possible provider who already has experience of providing contact centres and back office services in other local authorities. Successful conclusion of these negotiations will help the Council to provide better services to its customers.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 87** Partnership working, not only with the private sector but also with other public and voluntary bodies, is helping the Council to increase its capacity. For example, the arrangement with Havant Borough Council to provide the client management function for the outsourced revenues and benefits service is adding capacity in an area where Hart Council is relatively weak. The Council is also now actively involved in the LSP, following a period when it was not involved at all for two years, and as a result is opening up opportunities for improving access to services. The current leader of the Council chairs the LSP and councillors and staff are involved in the various working groups. For example, the community safety partnership has been working successfully for a number of years to reduce fear of crime in the district. The children and young people's partnership has worked together on policies and plans and is now moving towards delivering activities following a series of consultation exercises. Activities that are already taking place through this partnership are young drivers' training sessions and a drop-in centre for young carers. The Council has good working relationships with the voluntary sector, working together for example, on services for BME and traveller communities. It is also strengthening its support for parish and town councils, and working with them to facilitate local management of some services such as public conveniences and play areas. All these partnership arrangements are helping to increase capacity to support service improvements and improve access to services.
- 88** The Council is developing its approach to procurement. For example, it is starting to take a more strategic approach to partnering in service delivery and is beginning to review the value of its partnerships. The sustainable community strategy refers to the intention to ensure that public procurement and infrastructure investment is consciously low carbon. The Council is also working with its partners to develop performance management arrangements, particularly through the LSP. However, the Council does not currently have a coordinated overview of all the partnerships it is engaged in. This means that there is the potential for duplication of effort and lost opportunities to make the best use of existing partnerships.
- 89** Staff resources are limited although improving in some aspects. Morale appears low, but as a staff satisfaction survey has not been undertaken since 2006, the Council does not have an accurate understanding of the current situation. Uncertainties over redundancies and the impact of outsourcing plans, together with year-on-year budget cuts, are impacting on how staff members feel about their jobs. However, in a number of services, officers are still committed and enthusiastic about improving outcomes for service users. The corporate training programme was suspended for some time owing to a shortage of capacity in the human resource (HR) team but a new corporate training programme is being planned and resourced. For example, an e-learning package on equality and diversity is being introduced from April 2009 as a refresher following a corporate equality programme carried out a few years ago. Induction programmes now include a module on equality and diversity, customer care and the complaints procedure. These examples illustrate how the Council is starting to build staff capacity.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 90 Staff absence has been relatively high but the Council has taken action to tackle this. Managers have been trained in the staff absence policy which was updated in 2007. The capability policy runs alongside the absence one and has been used where necessary to dismiss individuals. Estimates indicate that absence figures are starting to fall although direct comparisons year on year are not straightforward as the total number of employees fluctuates. The estimate for 2008/09 is 8.6 days per employee, compared with 11.42 for 2007/08 and 11.66 for 2006/07. This indicates that HR policies are having a positive effect.
- 91 The contact centre is using monitoring information to help manage staff resources but there is more it could do to increase capacity. Managers are using monthly figures to identify peaks and troughs in work load and adjusting staffing levels accordingly. However, opportunities have not been fully explored for multi-skilling reception, cash office and contact centre staff so that they can all cover for each other. As a result, staff resources are not being deployed as effectively as they could be.
- 92 Training programmes are organised for councillors but there is generally a low take-up. For example, an induction programme was arranged for new councillors in 2008 but had to be cancelled for lack of interest. Lack of engagement in such training and briefing opportunities reduces councillors' understanding of the issues and their ability to challenge decisions or support service development that will increase customer focus and access across the district.
- 93 The Council is benefiting from a period of continuity in both political and administrative leadership, following long periods of political and managerial instability in the past. It now has a visible and effective corporate management team that is open and aware of the issues that need to be addressed. Members of staff appreciate the efforts made by senior officers to keep them informed and to listen to their concerns - for example, through regular briefings by the chief executive and through a question and answer page on the intranet. Political leadership is also now more stable, with group leaders working closer together. For example, group leaders meet once a quarter with the corporate leadership team to monitor implementation of the corporate plan and the delivery of key projects. These improved working relationships are enhancing the Council's capacity to improve.

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