

Inspection report

June 2005



Cultural services

Bristol City Council

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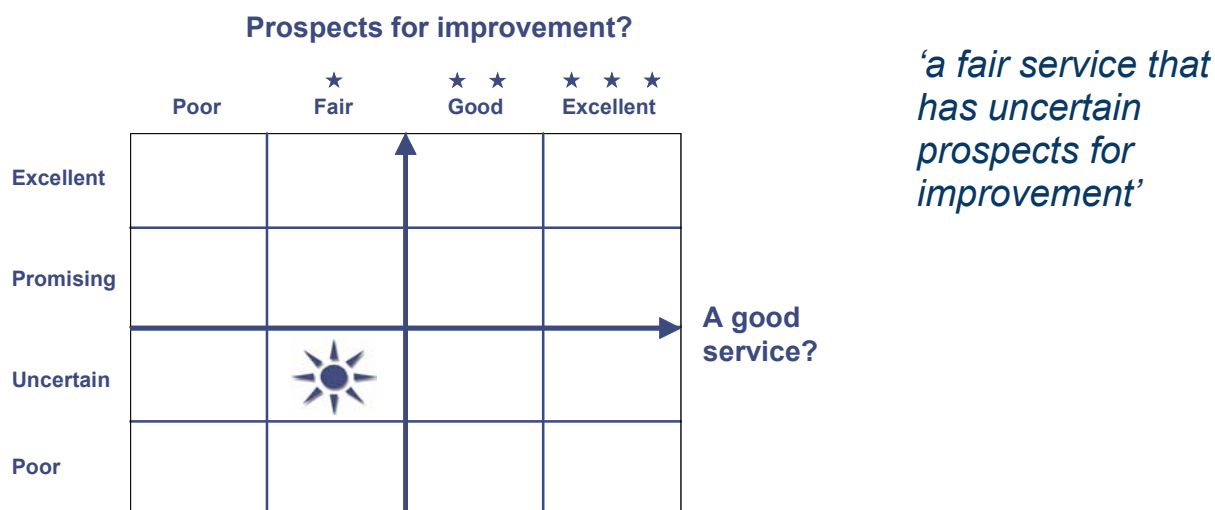
Summary

- 1 Bristol City Council provides **fair** cultural services which have **uncertain** prospects for improvement. Recognition within the council that cultural services have a role to play in contributing to community priorities is developing but at present, levels of awareness and understanding are limited. The council's own cultural ambitions are under-developed and it has yet to agree clear priorities for overall cultural improvement. It has yet to take hard decisions on the nature and scale of cultural activity it wishes to support in order to meet community needs and make best use of existing resources. There are few explicit references to culture in the corporate plan, except for culture's role in regeneration and city centre development.
- 2 Local satisfaction levels with cultural services have declined in recent years. These levels are poor when compared with similar councils. Service quality has suffered from low levels of investment which affects the quality of the customer experience. Cultural activities for black and minority ethnic communities and people with disabilities are under-developed. The council is not sufficiently aware of the needs and aspirations of all communities to inform cultural planning. It has made limited progress in tackling many of the barriers which may affect the ability of all communities to access the cultural activity on offer through the use of ICT and charging policies.
- 3 Aspects of the council's capacity and systems to deliver improvement are under-developed. The service has suffered from a lack of consistent corporate and political leadership and limited management capacity. Service integration is not strong and mechanisms for sharing learning are not in place. Resources are not effectively shifted to match need and there is a history of under-investment in improving the quality of the cultural offer and user experience. Performance management and cultural services' approach to promoting diversity are not fully effective. There has been no overall assessment of cultural needs and aspirations matched with an assessment of existing provision to ensure the location and nature of improvement meets needs. Future plans do not yet link priority areas and there is no overall strategic cultural plan to maintain the focus of the service.
- 4 Cultural services are making a valuable contribution to community priorities, especially on promoting healthy living and well-being. The council can clearly demonstrate impacts and outcomes aimed at making a contribution to improving the quality of life for local people. However, the extent of the cultural services contribution is unclear, due to weak target setting. Arts and sports development are achieving some good quality outcomes, especially in areas of deprivation. Use of heritage services continues to increase through targeted outreach programmes. Libraries are developing their role as being at the heart of local communities and encouraging lifelong learning is a strength. Cultural services staff well regarded by stakeholders. There are innovative partnerships which are delivering improvements through more imaginative ways of working. The council's support for other cultural providers is good.
- 5 Strategic service leadership is strong. At this level the value of culture and its potential role in contributing to wider agendas is clearly understood. The service is clearly focused on tackling its weaknesses and is making good progress. Cultural services demonstrate significant strengths in partnership working and the relationship is highly valued by partners. The creation of a new culture and leisure department is a very positive step and offers significant opportunities to tackle weaknesses. In addition, the council's plans for the exciting large-scale cultural developments and for new leisure facilities are clearly focused on achieving some local ambitions.

Scoring the service

- 6 We have assessed the 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.

Scoring chart¹: Bristol City Council - Cultural services



- 7 The service is fair because:

- ◆ residents’ satisfaction with all aspects of cultural services is low;
- ◆ satisfaction is in the worst 25 per cent of councils nationally and worst in a family group of similar cities;
- ◆ the customer experience is below expectations at many facilities as they are old, lacking investment and not meeting modern needs and local aspirations;
- ◆ not all sections of the community are well provided for or effectively engaged;
- ◆ access to cultural services is weak in some areas and the council’s approach to removing barriers is inconsistent;
- ◆ the council’s cultural ambitions and priorities for cultural services are not well-developed and the extent of the service’s contribution to local area priorities is unknown.

- 8 Strengths include:

- ◆ some good initiatives are making an effective contribution to local area priorities to improve the quality of life for local people, such as:
 - ◆ providing lifelong learning opportunities;
 - ◆ high levels of participation in active sport within schools and some effective healthy living initiatives;
 - ◆ supporting local cultural organisations; and
 - ◆ sport and arts development work in areas of deprivation improving levels of participation and engagement;

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.

- ◆ innovative partnerships leading to improved outcomes for local people; and
- ◆ in most areas staff are friendly and welcoming and there is a good focus on health and safety.

9 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- ◆ there has been a lack of consistent corporate leadership and support for cultural services and there is no clear understanding and demonstration of culture's potential contribution to achieving area priorities;
- ◆ cultural services and facilities suffer from historical under-investment and slow progress in tackling poor service quality;
- ◆ management capacity is limited and performance management is not fully effective;
- ◆ cultural service priorities are unclear, there is no overall plan for culture, resources are not shifted to match priorities and target setting is weak, resulting in a risk to maintaining focus;
- ◆ working across cultural services is under-developed and sharing learning is not systematic; and
- ◆ promoting equalities and diversity is not yet mainstreamed in service planning and delivery.

10 Strengths include:

- ◆ strong strategic leadership within cultural services supported by able managers and staff who are well regarded and recognised as innovative and creative;
- ◆ effective use of external funding to further cultural ambitions and contribute to the development of a high quality cultural environment in the city;
- ◆ strong strategic partnership working at the regional and neighbourhood level;
- ◆ well-developed major plans for cultural facilities in support of city-wide regeneration; and
- ◆ the council recognises weaknesses in some systems and process, such as project management, and has plans in place to tackle them.

Recommendations

11 The council is recommended to:

- ◆ develop cultural ambitions and translate these into clear and challenging objectives, priorities and targets taking account of national, regional and local aspirations by:
 - ◆ raising its own awareness and understanding corporately and politically of the potential role of cultural services in contributing to the achievement of community priorities;
 - ◆ developing strategic and resourced cultural planning with a focus on meeting community needs and aspirations; and
 - ◆ creating a political champion for culture to strengthen cultural leadership and ensure cultural services make the maximum contribution to wider agendas.
- ◆ improve the quality of users' experience and raise resident satisfaction by:
 - ◆ involving users and non-users in developing and designing ideas for service and facility improvements to meet the needs of all sections of the community;
 - ◆ implement a prioritised programme to improve the quality of visitor facilities across all cultural venues;
 - ◆ improving physical and electronic access to cultural services; and
 - ◆ tackling barriers to access through targeted charging policies and improved communication.
- ◆ improve the service's contribution to local priorities and ensure that service improvement is focused on community needs by:
 - ◆ carrying out a comprehensive assessment and analysis of the needs and aspirations of all communities in the city;
 - ◆ using this, and other corporate intelligence, to inform strategic cultural planning and drive service improvement;
 - ◆ implementing improved strategic planning and developing SMART action plans with a focus of achieving against strategic objectives;
 - ◆ allocating adequate resources to action plans to ensure deliverability and sustainability of improvements; and
 - ◆ undertaking joint strategic planning with key partners on shared agendas.
- ◆ identify mechanisms to enable it to measure effectively the extent of its cultural services' contribution to achieving local area priorities by:
 - ◆ identifying clear outcomes and impacts of service improvement at the outset of planning; and
 - ◆ setting challenging and measurable targets for service delivery.
- ◆ develop effective capacity within cultural services to enhance strategy development and management systems to drive service improvement by:
 - ◆ improving opportunities for sharing learning with better joint working and service integration;
 - ◆ creating a culture celebrating success and achievement; and
 - ◆ implementing improved performance management and monitoring.

12 We would like to thank the staff of Bristol City Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

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Dates of inspection: 17-21 January 2005

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Report

Context

- 13 This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission (the Commission) following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

The locality

- 14 The city of Bristol is in the south west of England. It benefits from good transport connections by road, rail, sea and air. The population of Bristol is 400,000, making it the eighth largest English city. Almost 92 per cent are White British (2001 Census). The largest black and minority ethnic community is Asian, accounting for nearly three per cent of population. The city has a young population with almost 40 per cent aged under 30 years.
- 15 Bristol is a city of contrasts. It has a high concentration of higher education institutions, including two universities. Its workforce is highly educated and skilled with 39 per cent educated to degree level. But the city's prosperity is not shared by all its citizens. The 2004 Index of Deprivation shows that 41 per cent of Bristol's 252 'super output areas' were in the worst 10 per cent nationally in terms of multiple deprivation. These levels of deprivation have meant that the government has allocated considerable resources to Bristol from its Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, SRB and New Deal for Communities programme. The city has also secured European funding, targeted to areas of deprivation.
- 16 Bristol is a growing centre for the creative industries and is home to many regionally, nationally and internationally important organisations. The city hosts four international film festivals, has over 4,000 heritage buildings and boasts a vibrant music and club scene. It was shortlisted for European Capital of Culture 2008 and although its bid was unsuccessful, is now a designated Centre for Culture.

The council

- 17 Bristol City Council is a unitary council, created in 1996. The council comprises 70 councillors representing 35 wards. After several years of Labour administration, since elections in May 2003, there is no overall political control. The current balance is: 32 Liberal Democrat, 27 Labour and 11 Conservative. The current administration formed in May 2005 is a minority led Liberal Democrat administration.
- 18 The council employs 18,000 staff across all services and following a restructuring in April 2005, now has 7 departments: Chief Executive; Education and Lifelong Learning; Social Services and Health; Neighbourhood and Housing; Planning, Transport and Sustainable Development; Culture and Leisure; and Central Support Services. Previously planning, environment, transport and cultural services functions were grouped together in the Environment, Transport and Leisure department. A chief executive was appointed in November 2003, following nearly four years of collegiate officer management.
- 19 The council's overall revenue budget for 2005/06 is £441.2 million, with a capital programme of £132.9 million. The council tax increased by 4.9 per cent in 2005/06 but it fell relative to the national average every year between 1998/99 and 2004/05.

- 20 The Audit Commission carried out a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) of the council in 2002, and an update based on service performance in 2003. These assessments initially judged the council's overall performance as weak, but then fair following improvements in the way the council was run. In the service block for libraries and leisure, which includes all of the council's cultural services, the council scored one out of four (four being the highest score).
- 21 The West of England Partnership of Bristol City Council and its three neighbouring councils has developed a vision for the west of England in 2026. This includes creating 'cultural attractions that are the envy of competitor city regions across Europe, making the West of England the place of choice for talent, creative workers and affluent visitors'.
- 22 The Bristol Partnership, the Local Strategic Partnership, has developed Bristol's first community strategy. The community strategy sets out a long-term vision for Bristol as 'a vibrant city, where everyone can thrive economically, culturally and socially; a safe city that promotes health, learning and sustainable development, and a diverse city that values all of its people and communities'. The long-term aims of Bristol's Community Strategy are:
- ◆ achieving lifelong learning;
 - ◆ building a thriving economy;
 - ◆ strengthening local communities;
 - ◆ promoting health and wellbeing; and
 - ◆ investing in a sustainable environment.
- There are also five shorter term priorities for action centred on young people, the local economy, the environment, transport and community safety.
- 23 The council aims to work with the Bristol Partnership to meet these local area priorities and improve the quality of life in the city. The council's priorities until 2007 are identified in the *Our Corporate Plan 2004-2007- our vision, our values, our priorities*. The council's cultural services feature in its priority for development which is focused on increasing the city's economic prosperity.

The service inspection

- 24 Bristol City Council is engaged in delivering cultural services and enabling cultural activity in the city in a variety of ways. There are a range of cultural activities which the council directly provides through the Cultural Services and Parks, Estates and Sports divisions within its Environment, Transport and Leisure department. These are libraries, sports and arts development, parks and open spaces, museums, archives and allotments. The council also plays an enabling and influencing role through partnerships with other organisations, working with different service providers and by using grant aid. Significant partnerships include:
- ◆ working with Bristol Community Sport, a trust who manage, through a contract, four sports centres, one leisure centre and eight swimming pools in the city;
 - ◆ grant-aiding notable venues and organisations in the city, such as the contemporary arts centre, the Arnolfini and the regional film and media centre, the Watershed; and
 - ◆ as lead partner in the South West Museums Hub, funded by Renaissance in the Regions programme.
- 25 This inspection considered the effectiveness of all of the above. It also probed specifically on how the council is using its cultural services to promote well-being and tackle health issues in the city.

How good is the service?

Do the council's ambitions for cultural services match those for the area?

- 26 The council has limited awareness and understanding of the links between its cultural services and local and regional priorities. Its understanding of the contribution cultural services can make to wider agendas and local priorities, such as promoting health and well-being and strengthening local communities, is under-developed. Corporate managers and leading councillors demonstrate some awareness, but this tends to be at an operational level. There is little connection made in corporate strategies and plans to the potential role cultural services can play on a daily basis in helping to deliver against local area priorities.
- 27 Local ambitions for cultural services are unclear. Cultural services are not explicitly identified as important in the community strategy or as a major tool in helping to achieve on shorter-term priorities, such as young people or community safety. The council adopted the local *Cultural Strategy* in February 2004 and it is under-developed. There are clear links between the ambitions of the community strategy and the cultural strategy, as they are both structured around the same longer-term aims. The cultural strategy's vision is:
- ◆ 'Bristol is a beautiful city. Its recent economic success has been significantly boosted by the creativity of its people. It is a city poised to become a European model for quality of life, built on cultural excellence.
 - ◆ Culture for us must be inclusive, active, vibrant, accessible, sustainable, exciting, global, local, fun, challenging, radical, aspirational and above all rooted in Bristol's uniqueness, building bridges and bringing us together.'

However, this vision is not translated into clear ambitions and does not define why culture is important for the city. It does not indicate what residents' views are about opportunities, services and facilities or their wishes for improvement. The strategy proposes 55 largely aspirational actions, which are not specific or prioritised. Although councillors have approved the strategy, it is not clear how the strategy is informing the council's priorities for improvement and development. The council recognises further work is required to improve the cultural strategy and there are plans in place to address this.

- 28 The council's own overall ambitions for cultural services are not well developed. There are no explicit corporate ambitions for culture which explain what the council is seeking to achieve for cultural services and acknowledge a place for culture in the wide range of council activity. This hinders the development of a clear understanding of the contribution culture can make to local area priorities. The council does have a good understanding of the local challenges, expectations and context facing cultural services. This has been established through user engagement and widespread consultation such as quality of life surveys and these have been used to inform the local cultural strategy. But the council has yet to use this understanding to inform clear cultural ambitions.
- 29 In addition there are variable links between the council's overall ambitions and service level aims and objectives. High level corporate ambitions are not always followed through into developing clear and challenging aims for individual services. Some are clearer and more challenging, as they are responding to regional and national priorities and local aspirations. But others are not. There is also a lack of clear cultural service priorities and the council has not yet defined lesser priorities for cultural services. Without explicit cultural ambitions and aims translated into service specific aims and priorities, the council cannot be confident that it will achieve all it could for culture and maximise the use of resources.

- 30 Stakeholders have some clarity about what the council is trying to achieve for cultural services. They consider the council is reasonably clear about what it is trying to achieve from most of its individual partnerships. However, they lack clarity about what the council is seeking to achieve overall for cultural services as a result of the lack of corporate cultural ambitions.
- 31 The council has ambitious plans for regeneration and city centre development and these include a well-developed cultural element. Its plans for high profile cultural developments link well with local area priorities for improving the quality of life through building a thriving economy and strengthening local communities. They respond to deficiencies identified in local surveys and are supported by the West of England Partnership. Planned major developments for cultural services include:
- ◆ the modernisation of the Colston Hall by 2008;
 - ◆ building a 10,000 seat arena for major events by 2008;
 - ◆ developing new and improved swimming pools and other sports facilities; and
 - ◆ leisure and health facilities as part of the extensive redevelopment of south Bristol at Hengrove Park.
- 32 The contribution of culture to local health ambitions is developing well. There are strong links in strategic plans to the local priority of health and well being. These plans recognise that the development of new sports facilities can play a role in improving the health and well-being of local residents. The council has also prioritised improving the participation of young people in the arts and the number of children who can swim. Its local public service agreement (LPSA) sets targets for improvement in these areas to:
- ◆ increase the attendance and participation of young people under 25 years of age in the arts with a particular emphasis on young black and Asian people and young people from neighbourhood renewal areas in the city; and
 - ◆ increase the numbers of children who can swim 25 metres by the time they are 11 years old. This target also focuses on pupils in education action zones and children from neighbourhood renewal areas.

How effectively do cultural services contribute to local area priorities?

- 33 The council's cultural services contribute to the community's priorities as set out in the corporate plan. The council can demonstrate impacts and improved outcomes for residents from the range of cultural activity and initiatives it supports. However, it does not systematically evaluate the level of this contribution to local area priorities. This is for a number of reasons, including poor target setting, and not identifying desired outcomes and impacts at the beginning of service improvement.

Achieving lifelong learning

- 34 Cultural services provide numerous opportunities to encourage lifelong learning. There are many well developed initiatives. These are popular with local people and are providing increased take up and improved outcomes. Libraries and arts in particular understand well their potential role as agents for skills and knowledge development. Successful library initiatives include:
- ◆ popular reading promotions, such as 'read a million words';
 - ◆ over 200 publicly accessible computers in libraries provided through 'Peoples Network' funding and offering access to online learning resources and tutor support; and

- ◆ the 'Stepping into learning' initiative in libraries in Bristol and South Gloucestershire supporting over 2,000 people from various target groups, giving one to one support and resulting in 159 of those participating returning to the labour market.
- 35 Cultural services work well in partnership to deliver lifelong learning opportunities, including through joint service centres. In July 2003 the City of Bristol College took over the running of the Lawrence Weston library and merged it with a learning resource centre. Opening hours increased from 23 to 41 hours and use has risen from 61 visits a day to 250 a day. The number of children's items borrowed from the library has also risen from 2,982 in 2002/03 to 4,200 in 2003/04. The new St Paul's learning and family centre includes a library. It opened in the heart of one of Bristol's most deprived wards in 2004 and offers a range of 'first rung' learning opportunities. The library attracted 589 new members of which 82 per cent are from black and minority ethnic communities and 268 were children. However, no targets or outcomes were identified when the new facility was planned and so the council does not know how effective the development is in meeting local needs.
- 36 Learning opportunities for children and young people are also well developed. The record office, museums and art gallery have active education programmes. Visits by school children to museums have increased through a learning and outreach programme with over 31,000 school visits in 2003/04. There are national standards that recognise sports participation in schools. In Bristol 25 per cent of primary schools have achieved the 'Activemark' award and 56 per cent of secondary schools have achieved the 'Sportsmark' award. This is through effective partnership working between schools and sports development workers. In addition there are well attended school holiday sports programmes and out of hours school programmes that run in 18 schools and cover 9 sports. The council is also actively working to develop its educational staff in their sports coaching skills with 277 teachers from 77 schools participating in 21 courses.
- 37 Learning through arts participation aimed at young people is very well developed, especially in music. The council hosts, in partnership with Gloucestershire councils, a Youth Music Action Zone, called REMIX, which is targeted at young people living in areas of deprivation. About 35 per cent of young people in Bristol live in these areas. This initiative is one of 20 set up across the country and has provided opportunities for more than 800 young people to take part in music making activities. Over 2,000 have attended showcase events in four years. Creative Partnerships, the national education and cultural programme, is very successful in Bristol. Opportunities are provided for teachers to participate in continuing professional development courses and 23 teachers from 11 schools have taken part. An arts coordinator is employed in the community education service to promote better links between the arts and lifelong learning.

Building a thriving economy

- 38 Bristol has a vibrant cultural environment within the city centre which contributes significantly to the economic vitality of the city. The council is using its leadership effectively to develop tourism in the city. Tourism is important to Bristol, with the city attracting over nine million visitors a year. This contributes over £500 million to the local economy and supports 16,000 jobs. The council sees culture as a key contributor to its tourism success. In 1999 it established the Bristol Tourism and Conference Bureau, now Destination Bristol, bringing together various agencies and businesses to support and develop the cultural offer in the city.

39 Culture in the city is enhanced through a programme of grant aid to cultural organisations. In 2003/04 the council invested over £1.7 million in local arts, youth, play and sports organisations to secure improvements for local people. Of this £719,740 was invested in arts organisations and some of the major cultural agencies that receive grant aid include the Arnolfini, the Bristol Old Vic and the Watershed media centre. This support is welcomed by the organisations and their activity makes a valuable contribution to the cultural vibrancy of the city.

40 Cultural services are also directly contributing to the high quality cultural offer in the city. Good examples include:

- ◆ the well regarded and high quality heritage collections at the museums and art gallery, some of which have international and national significance;
- ◆ an annual touring exhibition of paintings from different collections, such as the National Gallery, at the City Museum and Art Gallery;
- ◆ the wide range of public art commissions throughout the city; and
- ◆ a growing range of council-supported cultural events, including the Bristol International Balloon Fiesta and the Bristol Community Festival at the historic Ashton Court, which together attract over half a million visitors.

These high quality facilities and events play a significant role in meeting local aspirations and attracting visitors combined with developing a sense of civic pride.

41 The council has been slower to respond to the city's creative industries, which currently employ 3.7 per cent of Bristol's workforce, but this is improving and the council is now offering active support. The city is known internationally as a centre for media excellence with several major companies based in the city, such as Aardman Animation. The Bristol Film Office provides free support for film production and acts as a central point of contact for all filming enquiries. This is much appreciated by filmmakers as they receive a co-ordinated response from the council. It has also done much to raise the profile of the city with the industry.

Strengthening local communities

42 The council's approach to tackling social cohesion is effective and developing well in some areas of deprivation. Examples include:

- ◆ a new adventure play park with a jungle experience, skateboarding and sand and water play at Hengrove Park in south Bristol has attracted over 120,000 users a year.
- ◆ arts workers in neighbourhood renewal areas are working with local communities, improving access to arts throughout the city and supporting these communities in designing their own arts programmes. One group has designed a piece of decorative art for a new community facility.
- ◆ the council assists the Community at the Heart regeneration project through several community sports and arts projects working within Barton Hill, Redfield, Lawrence Hill and the Dings areas providing recreational opportunities for local people of various ages. These initiatives are successfully building capacity through local sports clubs.

However, although the LPSA targets for participation in arts events by under 25 year olds have been met in 2003/04, the targets for participation by disadvantaged groups were not met. Overall there remains more to do to ensure that the full range of cultural activity is used successfully to balance the needs of all communities.

- 43 The council is actively encouraging the development of community based cultural activities by providing support to community groups across the city. In 2003/04 it gave grants totalling over £50,000 to community groups, local charities and organisations and emerging arts festival from the neighbourhood arts festival fund. The resulting programme of local events attracted audiences of 42,000 people with over 2,000 participants.
- 44 There is a growing recognition that cultural services, especially those facilities based in the city centre, need to do more to engage with local communities through outreach programmes. The record office runs a four month programme of events in support of the National Archive Awareness Campaign. As a result of this extended promotion, the record office has seen a sharp increase in the number of new visitors. Museums outreach workers are improving access to the heritage collections through promotional programmes. The Colston Hall, the main concert venue in the city, has introduced a £5 ticket available for targeted groups in the community. This has resulted in nearly 4,000 under 25 year olds attending events from neighbourhood renewal areas. These initiatives are valuable, however, some developments are very new and yet to realise results. In addition there is no overall coordination of an approach to maximise resources and provide the greatest benefits for local communities.
- 45 Cultural services have made some effective contributions to supporting safer and stronger communities. The Southmead Youth Sports Development initiative is providing more sporting activity for young people in an area with high levels of substance misuse. There have also been initiatives in local parks to improve safety and facilities. For example, St Agnes Park in St Pauls suffered from high levels of anti social behaviour and local communities were reluctant to use it. Early indications are that the introduction of a park warden, community use of the park lodge and engaging with the local community are having a positive impact and local use of the park is now improving.

Promoting health and wellbeing

- 46 Cultural services are playing a major contribution to promoting health and well being. The annual quality of life surveys show that residents' participation in physical activity is good and improving. The percentage of residents who take part in active sports at least once a week has risen from 32 per cent in 2001 to 35 per cent in 2003. This is above Sport England's target for 2004 of 30 per cent with 1 per cent growth each year. The numbers of residents who take part in moderate exercise five times a week has also improved from 29 per cent in 2001 to 39 per cent in 2003.
- 47 The council has taken positive action to promote the health and well being of children and young people. Free swims at all of its swimming facilities in the school holidays last year encouraged children and young people to make better use of the facilities. This initiative resulted in over 62,000 swims, a considerable improvement from 21,000 swims in the previous year. Free tennis sessions have resulted in over 2,500 children attending taster sessions and over 1,000 children receiving free coaching. As a result of this initiative the Lawn Tennis Association has officially recognised Bristol as a 'City Tennis Club'.

- 48 Partnership working on health improvement initiatives is a strength. The council is working successfully with Primary Care Trusts to develop new facilities, linking cultural services and health promotion. In 2003/04 three GP referral schemes referred 58 patients to the council's leisure facilities. Doctors measured the health of participants at the beginning and end of the 18 week referral period. This showed that the referral had a marked impact on patients' health with 67 per cent of patients showing a weight reduction and 79 per cent had a reduction in their heart rate. Importantly 80 per cent of patients continued to use the council's leisure facilities after their referral was completed.
- 49 Cultural services are working successfully on health and physical activity improvements within Bristol's schools. Sports development teams are based in three 'hub school' sites within the city and there are sports development coordinators in each secondary school. As a result, more children are participating in active sports. In 25 per cent of primary schools children are spending at least 2 hours a week doing sport. This rises to 56 per cent in secondary schools who have well-developed links with out of school clubs. Good progress is being made on improving the health of children from deprived areas who may be less active and have poorer health. In 2002 83 per cent of all children and 64 per cent of children from neighbourhood renewal areas could swim 25 metres by the end of key stage two. The council plans to improve this to 90 and 85 per cent by July 2005. However, at present the council struggles to link effectively its education and cultural activity and risks missing opportunities such as through the major Building Schools for the Future programme.
- 50 The 'Healthy Walks' initiative is well supported and well regarded nationally. It is targeted on five areas of need within the city and is promoted through the parks and sports development sections of cultural services. The Primary Care Trusts refer patients onto the schemes which in October 2004 had 102 participants.

Do cultural services provide a quality user experiences?

- 51 The council is making a reasonable contribution to the high quality cultural environment in Bristol through its cultural services contributions to local area priorities. However there is a widespread recognition among stakeholders and within the council that the long-standing lack of investment in its cultural services has had a detrimental impact on the overall quality of the user experience.

Customer focus

- 52 Much of the council's cultural service improvement has been informed by community views collected at the local level. The service's understanding of the local demographic profile and community aspirations is reasonably good, and this allows it to target provision effectively in some areas. There are some examples of cultural services providing opportunities for local people to volunteer or to inform service improvement. For example, active friends groups in parks have taken effective action to protect wildlife and have informed service improvement. A large number of volunteers work with the museums service, especially at the Industrial Museum. They are actively engaged in the conservation, renovation and operation of much of the industrial heritage machinery and run access sessions for the public. The Bristol Magpies (Museums and Art Gallery Participation, Information and Enjoyment Society) is a registered charity that for over 20 years has supported walks and talks programmes and assisted with fundraising. However, community needs and views are not used consistently in service improvement and better opportunities for local people to become involved in designing services are only now being developed.

- 53 The council gives a clear priority to staff training and development. The Parks Estates and Sports, and Cultural Services divisions of the Environment, Transport and Leisure department have received their second Investors in People award. Staff are well trained and active management ensures that service users are safe when using council facilities. The staff receive an annual training needs analysis which results in courses as required. Staff are suitably and sufficiently vetted and trained on safety issues including child protection and risk assessments are regularly conducted across the service.
- 54 Cultural services for people from black and minority ethnic communities are under-developed. There is some good engagement at a local level with target communities on specific projects. A translation service is available, but the web-site does not provide links in minority languages to assist people whose first language is not English to access cultural services. The council has not carried out a needs analysis or consulted with black and minority ethnic communities and so cannot be sure that it is responding effectively to the long-term vision of the community strategy of 'valuing all its people and communities' through its cultural services.
- 55 Cultural services for people with disabilities are under-developed. There are some effective initiatives, such as Art and Power, an arts project working with people with learning disabilities. But overall there is more to do to provide targeted activity for people with additional needs. Standard services are provided and some improvements have been made, but with limited success so far. Physical access to buildings is poor with only 27 per cent of cultural facilities meeting the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act. Some facilities, such as the museums, offer extremely limited access to the wealth of collections and exhibitions. In addition not all facilities are fitted with aids, such as hearing loops, to assist people with sensory impairment. The council's progress in improving access for disabled people has been slow and the council anticipates that it will take three years for all cultural buildings to be fully compliant.
- 56 Service standards are generally not well developed within cultural services. There are some individual service standards, but overall these are not consistent or communicated well to residents and users. There is no overall customer charter. This means that local people are not as aware as they could be of what they should expect from their cultural services.

User satisfaction

- 57 User satisfaction with all cultural services is poor. Satisfaction has fallen in all areas since the previous survey in 2001 and satisfaction levels are well below the target the council set for itself in 2003. Comparative performance using national performance indicators is also poor and in the worst 25 per cent of councils nationally. Resident satisfaction is also the lowest for all cultural services when compared to the family group of eight similar cities.

Satisfaction levels compared with other councils

Service area	Satisfaction in 2001	Local target for 2003	Satisfaction in 2003	Worst 25 per cent in 2003
Sport and leisure	47%	55%	39%	48%
Libraries	58%	76%	46%	63%
Museums and galleries	61%	78%	31%	31%
Theatres and concert halls	46%	63%	33%	36%
Parks and open spaces	67%	70%	53%	66%

- 58 Citizens Panel surveys confirm that resident satisfaction with cultural services is declining. The survey in 2000 showed a net satisfaction rate of 69 per cent; this increased to 76 per cent in 2001, but fell dramatically to 48 per cent in 2002. The 2002 survey concluded that sports and arts facilities were some of the worst things about living in Bristol, specifically relating to the lack of a significant concert and music venue. However, 53 per cent of the Citizens Panel concluded that some cultural events, such as the balloon fiesta and jazz in Queens Square were exceptional and encouraged a real sense of community.
- 59 Satisfaction with cultural services for target community groups is mixed. Only 11 per cent of local residents are satisfied with the range of provision targeted to young people. Recent surveys of young people said that they would like to be more active and make better use of the council's swimming facilities, but 35 per cent said the poor quality of the swimming pools was stopping them. More than half of young people said in recent surveys that they never go to cultural places such as museums, art galleries or the theatre and they suggested that cheap or free passes to sports facilities might encourage greater participation.
- 60 User satisfaction with some individual service areas is higher. Local satisfaction surveys indicate higher levels of satisfaction where facilities and services have been improved. For example satisfaction with the library service amongst users is 89 per cent and satisfaction with museums and art galleries is 96 per cent. Staff in cultural services are well regarded and users consider them friendly and welcoming.

Accessibility

- 61 The provision of good quality visitor facilities is variable. The council is not investing adequately in its cultural facilities to maintain a high quality cultural environment. It has made little progress in developing safe, attractive and sustainable public open spaces. Residents regard the parks and open spaces to be among the best things about living in the city. There are areas of high wildlife value, such as the Avon Gorge, and some high quality historical landscapes, such as Blaise Castle. Recent surveys show that 24 million people visited the parks and open spaces in Bristol last year. Major investment programmes are under way at Blaise Castle and Ashton Court but many of the recreation areas and smaller parks are lacking in investment. The council's action to improve St. Agnes Park in St Paul's appears an isolated initiative. Many parks and open spaces do not meet the needs of local communities or user groups and many playing fields lack good quality changing rooms. Most cultural buildings lack modern reception areas, comfortable seating, refreshment facilities and up-to-date equipment. The availability and reliability of high quality customer facilities is important to local people. They can affect customers' experiences and their willingness to extend their visit or return.
- 62 Many cultural services buildings and facilities are poor quality. There has been a long-term lack of investment in cultural service buildings which has impacted on their use and longer-term sustainability. This particularly applies to libraries and swimming pools. A new library and the record office are providing an improved user experience, but overall this level of improvement is very small. The poor condition of many of the buildings has discouraged users and swimming pool use has reduced. This has considerably reduced income and adversely impacted on the viability of the swimming pool operator. There is a slow response to repairs and general maintenance. Poorer quality buildings are reflected in the low levels of use and satisfaction. The council recognises this and has begun to take corrective action, with plans to provide new or refurbished facilities. However, these plans are at an early stage of development and are not yet realising significant improvement.
- 63 There is no coordinated pricing policy for cultural services. Various discount schemes operate, and efforts are made to offer affordable pricing structures at the leisure centres and Colston Hall. However, there is no overall charging strategy aimed at stimulating new and additional use by target communities.
- 64 Currently ICT is restricting electronic access to services. Cultural service's use of new technology is good in places, but in other areas in need of considerable improvement. The record office has increased its accessibility for remote users with 85 per cent of the archive catalogue now searchable online. Libraries offer full electronic access to services. But many aspects of cultural services cannot be accessed online. For example, residents cannot book sports facilities online and there are few opportunities to pay for services electronically. Under-developed remote access could be limiting local people's ability to participate as fully as they could or would like to.
- 65 The council has invested in its allotments to make them more sustainable. It recognised that there were too many allotments and that the sites were not being maintained in a condition that attracted use. After consultation with users there has been a rationalisation and reinvestment programme, resulting in tenancy occupancy rates rising to 70 per cent. Sites are now more attractive to users with improved facilities and increasing income is improving their longer-term sustainability.

- 66 Increased opening hours at cultural facilities have improved use and take up of services. Library opening hours have increased following consultation to better reflect local demand. As a result use has increased from 1.6 million users in 1999 to over 1.9 million users in 2004. Following increased opening hours at the museums and art gallery visitor numbers have increased from 491,999 in 2002/03 to 537,000 in 2004.
- 67 Communication with local people about the opportunities available is not as effective as it could be. It is not always easy to find information in cultural facilities about other cultural services. Local people report that they are not always aware of the range of cultural activity on offer. There are some high quality leaflets and promotional materials produced, such as Park Life, a listing of all events and activities in the parks and open spaces. But overall high quality marketing and information is not maximising opportunities to develop new audiences and encourage non-users to access activities.

Summary

- 68 Overall the council is providing fair cultural services. Residents' satisfaction with cultural services is low and has declined in recent years. These levels are poor when compared with similar councils. Service quality has suffered from low levels of investment which is affecting the quality of the customer experience. Cultural activities for black and minority ethnic communities and people with disabilities are under-developed. The council is not sufficiently aware of the needs and aspirations of all communities to inform cultural planning. It has made limited progress in tackling many of the barriers which may affect the ability of all communities to access the wide range of cultural activity on offer through the use of ICT and pricing policies.
- 69 The council's cultural ambitions are under-developed and its overall levels of awareness and understanding of the potential role of culture in meeting wider agendas is limited to an operational level. There is a lack of cultural priorities. At present the extent of the cultural services contribution to local area priorities is unclear, due to weak target setting.
- 70 Cultural services are making a valuable contribution to local area priorities, especially on promoting healthy living and well-being. Arts and sports development are achieving outcomes through creative approaches, especially in areas of deprivation. Use of heritage services continues to increase through targeted outreach programmes. Libraries are developing their role at the heart of local communities and encouraging lifelong learning is a strength. Cultural services are well led and staff are well regarded by stakeholders. There are innovative partnerships which are delivering improvements through more imaginative ways of working and the support given to other cultural providers in Bristol is good.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

Does the council have the capacity and systems to deliver its cultural ambitions? Will they drive improvements in cultural services for all sections of the community?

71 In recent years, cultural services have lacked stable political leadership. There is a lack of clarity about the strategic priorities for the service and shared focus within the council's strategic leadership on cultural services. This has reduced the capacity and the ability of the service to drive improvement. The potential of cultural services has not been maximised to achieve high performance in all areas. Areas which are under-developed include defining priorities; service integration; mainstreaming equalities and diversity; and performance management.

Service leadership

72 Political and corporate leadership of cultural services is not well developed. At the time of the inspection councillors and senior officers demonstrated some awareness of the contribution cultural services can make to local, regional and national priorities, such as on educational attainment and through major cultural development projects. In addition the council has invested some capital funding in cultural services with some modest growth in revenue funding. However, this has had minimal impact as cultural services are starting from a low funding base. The long-term lack of investment in cultural services and few explicit references in corporate strategies and plans to the potential of cultural services' contribution to wider agendas demonstrates low levels of support for the service. In addition the role of culture in spatial planning and contributing to the regional spatial strategy has not been fully recognised.

73 Political instability and a limited focus on culture within the council have hindered cultural services' improvement. There were three portfolio holders for the environment, transport and leisure portfolio, which included cultural services, from mid 2003 to early 2005. This led to slow progress on major strategies and developments, such as the development and implementation of the swimming pool strategy and work on developing the cultural strategy action plan. With cultural services previously making up a third of a political portfolio, environmental and transportation issues often marginalised cultural issues to the detriment of service improvement. In addition youth services were also within this portfolio. The councillor led review of youth services delivered significantly improved youth provision, as recognised by a recent Ofsted inspection. However, this has taken some time to complete and appears to have diverted political and corporate capacity from cultural improvement.

74 The council's role as an effective cultural leader is under-developed, but this is improving. It has been slow to use cultural services in the development of sustainable and cohesive communities. However, this is changing. Major cultural projects, such as delivering improved swimming pools, the Colston Hall and the new Museum of Bristol, have corporate support and are seen as playing a significant part in delivering corporate ambitions for the city. Partners recognise the council is becoming more effective in using cultural services to meet local area priorities. However, cultural services are not yet understood as a contributor to transforming the lives of local communities and improving the quality of life in the city.

- 75 Strategic leadership within cultural services is strong. Senior managers are able and well regarded. They are active players at the corporate and regional level, promoting links between culture and wider agendas. The Director of Culture and Leisure, formerly the director of Environment, Transport and Leisure, leads on promoting health and well-being for the local strategic partnership and sits on the board of Culture South West, the regional cultural consortium. The Head of Cultural Services leads a city-wide group considering violent crime. There are some high calibre managers and staff within cultural services. Partners praise their creativity, innovation and positive attitudes. However, management capacity is stretched. Senior officers manage large and complex workloads and service managers tend to operate within service silos. The council's decision to split the Environment, Transport and Leisure department from April 2005 into two departments was a positive step. Although this decision was driven by a need to improve the council's focus on transportation and planning issues, it presents an opportunity to build capacity and take cultural services forward in an integrated way.
- 76 Self awareness and shared learning across the department is variable. Managers and staff have a growing recognition of service weaknesses and areas for improvement. At present cultural services lack a systematic way of capturing and sharing learning from experience and from others. Good practice and innovation are locked within services and are seldom shared with others. There has also been a reluctance to celebrate success within the service and with the wider community although this is changing. A 'celebrating achievement' event has been launched to mark personal and team successes in delivering high quality and innovative services and in gaining qualifications. Successful nominees go forward to a council-wide awards ceremony.
- 77 Service integration and joint working is variable. Mechanisms are not in place to promote systematic joint working across cultural services. Management teams of the cultural services and parks, estates and sports divisions meet separately and limited joint planning takes place. Common themes, such as access, intelligence on community needs and working with target communities, are not being fully exploited. Joint working with other council departments and at the local level and on projects is more effective, such as with education on promoting active living to children.
- 78 The service is open to challenge and learning from others. External challenge was a strong feature of the council's recent cultural services best value review where the review group was led externally and made up of external colleagues and partners. The council has responded positively to a recent Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) Peer Review of libraries and an action plan is being taken forward addressing areas for development. The Audit Commission has also identified weaknesses in the council's approach to managing major projects and cultural assets. Good progress is being made in cultural services to address issues highlighted. Progress has been slow in responding to weaknesses identified in a previous Audit Commission inspection of sports services, although this is improving. The service responds well to external challenge through its open approach to partnership working.

Financial management

- 79 Systems are in place to ensure reasonable budget management across cultural services. Generally financial monitoring and reporting arrangements within the department are good with timely financial reports available for managers. Arrangements across the department have improved recently to enable senior managers to challenge performance on spend more effectively. Cultural services have traditionally managed spend well within the allocated budget.

- 80 Cultural services' approach to reviewing its priorities and moving resources from areas that are no longer as important locally is not so well developed. Historically budget allocations have been incremental. The service is not continuously reviewing priority areas and systematically moving resources from these areas to meet higher priorities. This is partly because the service does not have clearly defined priorities but also because cross service working is not fully developed. The lack of flexibility to shift resources hinders the service's ability to improve services.
- 81 Cultural services' capacity to respond to the need for improvement has been enhanced by plans for some additional revenue funding, but overall funding levels are below average. Traditionally the council's expenditure on cultural services is low, when compared with similar councils. This particularly applies to the council's spend on indoor sport and recreation facilities which at £3.97 per resident is the lowest spend in the family group of eight similar cities where the average spend is £11.64 and the next lowest is £7.25. In addition low levels of investment in library stock mean that the council is unlikely to meet the public library service standards on items added to stock and replenishment rates. Additional funding has been targeted to, for example, extending library opening hours to improve access. More funding is being targeted to delivering sports improvements, arts education work and library stock. However, these improvements are planned over the next three years, so are not showing results yet and the council is starting from a low base.
- 82 Cultural services, buildings and facilities suffer from a long-term underinvestment. The council recognises that many of its cultural buildings and facilities have been poorly resourced and maintained. Through its audits and condition surveys, the council has identified a need for in excess of £10 million to bring facilities up to a suitable condition. To raise the standard of parks and open spaces more than three times this amount is required. Funding has been used to improve access to facilities, targeted at meeting the needs of people with disabilities. In particular the council is prioritising buildings with the greatest use by the public. Work at the central library and city museum has been carried out early in the programme and this is being rolled out to other libraries funded by a £1 million annual corporate budget.
- 83 But generally the annual budget available is inadequate and this is targeted to facilities which have been identified as having long-term use. The council has plans to address this. It recognises that it has insufficient resources to improve its cultural facilities and that in some areas there is over-provision. A programme is underway to rationalise some aspects of service provision and dispose of surplus assets, with significant amounts of the sale of assets being reinvested in cultural facilities. Currently £10 million of a £37 million programme has been delivered.
- 84 Significant funding has been allocated in the capital programme for cultural facilities, in some recognition of the need for investment. In 2001/02 £13 million was allocated to the implementation of the swimming pool strategy providing new and refurbished facilities and two new facilities are scheduled to open in 2005. In 2003/04 £7 million was allocated to the redevelopment of Colston Hall alongside secured external funding. Over £6 million will be spent refurbishing or building libraries. This has been identified through a mix of capital and external funding. But progress has been slow in realising some improvements and no funding has been allocated in the short to medium term to improving the quality of the user experience at many of the other ageing facilities.

85 Cultural services have a strong track record in securing external funding. Over the last few years the service has attracted significant amounts of external funding, both for capital and revenue projects. Much of this has been achieved through innovative partnerships and a growing local recognition of cultural services role in regeneration, at both the city centre and local neighbourhood levels. Museum services have expanded significantly through funding from the South West Museums Hub, as part of the national Renaissance in the Regions programme. This has provided improved access to collections through outreach work, education programmes and better interpretation and display facilities. The Active Sport award brought £1.5 million to community sports development programmes supporting improved healthy living. Over £10 million has been attracted to parks and open spaces with significant awards from the Heritage Lottery Fund for the Blaise Castle estate and Ashton Court. However, some of the revenue grants are for additional staffing. The council has yet to develop a robust approach to ensuring that short-term service improvements, especially those that raise local expectations, are sustained for the future.

Performance management

86 Performance management is under-developed across cultural services. The council has invested in improving its mechanisms for managing performance at all levels in the organisation, but there is more to do to ensure this is embedded across the council. An improving corporate approach will help support improvement in performance management in cultural services, but at present many weaknesses remain.

87 No mechanism is in place at a strategic level within the department to assess overall progress and achievement towards corporate and local ambitions for cultural services. There is no overall strategic cultural plan and discussions on performance are focused within the two individual divisions within culture. As a result it is not always clear what the desired outcomes and impacts are from actions taken, the levels of success and the effectiveness of action taken.

88 The service has not established strong and clear links from corporate objectives to service and individual staff objectives below manager level. Staff performance is not routinely linked to performance indicators. Appraisals and regular meetings with managers are variable. As a result staff are not always clear about what is expected of them and how workloads should be balanced to meet conflicting demands and priorities. The council recognises the need to improve service planning and improvements are being introduced for 2005/06. However, training has yet to be provided for managers to enable them to implement the improvements effectively.

89 Overall measuring and monitoring of service performance is under-developed. Performance measurement and monitoring relies heavily on a wide range of national and local performance indicators. The current system for developing performance indicators and target setting is sophisticated and ensures managers are responsible and accountable for performance against targets. This provides robust monitoring data, but cannot be interrogated at a local level. In addition the service has significant amounts of performance information, for example the information collected for LPSA target monitoring and within libraries. However it is not clear how this data is used in service planning or how it is drawn together to give an overall picture of cultural services performance and to identify priority areas for improvement

- 90 There is variable monitoring of outcomes and impacts. Most performance indicators focus on measuring outputs, such as levels of take up, instead of measuring cultural vibrancy, benefits to those participating and qualitative assessments. Areas where performance management is strongest are those services where improvement has been driven by external funding, such as arts. As a result cultural services are not well placed to use performance information effectively to improve performance. Some services recognise this and are developing more outcome-focused indicators. For example, a new LPSA target for parks is being proposed. This seeks to improve the quality of the city's parks and green spaces in neighbourhood renewal areas and encourage local people to be more engaged in managing these areas. This supports the local priority of strengthening local communities and promoting health and well being.
- 91 The role of councillors in managing the performance of cultural services is not fully developed. Councillors do not receive performance information that is easily usable or focused at an appropriate level. Under the previous administration national performance indicators were reported to the executive and to scrutiny, although there was little discussion of cultural issues. The new minority administration has yet to establish its preferred arrangements. But overall cultural services lack a framework for providing relevant information to councillors. Briefings for portfolio holders focus on projects and topics, such as progress on the development of service based strategies. There is no detailed analysis or discussion of performance against corporate ambitions. This limits councillors' ability to influence and drive improved performance.

Addressing equalities and diversity

- 92 The service has taken some steps to understand the communities it serves. It has collected good intelligence about the aspirations and needs of some local communities. This has included demographic information, user and resident surveys, user focus groups, public meetings and consultation events. Service strategies, such as the swimming strategy, playing pitch strategy and public art strategy, and action planning are informed by this local community information and research. However, this knowledge is patchy and existing knowledge and information is not used consistently. More remains to be done to ensure cultural services have an overall understanding of the needs of all sections of the communities and that this is used systematically.
- 93 There has been no overall strategic assessment of the cultural needs and aspirations of local communities in the city matched with an audit of existing provision. The council has yet to clearly define who its communities are in terms of its cultural activity and balance the needs of visitors with local people. In common with many councils, there has been limited assessment of existing activity and provision. The focus in Bristol has tended towards developing new initiatives and facilities rather than always thinking spatially about existing facilities and locations. The council has not examined overall if it has the right number of cultural services and facilities in the right location given local social and economic information. The exception to this is the development of the swimming pool strategy. Without this broader understanding of cultural and spatial needs the council cannot be confident that it is investing appropriately in service improvement to meet local needs.
- 94 Cultural services are recognising and responding to the needs of some of the diverse communities in Bristol. Some services have tailored and targeted programmes and activities aimed at promoting equalities and diversity. But there are gaps, especially for people from the black and minority ethnic community and people with disabilities where the response is patchy. By responding to local needs in the way it delivers services the council would be better able to achieve an effective contribution to local priorities.

- 95 Individual cultural services are reasonably good at gathering and using customer feedback to deliver service improvement. User-focused changes, such as extending library and museum opening hours, have been introduced and continue to be developed in response to customer feedback. Friends of parks groups have also been successful in securing improvements in some parks in landscaping and play facilities. However, some opportunities have been missed. Local people were not involved in designing the new and refurbished libraries, although users were consulted on the service's plans. Engaging with local communities and listening to their views allows service planning to be more focused on local wishes and needs. There are some strong examples of better local engagement in the council's plans for cultural services, such as on the development of the Easton creative learning centre.
- 96 There is a high level of commitment to continuing to address equalities and diversity in cultural services. Cultural change is slow and there is more to do to ensure these issues are at the centre of cultural services activity. At present promoting equalities and diversity is not effectively mainstreamed into service planning and development. Monitoring information on the department equalities action plan for councillors is not timely as it is presented for discussion eight months after the plan has been reviewed. Also the extent of achievement is unknown as the plan lacks clear measurable targets.

Successful partnerships

- 97 The council is seeking to maximise its capacity through alternative means of service delivery. Cultural services within Bristol are delivered through a variety of mechanisms and approaches. These include direct provision, a leisure trust, partnerships with the health sector, and through grant aiding local organisations and groups.
- 98 Partnership working is generally a strength. The council has established a network of strategic partnerships, many with nationally and regionally significant organisations, especially in the creative industries. Partners include the West of England Partnership, the South West Regional Development Agency, the National Gallery, the Philharmonia Orchestra and the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE). These relationships are actively used to drive innovation and improvement and seek to maximise limited capacity and resources. For example through its work with CABE, the council has developed a strategic approach for the management of its green space which is regarded as a model of good practice by CABE. Strategic partnerships have the opportunity to become stronger through significant regional and local developments, such as plans for the refurbishment of Colston Hall, a new Museum of Bristol, a new arena and the creative learning centre in Easton.
- 99 The service uses partnership working effectively to contribute to what it is trying to achieve and service improvement. There are many successful and creative partnerships with the voluntary and business sectors, education providers, local and regional agencies and other council services. Examples of significant achievements through partnership working are:
- ◆ Opportunities to participate in museum outreach and education programmes have been increased through significant funding secured as the lead partner in the nationally funded South West Museum Hub.
 - ◆ Public art commissions in the city centre and local neighbourhoods in partnership with public and private sector organisations are enhancing public space and encouraging civic pride.

- ◆ Youth Music Action Zone in partnership with Gloucestershire councils is providing music production and participation opportunities for young people.
- ◆ Accredited and semi-formal ICT learning opportunities are provided in libraries with lifelong learning providers, such as the City of Bristol College and Internet Exchange.
- ◆ New libraries are increasing opportunities to participate and improving access in areas of deprivation in the city through partnerships with community education, health partners and the private sector.

100 Cultural services approach to building capacity through grant aid is strong. The use of grant aiding to arts organisations is effectively managed and contributing well to the wealth of cultural experiences in the city. Awards are based on service level agreements (SLA) and key performance indicators. A typical SLA requires a commitment from the organisation to work with agreed communities to set targets. Achievements are regularly reviewed and monitored to assess achievement against targets. As a result, the council can effectively use limited resources to target activity which contributes to local area priorities.

101 Cultural services have a positive approach to working in partnership. Partners report that they are able to work in flexible and creative ways to ensure that the partnerships are effective. However, partners also express a concern about the council's ability to deliver and question whether its capacity matches its ambitions. This stems from historical perceptions of the council promising more than it can deliver. This was also a concern of the previous Audit Commission inspection of sports services in 2002. As performance management and service planning are still under-developed and there has been slow progress in delivering improvement in some areas, this remains a concern. The council is aware of this and has some plans in place to tackle these issues.

102 However, there are some key partnerships which are not so effective. For example, there are opportunities for joint working between education and cultural services on adult learning and skills and vocational training which are not being exploited. In addition, the council's partnership with Bristol Community Sport² has not managed the indoor leisure facilities to the desired standards and it has failed to deliver significant improvements in the service. The council has provided inadequate investment in its assets and the leisure trust has poorly managed its facilities. This has resulted in a failure to deliver a high quality service. The council has not given sufficient emphasis to the active management of this contract to ensure that it operates successfully. This coupled with inadequate investment in maintaining the facilities has led to decreasing levels of satisfaction, reduced attendances and less income. This has all impacted on Bristol Community Sport's ability to operate successfully and they ceased trading in February 2005. As a result of this the council has taken the service back in-house until a new leisure management contract is let in late 2005. The council has yet to develop short-term plans to tackle long-standing problems with low standards of service quality and customer care at the leisure facilities.

² Bristol Community Sport was established in September 1997 when council staff transferred its in-house staff to a 'not for profit' Industrial and Provident Society which was set up for the benefit of the community.

- 103 The council has an under-developed approach to systematically evaluating its partnerships. It is not consistently reviewing the cultural partnerships it is engaged with to ensure a continued focus on what matters to local people and that it is realising the full benefits of maximising its capacity. For example, it is unclear about what it wants from its contribution to the Bristol Cultural Development Partnership. This partnership of Arts Council England South West, Business West and the council has been in place for several years and has successfully driven some high level projects, including the Capital of Culture bid. Currently the council has yet to clarify its contribution to generate win-win arrangements for all partners.
- 104 Partners perceive that there are blockages in the council's business systems. These lead to slower than expected responses and limit cultural services' capacity to work effectively. Problem areas identified include issues such as financial systems, selection and recruitment, property management and decision making.

Do the council's plans focus on achieving its ambitions for cultural services?

- 105 The council's plans and strategies do not adequately reflect cultural services' potential contribution to wider community ambitions. Its plans for major developments do support local ambitions, but its cultural sector priorities are not confirmed or explicit in corporate plans. Opportunities have been missed to demonstrate the contribution cultural services and activity can make to wider agendas and local priorities. For example, the draft *Behaviour improvement Plan 2004-2007* and *Improving Neighbourhoods, Changing Lives*, the council's neighbourhood renewal strategy, contain few explicit references to cultural activity. This lack of reference to cultural services input is exacerbated by the council not yet having clearly developed its priorities for cultural services. Until these are developed there is a risk of a lack of focus, loss of confidence among stakeholders and a lack of pace in delivering improvement.
- 106 A 'golden thread' is missing which links any cultural ambitions into clear priorities which are then translated into medium and short-term objectives and targets running through a hierarchy of plans. The cultural strategy and its action plan and a range of individual service strategies and plans are in place. But many of these strategies are very new or in draft and have had little impact on recent service developments. It is also difficult to map the direction and focus of the plans to each other. Without a clear cascade through the plans it will be difficult for the council to ensure it is focusing on priority areas and providing clarity and inspiring confidence to all stakeholders about what it is trying to achieve.
- 107 There are weaknesses in the content and structure of the cultural strategy action plan. It lacks focus and priorities and does not adequately describe what the council and its partners are seeking to achieve or how actions will be delivered. The council and the cultural strategy steering group recognise this and intend to carry out further work to identify resources, priorities and set realistic timescales for delivery.
- 108 Service-based strategies and plans are of variable quality and target-setting is under-developed. Service planning in cultural services is not strong. Individual service plans, where they exist, are of variable quality. Linkages between these plans, service strategies, the corporate plan and the cultural strategy are mixed. Most plans are not specific, measurable, achievable, realistic or time-bound (SMART), do not use a common language and are currently not in a common format. An exception to this is the libraries position statement where some clear targets are set, linked to achieving public library standards. A lack of consistent and high quality plans means the council risks not knowing if it has achieved what it set out to do.

- 109 Mechanisms for reviewing plans are under-developed. There are few opportunities at department level to challenge draft plans and there are no joint planning sessions across cultural services. Plans and strategies are not regularly reviewed and updated by senior managers to identify progress and achievements. This hinders the ability of councillors and senior managers to assess the extent to which services are improving and achievement against area priorities.
- 110 The failure within the department to bring together individual service plans into a consistent and coordinated cultural service plan means that there is no clear prioritisation across the service and it is less clear what the overall focus is for service improvement. This limits the council's and stakeholder's ability to have a clear understanding of what is important for the service and to allocate resources accordingly.
- 111 The council's strong partnership working has resulted in the engagement of stakeholders in developing cultural plans. Stakeholders have participated in consultation on the cultural strategy and service strategies, such as *Playing for Real*, the draft play strategy, the playing pitch strategy, the swimming pool strategy and the draft creative industries strategy. The council has commenced improvement programmes at its libraries, allotments and swimming pools and has carried out extensive consultation with stakeholders who have been able to influence improvement plans. The council and key partners are developing a joint Bristol Creative Industries action plan. However, partners are aware that overall there have been few opportunities for joint strategic planning on shared agendas.
- 112 Cultural service improvement is reflected well in some sub-regional and corporate plans for neighbourhood regeneration and improved community facilities. Good examples include:
- ◆ Hengrove Park which has been identified through the South Bristol Urban Framework as a regeneration site. Redevelopment plans for the area include a new sports centre, 50 metre swimming pool and a high quality park.
 - ◆ Knowle West Health Park developing in partnership with the Primary Care Trust and social services. This centre has attracted funding from Sport England and Arts Council England for community art and sports initiatives.
 - ◆ The new creative learning centre in Easton is planned to support community cohesion. The range of services offered at this facility will be influenced by a steering group of local residents and the findings of action-based research projects with the local communities.

The cultural elements of regeneration plans demonstrate clearly the high level of understanding and awareness among senior cultural managers of the contribution cultural services can make to community cohesion and sustainable communities and it demonstrates that at a local level culture is helping to meet wider community ambitions.

- 113 The council has exciting future plans for major developments to enhance the city's cultural experience. These include major refurbishments at Colston Hall and the development of the new Museum of Bristol. Both these projects have high profile and support within the council and from key regional and local stakeholders. They will be delivered through strategic partnership working and using significant external and partnership funding, much of which is in place, secured or sources identified. Colston Hall will be redeveloped using a phased approach turning it into a major music venue in the region. Improved facilities for performers and audiences are proposed presenting opportunities for participation, performance and production. The approach taken to deliver the improvements through discrete phases is sound and phase one is scheduled for completion in 2008. The Museum of Bristol will be situated in the current Industrial Museum site and will focus on presenting and interpreting the history of the people of Bristol. The first phase is scheduled for completion in 2009. Both these initiatives tackle weaknesses in the existing provision and will complement well the cultural offer in the city. The council is making good progress on developing its plans and is becoming well placed to deliver these cultural developments. It is confident that these new developments can be sustained. This stems from the level of support the projects have within the council. The council is developing its plans for sustainability but these have yet to be finalised.
- 114 Mechanisms are in place to support the successful delivery of these major cultural projects. The council has taken steps to improve its project management of these major capital projects and has set up a capital projects team with skills in project management to lead the redevelopment of Colston Hall. It recognises that service managers are not always best placed to deliver on major developments and has strengthened its capacity and skills in this area. The capital projects programme board, made up of senior officers and leading councillors, is overseeing these projects and regularly monitors progress and spend. This robust approach minimises the risk to the council of not delivering the projects to time and on budget.

Summary

- 115 Overall, the council's cultural services have uncertain prospects for improvement. Currently, many aspects of the council's capacity and systems to deliver improvement are under-developed. In recent years the service has suffered from a lack of consistent political leadership, limited corporate recognition of its potential contribution to local and regional agendas and limited management capacity. Service integration is not strong and mechanisms for sharing learning are not in place. Resources are not effectively shifted to match need and there has been a history of under-investment in improving the quality of the cultural offer and user experience. Performance management and monitoring are under-developed. Cultural services' approach to promoting diversity is not fully effective and there is a lack of overall understanding of local cultural needs and aspirations. Future plans are of variable quality with few linkages across priority areas and there is no overall plan for culture that brings together individual plans into a co-ordinated way that governs the future direction of the service.
- 116 Strategic service leadership is strong. At this level the value of culture and its potential role in contributing to wider agendas is clearly understood. Cultural services demonstrate significant strengths in partnership working, both internally and externally, and the relationship is highly valued by partners. The creation of a new culture and leisure department is a very positive step and offers significant opportunities to tackle departmental and service weaknesses. In addition, the council's plans for exciting large-scale cultural developments are clearly focused on achieving some local ambitions. However, these proposed developments are not in place yet and so not producing results.

Appendices

Documents and interviews

The purpose of a best value inspection is to make two judgements. The first is how good is the service being inspected? The second is what are the prospects for improvement? We carried out a range of activities to enable us to reach our judgements.

Documents reviewed

Before going on site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that the council provided for us. These included:

- ◆ The council's self assessment;
- ◆ *Community strategy*;
- ◆ *Corporate Plan*;
- ◆ *Local Cultural Strategy*;
- ◆ *Performance plan 2004/05*;
- ◆ Cultural services service strategies and plans;
- ◆ Resident and user surveys;
- ◆ Performance data;
- ◆ *Environment Transport and Leisure equalities action plan*;
- ◆ Financial information;
- ◆ Councillor briefings and cabinet reports; and
- ◆ Previous inspection reports and improvement plans.

List of people interviewed

We met a range of people involved with the service:

Louise Baker	Consultant for performance management
Paul Barnett	Head of Cultural Services
Kate Davenport	Head of Libraries
Nick Gurney	Chief Executive
Councillor Peter Hammond	Leader of the Council
Councillor Helen Holland	Deputy Leader of the Council and cabinet member for external affairs and regeneration
Andrew Kelly	Bristol Cultural Development Partnership
Richard Mond	Head of Parks, Estates and Sports
Mary O'Malley	Head of Arts
Derrick Price	Chair of Cultural Strategy Steering Group

Councillor Richard Pyle	Cabinet member for Environment, Transport and Leisure
Lindsay Renwick	Chief Executive, Bristol Community Sport
Carew Reynell	Director of Central Support Services
Nigel Smith	ICT Project Support Officer
Councillor Anne White	Chair of Environment, Transport and Leisure Scrutiny Committee
Peter Wilkinson	Parks Services Manager
Stephen Wray	Director of Environment, Transport and Leisure
Focus group	Frontline staff
Focus group	Middle managers
Focus group	Partners
Focus group	Staff with responsibilities for equalities and diversity
Focus group	Staff and partners with responsibilities for healthy living and well-being
Focus group	Staff with responsibilities for property and asset management

Shared Priorities

A set of shared public service delivery priorities were agreed by the LGA's General Assembly and the Central Local Partnership in 2002. Central and local government agreed seven areas in which it was most important to deliver tangible improvements over the following three years.

Raising standards across our schools

- ◆ matching excellence of the best;
- ◆ transforming secondary schools; and
- ◆ workforce capacity.

Improving the quality of life

- ◆ of children;
- ◆ of young people and families at risk; and
- ◆ of older people.

Promoting healthier communities through key local services – such as health, education, housing, crime and accident prevention

Creating safer and stronger communities, by working with the police and other local agencies

Transforming our local environment

Meeting local transport needs

Promoting the economic vitality of localities.

Further information from www.lga.gov.uk

Improving public services

The Government has placed a duty upon local councils to deliver services to clear standards – of cost and quality – by the most economic, efficient and effective means available.³ Best value is a challenging framework that is designed to improve local services. Councils are required to assess their own performance and put in place measures to ensure continuous improvement in all of their services.

Councils must show that they have applied the 4Cs of best value:

- ◆ **challenging** why and how a service is being provided;
- ◆ **comparing** their performance with others' (including organisations in the private and voluntary sectors);
- ◆ embracing fair **competition** as a means of securing efficient and effective services; and
- ◆ **consulting** local **taxpayers**, customers and the wider business community.

The Government has decided that each council should be scrutinised by an independent inspectorate. The Audit Commission performs this role.

The purpose of the inspection, and of this report, is to:

- ◆ enable the public to see whether best value is being delivered;
- ◆ enable the council to see how well it is doing;
- ◆ enable the Government to see how well its policies are working in practice;
- ◆ identify failing services where remedial action may be necessary; and
- ◆ identify and disseminate best practice.

³ This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission ('the Commission') following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.