

Inspection report

June 2005



Customer Access

Hart District Council

Contents

Summary	3
Scoring the service	4
Recommendations	7
Report	8
Context	8
The locality	8
The Council	8
The Council's customer access services	9
How good is customer access?	10
Are the aims clear and challenging?	10
Does the Council meet these aims?	11
How does the performance compare?	16
Summary	17
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	18
Ownership of problems and willingness to change	18
A sustained focus on what matters	19
Capacity and systems to deliver performance and improvement	20
Integration of continuous improvement into day-to-day management	22
Summary	24
Appendices	25
Documents reviewed	25
Reality checks undertaken	25
List of people interviewed	26

Summary

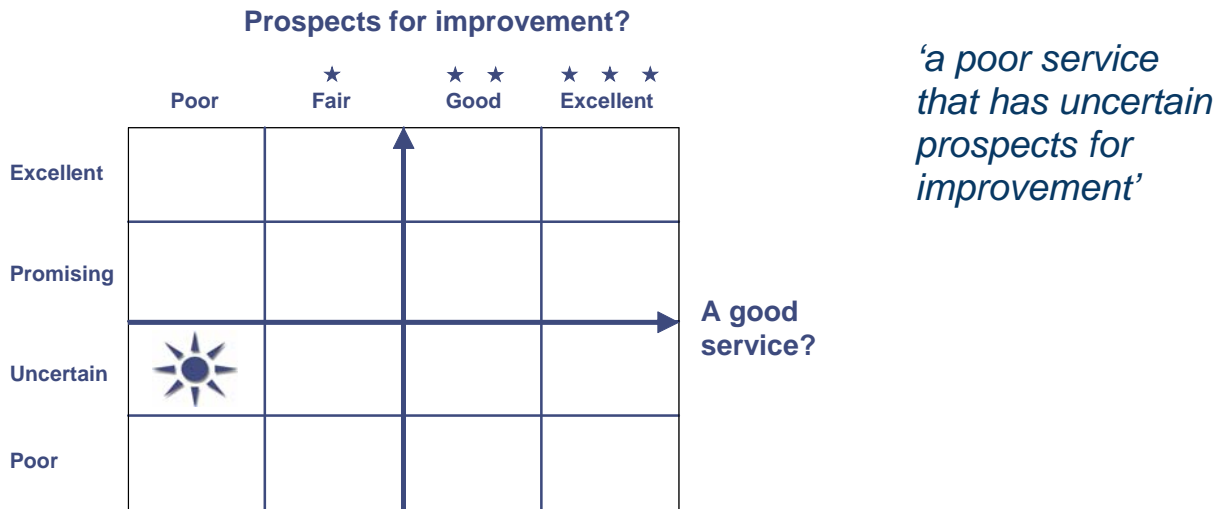
- 1 Hart District Council is in Hampshire, in the commuter belt of southern England and in the least deprived area in the country. Earnings and housing costs are high. It serves a population of 83,500, of which 5.6 per cent have described themselves as other than white British, compared with just over 13 per cent for the country as a whole. The Council is Conservative-led, with 19 of the 35 seats at the time of our inspection (and 17 from May 2005), and employs 470 staff across all services.
- 2 Despite some areas of good performance, there are fundamental weaknesses in the current level of customer access. These result in a poor service overall. The Council has a limited ambition for top quality services, and lacks good district-wide access to, and information about, services for residents. Customer access standards are below user expectations. The Council does not perform well in meeting these standards and offers a poor performance in comparison with other councils. There are positive areas, including the friendliness and efficiency of its frontline staff, and some of its partnerships and web-based services. The Council recognises many of its weaknesses and is working with others to address them.
- 3 Because change is at an early stage, the Council's overall prospects for improving customer access are uncertain. It has begun a comprehensive council-wide review of customer access, which it is now managing with energy and commitment, but many important decisions, investments and action plans still lie ahead. This means that the Council cannot be certain that it will be able to tackle all that may be needed once it has completed its internal reviews and external consultation. And although it has started to take actions to address its poor performance in customer access, it is still in the process of changing its culture in order to do so.
- 4 Our judgement also reflects uncertainty over the degree of improvement. While it is clear that the Council will achieve improvements in customer access, it is not yet clear that this will enable it to reach the standards of the best performers in similar councils elsewhere. It has not yet set its sights on a significant level and pace of improvement towards that of those best performers, and has been relatively slow to develop its track record in making changes that improve access to its services.
- 5 Our inspection of customer access was designed to follow-up the actions taken by the Council since January 2004, by assessing the current level of service and its prospects for improvement. The Council completed a comprehensive self-assessment of its customer access that helped inform and guide this inspection.
- 6 In January 2004, we reported on weaknesses in the Council's approach to customer access through our Corporate Performance Assessment. Our view then was that 'standards of customer care are inconsistent and the Council has yet to develop a comprehensive corporate approach to ensure that it makes full use of user and staff feedback. This is important in ensuring that all users receive a consistently good standard of service and that customers are actively involved in helping shape services to meet their needs. The Council recognises this and is taking appropriate action to implement a new corporate complaints system and commence a cross-cutting review of customer service'¹.

¹ Audit Commission (January 2004) Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) Hart District council.

Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed the Council as providing a ‘poor’, no-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Scoring chart²: Hart District Council - Customer Access



- 8 We assess customer access as ‘poor’ because:

- ◆ the Council does not provide good, district-wide access to, or information about, services for residents:
 - ◆ the telephone service is inadequate;
 - ◆ voicemail is used inconsistently;
 - ◆ electronic access is limited;
 - ◆ office opening hours for the civic office in Fleet are not focused on customer need;
 - ◆ only 35 per cent of the Council’s buildings are fully accessible by people with disabilities;
- ◆ the Council does not perform well in meeting standards and targets for customer access:
 - ◆ overall satisfaction is below average;
 - ◆ standards for answering the telephone, letters and emails compare poorly with other councils and are below users’ expectations;
 - ◆ there are high levels of dissatisfaction with responses to complaints;
 - ◆ it is a weak performer on its e-government targets;

² 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.

- ◆ the focus on equalities and diversity issues is weak;
- ◆ in general, the Council does not engage well with its customers and partners to determine service delivery:
 - ◆ it does not consult well or use feedback effectively;
 - ◆ it does not systematically monitor letter and email responses across all its services to know how it is performing;
 - ◆ it does not view access from a customer's point of view, which has resulted in some basic inadequacies such as a lack of signing to offices and leisure centres; and
- ◆ the Council does not have a clear and ambitious set of aims and targets for delivering access to services for customers.

9 However, there are some positive aspects:

- ◆ the reception staff are friendly and efficient and the reception area is welcoming;
- ◆ partnership working is being used to extend service access;
- ◆ the planning service has a helpful and well-used web-based information system and its leisure services offer strong customer service; and
- ◆ there are positive examples of consultation within individual services.

10 We have assessed the prospects for improvement as uncertain. The Council recognises the need to improve customer access and is at an early stage in taking steps that will lead to improvement. Positive features include:

- ◆ organisational restructuring, with new senior posts, that offers potential for a fresh corporate approach to delivering better customer experiences;
- ◆ appointing lead cabinet members for partnerships and electronic governance and demonstrating commitment to improving electronic access;
- ◆ beginning a review of customer access issues, under the corporate banner of the Council's Project C;
- ◆ developing lead managers and staff who are now clear about the level and nature of change needed – and are energetic, committed and enthusiastic about delivering it; and
- ◆ developing performance and monitoring systems that will help achieve improved access, and are supported by better staff appraisal and development systems.

11 However, there are weaknesses that need to be overcome in order to achieve a significant level and pace of improvement, including:

- ◆ limited progress in tangible improvements that could be recognised by customers since weaknesses were identified over 12 months ago;
- ◆ limited development of the range of detailed actions needed to improve access, and not yet setting aspirations, goals, priorities and budgets;
- ◆ levels of councillor and staff engagement in, and understanding of, customer access that vary considerably;
- ◆ difficult and complex decisions that still have to be made about some critical changes, including technological changes to telephone and web services;

- ◆ the Council's weak track record in consultation, market research, response to customer feedback, equalities, information technology and partnerships;
- ◆ the low ambition for customer access, despite the Council's stated value of 'excellent customer service';
- ◆ managers feeling over-stretched, and concerned about the Council's capacity to deliver results; and
- ◆ mixed messages about the level of the Council's commitment to change that are affecting organisational morale and team-working.

Recommendations

12 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. In this context, we recommend that the Council should:

- ◆ develop the momentum and challenge that it has begun with its Project C, to set clear standards and delivery for customer access that are more ambitious, comprehensive and that accelerate improvement towards that of the best councils;
- ◆ improve customer access across the District, ensuring changes happen quickly to reflect the Council's value of 'excellent customer service', and including by engaging with local people, extending partnerships and equalities standards, and by reviewing customer access regularly from a user's point of view; and
- ◆ ensure that an effective decision-making and governance framework is put in place to make improvements happen in customer access, and deliver the management actions and processes that will achieve this.

13 We would like to thank the staff of Hart District Council, particularly Jane Terry, who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Alison Dewar

Kevin Whiteside

Inspectors

Dates of inspection: 31 January to 4 February 2005

Email:

a-dewar@audit-commission.gov.uk

k-whiteside@audit-commission.gov.uk

For more information please contact

Audit Commission

Southern Region

Westward House

Lime Kiln Close

Stoke Gifford

Bristol

BS34 8SU

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

Telephone: 0117 923 6757

Report

Context

- 14 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

- 15 Hart District Council is in Hampshire and the least deprived area in the country³. Predominately rural, its main urban areas are near the M3 motorway and with rail access to London. While most employment is in the services sector and technology, over 60 per cent of the population commute outside the District for work – placing significant commuter pressures on land and housing prices.
- 16 The population has doubled in the last 40 years, and is now 83,500. The percentage of the population describing themselves as other than white British is 5.6, compared with just over 13 per cent for the country as a whole⁴. Unemployment stands at 0.7 per cent compared with the national average of 2.1 per cent⁵. Although earnings are 17 per cent above the national average, there are pockets of deprivation. Those without cars are at a particular disadvantage in accessing services, as village shops, post office and rural transport have all declined.

The Council

- 17 The Council comprises 35 councillors. At the time of our inspection the Conservative Party had overall control, with 19 seats. This leadership was retained in the May 2005 elections but with 17 seats and a loss of overall control. Currently, a leader and executive system governs the business of the Council, supported by a scrutiny committee and staff and general purposes committee.
- 18 The Council's overall budget for the year 2004/05 was £8.2 million. It employs 470 staff across all services.
- 19 The Council's overall purpose is to 'secure the best possible services which are locally determined, at affordable prices and for the benefit of the whole community'. This is supported by five values of low taxation; freedom of choice; supportive intervention; excellent customer service; and enhancing the quality of life of the whole community. It has also set out a number of priorities that relate to customer access, including 'to deliver a strong customer focus throughout the organisation'⁶.

³ Hart is 354th out of 354 on the indices of multiple deprivation prepared by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

⁴ 2001 Census.

⁵ Office for National Statistics labour market statistics (NOMIS), December 2004.

⁶ *Hart's Plan 2002/03 to 2006/07* (Corporate Plan).

The Council's customer access services

20 In January 2004, we reported on weaknesses in the Council's approach to customer access through our Corporate Performance Assessment. Our view then was that standards of customer care were inconsistent and that the Council lacked a comprehensive corporate approach. Our inspection of customer access reports on the actions taken since then by the Council, by assessing the current level of service and its prospects for improvement.

How good is customer access?

Are the aims clear and challenging?

- 21 Inspectors look to see how a council has agreed the key aims for the service being inspected, how clear these aims are to the people that receive the service and whether these reflect the corporate aims of the organisation as a whole.
- 22 The Council does not have a clear set of aims, standards and targets for delivering service access to customers. It has made 'excellent customer service' one of its five key values and 'access to facilities and services' is stated in the corporate plan as an ambition. Although it is developing these, at the time of our inspection this was not supported by a customer access strategy or clear expression of what constitutes 'excellent customer service' in either general or specific terms. This is perhaps not surprising given that the overall ambition of the Council, as described by some leading councillors, is limited and does not aspire to the provision of high quality services. Without a clear sense of purpose and a shared vision for high quality services, it will be difficult for the Council to deliver a challenging agenda for improvement.
- 23 The Council does not have a robust communications strategy. Despite having a document named 'communications strategy, the Council recognises that it is limited and in reality, is only a strategy for its community newspaper, *Hart News*. As a result, consultation has been piecemeal and the Council does not have a full knowledge of the needs of residents in relation to accessing services.
- 24 Corporate customer access service standards are not challenging and are below what is generally accepted as adequate. Service standards are not comprehensive. Where they exist; they are not published and have not, with one or two exceptions, been developed in conjunction with service users. Standards for customer access are:
- ◆ telephone answering within 11 rings and a target of meeting that standard on 73 per cent of occasions;
 - ◆ letter and email answering within 15 working days – there is no associated target for meeting this standard; and
 - ◆ these unambitious targets mean that the Council lacks a clear framework on which to base its aspirations for improvements that customers will notice and should expect.
- 25 Customer access issues have yet to make a significant impact in service planning across the Council. Service planning is developing and the extent to which it reflects customer access issues is variable. The Council produced interim service plans for 2004/05 ahead of its management re-structuring in June 2004. In some services, such as leisure, customer needs featured strongly and have been used to shape the type of service delivered. However, this approach has not generally been followed and, as a result, it is not a core part of service delivery in many other areas. However, the Council is preparing plans that reflect its new service structures for 2005/06, and in accordance with revised corporate guidance.

26 Despite not having a formal strategy, the Council is developing a plan to put in place the building blocks that will enable better customer access to be delivered. This is called Project 'C', which has the aim of 'Putting Customers at the Heart of Everything'. Its current initiatives include:

- ◆ kiosks and one-stop shops in areas outside Fleet (including Odiham, South Warnborough, Yateley and Hook);
- ◆ a new customer care charter, complaints procedure and service standards;
- ◆ an up-to-date telephone system;
- ◆ an inter-active website and enquiry management software; and
- ◆ a corporate approach to consultation.

Project 'C' represents a new and ambitious programme to improve access and although at the time of our inspection, it did not specifically set out aims for the Council, it is providing a framework for improved customer access.

27 The Council also has a comprehensive e-government strategy and statutory IEG (implementing electronic government) statement. These documents set out a challenging programme, underpinned by 19 targets and actions, to widen electronic access and to enable online transactions. In this area there is clear support by councillors and a determination to succeed by the portfolio holder.

Does the Council meet these aims?

28 Having considered the aims that the Council has set for the service, inspectors make an assessment of how well the Council is meeting these aims. This includes an assessment of performance against specific service standards and targets and the Council's approach to measuring whether it is actually delivering what it set out to do.

29 In assessing customer access we have looked at performance in the following areas:

- ◆ how easy is it to access services?;
- ◆ use of e-government to support access;
- ◆ use of feedback and complaints; and
- ◆ improving access through partnerships.

How easy is it to access services?

30 The Council does not provide good district-wide access to services for residents. This is important because Hart does not have a large centre of population and people live in towns and villages across the area. The Council's offices are situated in Fleet, which is relatively central to the District. However, as public transport does not cover the whole district, access from many of the rural areas can only be obtained by car or community transport. The Council plans to introduce a one-stop shop in Hook in June 2005 but this project only recently restarted after the original building contractor went into liquidation. Another one-stop shop in Odiham has limited opening times. The Council has introduced electronic access points at Yateley and South Warnborough but only the one at Yateley is working fully. The lack of any sub-offices outside Fleet means that for many people physically accessing the Council's services involves a significant journey.

- 31 The Council is not making good use of public buildings outside Fleet to provide information on its services. At Odiham library, for example, there are leaflets from the nearby Rushmoor District Council but very few from Hart District Council. The two community centres at Velmead and Elvetham Health also have little information on council services. However, in contrast in Frogmore Leisure Centre, there is a good range of council leaflets. The Council has recently developed a leaflet file for public buildings that when fully distributed will lead to an improvement, as it will make a more consistent range of information more readily available.
- 32 Initial access information is reasonable. The local Yellow Pages contains a half-page box with council telephone numbers clearly set out. The Council also publishes a yearly A to Z pull-out in *Hart News*, with relevant council telephone numbers. Telephone book entries are variable – the current version of the main directory for the area includes a short listing of council services while the previous version contained a more accessible half page box.
- 33 Signing to the Council's own buildings is often poor. There are no signs from the main roads to the visitors' car park in front of the main building in Fleet and access to car parks at the rear of the building are similarly difficult to find. In addition, there are no pedestrian signs to the building although a map board is located in the High Street. The leisure and community centres are also not well signed and are difficult to locate. While local people may often be aware of the location of council buildings, the lack of appropriate signing is unhelpful for people new to the area or first time users of a facility.
- 34 Office opening hours for the civic office in Fleet are not focused on customer need. It is open 8.30am to 5.00pm Monday to Thursday and 8.30am to 4.45pm on Fridays. There are no late night or weekend openings and the Council does not know whether the current opening times are the best for customers, or whether some extended working would be useful. This is particularly relevant in Hart, as a large number of residents commute out of the District to work and are, therefore, not able to access during normal working hours.
- 35 The Council's reception in its Fleet offices is well-presented and welcoming. It is easy to speak to a receptionist and waiting time is normally short. A range of useful leaflets is available (although some were out of stock when we visited). There are also adequate facilities for looking at plans or other information together with private interview rooms. The area contains space for small exhibitions. Outside the reception are two notice boards but these do not give a good impression, as they are not kept clean and the space within the boards is not used effectively.
- 36 The quality of service provided by frontline staff is well regarded by customers and from our enquiries we found the receptionists to be friendly, helpful and efficient. The level of customer service at the Council's leisure centres has been recognised as being in the top 25 per cent in the country by the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management. The written replies we received to email enquiries were informative and clearly written. In this important area of communication our limited tests suggest that the Council performs well.

- 37 Telephone access arrangements are unsatisfactory. The Council's telephone system does not meet the best modern standards, has a limited number of direct dial numbers and inadequate capacity. As a result, customers can experience long delays in getting through and the Council has rarely been able to meet its target of 73 per cent of calls answered within 11 rings – the average for 2004 was 69 per cent. The use of voicemail also causes frustration and is unpopular with many users – the Council has no clear guidelines on the use of voicemail and while some staff use it effectively others access messages infrequently or do not respond to them. As a result, phoning the Council is a poor experience for many customers.
- 38 Access to out-of-hours services is not customer-friendly. A range of out-of-hours services includes homelessness, Careline, CCTV, environmental health, revenues and benefits, drainage and flooding. However each service has a different out-of-hours number, six of which are given on the Council's out-of-hours recorded message. There is no facility for automatic transfer. While these arrangements may be adequate on most occasions, they would be confusing in an emergency or where a customer is in a state of panic.
- 39 The Council does not corporately record information on the speed of response to letters or emails and is therefore not able to manage performance in any structured way. There are exceptions in some services where letter responses are monitored – for example, housing and planning – but this kind of approach is not being used corporately to drive service improvement. Feedback from partners suggests that performance is variable. In some areas, such as housing and environmental health, it is acknowledged generally to be good while in other services response times can be extremely long.
- 40 The Council's approach to the equalities and diversity agenda has been weak and unfocused. It is not yet at level one for the equality standard for local government and has completed none of the requirements in its duty to promote race equality (and is therefore among the group of councils that are the worst performers in the country on equalities issues). While training has recently been completed for all staff and councillors on customer care, a programme of equalities and diversity training has not yet started. In addition, only 35 per cent of the Council's buildings fully meet the access requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act that came into force in October 2004. The Council has now put in place a plan to address this but it will be five years before its buildings comply with the standards of the Act.
- 41 The Council does not have a system for regularly reviewing customer access from a user's viewpoint. This is a fundamental gap in the service and is the reason why, for example, signing is poor. There is no one checking whether leaflets are available or if information is clearly displayed. As a result, a number of low cost actions that could make a real difference are not being delivered.

Use of e-government to support access

- 42 The Council offers only a limited electronic access to services and its website is weak in relation to interactive features. The main obstruction to progress is the basic construction of the Council's website. Because it is a 'static' site, the Council is not able to provide online services such as payments or the submission of applications. These services will not be able to be offered until the Council has in operation an entirely new 'dynamic' website.

- 43 Even allowing for the restrictions of its basic construction, the site has a number of weaknesses. The site is not consistently updated across all its pages. This means that information such as swimming times is not necessarily correct with the result that customers have arrived at the leisure centres only to find that the swimming sessions are not available. The situation is confusing to users because the 'date of last update' at the bottom of each page is not automatically changed when a page is updated. The site does not have a search engine and we found that the A to Z of services did not always work. In addition, the website has no advice to help people with visual impairments. These weaknesses mean that the Council is not making the most of the facility that it has in place.
- 44 Nevertheless, the current site does contain some good features – the planning section, for example, was found to be particularly useful by both councillors and partners. Applications (including plans) can be viewed, comments/objections made and the progress of the application tracked, all online. This stands comparison with the better performing councils in this area. In addition, the site contains a number of useful links to the Hampshire County Council website, sport and leisure facilities, higher education and adult learning, schools, health, business support and others. It also has a new section on the Freedom of Information Act where a form to apply for information can be downloaded.
- 45 The Council is a weak performer against the national e-government targets in key areas, although it has made some progress. Overall 26 per cent of the 78 actions have been assessed by the Council as being 'red', which means that little progress on implementation has been made. These targets include e-procurement, integrating planning, regulating and licensing functions, online submission of forms and payment of invoices and the resolution of housing and council tax benefit enquiries. Much of this lack of progress links to technical issues with the website and until they are resolved the Council will not be able to offer a full range of e-services and therefore not address some of the access issues associated with a dispersed rural community.
- 46 The Council is not always publicising its website. The website reference is printed on the bottom of each page of *Hart News* and is on the Council's letter heading. The Council also franks its letters with a website promotion although the stamp is changed from time to time to promote other issues. Not all leaflets contain a reference to the website, and sometimes the font used is very small. Greater knowledge of the existence and content of the Council's website not only enables wider access but should reduce the need for telephone calls and therefore take some pressure off the current system.

Use of feedback and complaints

- 47 The Council does not have a robust system for using complaints and other feedback to improve services. Although the Council has had a corporate complaints procedure in place since 2002, it has not used complaints in a constructive way to improve services. There has been no regular reporting to senior managers or councillors on the level or type of complaints. There is also a high level of dissatisfaction, with 58 per cent of those who complained expressing unhappiness with the response they received. However, on 4 January 2005, and following a scrutiny committee review, the Council introduced a new complaints and comments procedure that is supported by a monthly reporting mechanism. At the time of the inspection, it was too early to assess the impact of the new arrangements.

- 48 The Council communicates effectively to residents through *Hart News*, but this has had limited success when used as its principal consultation tool. *Hart News* is produced by the Council on a quarterly basis and delivered free to all 33,000 houses in the District. The paper is well set out and easy to read. However, when used to consult residents it has not worked so well – a number of consultation exercises produced less than 100 responses. Things are starting to improve and a questionnaire in the January edition, combined with an online questionnaire, has led to over 3,000 replies. The Council now recognises that its newspaper alone has not been the most effective method of obtaining the views of the community.
- 49 While consultation with all residents has generally been weak there are examples of useful consultation for particular services or issues. These include:
- ◆ a meeting with community transport users and partners that resulted in the service being changed and funding continuing;
 - ◆ yearly surveys of car park users to find out views about the charges, convenience and management of the Council's car parks;
 - ◆ ongoing surveys and consultation with leisure centre users to help ensure that the services provided meet the needs of customers; and
 - ◆ a focus group of users of the homelessness hostel resulted, among other things, in the common room being open for longer hours.
- 50 The Council's responsiveness is mixed. For example, public participation has been introduced at all meetings, but its written papers are not always clear from a customer's perspective. There are positive examples of responsiveness, including the Council's review of flooding issues that resulted in a large grant to reduce the likelihood and impact of flooding and its development of a scrutiny review of youth services in response to needs identified in a MORI survey. However, in one of the key areas of concern to residents, refuse collection, the Council has not consulted residents or taken effective action to address their concerns. The Council has now recognised this issue, and in February 2005, approved a strategy that included asking users about their views on refuse collection.

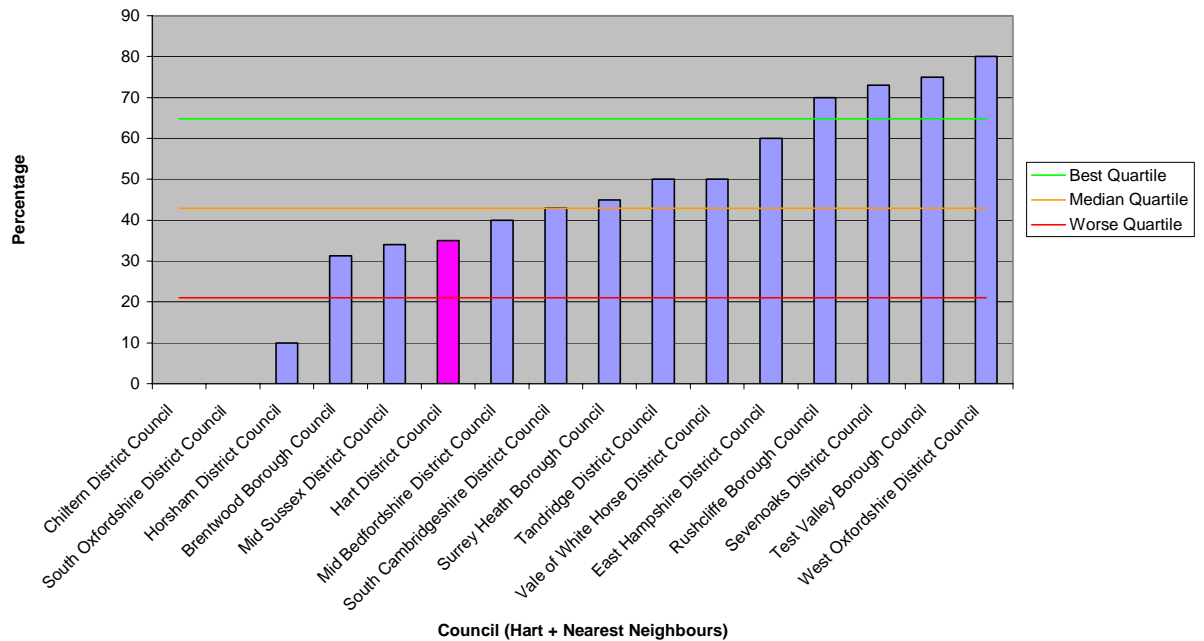
Improving access through partnership

- 51 In general, partnership working is not yet a strength for the Council and this limits the opportunities for wider customer access arrangements. However, the Council is developing its relationship and work with the local strategic partnership and launched a revised community strategy with them on 15 June 2005. There are also specific examples where the Council is working with others to extend access. On the ground floor of the main council building in Fleet, are the offices for a number of agencies, including the local highways office of Hampshire County Council, Fleet Citizen's Advice Bureau and Hart Voluntary Action. This widens the number of services that can be accessed by visiting the civic offices.
- 52 The Council has also worked in partnership to set up the electronic information points discussed earlier in the report. In the case of South Warnborough, this is a part of a partnership to help keep the village shop open and thus has wider benefits. The new one-stop shop at Hook will open in 2005 and is being delivered jointly by the local crime safety partnership, with funding from the police authority and the Council. The Council has also supported the introduction and operation of community transport schemes by £20,000 per year plus developers' funding of £30,000 per year. These arrangements show the value of working with partners to improve access to services.

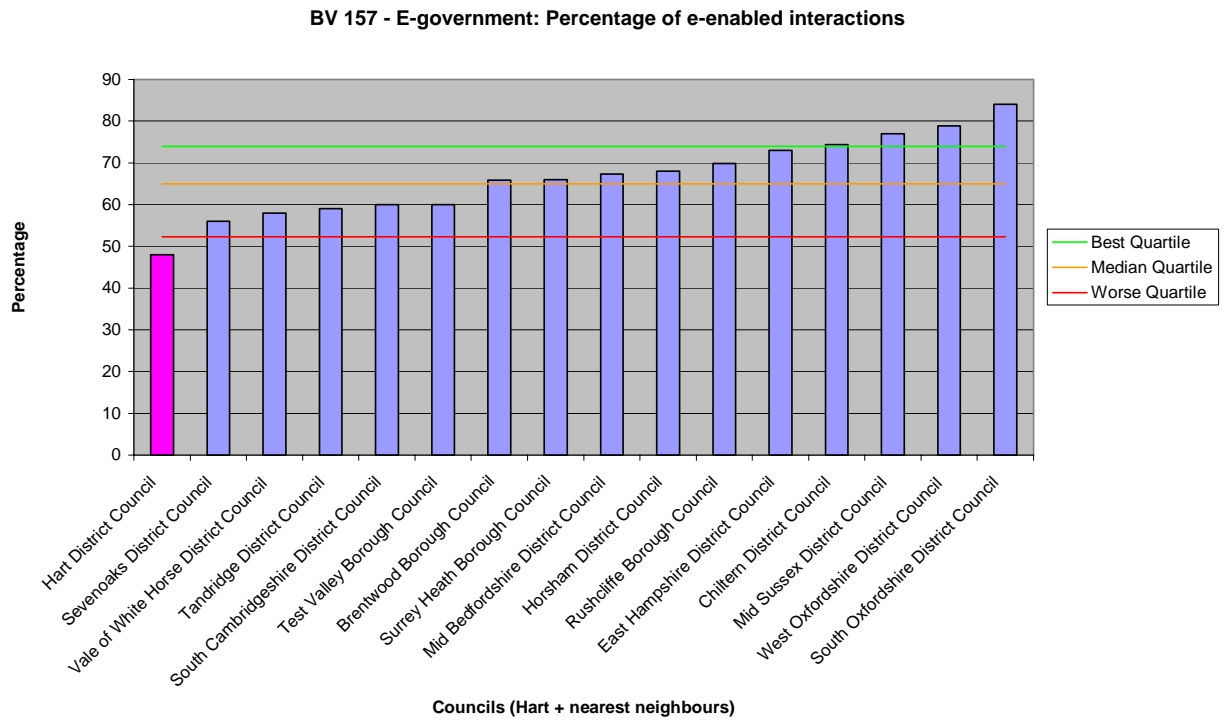
How does the performance compare?

- 53 In order to judge the quality of a service, it is important to compare the performance of that service against other suppliers across a range of sectors. The aim is not exact comparison, but an exploration of how similar services (or elements of services) perform in order to identify significant differences, the reasons for them, and the extent to which improvements are required.
- 54 The Council does not perform well when compared with other similar councils. Overall customer satisfaction is only 54 per cent, which is below average nationally and 13th out of the 15 similar councils in Hart’s family group. The level of satisfaction has fallen 11 per cent over the last three years. Although this is only slightly more than the national average of 10 per cent, it shows that the Council has not been able to improve, relative to other councils, from what was a low base.
- 55 Indicators relating specifically to access are mostly poor. The Council is in the worst 25 per cent nationally for satisfaction with the complaints process and satisfaction with the clarity of housing benefits forms and leaflets. In addition, the Council is below average nationally and 11th in its family group for the number of buildings that are fully accessible by people with disabilities as shown in the graph below.

BVPI 156 - Buildings with facilities for people with disabilities



56 The Council also has one of the worst records for the percentage of transactions that can be carried out online, as shown below.



57 The Council's access standards are also weak in comparison with others. As described earlier in the report, the telephone answering standard of 11 rings and the letter answering standard of 15 days are long when compared with the norm in both the public and private sector and do not meet the reasonable expectation of customers.

Summary

58 Despite some areas of good performance, there are fundamental weaknesses that mean the service is assessed as *poor*. The key issues are a limited ambition for top quality services, and a lack of good district-wide access to, and information about, services for residents. Customer access standards are below user expectations, and the Council does not perform well in meeting these standards. Weaknesses include an inadequate telephone service, a lack of systematic monitoring of letter and email response times, a weak focus on equalities issues and poor performance in comparison with others. Its use of consultation is mixed. However, there are some positive areas including the friendliness and efficiency of frontline staff, the web-base information in its planning service, and the use of some partnerships to extend access. The Council recognises many of its weaknesses and has started to take some actions to address them – these are considered in the next section.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 59 Our inspection used the following criteria to judge the service's prospects for improvement.
- ◆ Ownership of problems and willingness to change.
 - ◆ A sustained focus on what matters.
 - ◆ Capacity and systems to deliver performance and improvement.
 - ◆ Integration of continuous improvement into day-to-day management.

Ownership of problems and willingness to change

- 60 The Council has been effective in taking some difficult decisions that will support overall improvement in customer access. Notably, it has carried out a radical organisational restructuring, with a focus on instilling fresh thinking by replacing its traditional business unit structure with a more corporate and strategic approach. It has been doing this by appointing a new tier of three corporate directors, as well as new heads of service. This includes a new post of Head of Community and Customer Services. In the light of our assessment of customer access as 'poor', this more corporate approach is a very positive step, as it delivers opportunities to achieve fresh organisational goals.
- 61 The Council's broad intention to tackle improvements in customer access is a good example of its new corporate approach. Although it has not yet formalised, either its decisions or strategy for improved access, it is beginning to champion some of the key issues through lead portfolio holders whose roles include responsibilities for partnerships and electronic government. It has also started to develop a fundamental review through its Project C, which is engaging staff and managers from across the Council in a coordinated programme of access improvements. Although Project C is at an early stage, the broad aims include areas that are relatively new to the Council, such as consultation and community engagement. These represent significant steps. The Council also provided a comprehensive and self-aware assessment, as part of our inspection process, which recognises many of the issues that we raise in this report.
- 62 The Council is also developing momentum in e-government. Early strengths in this important area are that councillors have approved funding bids under national programmes and have set aside £94,000 for this in the medium-term financial strategy. They have also given it a strong political drive by championing it at cabinet-level, under a new and committed portfolio holder with business expertise in ICT. Councillors are clear that electronic solutions can support improved access significantly – for example, outside the central location of Fleet, with partners, and beyond traditional opening hours. If delivered, this will add to the facilities available to residents and others.
- 63 However, the Council still has much to do to ensure a significant level of progress towards the standards and approaches of the best performers in customer access. Since our CPA review over 12 months ago the quality of customer access has remained poor, and the Council still has to overcome this threshold. It has not yet developed its ambitions, delivery and infrastructure – or done so in consultation and engagement with local people and partners. As a result, its track record in securing access changes that benefit its customers is slow.

- 64 So far, the Council has not developed its ambitions and aims fully for improving customer access. It is beginning to review its whole approach to customer access but, as this is under review, the Council does not yet know in detail all that it might need to do to deliver improvements. For example, the Council faces some complex financial decisions – such as the choices available in integrating its website, telephone and information systems – but it does not yet have a clear framework within which to make these. As a result, it does not yet have a clear set of priorities for customer access.
- 65 Levels of understanding of, and engagement with, the overall theme and the potential of improved access vary considerably. This is understandable, as the Council is at an early stage in developing improvements. Although briefings have been given and teams established, the influence of proposed changes is not yet far reaching. Some councillors have a core role and others have been involved in scrutiny and consultation over issues such as the Council's complaints procedure, youth services and planning enquiries. At the time of our inspection,, most councillors had not been presented with decisions on the detail through service and budget planning, although work towards this was underway. Until the Council carries out its exploratory analysis, it is not clear what all the access issues are, what the aspirations might be, and whether the Council will be able to deliver all that may be needed within its medium-term financial plans.
- 66 One impact of these factors is that the Council has not taken ownership of all that it means to deliver 'excellent customer service'. Although there is broad approval among councillors for improved access, particularly through support for Project C, this lack of clear ambition is a major hurdle. The Council has not set clear aims to be a best performer in customer access, when compared with others. Some specific aims for improved access will lie, inevitably, in the detailed planning that is currently taking place through service plans, project bids and ICT strategies. However, a history of unclear overall ambition for the Council presents a significant potential limitation to the delivery of better service access.
- 67 Nor does the Council have a consistent view of value for money. Many people reported this as a limiting hallmark of its organisational culture. For example, councillors, staff and managers expressed a range of different perceptions of the cost of improving service access, which the Council has not yet been able to resolve. Some key stakeholders said they did not think the Council could improve access significantly unless it was able to find additional resources and capacity, and saw this as a clear barrier. While some investments may be needed, it is also clear from our discussions that many people think that there is scope to become much more cost effective and to achieve change without additional expenditure.
- 68 In conclusion, the Council is moving forward in its corporate approach to improving access. The Council is developing improvements through a wide-ranging review of customer access that was gathering momentum at the time of our inspection. However, there are significant issues to overcome in articulating a clear and more ambitious vision, shaping priorities, and developing detailed plans and priorities.

A sustained focus on what matters

- 69 The Council has started to develop experience in consultation, to good effect in some services and, for example, in the recent decision to consult on its waste and recycling services. This adds to its experiences with major planning enquiries, and in consultation over youth services. It has also been developing wider consultation through *Hart News*, with a residents' survey in January 2005 showing a more promising response rate. It has also been making customer-focused changes, such as improvements to its reception area and in access to its meetings. This shows that it has been learning, and is developing its track record.

- 70 However, it is not yet in a position to maximise its use of this consultation. The Council has not, until recently, focused on customer access as a key element of service delivery. Managers are aware of this and are beginning to explore some of the issues through Project C, with the support of the Council's electronic governance strategies, and in developing a communication and consultation strategy. But until Project C develops further the Council does not have sufficient detailed knowledge of the needs its customers – those that live and work in the area – to know how best to plan and deliver a range of current and future services for them. It has a broad picture, but lacks information that it could use in the immediate future to shape services so as to be more responsive to needs.
- 71 The Council is working from a weak knowledge base. For example, the Council's information, from the doorstep and from surveys, has not been backed systematically by other market research. It lacks data over time, as the low response to its 2002 survey in the Council newspaper, *Hart News*, means that this cannot be compared with the data it is collecting in 2005. At the time of our inspection, staff were beginning to collate feedback from complaints and other comments and were intending to use this information to identify areas where it might improve its responses and adjust its decisions.
- 72 The Council also has a poor track record in focusing effectively on one of the key issues of local concern. It has had an unacceptably high level of complaints over the past three years about its waste collection service, with levels of missed bins that were among the highest nationally in both 2000/01 and 2001/02⁷. Despite all the attention this generated, the Council continued to miss its own target of 1,000 missed bins per 100,000 population – rising in the summer of 2004 to over 11,000 misses. This is nowhere near many other councils, who routinely miss less than 100 bins per 100,000 population, or near the performance of other councils who have been able to show significant levels of improvement. Although it is now consulting on a waste strategy, this weak track record in satisfying the concerns of the majority does not yet inspire confidence in the Council's capacity to tackle its residents' needs in areas where they may be less vocal.
- 73 In conclusion, the Council is developing its use of consultation and is aware of the need to learn from this. However, it does not yet have sufficient knowledge with which to shape a more effective approach to customer access. It has a weak track record of improvement, which means that it is not yet able to reassure local people that future progress will be sustainable and meaningful in the longer-term.

Capacity and systems to deliver performance and improvement

- 74 The Council has been investing in its capacity. It has been effective in taking some new skills on board, particularly in strategy, with managers providing fresh thinking about customer access. The Council's restructuring was being completed, with new posts being filled, at the time of our inspection. There is a real sense of energy, enthusiasm and commitment from managers, and from some frontline staff and councillors, for this new agenda. Those leading the corporate review of access are clearly determined to deliver better outcomes.

⁷ Information on missed bins was collected as a national performance indicator in 2000/01 and 2001/02. Although it is no longer a national indicator, Hart Council – like many other councils – has continued to measure its performance on missed bins.

- 75 The Council's strengthened corporate approach means that it is becoming better positioned to iron out unintended differences in the level and nature of services across different departments. This will also support the Council's capacity to deliver a 'one-stop shop' approach, including making links with different public sector organisations. While this potential is far from realised, managers are aware of, and very committed to, the challenge.
- 76 The Council is also strengthening its performance management in a number of ways. For example, it is building its systems for responding better to customer feedback, by developing its monitoring. This includes a corporate response to complaints. And its approach to performance management includes strengthening the links between its corporate planning and staff appraisal and training – which has helped in retaining its Investor in People status. Performance monitoring is improving, which will help it provide better feedback to councillors on priorities and risk areas. The Council recognises that its corporate systems are underdeveloped and is currently working with the Audit Commission to improve its approach.
- 77 The Council intends to develop its Project C during 2005, so that it becomes integrated with the performance management system and with other plans and goals. For example, at the time of our inspection service heads had been asked to identify specific outcomes and performance indicators for customer access. This will build considerably on its approach in 2004/05 and provide a better starting point for 2005/06, although the system will take some time to settle in.
- 78 The Council is also making its approach more consistent by developing and communicating a strong brand for renewed customer focus. Project C represents substantial potential for co-ordinating a wide range of improvements in a single programme. It has already begun to draw together a range of customer access activities, including reviews of the Council's reception, complaints procedures, website and relationship management, and the introduction of a customer care charter and staff training.
- 79 However, the Council has not yet got the systems established through which to deliver a significant level of improvement. At the time of our inspection the ambition for access had not been articulated fully, which meant that the Council lacked clear, focused goals for better customer access. These are being developed but the Council has some way to go before achieving robust plans with clear budgets and SMART⁸ action plans. While some of this reflects the relatively early stages of the Council's review of access, staff and managers also report the need to overcome barriers in the low level of the Council's ambition to deliver good, responsive services. Until the Council clarifies the extent of its goals for customer access, it will remain unable to identify its priorities and budget, relative to other council commitments. This also means that managers and councillors are not yet working effectively together on a clear agenda for customer access.
- 80 There is also concern among staff and managers about the capacity to deliver better access. This ranges from concern about the level of councillor commitment and ambition, to concern about whether the Council will be able to release the resources and potential needed for important changes. People are working hard but some of the energy that might be put to better use developing the Council's customer responsiveness is being sapped by poor morale. Managers feel – and appear to be – overstretched. Project C is bringing key players together but there are risks that the Council's systems and managerial capacity may not be able to free up all the energy and enthusiasm that the Council has been investing in.

⁸ Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Resourced and Timed.

- 81 It is also evident that resources are not always well used and organised to achieve customer access. Electronic systems and equalities schemes are relatively undeveloped, for example. Some quick wins have been missed – such as working effectively across teams to provide clear directions to all council access points. This may change, as new managers settle in and begin to work together. However, some unexpected managerial changes have generated considerable delay to the improvements that the Council had anticipated making to electronic access.
- 82 The Council has not yet maximised partnerships to improve the service to its customers. Although there are several good examples, some of the Council's past approach to partnerships has been negative. This means that the Council has missed opportunities to extend its own resources. It is beginning to rebuild its credibility with some local players, has appointed a cabinet member to lead on partnerships and has developed a health strategy so that it can work better with key partners. But it has to overcome considerable lost trust – as well as develop greater skills and capacity for effective partnership working. A similar set of circumstances applies to consultation, where the Council is only beginning to explore its corporate capacity for community engagement, and to equalities.
- 83 The Council has also been weak in project managing some of the good ideas it has developed for improving access. For example, it has not ensured that the information point in South Warnborough actually works. This was set up as a pilot initiative, but has not yet been used to offer developmental learning for other occasions. However, the Council does recognise the importance of this area of access and is improving its electronic systems in order to keep pace with the changing technological preferences of the majority of its electorate. This form of investment also has the potential to provide better district-wide services.
- 84 The Council has been relatively slow to invest in improved access for people with disabilities. Although it has made a significant capital investment of £700,000 over six years, and is intending to pursue elements of good practice, this will only enable it to meet compliance levels of part 3 of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) by 2011. By this time other councils will be much further ahead, as they responded earlier and quicker to the DDA when it was first published in 1996, whereas Hart only met the minimum legal requirement to carry out an audit by October 2004. Further, partnership support for groups of people with disabilities has not benefited from a dedicated access officer or from strong consultation.
- 85 In conclusion, the Council has been investing in the management capacity and performance management systems to support improved customer access. Enthusiastic and committed managers are developing the Council's review of customer access, Project C. However, clear – and fully resourced – improvement aims and plans are not in place and the Council has to overcome weaknesses in morale, partnerships, project management, and access for people with disabilities.

Integration of continuous improvement into day-to-day management

- 86 The Council has taken an important step in recognising the need for internal culture change. Leading councillors recognise the links between this, the decision to restructure and the need to promote continuous improvement throughout the organisation. The leadership team of directors and Chief Executive are also clear that this is needed. Other senior staff are also committed to developing a culture in which a focus on improvement becomes part of everyday thinking and in which staff become readily able to take actions needed to improve access, within a clear and prioritised framework. This is important, and is emerging within the ethos of Project C, although change is not yet firmly rooted.

- 87 The Council is also demonstrating some positive self-awareness. Culture change is emerging as a specific pre-requisite of making effective and sustained improvements in customer service. For example, this is reflected in the outline proposals for Project C, which helps ensure that council-wide services will become more consistent and better integrated. This is important, as the current approach to access has been disjointed and has not benefited from the transfer of learning and good practice from one service department to another. Further, managers and councillors report a strong feeling that changes that benefit the people of Hart will only come about if all staff and managers feel able to make them happen.
- 88 Having restructured, the Council is planning some further activities that will be effective in encouraging a culture of change and improvement. Staff briefings have taken place and the Council is investing in management and leadership training for the new heads of service and leadership team. A performance board is being set up to champion improvement. Councillors have also agreed to address improvements in performance management and in clarifying their vision. These are important building blocks, and will help encourage changes in the way all staff are able to contribute to improvement.
- 89 However, the Council does not have a fully-developed strategy for rooting a culture of continuous improvement throughout the Council. Having focused on recruiting new managers and directors, some of the processes by which it will continue the cultural changes set in motion by its restructuring are unclear. This is because change so far has been focused at management level and in individual services. This leaves a potential gap in its future capacity, given the role for all staff in improving customer access.
- 90 Although it has been working on it since our inspection, the Council has not clarified the extent to which it is prepared to improve. Despite its stated value of 'excellent customer services', the organisation is not yet fully engaged in the challenge of striving for it. It remains hesitant about taking steps to match the best performing councils and about engaging fully with its residents and potential partners in developing plans and priorities. Although it is developing plans for cultural change, it does not yet have a strong ethos of learning from others, or across its own services and departments, when compared with similar councils elsewhere. This affects its customer responsiveness. It also means that staff are experiencing mixed messages about the Council's commitment to continuous improvement.
- 91 This lack of a clear direction on continuous improvement is leading to uncertainty. It is creating tensions, as staff perceive barriers in the extent to which the Council wants them to deliver their best for local people. At a time when the Council recognises that it still has to deliver some attitudinal changes if it is to work more effectively across its services, this presents a significant organisational risk of under-achievement. The possible effect of this on morale includes the potential loss of committed, hard-working and capable staff. Sustaining a capacity to be innovative will be essential in making headway on improved customer access.
- 92 In conclusion, the Council recognises the need for culture change, and is investing in it. However, this is at an early stage and the desired ethos of continuous improvement is not yet established. This affects customer access improvement, where the Council is not yet striving to be among the best performers.

Summary

- 93 The Council has begun a comprehensive council-wide review of customer access – under the corporate banner of Project C – that it is managing with energy and commitment, under the direction of enthusiastic managers and staff. Its comprehensive managerial change, and the rationale for culture change through fresh thinking and approaches, offers potential for an improved corporate approach to customer access. Councillors are already committed to some customer access improvements, and have appointed cabinet members to lead on partnerships and electronic government. This approach is bringing staff together from across the organisation to develop improvements, building further on some recent improvements to customer access and on the Council's first steps in developing consultation methods and approaches. This approach is being underpinned by changes to the Council's performance management, monitoring, and staff appraisal and development systems.
- 94 However, this review is still at an early stage – with important decisions and action plans still lying ahead. The Council's progress with customer access has been limited since weaknesses were pointed out in its comprehensive performance assessment, over 12 months ago and it has been slow to develop its track record in improving access to its services. Although it has started to take actions to address its poor performance, its ambitions remain low and it has not set its sights on a significant level and pace of improvement towards that of the best performers.
- 95 The Council is not yet clear about the detailed plans needed to improve access, and has still to engage all its councillors and staff in developing its corporate approach and identifying the ambition, goals, priorities, budget and activities that it will need to improve access. This includes some complex decisions over technological systems. Although it is improving consultation, the Council lacks an effective and systematic knowledge base through which it could develop more responsive services. It does not yet have a track record in customer service excellence, or in many aspects of it – including in important areas of consultation, partnership, equalities, performance monitoring and electronic capacity.
- 96 The Council has been investing in building its capacity, particularly at managerial level but this is also at a relatively early stage and is yet to make an impact throughout the organisation in making changes for customers. Despite proposed investments, managers express some concern about the capacity for delivering improvement. Morale and team working are under pressure as a result of this and from mixed messages about the extent of the Council's commitment to change.
- 97 Overall, we conclude that the prospects for improvement are uncertain, for two main reasons. First, because change is at an early stage the Council cannot be certain that it will be able to tackle all that may be needed once it has completed its internal reviews and external consultation and it has still to complete the process of changing its culture in order to do so. Second, our judgement also reflects uncertainty over the degree of improvement. While it is clear that the Council will achieve improvements in customer access, it is not yet clear that this will enable it to reach the standards of the best performers in similar councils elsewhere.

Appendices

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:

- ◆ consultation strategy for *Hart News*;
- ◆ council, cabinet, scrutiny and other committee papers;
- ◆ customer access inspection self-assessment;
- ◆ customer satisfaction surveys;
- ◆ draft community strategy and action plans;
- ◆ forms, publicity and complaints leaflets and other council literature;
- ◆ Hart e-government strategy;
- ◆ Hart implementing electronic government return;
- ◆ Hart News;
- ◆ Hart's Plan 2002/03 to 2006/07 (corporate strategy);
- ◆ meeting minutes and internal documents; and
- ◆ staff training and induction plans.

Reality checks undertaken

When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. We also followed up on issues relating to the management of the review and the improvements flowing from it. Our reality checks included:

- ◆ making telephone calls and sending emails enquiring about council services;
- ◆ mystery shopping around the District, and in and around council offices;
- ◆ observing a cabinet meeting;
- ◆ using the Council's website, including making enquiries through it; and
- ◆ visiting the premises of partner organisations.

List of people interviewed

Ruth Anderson	Corporate Support Manager
Elaine Cooper	Head of Community and Customer Services
Christina Earls	Head of Finance
John Elson	Head of Engineering and Transport
Viv Evans	Corporate Director
Clive Green	Press Officer
Councillor Sean Haffey	Cabinet Member for Finance and Information Technology
Lynton Jones	Programme/Project Manager (IEG4)
Councillor Roger Jones	Cabinet Member for Information and Communication
Dave Love	Leisure Services Manager
Janet Martin	Chair, Hart Local Strategic Partnership
Councillor David Neighbour	Liberal Democrat Leader, and Chair of Scrutiny
Councillor Stephen Parker	Leader of Council
Oliver Pearman	Webmaster
Cathie Powell	Corporate Director
Nigel Preston	Unison
Councillor James Radley	Community Campaign Hart
Councillor Jenny Radley	Community Campaign Hart
Emma Reeve	HR Officer
Jules Samuels	Chief Executive
Yvonne Sherwood	Assistant HR Officer
Jane Terry	Head of Performance and Innovation
Iris Thompson	Environmental Health Officer
Alistair Trigg	Programme/Project Officer (IEG4)

Councillor Sarah
Wallis

Cabinet Member for People and Partnerships

Focus Group

Councillors

Focus Group

Frontline staff and managers

Focus Group

Partner organisations

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.⁹ 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 four Cs 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.

⁹ 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.