

Service Inspection Report

January 2006



Culture Services Inspection

Wansbeck District Council

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Service Inspection

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

Audit Commission service inspections should:

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

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

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

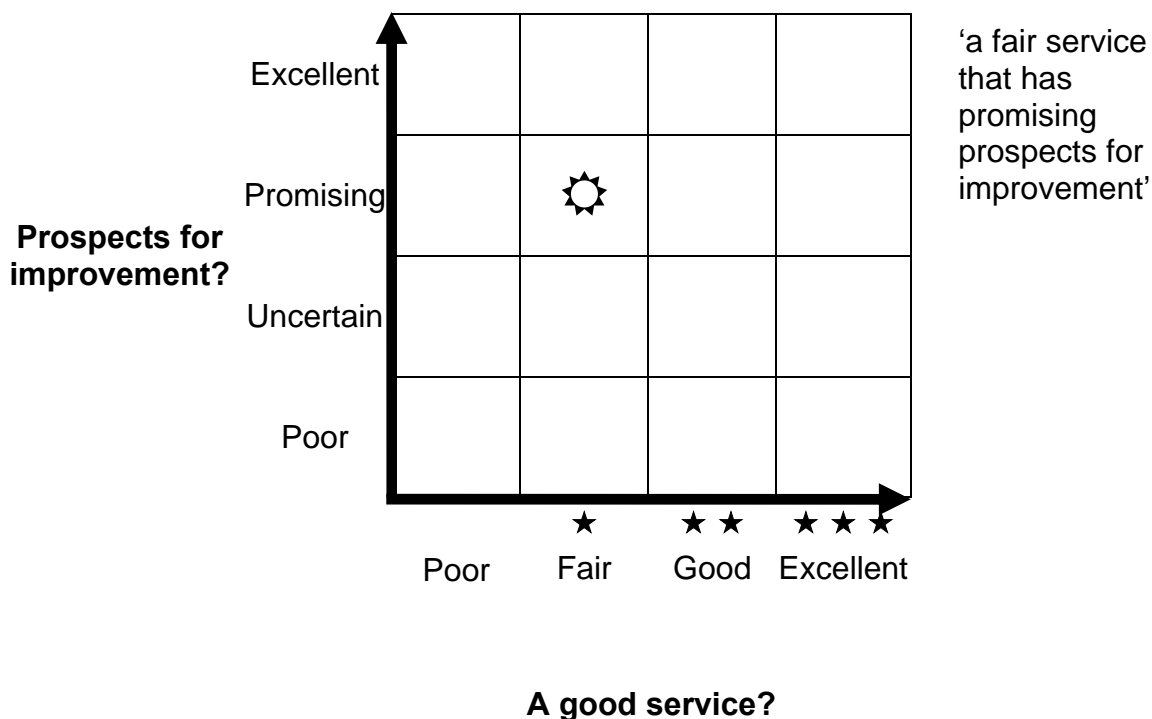
Summary

- 1 Wansbeck District Council has identified the provision of culture services as a way of contributing to achieving corporate objectives such as health improvement, establishing safer and stronger communities and creating a better environment for the resident population and visitors.
- 2 The Council provides a range of culture services from indoor and outdoor sports and recreation, urban and country parks, arts and events, sports and arts development, museums and tourism. The quality of the facilities and activities does however vary and there are access issues influencing the availability of the services to potential users.
- 3 Due to the lack of a systematic approach to consultation and use of population profiles the Council does not fully understand what its residents want from culture service provision. Much of the service provision and development stems from consultation with existing users.
- 4 As a small district council with limited resources the Council is dependent on partnership work for some service delivery and to enable continuous improvement. The service has a successful track record of attracting external investment. The Council's expectations of its partners are not always clear.
- 5 Although service provision is clearly guided by national, regional and local priorities, the Council cannot effectively demonstrate the extent to which its impact contributes to these objectives nor whether it is providing the Council with value for money.
- 6 There is a clear trend of improvement across the service facilities and activities and the Council has the resources in place to sustain this improvement.
- 7 The service should continue to evolve by gaining a greater understanding of what the residents of the district expect from the Council's culture services, and of the means to attract larger numbers of new users to the service.
- 8 The service also has to develop a greater ability to measure the impact it and its partners is making on the corporate objectives and to be clear on what it expects from the local partnerships.

Scoring the service

- 9 We have assessed Wansbeck District Council as providing a ‘fair’, one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹:



Source: Audit Commission

- 10 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- corporate priorities influence culture service plans and use of resources;
 - there is regular consultation with existing user and community groups which is used to influence service provision and development projects;
 - there is a good range and distribution of culture facilities across the district;
 - the service is pro-active in engaging with partners to deliver culture services; and
 - culture service initiatives contribute to national, regional and corporate aims.

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.

However:

- the approach to consultation is not systematic and service provision is not informed by population or user profiles;
- the facilities and standard of service delivery varies in quality;
- there are several issues on accessing the service, and Council does not appear to celebrate diversity;
- few value for money measurements are in place;
- the service has extensive partnership working but no partnership register nor are partners always clear on the Council's objectives; and
- outcomes from service delivery and improvements are not clear.

11 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- councillors and senior managers are clear on those issues where the Council should lead and those on which it has a support role;
- the service strategies and plans integrate with the corporate objectives;
- the service has a track record of service improvement for users and in restructuring resources to focus more on corporate objectives;
- the service has robust and challenging targets in place;
- there is an effective performance management framework in place to monitor operational progress and take action when performance falls below target;
- the Council are applying resources, staff training and new technology to continue service improvement;
- a major programme of facility improvements and increase in activity opportunities for residents is underway;
- the service is successful at securing external capital and revenue funds and has exit strategies in place to sustain projects funded by these means; and
- the culture service imports best practice and ideas from outside.

However:

- there is a lack of outcome targets relative to the corporate priorities;
- the service has a mixed direction of travel performance;
- performance management is not applied to partnerships;
- some key components of the service don't have action or business plans;
- future changes in external funding schemes could put capacity to improve at risk; and
- there are risks associated with the limitations on the Council's resource base, for example any prolonged absences by key staff would impact on capacity.

Recommendations

- 12 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the council. In addition we identify the approximate costs¹ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that the council should do the following.

R1 To improve its understanding of the culture needs of all of the local population and communicate the available opportunities to residents the service should:

- *introduce a systematic approach to consultation;*
- *prepare and implement a marketing plan for the culture service;*
- *review pricing policies in relation to corporate objectives; and*
- *formalise a process for feeding consultation results and their impact on the service delivery back to the population.*

The expected **benefits** of this recommendation are:

- attracting new users to the culture service with consequent improved contribution to corporate objectives;
- having greater influence on the shape of culture service provision by users and potential users; and
- local people will have a greater 'ownership' of the culture service.

The implementation of this recommendation will have **high** impact with **medium** costs. This should be implemented by the **end of 2006**.

R2 To improve its capacity through more focused partnership working the service needs to:

- *clearly define what is understood to be a 'partnership';*
- *prepare a partnership register and audit the purpose of the Council's participation; and*
- *have clear agreements with each partnership on the outcomes expected by the Council.*

The expected **benefits** of this recommendation are:

- increased direction of partnerships to meeting the Council's objectives;
- strengthening community capacity to contribute to corporate objectives; and

¹ Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 percent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

- duplication of effort can be minimised and opportunities for service development maximised.

The implementation of this recommendation will have **high** impact with **low** costs. The definition, 'partnership' register and participation audit and negotiation of the Council's desired outcomes should be completed by **July 2006**.

R3 Improve the performance monitoring across the culture service to include outcome related performance indicators so that:

- *challenging but realistic targets can be set based on corporate objectives and priorities; and*
- *the impact of the service provision on the local population can be more accurately determined.*

The expected **benefits** of this recommendation are:

- improved clarity on the contribution the culture service makes to the corporate objectives;
- improved clarity on the value for money from existing and proposed investments in the service; and
- further opportunities to design and deliver the service in line with Council priorities.

The implementation of this recommendation will have **high** impact with **low** costs. This should be implemented by **March 2006**.

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 Wansbeck district is small in land area at only 6,691 hectares and lies in the south east of Northumberland County about 13 miles north of Newcastle and bounded on the east by the North Sea and is close to the A1 trunk road on the west.
- 14 The district has a population of 61,183. The three towns of Ashington, Newbiggin and Bedlington are the main population centres but there are also numerous village communities in close proximity to each other. Minority ethnic communities make up 1.6 per cent of the population.
- 15 The local economy was traditionally centred on coal mining but its decline has had a severe impact on the residents of the district. The numbers claiming job seekers allowance at 3.7 per cent is higher than the regional (3.1 per cent) and national (2.4 per cent) averages. Average income in the area is lower than both regional and national levels and 42 per cent of children under age 16 live in low income households.
- 16 The district population has poor health generally with lower life expectancy levels than those regionally and nationally. Female mortality rates are especially high. Forty four per cent of households have at least one person with a limiting long term illness.
- 17 Wansbeck is ranked 47th most deprived district in England and the 2004 Indices of Deprivation identified that 39 per cent of Wansbeck's Super Output Areas (SOA) are ranked in the 20 per cent most deprived in England. The district is therefore one of the Government's Neighbourhood Renewal areas.
- 18 Community safety is a significant issue in the district and although there is some improvement in some crime statistics. Overall 54 per cent of the residents surveyed in 2003/04 felt that crime had got worse with drugs use, vandalism and graffiti regarded as major problems.
- 19 Of those people in employment 45.9 per cent work in public administration, education and health thus demonstrating the extent of the decline of mining as the mainstay of the economy. The percentage of 16 to 24 year olds in full time education or employment has improved to 89 per cent and is above the national average but 38 per cent of the population have no or low qualifications.
- 20 Economic recovery is slow but may accelerate now that the occupancy levels of business park developments in north Tyneside are reaching saturation. The area is experiencing growth as a commuter belt for the Tyneside conurbation.

The Council

- 21 The Council comprises 45 councillors and is in the overall control of Labour with 37 seats. The Liberal Democrats with eight seats form the opposition. A Leader and Cabinet governance system is in place with seven councillor portfolios and two Scrutiny Committees. The Council has introduced a performance management support member to each portfolio holder to improve the performance management system.
- 22 The Council is managed by a Strategic Management Team of the Chief Executive and seven senior managers, including the Chief Leisure Services Officer.
- 23 The Council's net revenue budget for 2005/06 is £9.2 million and the capital budget is £4.2 million.

The Council's culture service

- 24 The Council provides a broad range of culture services to the Wansbeck population both directly and through supporting partnerships. This is an important role for the Council and other public and voluntary sector organisations as there is very little private sector provision of culture facilities or activities. The facilities and activities within the culture service responsibility include indoor and outdoor sports, recreation and arts facilities, activities and development opportunities, urban and country parks, children's play areas, museum and heritage services, allotments and tourism services such as information provision for visitors and the operation of a touring caravan site.
- 25 The Council's net revenue budget for the service in 2005/06 was £2.9 million and a capital commitment to culture projects excluding Woodhorn Museum is £273,000. The projected capital budget for 2006/07 and 2007/08 is £363,000 and £372,000, principally to fund the improvement programme for children's play areas. The service employs 120 full time equivalent (FTE) staff.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 26 Wansbeck is a small district council with a limited resource base and this is a major factor in determining how best the services can be delivered and the depth to which the service can be provided. Nevertheless the Council aims to provide culture facilities and activities for all of the population on the basis that this group of services will contribute positively to the Council's wider corporate aims. To maximise the impact on the population of this broad area of service delivery the Council applies a strong degree of focus to direction of the services and seeks to work in partnership whenever possible.
- 27 The Council's strategic corporate ambitions and priorities have been developed after consultation with the local population. Health improvement, community safety, environmental improvements and economic regeneration are high on the priority list of Wansbeck residents. These aspirations are central to the Community Plan, the Council's Strategic Plan and across the various service strategies and plans. For example the Local Plan policies seek to protect and improve recreation open space for residents and visitors. Furthermore the Council has clearly identified those corporate priority aims in which it is the lead agency and those, such as 'confident and secure' and 'being healthy and feeling good', where it has a key supporting role. Consequently the culture services strategies and service plans have clarity of focus on contributing to the achievement of the corporate aims.
- 28 The content and focus of the culture services delivered by the Council are aligned to national and regional priorities. For example the Council shares with national government and regional agencies the focus on health improvement, safer and stronger communities and improving the environment. The arts element of the service relates to the Northumberland Arts Strategy and the Woodhorn Museum project incorporates the relocation of the County archives. This degree of association between national, regional and local aims enables the Council to benefit from partnership working to benefit the district's residents.

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

- 29 The service does not have a full understanding of the cultural needs of the Wansbeck residents due to the absence of a systematic approach to consultation with the local population. To date there has been very limited exploration of cultural issues through corporate consultation with the population. Consultation by the service is with people who are already using the service, with local culture organisations and community groups, through the Council newsletter or on specific projects.

The consequence of the limitations on the consultation which is carried out and the lack of in depth profiles of current users, is that the service cannot be certain that it is designed, managed and delivered to fully meet the needs of Wansbeck residents. The service can demonstrate however that where consultation has taken place the results have been used to influence the development and improvement of facilities and activities.

- 30 The culture service consultation employs a range of mechanisms such as user surveys, customer feedback, complaints analysis, focus groups, and liaison with sports and arts clubs and community groups.
- 31 Consultation with specific groups within the population provided information to help design elements of the cultural service. For example the Council's Youth Strategy is based on consultation with 1,000 young people aged 11 to 24 and this revealed that provision of opportunities through cultural services is high on the priorities of young people. Every five years local residents are surveyed on what they want provided in parks and open spaces and provision of youth shelters, skateboard areas, play equipment and more park benches has been the outcome. Feedback from audiences attending the 2004 theatre programme has been used to alter the content of this year's programme and also suggests that what the Wansbeck population expects is more focus on 'entertainment' rather than arts.
- 32 Community Area Partnerships and LIFE project groups in Newbiggin, East Ashington and Wansbeck are a developing source of consultation which will enable different projects to take place in different areas with a greater focus on local needs.
- 33 Some feedback from consultation with the public takes place through articles in the Council's bi-monthly newsletter delivered to all households in the district. This also includes articles to encourage people to complete surveys thus providing a further source of information on user needs. Summaries of the initial findings are fed back through the newsletter.
- 34 The ease of access for Wansbeck residents to culture service facilities and activities is varied. The main indoor sports facilities are located in Ashington and Newbiggin, but the service makes use of other venues such as community centres for arts and sports development purposes. Outdoor facilities such as urban and country parks are provided across the district and playing pitches and children's play areas are distributed throughout the local communities.
- 35 The Council provides a range of facilities for different indoor and outdoor sports. Although the Woodhorn museum is undergoing a major redevelopment, museum services such as access to the collections or identifying artefacts are still available to the public. A range of arts and entertainments activities from creative writing classes to performing arts are provided. The service maintains a comprehensive sports club directory and is aware of the alternative provision for sports and recreation in Wansbeck either by member clubs, schools or by the private sector. This information enables the service to step in where there are gaps in provision and to work with those clubs open to non members, which welcome children and have facilities for people with disabilities.

- 36 The quality of the facilities on offer is not consistent within each of the culture sectors. Playing pitches on the whole are good quality, as are the country parks and there is an ongoing programme to upgrade the quality of the urban parks and the children's play areas. However, the quality of indoor facilities is varied and some of the facilities used for arts activities are not ideally suited for this purpose. Where specialist sports and arts activities are offered, the quality of the provision is increased by importing specialist coaches.
- 37 A broad range of recreation activities and sports development courses are available through the work of the sports development unit and are made accessible by staging them in or at local venues throughout the district. The activities themes reflect the corporate priority by being mainly, but not exclusively, targeted at young people between the 7 to 17 age groups. These include school holiday activity programmes and sports coaching courses. A range of activities are also provided for the older members of the community including swimming, badminton, walks, circuit training and an extended GP Referral scheme. The arts service focuses on specific issues and initiatives which reach relatively small priority sectors of the community.
- 38 Significant accessibility barriers still exist for sections of the Wansbeck population. The service is aware of the need to maximise the accessibility of its services to all sectors of the local population and to visitors but it is currently compromised by slow progress such as in ensuring there is access for people with disabilities, by the pricing policy and by other agencies, even when pressured by the Council, as in the case of making improvements to public transport services.
- 39 The opening hours of the facilities are generally responsive to public demand. However, access by public transport from outside the locality to some facilities such as the indoor leisure centres or care trust/cultural service health improvement initiatives can be difficult and is a barrier to use especially for young people.
- 40 Few of the facilities are fully accessible by people with disabilities. An external consultants report has been completed on Disability Discrimination Act compliance by all of the buildings operated by the culture service, and a programme of work to meet these requirements has been put in place. However, local people with disabilities do not appear to have been consulted on the requirements and the reports also exclude wider issues such as access to urban or country parks for people with disabilities.
- 41 There is no overall pricing policy which supports achieving the Council's key objectives. The general rule appears to be annual incremental price reviews and some use of pricing variations to encourage increased use of facilities and activities by sectors of the population identified in the corporate priorities of the Council. Prices range from the intention to continue with free entry to the new museum to charging for some arts events or sports development activities. The pricing for use of the amenities of the indoor leisure centre requires a balance to be maintained between attracting as many users as possible, particularly from priority groups, to maximising revenue generation.

The service has a concessionary fee structure that takes older and young people and those on benefits into consideration. This approach is consistent across all sports and leisure facilities, but in some instances the fee structure discriminates against lower income groups becoming frequent users of the gym facilities. There is a sharp increase in swimming pool users during 'free swim' promotions which is not sustained outside these periods.

- 42 The culture service marketing of the facilities and activities is relatively low key. Information literature is available through Council offices and local advertising of events and staff engage in occasional promotions at local retail outlets and school assemblies. In the latter case the result was a 300 per cent increase in attendance at the 2005 Holiday Programme. The Council's web site is regarded as good practice in relation to e-Government Meta Standard compliance. It provides detailed information on the service's facilities and activities but stops short of enabling on line reservations thus closing off this access channel.
- 43 The Council has a set of corporate service standards for users in place and are committed to having specific service standards in place by the end of 2005/06. Currently the existence of service standards is inconsistent across the culture service. The leisure centres have a set of user focused standards, prepared in consultation with service users, on display in each centre. There is also variable quality of service delivery to customers. This has been noted in the Scrutiny Committee report on the Ashington Leisure Centre.
- 44 The culture service recognises equality, diversity and human rights in its service delivery and responds to corporate guidance on these issues. The service has a Sports Equity Statement and Plan in place but it is not clear however whether this extends across all culture service activities. The statement is clear on the responsibilities of planning and delivering a service which excludes no one from using sports facilities or participating in sports activities. The plan caters for all sectors of the community and embraces the need to set targets to increase participating numbers from specific groups within the population and from priority target areas such as deprived urban wards. However, there was little evidence of the service celebrating its cultural diversity with only photographs of children engaged in arts activities displayed in the public areas of Council premises.
- 45 The sports development section's approach to equality and diversity results in the provision of activities and events for people with disabilities, in conjunction with the Sports Disability Forum, 'girls only' sessions for some activities, and the Active Support Programme targets ethnic minorities. An arts initiative, the Decibel project, has trained local, ethnic minority, community representatives to conduct participative action research with the output of identifying needs to counteract problems experienced by their families, friends and peers. One output has been the formation of a Young Peoples Equity Group to progress this work and engage with adults in the community.
- 46 There is a clear understanding in the culture service that it has to contribute to the corporate objectives and priorities and there is a range of initiatives across the service with this specific purpose.

47 It is not possible to quantify the impact which the culture service provision and initiatives have on the corporate priorities let alone the contribution they make to regional or national agendas. Performance measurement is not linked to outcomes nor is there a linkage between service outcomes and the performance measures of partner agencies. There is anecdotal evidence of success but the performance measures are on the whole simply attendees from the various target groups on the various courses and there are no outcome measures.

48 The culture service contribution to the 'Healthier Communities' and 'Safer and Stronger Communities' corporate objectives was examined in more depth.

'Healthier Communities'

49 The culture service delivers a range of initiatives directly related to health improvement of various sectors of the Wansbeck population. The latest performance monitoring report shows that there is consistent increase in the numbers of participants in these schemes and that this is ahead of target.

50 The initiatives to establish 'healthier communities' are spread across the culture service. The greatest growth has been in the expansion in gym provision, gym membership, the development of the GP Referral scheme, and in Healthy Lifestyles programmes which range from schemes for very young children to those for the over 75s age group. The GP Referral scheme has a dedicated officer within the sports development team and is now a four stage scheme to encourage continuing health improvement by participants.

51 There is also an arts based GP Referral pilot programme for young women suffering from post natal depression. Difficulty in securing external funding has prevented the widening of this pilot to pursue further initiatives to improve mental health. An Arts/Health project in Cambois centred on dance movement for older people with a professional dance instructor was adapted into a walking project aimed at stress reduction.

52 There is liaison between culture services and the Council's Healthy Living Centres staff to address health improvement issues. Projects include performing art to tackle poor health issues. For example with the involvement of the health trust and a dietician a Pop Step Dance Project used dance/music to educate young females with dietary problems. Due to its success a Pop Step Dance Club has been established to continue the work of the original project.

'Safer and Stronger Communities'

53 The approach to community safety is fragmented and the effectiveness of Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) seems to be limited by poor attendance by other agencies. The negligible response to public consultation indicates that the CDRP is not engaging with local people.

54 The community safety team operates within the Council's Economic and Environment Services department but the Housing Service staff have responsibility for Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) on Council owned housing estates although there is good liaison with other Council staff such as Park Rangers and to a lesser degree leisure staff. The Head of Leisure Service participates in the CDRP and the service is part of many of the action groups within the partnership.

Many of the targets contained in the last CDRP strategy were met, but it would appear that this was due to positive policing in the area.

- 55 The corporate template for service plans being prepared for 2006 includes specific reference to how service delivery impacts on both crime and disorder and diversity. This will ensure a consistent approach is undertaken across the council and these aspects are always considered when planning initiatives and projects.
- 56 Staff training in community safety issues is varied. Wardens, park rangers as well as management staff in sports centres and sports development, events and festivals, and recreation and community services receive training in ASB, how to deal with Sharps and on the implications of Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 for the Council. This does not however extend to all members of the culture service staff.
- 57 The service is also guided by the Council's Child Protection Policy which covers all aspects of the processes to be followed in cases of racism, bullying and abuse. The Leisurewatch scheme has been implemented at both leisure centres and all staff have had relevant training.
- 58 Despite the CDRP not being fully effective and the fragmentation of the corporate approach to community safety, the culture service works with a range of agencies to improve community safety and reduce crime in Wansbeck. The parks and open spaces unit within the service contributes actively to community safety through good maintenance such as planting and aggressive pruning of shrubs to create safe corridors through parks with better lighting and visibility, provision of play equipment for different age groups, security fencing of allotments, and entrance barriers to prevent vehicle access to parks. The service provided, in consultation with local young people, the teenage and children's play equipment in the Scotland Gate Doorstep Green Project. Early indications are that this project has helped prevent disorder and damage since its completion. A second doorstep green project at The Paddock in North Seaton has involved thinning trees and shrubbery and installing good play equipment.
- 59 There is safe access to both leisure centres and CCTV cameras have been installed internally and externally making staff and users feel more secure.
- 60 The focus of initiatives is on young people and there is partnership working between the County Council's Youth Service and the cultural service to deliver a range of initiatives dealing with criminal issues, for example drugs; alcohol; and anti-social behaviour.
- 61 The Positive Futures programme focuses on young people at risk of offending. The programme has Initiatives such as basketball training courses in association with Newcastle Eagles Basketball Team; an 'artist in residence' scheme in the deprived Hirst ward focusing on diversion from drugs use; whilst the Car Crazy project involved young people at risk of offending or who had a first conviction in car crimes. Other community safety initiatives involving young people and children include tree planting; and path and fence maintenance to increase the level of respect for the local environment. A specific example is the involvement of young people repairing a bridge which had been vandalised and set alight.

This project was completed three years ago and the bridge has not been subsequently vandalised.

- 62 Residents' satisfaction with the provision of cultural services is low. Ten of the twelve best value performance indicators for 2004/05 are below district council average performance nationally.
- 63 A corporate consultation indicated that 70 per cent of respondents were dissatisfied with the cultural and recreational facilities provided and that in their areas these facilities are poorly run. Similarly user satisfaction with Ashington Leisure Centre is low at 42 per cent (2003/04).

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 64 The Council has difficulty in demonstrating that it receives value for money from its investment in culture services. The council has been attempting to measure benefits against costs using benchmarking with other authorities and by using national agency such APSE data. There is a lack of information on the relationship between value for money and residents' satisfaction or the outcomes from the culture service initiatives and projects. This situation impacts on the planning of future service delivery.
- 65 The cost of providing Wansbeck's culture service is in the top 25 per cent when set against its nearest neighbours in the similar group of district councils. Clear and accurate information is maintained on the costs of delivering the various elements of the service set against the allocated annual budgets, but the extent to which costs are benchmarked against other similar councils is varied. Value for money comparisons are not consistently applied across all the cultural services and performance is mixed.
- 66 Parks and open spaces can demonstrate good value for money on operational costs with similar district councils. Wansbeck has the second highest number of hectares of maintained public space per thousand head of population and has the lowest maintenance cost per hectare with the fewest number of full time equivalent employees.
- 67 The two leisure centres show mixed performance in delivering value for money. Based on 2002 data they do reach top quartile in some categories, and this is confirmed by recent value for money comparisons from APSE. The museum is currently closed and the arts service is not benchmarked due to difficulty in identifying partners to participate in such comparisons.
- 68 The Council's view is that partnership working is essential to achieve the priority objectives. The impact of partnership working increases the value the Council gains from its investment through attracting supplementary funds and additional expertise from external sources. Such funds enable projects and initiatives to progress and in turn this benefits the local residents through the provision of a greater range of culture service activities, the establishment of new projects and upgrading of existing facilities.

- 69 In some instances however the impact of partnership working is less effective due to the Council not making clear to partners why they are participating and what outcomes they expect of the relationship. Furthermore there are some local concerns over communication by the Council on partnership arrangements where responsibilities being placed on partners are not made clear and the Council is slow to confirm agreements.
- 70 The culture service uses a variety of partnership arrangements to increase the range of provision in Wansbeck, but does not have a register of all the partnerships it participates in or supports to ensure that these working arrangements contribute to the delivery of the service aims and corporate objectives.
- 71 Examples of partnerships include the following.
- At a national and regional level to fund the redevelopment and expansion of the Woodhorn Museum and Hirst Park.
 - Linking regional associations and community sports clubs as in the case of the Football Development Group producing and implementing an action plan for service and facility improvements which meet the needs of the community.
 - Working with Wansbeck Initiative to deliver arts opportunities to the Wansbeck communities. The Cultural Services Manager is on the Creative Theme Group of the Wansbeck Initiative and can influence other theme groups of the Initiative, as well as the Community Area Partnerships. The largest arts project, INSPIRE, is a partnership between Wansbeck, neighbouring district councils, the County Council, voluntary organisations and the Woodhorn project. This public arts development project has a £300,000 budget of which only £15,000 comes from Wansbeck District Council.
 - Council sports and leisure facilities being managed by local clubs and associations. For example allotments are managed by allotment associations and although the Council maintains the public bowling greens these are managed by local bowling clubs.
 - Management services provided by the cultural service to locally owned facilities as is the case with Bedlington and Newbiggin community centres and the Ashington Leisure Centre. The partnership arrangements in these situations enable the local owners, often miners' welfare trusts, to influence this management on issues such as who is able to use the facilities and the proposed pricing structures for use of the facilities. The impact of this arrangement is seen by the trust as making sure that the leisure centre is not elitist and there is availability on an equality basis to all sectors of the Wansbeck community including the ethnic minority sector of the population.
 - Attracting external funding support the revenue costs of a range of initiatives and partnerships with large regional organisations the funding is an investment to deliver national, regional and corporate objectives.

- 72 There is also cross cutting work between the Council services to achieve corporate objectives. This includes the involvement of the arts unit with community regeneration projects, and sports development with the healthy living centres.
- 73 The Council has a five year Procurement Strategy in place and this contains value for money in delivering services as an important element, not simply in terms of lowest costs options but also on the contribution to be made to the wider corporate objectives taking into account community benefits and social outcomes.
- 74 The service applies the procurement strategy to its activities with for example open tendering being used for specialist services such as consultancy advice, and to purchase equipment and supplies in the parks section. In some cases as with the Ashington leisure centres the property is owned by a trust and the culture service manages the operation.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 75 The culture service has a track record of being able to change the thrust of its resource allocations to concentrate its efforts on the things which it believes matter to local people. The Council delivers a broadly based culture service for all the residents of the district, but the organisational structure of the service management has changed in recent years to align staff numbers and expertise to focus on those activities which will contribute most to the corporate objectives. The sports development and arts development units have increased in staff numbers partly through redeployment of posts and partly through using external funding to support new posts, and the heritage and tourism officers are now part of the Woodhorn Museum management.
- 76 The service has implemented the recommendations of previous best value reviews including that of Recreation and Community Services completed in November 2002. As a result there has been improvement in some areas of customer experience of the recreation facilities, to the access to the facilities and activities, and greater engagement with users in service development with continuous improvement being embedded in the ongoing work of the service.
- 77 The service has a positive track record of delivering service plan objectives. The improvements to some facilities such as parks and children's play areas, and increased opportunities to participate in activities will be noticeable to users and local communities, whilst major projects such as Woodhorn Museum is likely to draw attention across the district and beyond. Furthermore the increase in partnership working across all of the service has led to improvements in the scope of services provided and the depth of expertise available to residents.
- 78 However not all of these improvements are reflected in the direction of travel of the key performance indicators (PIs). The PI's show the culture service has a mixed performance. The residents' satisfaction levels with the culture service have improved between 2000/01 and 2003/04, other than for the museum, which has been closed for redevelopment. Although the impact of the services is slowly improving it has to be noted however that this is from a very low base and the scale of improvement needed to meet resident's expectations is considerable.
- 79 The Council mostly measures the culture service performance on the basis of customer visits to the facilities or attendances at courses or activities rather than outcomes. The direction of travel of sports development performance indicators show a varied picture. There have been increases in health related activities such as gym memberships, participation and continuing involvement in the GP Referral programmes and an encouraging take up of Healthy Lifestyle opportunities. The increase in the number and venues of the summer holiday programmes between 2004 and 2005 resulted in attendance numbers increasing by over 300 per cent.

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The numbers engaging in sports activity courses remain at more static levels as each course has a participants limit. Overall however the sports development work is having the impact of engaging with increasing numbers of local people annually.

- 80 The number of visits to the Ashington Centre has shown a steady annual decline from 326,000 to 272,000 over the last five years. The annual number of visits to the Newbiggin Sports Centre after a period of hovering between 80,000 and 85,000 from 1997/98 and 2003/04 showed a sudden upsurge to 9,300 in 2004/05.
- 81 The arts unit has delivered improvements including a successful theatre season which is to be repeated with an extended programme and incorporates improvements to respond to user feedback by having less experimental shows and more family based entertainment.
- 82 The impact of the changes in the service organisational structure on the residents of Wansbeck has been mixed. Importantly there is an increased number of initiatives relating strongly to contributing to corporate objectives which have been stimulated by the reallocation of the service resources. These appear to be having a positive impact if only in terms of the numbers participating, albeit those numbers are still small. The lack of outcome related performance measures across the service however renders it difficult for the service to quantify the difference the culture service is making to the lives of Wansbeck's residents.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 83 The Wansbeck Strategic Plan provides a clear vision of how the culture service can contribute to improving the quality of life for residents. The Plan clearly sets out objectives to improve urban and country parks, children's play areas and for increased engagement of the public in planning of the urban parks as well as the possible externalisation of the caravan park owned by the Council. Sports and arts activities feature in the Council's approach to the 'Being Healthy' theme and the new Woodhorn Museum is listed in the tourism component of economic regeneration. There is less clarity on how culture services will contribute to creating safer communities.
- 84 The principles at the heart of the Community Plan include pursuing equality and diversity in the provision of services for the Wansbeck population and plans are being developed corporately to respond to the equality agenda. The Chief Leisure Officer is leading on this work.
- 85 The Council also lacks a complete understanding of the culture expectations of local residents. However, corporately the Council is taking steps to improve the consultation process. A consultation strategy is close to approval by the Council and a centrally co-ordinated programme and timetable for community consultation is in place. The service also has access to information collected by other agencies such as the County Council's Youth Service and this could provide a greater understanding of, for example, what families and children expect of the culture service.

- 86** The Best Value Performance Plan contains actions for the culture service to enhance the environment, create safer communities and encourage health improvement. There are plans to improve the six urban parks, which are mainly located in deprived wards and to create opportunities for healthier lifestyles through walking, cycling, and roller blading. The development of multi use games areas and skateboard parks relate to establishing safer communities and the culture service features strongly in creating healthier communities through increasing the numbers using sports facilities and activities.
- 87** The Council's approach to service planning is clear and robust. There is a corporate service planning template in place. This template ensures that risk and financial planning, as well as crime and disorder and equality and diversity issues are taken into account. The template also challenges provision in terms of cost and quality and seeks proposals for efficiency savings, improving value for money and estimates of outcomes and PI targets. Base line budget reviews of current service provision and identification of additional resource bids add further to the strength of this process. Service employees are involved in the service planning process bringing their experience of regular contact with users and their demands into the process.
- 88** Within this improvement planning structure the culture service is clear about its aims and the importance of relating these to national and regional priorities as well as the corporate objectives. Although service staff are clear from the service plans on their responsibilities, they do experience difficulty in identifying what are lesser priorities.
- 89** There is no composite vision for the culture service but for most areas of its work there are strategies supported by action or service plans. There are exceptions. Although the arts activity is guided by the Northumberland Cultural Strategy there is no action plan for the district. Furthermore major facilities such as leisure centres do not have business plans despite the importance of their meeting revenue targets annually.
- 90** The various strategies do have sets of aims which are stretching, ambitious and cross cutting, taking account of major changes which are likely to influence how the service can be delivered in future. There is a focus on core facilities. For example the five year rolling improvement plan for parks and green spaces is already under way, progress is beginning to be made on implementing the recommendations on upgrading and development of children's' play areas as part of a longer term plan, and consideration is being given to further development of the Woodhorn Museum to strengthen its role regionally and to provide further improvements to the experience for local people. However there is a lack of consistency in seeking an input from service users and residents to the strategy development process.
- 91** The Council has a capital programme in place for the period from 2005 to 2008 in association with the Asset Management Plan. This includes the improvement and replacement of culture service assets such as the Hirst Park pavilion, environmental improvements along the Newbiggin shore line, planned maintenance at Ashington and Newbiggin leisure centres, children's play areas and upgrading of footpaths in the People's Park.

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- 92 Partnership working to improve the culture provision in Wansbeck is a clear aim of the service. For example the future community use of school facilities and in some cases new school facilities will replace some older and larger facilities currently operated by the Council as in the case of the Ashington Leisure Centre which would be replaced by facilities at the proposed higher education college on the Learning Park development. This strategic development is however at a very early stage and it is not clear to what extent it will be realised.
- 93 The culture service planning aims to improve the quality of service to users through the introduction of clear service standards and through achieving national quality accreditations. Sports Development is progressing towards Quest accreditation, the catering service is developing its service to 'Hospitality Assured' quality standards and the parks are being improved to Green Flag standard. Seeking such accreditations increases the service focus on users and adds to a culture of improving service quality.
- 94 An important element of the Strategic Plan is the recognition that the Council has to play a leadership role in the future of Wansbeck district. Councillors, senior managers and staff are clear about their strategic and operational roles, responsibilities and accountabilities, and these are clearly set out in protocols and standing orders. The leadership capacity has been strengthened by the introduction of shadow portfolio holders to assist the development of corporate themes such as health and environmental improvement.
- 95 Councillors also have the opportunity to participate in the service planning process through workshops to discuss the content of service plans at the draft stages. The impact of this process is to ensure the Councillors have a leadership role by engaging with the service planning process and are in agreement with the thrust and content of the service plans prior to these being presented to the full council for formal approval.
- 96 The Council is also demonstrating leadership through its own services with for example the catering services unit of the culture service banning smoking and promoting a healthier eating regime through introducing menu changes such as using more fresh vegetables, hummus, and brown breads and cutting down on fried and processed foods in Council venues, leisure and community centres.
- 97 The re-organisation of the culture service management is committed to lead on improvement to contribute to corporate objectives. The service does however still tend to work in traditional silos and although cross cutting working within the service is aided by being a small department the formal linkages for cross cutting working with other council departments is less clear. The new leadership should positively impact on the Council's ability to drive progress and achieve improvement in the cultural services.
- 98 Robust performance management and monitoring arrangements are in place based on the implementation of the service plans and are linked to the corporate performance management arrangements.

- 99** The Council has in place a performance management framework which sets timings and responsibilities for the completion of key tasks on an annual basis. This framework also sets the process for the review and completion of policy and service planning, budget and target setting preparation, staff appraisals, scrutiny programme, performance management and review, best value and cross cutting engagement. As a top level framework this provides a process to drive improvement and monitor progress.
- 100** The Council receives quarterly reports on performance. BVPIs appearing in the Strategic Plan are subject to regular monitoring through this system. The impact of this process is to monitor progress against targets and enable early action to be taken where progress is falling short. There are regular performance clinics for each service area and the process has the impact of monitoring whether targets are being achieved and enabling remedial action to be taken where slippage is occurring.
- 101** As well as managing performance to attain improvement in the national PIs, local targets are set by the service. These targets are however mostly output rather than outcome driven and relate to challenges such as increasing facility user and activity participation numbers, satisfaction levels with the culture facilities and targeting priority groups of residents. The consequence is that the service has few outcome measures which demonstrate the impact of its activities on users or on the corporate priorities.
- 102** Given the importance of partnership working and external investment to delivering culture services to residents it is notable that there has been little development of performance monitoring to encompass this element of the culture service work. There are examples of attempts to match performance more to outcomes through exploiting data to that held by partners or by introducing new performance measures. Outcome measures related to health improvement are being piloted for the GP Referral scheme participants. As a result proposed outcome measures are being put forward to the health performance clinic for consideration. Other efforts have been less successful. Relating holiday play programmes to reduction in arson incidents is very inconclusive and doesn't show that this initiative is having an impact on reducing this form of crime.
- 103** The culture service applies learning from elsewhere to improve the provision for Wansbeck residents. Examples include the arts and sports development units using external expertise and specialist coaches to deliver courses and service staff gaining information on good practice from partnership participation. The impact of this learning from both public and private sector sources can also be seen in the introduction of travelling theatre and cinema projects, the Puffin sculptures on roadside bollards in Newbiggin by the Sea to enhance the appearance of the area, adopting a more scientific approach to playing field maintenance resulting in longer playing time and improved surface, and income generation from allowing utilities to disturb the coastline when pipe laying.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 104 A stated priority in the Council's Strategic Plan the Council is the need to improve its capacity. This applies to the areas of management, human and financial resources, use of technology and partnership working. These aspects of capacity all impact on the culture service.
- 105 The Council has undergone change to put management arrangements in place to increase its effectiveness in delivering improvement. Portfolio holders now have a support member to improve the focus on improvement delivery and two cross cutting Scrutiny Committees have been established - Neighbourhood Scrutiny and Social Scrutiny. The intention is to be more challenging of service delivery in relation to the corporate priorities but it is too soon to tell whether the Council's management effectiveness has improved as a result.
- 106 The capacity of the culture service is increasing through restructuring to allocate resources to areas of corporate priority. This is being achieved through the recruitment of additional expertise and through skills training of existing staff. The increase in staff resources has particularly benefited the arts and sports development capacity, whilst the Woodhorn Museum staffing adds further depth of expertise to delivering heritage services to the Wansbeck communities.
- 107 The Council's draft Human Resources Strategy includes focus on the need to continue change within the Council's staff resources through recruiting and developing staff to ensure that the right expertise is available to deliver the Council's objectives. This approach is being followed by the culture service.
- 108 The capacity of the culture service is addressed in the staff appraisal scheme which is structured to establish a culture of continuous improvement and to focus on deliver the corporate objectives. The application of the scheme covers six key areas: effective leadership at management level; strategic planning and performance management; effective communication and engaging with communities; equality and diversity; delivering the forward plan; and statutory certification. Training needs are also clearly highlighted in order to develop the expertise within the organisation.
- 109 Staff appraisals for all culture service staff are on a six monthly cycle and achievement of targets is part of the review. However, the targets are more about the skills for the job and don't have a clear link to corporate objectives, service plan performance targets, or user related quantification.
- 110 Training requirements are an output from the staff appraisal process, and training programmes for specialist staff are provided to add to the capacity of the service. The need for training on wider corporate issues such as equality, diversity and community safety has been identified and refresher training sessions for staff on the implications on their services of Section 17 are planned in conjunction with Blyth Valley District Council. Job specific training is delivered promptly.
- 111 The service has a staff time plan in place for the 2005/06 year. This capacity planning tool shows the advance allocation of staff time to each section's activities and focuses on how staff resources are being deployed to deliver corporate objectives. This is noteworthy practice.

- 112 The culture service approach to staff resources should increase capacity through its greater focus on areas that matter to Council and residents, and in the range and quality of service delivered. This resource pool is a positive asset in the Council's drive for improvement but there is a risk factor in that capacity is still finely balanced and could be compromised if any prolonged key staff absences occur due for example to sickness although this has not been a problem to date.
- 113 Part of the development work undertaken by the service is directed to creating capacity within the communities themselves to add to the overall resource available within the district to improve culture activities. Thus development of coaching expertise amongst local residents and advice on events organisation are adding to the capacity.
- 114 The Council has corporate financial planning in place. There is a robust medium-term financial plan which demonstrates the financial capacity of the Council to deliver its service aims, priorities and the work programme set out in service plans. The Council has maximised income and has been successful in securing other forms of inward investment, such as lottery funds, to meet service priorities. Assets are well-managed and are used effectively, efficiently and responsibly towards achieving service aims. Set in this corporate context the culture service has the financial capacity to deliver an improvement in services.
- 115 The ability of the Council to provide its share of investment to attract external funding is an important boost to its capacity with the beneficial impact of expanding the range and quality of facilities and activities for the Wansbeck population as well as for visitors to the area.
- 116 The Council recognises however the importance of having exit strategies in place to deal with sustaining longer term initiatives when this source of funding expires as for example the likelihood of the Groundwork Trust taking over the arts/health initiative at Cambois.
- 117 All external funding bids are channelled through the Head of Financial Services, discussed at the Senior Management Team and require Cabinet agreement. This process includes considering the liability to the general fund; the business case for the bid and, if the Council is not to mainstream, whether there is an exit strategy. The majority of bids are mainstreamed to ensure the initiative continues once funding ceases.
- 118 A further incentive for the service to improve the effectiveness of its resource planning is that in most cases any financial savings made can be reallocated within the service. The impact of this approach is that the Council has been able to sustain initiatives which were started on the basis of external funding.
- 119 The culture service is successful in securing external funding and investment for facilities, activities and specialist staff. The outcomes of this success can be directly appreciated by the district's residents. For example between 2003/04 and 2005/06 the Council secured £17 million external funds for the delivery of projects across the service area.

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Allowing for the £13 million to fund the Woodhorn Museum redevelopment, the Council has still attracted in excess of £1 million annually for projects such as Hirst Park refurbishment, children's play area and sports pitch upgrading, the establishment of a youth theatre at Newbiggin, a teen shelter and creation of a cyber cafe at Newbiggin leisure centre. External funding will also enable the service to appoint a community network sports officer, a healthy lifestyle co-ordinator and additional park force wardens. Sources of this external funding vary from the Heritage Lottery, Neighbourhood Renewal and New Opportunities Funds to Sport England, Northern Rock Foundation and Section 106 commitments from national house builders.

- 120 External funds are crucial in joint culture service and Health Care Trusts initiatives. For example NRF Funds are used for Healthy Lifestyles Initiatives and Care Trust funds for Cardiac Phase 4 initiative. However, the lack of further Health Care Trust funds limits the introduction of more health improvement initiatives by the culture service. Likewise in the foreseeable future there is unlikely to be further new funding from the County Council for youth development initiatives casting doubt on whether the development of some youth initiatives can be sustained. However, the Creative Theme Group of Wansbeck Initiative is using Neighbourhood Renewal Funds to support initiatives dealing with young people.
- 121 Residents have also benefited from the ability of the culture service to use external funds to expand its own capacity as in the case of the sports development unit being able to appoint three sports coaches, a Healthy Lifestyles co-ordinator and a community sports coach.
- 122 IT systems are being introduced to create further resource capacity and to drive improvement in the culture service delivery to residents. For example the introduction of a new till system at the leisure centres will allow a greater degree of user analysis to strengthen the input to service planning through better customer focus and will enable further redeployment of staff resources into priority areas. The service is also testing an on line, activity session booking system to go live from March 2006 which will also provide a better customer service and again release staff capacity.
- 123 The Council has an open approach to partnership working recognising that this is an important means of increasing capacity to deliver improved culture services in Wansbeck. The culture service uses partnerships to expand the range and quality of its service to users, and to sustain services through the use of local residents to manage facilities. The partnership means of increasing capacity is not simply applied to small localised facilities. For example consideration is being given as to how the redeveloped Woodhorn Museum should be operated. The South East Northumberland and North Tyneside Initiative (SENNTRI) project uses regeneration funds to develop a Learning Park in Ashington. If realised this project could have a major impact on the leisure facilities available to Wansbeck residents' as the sports and recreation facilities on the campus would be a means of replacing the Ashington Leisure Centre.

- 124** The Extended Schools funding is a potential major opportunity for the culture service to develop local community focused partnerships with schools to increase the range of facilities and leisure and cultural activities made available to the public. This opportunity is further enhanced by the fact that Parent Support services could fund developments, and the development of Excellence Clusters of schools is a further possible development route for facilities and activities.
- 125** Partnership working offers a continuing increase in capacity to the culture service. Some benefit could be lost because the Council does not clearly translate its main aim to most partnerships, and does not co-ordinate partnership activities across the council to ensure a cross-cutting approach to achieving the corporate aims.