

Service Inspection Report

January 2006



Allerdale Cultural Services

Allerdale Borough Council

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Contents

Service Inspection	4
Summary	5
Scoring the service	6
Recommendations	8
Report	10
Context	10
The locality	10
The Council	11
The Council's cultural services	12
How good is the service?	14
What has the service aimed to achieve?	14
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?	15
Access, customer care and user focus	15
Diversity	17
Service outcomes for users and the community	17
Is the service delivering value for money?	22
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	23
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	23
How well does the service manage performance?	24
Does the service have the capacity to improve?	26

Service Inspection

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

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

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

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

Summary

- 1 Allerdale Borough Council is in North West England, situated at the north-western edge of Cumbria, covering an area in excess of 1,200 square kilometres, stretching from the Solway Firth in the north, down to its largest town of Workington, and bounded by the Lake District mountains.
- 2 The population is 94,500. The Council comprises 56 councillors, no party has overall control, although the Labour party has the largest number of councillors with 27 seats. We inspected the Council's cultural services encompassing indoor sports and leisure provision, museums, arts and theatre and including partnerships with various agencies supported by the Council.
- 3 The Council has been assessed as providing a fair one star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined overleaf.

Scoring the service

- 4 We have assessed Allerdale Cultural Services. 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.

Allerdale Borough Council - Cultural Services

Table 1 Scoring chart:

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

- 5 The service is a one star service because:
- the cultural services have high user satisfaction ratings (all are in the best performing quartile for district councils);
 - the arts and sports development functions work closely with partner organisations to deliver a wide range of opportunities for local residents and visitors, in particular young people;
 - improvements have recently been made to leisure facilities and some museums resulting in increased usage and improved user satisfaction; and
 - the services use partnerships and a range of procurement arrangements to enhance service provision and deliver improved value for money.

¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

However:

- the services do not have a detailed understanding of the specific needs for their services in relation to priority target groups within the community;
- service users are not usually involved with setting or monitoring service standards;
- service standards are not well-publicised for users and non-users;
- detailed monitoring of usage of cultural services by target group, age, ethnicity or residential location is not routinely carried out; and
- services are planned and delivered from the basis of individual service plans, rather than through an integrated approach which encompasses all cultural services.

6 The service has promising prospects for improvement because the Council and its cultural services:

- have a good track record of delivering improved and more efficient cultural services through partnership working;
- have a clear investment strategy for refurbishment/replacement of its facilities and has already implemented a programme of refurbishment at leisure centres;
- are shortly to realise over £14 million from its assets and has firm plans to invest at least £3.4 million of this in two main cultural premises with the majority of the remainder earmarked in the asset plan for investment on other leisure and cultural developments; and
- have demonstrated the ability to focus on what is important and improve in response to previous inspections and reviews.

However:

- annual service based plans are produced with little cross-service co-operation or planning and so are less able to take advantages of synergies and co-operative working to drive improvement;
- target setting within the plans is vague and non-specific and does not use SMART targets. This causes difficulties in monitoring specific outcomes and measuring impact; and
- the Council's plans to improve its service planning, target setting and performance management have yet to be implemented.

Recommendations

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

Recommendation

R1 Develop arrangements to review the performance of cultural services as a whole and their specific contribution towards achieving aspects of the corporate vision eg:

- everyone has access to the cultural services they need;
- young people are having fun and older people feel safe;
- the area is clean and green, peaceful and welcoming; and
- visitors and local people enjoy a wide range of cultural activities.

- 8 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:
- greater opportunity to identify SMART outcome-based targets that can be monitored;
 - improved overview of the contribution and value for money provided by cultural services; and
 - improved opportunities to combine performance management information with partners to evaluate overall improvement from a community perspective.

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

Recommendation

R2 Review the effectiveness of different elements of the Council's cultural services, to identify aspects where better co-ordination of planning and delivery will improve services overall.

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

9 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved targeting of resources;
- improved value for money in overall cultural services offered by the Council and partners;
- improved connection of cultural services to corporate objectives and wider community plans; and
- opportunity for greater joint working across the services including improved communications and promotional activities.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by June 2006.

<i>Recommendation</i>
<p><i>R3 Develop clear service standards that are:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - based on the identified needs of the whole community; - communicated to users and non users; and - focussed on improving the accessibility of the services.

10 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- greater contribution to wider objectives on the quality of life for deprived vulnerable or isolated groups;
- improved targeting of service improvement effort;
- increased take up of services by priority target groups; and
- improved user satisfaction levels.

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

Report

Context

- 11 This report has been prepared by the Audit 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 Act.
- 12 The Local Government White Paper '*Strong Local Leadership – Quality Public Services*' set out a new performance framework within which the Government is committed to working in partnership with local government to secure a progressive improvement in authorities' performance. The new framework is underpinned by the statutory provisions in the Local Government Acts 1999 and 2000, and seeks to integrate these with the approach to public expenditure described in the Government's Spending Review and reflected in local and national Public Service Agreements (PSAs). In particular, the provisions in Part I of the 1999 Act require that services are:
 - responsive to the needs of citizens;
 - of a high-quality and cost-effective; and
 - fair and accessible to all who need them.

The locality

- 13 Allerdale Borough Council is in North West England, situated at the north-western edge of Cumbria, covering an area in excess of 1,200 square kilometres, stretching from the Solway Firth in the north down to its largest town of Workington, and bounded by the Lake District mountains. Other principal centres are Maryport, Cockermouth, Keswick and the northern market towns of Silloth, Wigton and Aspatria.
- 14 The population of the area is 94,500, living in approximately 44,000 households. The proportion of people from ethnic minorities is 1.6 per cent. It is an area of great contrast, with significant deprivation levels in some of the wards in Maryport and Workington. Unemployment is slightly higher than the regional and national averages although there are variations across the borough. However, it has recently reduced at a faster rate than that of the regional and national averages.
- 15 The towns of Workington and Maryport have diversified from their traditional economic base of coal and steel, but are still dependent on manufacturing employment. Local manufacturing and farming provide most of the employment in the northern areas. Upland hill farming has declined, but there is a thriving tourist industry, particularly in the east of the borough. Many Allerdale residents are employed by British Nuclear Fuels Ltd Sellafield in neighbouring Copeland. With the publication of the government's intention for the future of nuclear power, there will be challenges for the economic stability of the area which will have implications for the Council in its role as a community leader.

- 16 Crime levels in the borough are generally low compared with similar districts but fear of crime is identified as an issue in recent crime partnership surveys. Anti-social behaviour associated with town centres and weekend drinking is an issue for the police and local health services as it results in peaks of demands for their services later at night on Fridays and Saturdays.
- 17 The health of the population, as measured by the indices of deprivation, is worse than in many districts, with seven wards across Allerdale being within the worst 10 per cent health deprived in the country.
- 18 Educational achievement is below the national average as defined by GCSE performance at age 16, but is showing steady improvement in recent years.

The Council

- 19 The Council comprises 56 councillors and no party has overall control, although the Labour party has the most seats with 27. Currently, the business of the Council is governed by a leader and cabinet arrangement. Overview and Scrutiny is provided by two committees, one corporate and one community.
- 20 The Council's net overall expenditure in 2005/06 amounts to £14.9 million. The Council has recently refreshed its vision to take account of the broader needs of the community and making Allerdale 'a great place to live, work and visit'.

A great place to live

- Everyone has access to the services they need.
- Everyone can find a home that suits them.
- Older people feel safe.
- Young people are having fun and believe they can build a future in the area.

A great place to work

- All local communities share in prosperity that is sustainable in the long-term.
- Skilled and talented people remain in the area to build their careers.
- There is good local provision for gaining learning and skills.

A great place to visit

- Visitors are delighted to find the area clean and green, peaceful and welcoming.
- Visitors are invited to join with local people in enjoying a wide range of cultural activities, including sport, music, drama, food and drink, highlighted through a popular programme of festivals.

- 21 At the time of our Inspection, the Council had recently appointed a new Chief Executive and, under her direction, were preparing a revised Corporate Improvement Plan (CIP) aimed at delivering the key objectives highlighted above between 2006 and 2011. Consultation over this revised plan has included various internal meetings and also meetings with local community groups through neighbourhood forums.

The Council's cultural services

- 22 The delivery of cultural services in Allerdale falls mainly under the remit of the environmental group of services which encompasses leisure services (including arts and museums) and parks and open spaces.
- 23 Cultural services fit within a group structure consisting of the following functions:
- contract services;
 - environmental Health;
 - bereavement services; and
 - leisure services.
- 24 The leisure services manager is responsible for the following core services:
- heritage and arts;
 - sport and recreation; and
 - entertainments and events management.
- 25 The facilities the Council owns include:
- three leisure centres in Workington, Keswick, and Cockermouth. New partnership arrangements to manage and develop the Council's leisure centres have been in place since April 2004. Now operated by Carlisle Leisure Ltd a trust established to operate leisure centres where the Council pay a partnership fee on an annual basis;
 - three museums in Keswick, Maryport and Workington - operated by voluntary groups part funded by the Council;
 - two arts and entertainment venues at Maryport, (the Civic Hall) and Workington, (the Carnegie Centre);
 - three parks across the district;
 - sixteen grass sports pitches; and
 - a variety of outdoor recreation spaces and nature sites.
- 26 Tourism in the Council has gone through some major changes in recent years. Prior to 2002, the Council operated a small stand-alone tourism unit, but following a Best Value review of the service, a new Communications and Marketing Unit was created that now incorporates some aspects of tourism including maintaining links with key agencies such as Cumbria Tourist Board. Management of the tourist information centres was maintained in-house and these services now sit within the corporate customer services function.

- 27 The leisure services department employs 25 full-time equivalent staff. for 2005/06, the net cost of the service, including all trading activities, is set at £2.2 million, this represents 18 per cent of the Council's annual revenue budget.
- 28 The Council's political structure includes three elected councillors with responsibility for elements of cultural services, namely the leisure, tourism and museums and contracts portfolio holders.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

The Local Strategic Partnership

- 29 The West Cumbria Partnership is the Local Strategic partnership (LSP) covering both Allerdale and Copeland Borough Councils. The community plan produced by the LSP is currently under review following a recent assessment of the LSP carried out by the Government Office North West. At present, the stated aims of the strategy are to:
- ensure that all organisations, people, communities and businesses share in the benefits of activities that improve prosperity;
 - ensure that the natural and built environment can be enjoyed by all people, now and for generations to come, and contributes to health, quality of life, and economic prospects; and
 - ensure an increasing sense of well-being for the community and the individual through encouraging active engagement for mutual benefit.
- 30 At the time of our inspection, the various cultural services in Allerdale did not have any common shared objectives or aims. Leisure Services have, however, adopted the aims of the Allerdale Cultural Strategy with service plans which identify tasks and activities which each section of leisure services will address during 2005/06, while each individual service plan does make reference to supporting corporate objectives.

Allerdale cultural strategy

- 31 The development of a Cultural Strategy in Allerdale was a key recommendation of an internal Best Value Review conducted in 2003. In August 2004, the Council adopted a Cultural Strategy for Allerdale which included a set of key actions that were produced in line with a refreshed Council Vision and Corporate Plan.
- 32 The vision articulated in the Cultural Strategy is to ensure that:
- 'Allerdale is a place where all individuals and communities can achieve, through participation in cultural activity, improvements in social, economic and environmental well-being, making it a great place to live, work and visit.'
- 33 Underpinning this are the following strategic themes:
- social and community;
 - economic; and
 - environment.
- 34 This strategy lists service activities to support local and national priorities for health, safer and stronger communities, economic vitality, learning, and improving the quality of life for local people, in particular for children and young people, older people and specific target groups identified as being 'hard-to-reach'.

- 35 The strategy is supported by an action plan which itself has been used to shape the service plans for the following services:
- arts;
 - sport and recreation;
 - parks and countryside; and
 - museums and heritage.
- 36 The cultural strategy refers to tourism activity but, in addition, the Council has also produced a separate tourism strategy supported by a 49 point action plan. This action plan was approved by the Council in September 2005.
- 37 Therefore, the key themes contained within the high-level plans and strategies are translated into service plans which support local and national priorities. The service plans include actions and activities to develop partnerships and enhance community capacity in order to help achieve these wider strategic aims and contribute to corporate priorities.

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

- 38 Provision of cultural services in Allerdale, generally meets the needs of the local community and users as far as these needs are understood by the services and the Council. However, the Council does not have a detailed understanding or analysis of the needs of specific priority groups, therefore, the delivery of these services is often based on the interpretation of broad strategic statements at the operational level, which staff and managers in the services do well. However, in the absence of detailed information on community needs, and with few specific targets set, the monitoring and evaluation of service delivery relies on indicators such as user satisfaction and the measurement of activity rather than on demonstrable impact against well-defined, community driven, targets.

Access, customer care and user focus

- 39 The services' approach to accessibility and user focus is fair. Service planning is not based on a comprehensive understanding of local needs, but more on the high level statements of priorities contained in plans and strategies. Individual services do focus on accessibility and customer care but there is no integrated approach to these issues across all cultural services. Service delivery is geared to increasing activity in priority areas but there is no consistent approach to monitoring outcomes or evaluating impact.
- 40 There is a good range of opportunities for local residents to access cultural facilities and as a result of the Council's actions, user numbers are increasing within theatres and museums. The standard of local facilities has been improved noticeably within leisure centres as a result of savings the Council has made from the leisure trust partnership with Carlisle Leisure Limited (CLL).

- 41 Managers and staff demonstrate a good understanding of how to deliver local services to address the high-level priority areas such as more provision for young people or delivering services through outreach activity. However, the age and condition of the premises used for delivery of services means that less than half of the facilities currently comply with the accessibility standards defined within the Disability Discrimination Act, a figure which puts the Council in the worst performing quartile when compared with other Councils.
- 42 There are some good examples of widening initiatives to help improve accessibility to services. Within the leisure centres, the Council have extended the discount leisure card to encourage greater participation. This is supported in part by funding from the local primary care trust. A similar card, 'leisure access priority' is available for unemployed, students and OAP's. This has recently been specially targeted at 11 to 16 year olds through an 'On the Move scheme', which targets young people in the most deprived communities and offers a discount rate in leisure centres across Allerdale. This has led to increased opportunities for young people to access sporting and recreational facilities throughout the week. The service is, however, unable to record the exact increase in activity generated by this or other initiatives and the Council has not set precise targets for the increased activity it expects from the additional investment in this scheme. As such, the Council cannot fully assess the effectiveness of these initiatives.
- 43 Cultural services do not routinely collect information on the ethnicity, factors relevant to target groups, or disability of service users. There is no consistent approach to segmentation of users in order to develop services suited to their particular needs. This means that, overall, cultural services cannot easily demonstrate that services are delivered in a manner which is non-discriminatory neither can they effectively assess the impact of initiatives aimed at specific target groups.
- 44 There is some availability of socio-economic and other local data, but this is not systematically collated, analysed and shared across services to make best use of what is available. Examples such as the CA15 community arts project in Maryport and changing service provision at Keswick Museum show a sensitivity to local needs but this is not based on a consistent and strategic application of knowledge of the community across Allerdale, rather on the development of initiatives to meet demands articulated locally. The use of consultation, regular surveys and use of customer suggestions and feedback is inconsistent. As a result of this, the Council cannot be certain that it is delivering cultural services in a way that is based on a full understanding of local needs.
- 45 Other good examples of initiatives which increase activity and improve access are the School Sports co-ordinator programme and the joint working with a range of agencies including the County Council, Netherhall Sports College and Surestart to provide an extensive summer activity programme aimed at young people in Maryport.
- 46 The services do not make effective use of ICT-based solutions to help improve accessibility, for example, online booking of activities and cross-venue booking is not generally available.

Diversity

- 47 The Council is currently working at a limited level with regard to its formal approach to equality and diversity. It has developed an overall corporate equality policy which includes the Council's Race Equality Scheme and which sets out a variety of policies relating to specific aspects of diversity and equality. At present, it has currently achieved level one of the Equality Standard for Local Government.
- 48 There are several examples where the Council is proactive and creative in developing enhanced access to services and facilities. These include the use of exhibits such as the musical stones from Keswick Museum at community events at other venues and at the Maryport Blues festival where the event was advertised in five different languages and the Council funded the provision of interpreters in eastern European languages for the whole weekend to serve the expected audience. However, although the tourist information centres operated by the Council offer a translation service by telephone link, other venues do not and most publicity material and brochures for Council services are presented in English only.
- 49 The Council has been proactive in addressing access problems experienced by young people living in rural parts of the borough, but the resulting initiatives have not always been sustainable or successful. Outreach activities and funding for transport to support reduced entrance for young persons swimming in school holidays (a 10 pence bus fare and a 10 pence swim), are utilised to try and combat access issues arising from the rural diversity of the Borough. The funding for transport, while still available, cannot be used at present as the bus operator is reluctant to provide this service following incidents of vandalism and arson by young passengers.

Service outcomes for users and the community

Economic vitality

- 50 The Council works well in enhancing the economic vitality of the community through cultural service activities. There are some promising new initiatives, in particular around arts development, but there is scope to achieve more. The sector's contribution is valued and recognised by most partners and stakeholders, but the Council is not always clear about the best way to support the local community and its wider business and visitor stakeholders.
- 51 Creative industries are actively and positively encouraged and promoted through ongoing support. This includes providing support for the Jazz festival at Keswick and the Blues Festival at Maryport. These events help support work experience opportunities across private, public and voluntary sectors. The Council's support of the theatre by the lake in Keswick helps provide outreach workshops with emphasis on provision in areas of multiple deprivation in Allerdale. This also supports training and participation programmes aimed at sustainable employment including the establishment of a full-time theatre studies course at The Lakes College in Workington.

- 52 The services can demonstrate good examples of partnership working to assist improvement in economic vitality within the Borough. The Council has developed, in consultation with partners and the community, a new Tourism Strategy. The entertainment and events function have been effective in instigating the Maryport Blues Festival and The Keswick Jazz Festival, both of which contribute to tourism and economic vitality in the Borough and which are now run by community organisations. More recently, an international fell running championship has been brought to Keswick by the efforts of the tourism function. A strong partnership exists with Copeland Borough Council Arts Development Service. Together the partnership set up the West Cumbria Rural Touring Scheme in 1999. Other joint work includes the development of the West Cumbria Public Art Policy, work towards aligning priorities, leading on the creative industries Audit with Cumbria County Council, development of a West Cumbria Arts Development forum. The Arts service is also currently working with Workington Regeneration Company to incorporate art displays into the regeneration of the Town Centre.
- 53 The services demonstrate an ability to learn from outside bodies as shown by an Arts Council contracting framework being adapted for use with the theatre by the lake. This has enabled clearly defined outcomes and benefits from youth theatre activities to be specified such as longer-term entry of participants into the creative arts job market.

Safer and stronger communities

- 54 Overall, the approach to safer and stronger communities work within the services is basic. There is now a better understanding amongst managers and staff of the role cultural services can play in developing safer and stronger communities, but this is not yet consistent across all services. Cultural services do not make use of the intelligence held by police in planning their services and the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP) was not involved in consultation on the development of the cultural strategy. As a result of this, action plans cannot be said to be based on a robust understanding of local issues in respect of crime and disorder.
- 55 Community safety issues do not figure highly in the plans for cultural services, although several service based initiatives are targeted at specific elements of community safety. The Council has only recently begun to mainstream crime and disorder and community safety across all its services, through seminars and information leaflets for managers and staff, and has yet to run seminars for Councillors. As such, cultural services are not maximising their impact in supporting the Council, the LSP and the CDRP to achieve their targets and objectives.

- 56 One of the most prominent and positive contributions made across the services to effective crime reduction is the CA15 project in Maryport (which initially evolved out of the Ewannrig project). This is a long running, sustainable community project which has won an award from the police for contributing to safer communities. The project includes community activities to train volunteers and improve community capacity and has delivered training for people returning to work. In addition, the programme of summer activities run in Maryport by CA15 and several other agencies was well co-ordinated to ensure the most effective use of facilities and resources and minimal overlap. This proactive approach is not always repeated across other sectors of the service.
- 57 The linking of CDRP activities and objectives into service and business plans for culture is limited. There is little engagement between cultural services staff and the CDRP task groups resulting in limited planning to address community safety issues. Recent work on the ground can demonstrate some good examples of local initiatives including the basketball league held within the leisure facilities in liaison with the police, but when CDRP funding was secured for the development of the skatepark in Workington, no specific targets relating to reduction of anti-social behaviour or youth nuisance were set.

Healthier communities

- 58 Allerdale's cultural services work well in supporting the wider strategic objectives of the LSP and partners in seeking to develop a healthier local community. There are some strong partnerships in place to deliver health related objectives and there is generally good joining up within the Council to work together on health initiatives, although links could be strengthened. There is, however, no specific Council plan that relates to national drivers and strategies, such as delivery of the Game Plan (Sport England) target to increase participation in physical activity and to achieve a target of 70 per cent of the national population active. However, the Cumbria Sport Partnership sub-regional strategy in which the Council plays a significant part does address this issue. The Council does count programme and participation figures for physical activity and report them to the local PCT as part of monitoring of activity, but it is unable to identify the proportion of Allerdale's residents currently participating at the level and frequency identified in the Game Plan.

- 59 The Council can demonstrate some good and creative examples of using pricing strategies and joint working to support young people's activities and health related issues within the borough. In 2003, it launched the 10 pence swim schemes across each of its three swimming pools. Operating during school holidays and also throughout the term-time at Keswick pool, this initiative promotes the value of exercise and encourages young people to participate in activities within Council venues. The service has also reached agreement with the local PCT to fund a Coach Education Programme, aimed at stimulating local enthusiasts to enter sports coaching. This initiative will enhance local services and lead to a greater supply of trained and accredited coaches for future work with young people. Leisure centres in Cockermouth and Workington also work in partnership with West Cumbria Primary Care Trust to provide opportunities for local people who have suffered heart related problems to participate in pre-arranged exercise activity at the leisure centres.
- 60 In relation to physical activity and sporting opportunities, the Council financially supports numerous posts with different agencies that benefit the health of young people including:
- rugby league development officer;
 - community sports coaches; and
 - a community sports development officer based at Netherhall Sports College.
- 61 Cultural services' relationship with the various agencies who support these posts provides a good example of how services are joining up to make a difference to young people's sporting opportunities with direct benefits to health through increased activity levels.
- 62 Arts development also contributes positively to physical activity levels by recently agreeing to appoint a dance development officer. The PCT speak highly of the current provision of dance activity within the borough, particularly at the Carnegie centre, and recognise it contributes to the healthier community agenda as well as providing meaningful activity for a wide age range of young people. Arts and cultural provision also helps maintain and enhance the mental health of residents of the Borough.

Learning

- 63 The Council works well in helping members of its community learn and develop new skills through cultural activities. It also supports the achievement of wider objectives such as the national targets for exercise for primary school children. Activities such as sports coach development, college courses in performing arts, dance activities, school visits to museums and junior basketball and rugby league activities demonstrate the range of ways in which the Council works to help achieve additional learning.

- 64 Some initiatives are positively designed to help young people develop a wider range of skills. The leisure service worked with a group of young people to develop a skate park in Workington. From design to completion this project enabled young people to self manage the project. However, the services do not have in place mechanisms which enable the transfer of learning and effective practice within the cultural services or between this group of services and the Council's other service departments.
- 65 The arts service has developed some strong delivery partnerships which are key to its success in encouraging learning. These include theatre by the lake which has recently established a full time theatre studies course at The Lakes College in Workington. Arts development work is helping deliver against educational objectives by arranging school visits across its museums and by arranging activities for local artists and craftsmen, also supporting children and young people by specific activities and the use of young volunteers.
- 66 The CA15 project has a good record of running activities aimed at developing the skills of young people and community volunteers. These include Information Technology programmes and a digital photography course for returners to work. These help give members of the community a wide range of transferable skills and help them to re-enter the job market with more confidence.

Quality of life

- 67 Cultural services contribute to improvements in the quality of life for local people, including young and older people and targeted communities. However, as described in the sections above, the range of provision is not comprehensive and there are inconsistencies in the quality of facilities across the Borough.
- 68 The outdoor environment is generally maintained to a high standard and there are some attractive open spaces suitable for events and other uses across the district. Satisfaction with open spaces and parks is now in the best quartile of performance and has improved significantly over the past three years.
- 69 Facilities for children and young people are not of a uniformly high quality or comprehensive across the Borough, but play areas are generally of good quality with four having been refurbished to the current EU standards. Playing pitches are well maintained but there are some drainage problems.
- 70 In terms of external recognition of quality of service, some beaches and sand dune areas maintained by the Council have blue flag awards, and leisure centres and swimming pools have achieved the QUEST standard. As yet the Council has not put forward any of its parks for a green flag award.

User experience and satisfaction

- 71 Residents' satisfaction with cultural services is high, with all indicators from the most recent Best Value User Survey (for 2003/04) in the best performing quartile. In this survey, residents also reported increased usage and activity across all cultural sectors.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 72** Allerdale Council's cultural services deliver good value for money. The Council currently spends 18 per cent of its total revenue budget on cultural services, (typically, district councils spend around 20 per cent of their budget on cultural services), and delivers excellent customer satisfaction from this investment.
- 73** Compared to its nearest neighbours group, Allerdale's overall cultural spending is median. When broken down by service, the spend on tourism, recreation and sport and culture and heritage is slightly less than the median for the comparator group while the spend on parks and open spaces is slightly more than the median. This level of expenditure produces very good user satisfaction figures across all services. All satisfaction ratings are in the best quartile and all have improved over the past three years. Usage and attendance figures have increased in most areas, the exception being leisure centre usage which, for 2004/05, declined by two per cent compared to 2003/04. Overall, however, the latest residents' survey shows that residents of Allerdale report a significantly higher usage of cultural services compared with residents of other councils. The figures show these indicators to put Allerdale in the best performing quartile.
- 74** The mixed economy approach to Cultural services across Allerdale, with direct delivery of some services and partnership or enabling roles for others, enables the Council to develop alliances with a range of different agencies both voluntary and private. The Councils use of partnerships to deliver arts activities demonstrates the value for money benefits of the approach as it helps attract significant amounts of external funding and allows the employment of specialist expertise in key activities and shorter-term projects.
- 75** The services' approach to procurement is delivering cost savings and enabling increased investment in premises. Partnership arrangements for museums management and the revised partnership for leisure services are delivering significant cost reductions within the revenue budget. The environment partnership arrangements, within which the parks and open spaces service is based, are not focussed on cost savings but concentrate more on improving the quality of open spaces and improved customer service and satisfaction. This partnership has delivered an impressive increase in user satisfaction results (up 18 per cent from 2001 to 2004) and continues to focus on further improvements.
- 76** Overall, however, a coherent and systematic approach to VFM (Value for Money) is not in place across the service. Service managers do not routinely assess VFM and target setting remains weak across the service in particular around service outcomes.
- 77** Cultural services in Allerdale Borough Council are judged to be providing a fair, one-star level of service.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 78 Services within the cultural portfolio demonstrate a good track record of implementing change leading to improvements for customers and cost savings. Revised management arrangements have led to an increased variety of activities available to the public at a reduced annual cost to the Council.
- 79 Value for money, as measured by the definition of continued activity at a reduced cost while maintaining customer satisfaction, is improving. The main driver for this has been the revised procurement and joint management arrangements for leisure centres and museums. The Council does not, however, in general, link measures of expenditure and cost savings to qualitative measures of value or to achievement of specified outcomes for priority groups. For example, it does not set clear targets for the range and type of increased usage of leisure facilities which it hopes to achieve from its additional investment of £20,000 in the revised leisure card scheme.
- 80 Direction of travel of key performance indicators is good. User numbers are increasing for most services - the exception is leisure centres which recorded a fall of 2 per cent over the previous year, due to closures for refurbishment and remedying of previous inaccurate recording of activity, (unaudited figures for this year show an increase in attendance of over 10 per cent). Customer satisfaction is in the best quartile and increasing whilst costs to the Council are reducing. This latter aspect is enabling further investment in other priority areas such as upgrading of leisure facilities and the continuation of the youth fund which is supporting, amongst other things, expansion of cultural services provision.
- 81 The new arrangements for managing the leisure centres have resulted in improved facilities for users and an improved capacity for the Council to allocate funding to activities for priority groups. This is a result of cost savings accruing from the new contractual arrangements allowing additional investment in premises for upgrades and use of the savings in other key areas.
- 82 The partnership arrangements with trusts for managing the museums have produced cost savings and, as demonstrated at Keswick Museum and Art Gallery enabled an increased programme of activity with a more local focus to be developed leading to increased numbers of visits from official school parties.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 83 The Council is unable to routinely demonstrate evidence of its actions having led to improved outcomes for local people or targeted communities and the ability of cultural services to demonstrate achievement against its stated aims and targets is mixed. The planning processes within services do not always clearly identify the improvements and outcomes required from the services concerned and hence make effective performance management difficult.
- 84 Target setting within plans is imprecise with few quantifiable measures and only limited reference to outcomes for users in general or priority groups in particular. This approach results in monitoring and reporting arrangements that measure activity rather than outcomes. Up until October 2005, there was no regular, formal arrangement for reporting performance to members or scrutiny committees. The result of this limited approach is that the Council has not been able to effectively monitor the overall impact of service changes.
- 85 Co-ordination of service plans across cultural services is variable as is co-ordination of plans with organisations outside the Council. The service plans, in general, give outcomes in terms of activities and non-quantified increases in activity levels. There are few detailed aims and priorities within the plans. Target groups, and specific outcomes for them, are not generally identified. This approach is limiting the Council's ability to target its provision and to assess whether it is having a real impact in those areas which its high level strategy and vision state as priorities.
- 86 Some specific initiatives such as the arrangement with the theatre by the lake and the work of the CA15 project have very clear targets and outcomes defined leading to a focus on delivery of specific outcomes and improvements. Other plans and activities, such as the revised leisure card scheme, or the new skatepark, do not have clear outcomes defined, either in terms of specific target groups or in the wider sense of contributing to reduced youth nuisance or community safety targets.
- 87 The Council is good at developing and delivering solutions to ensure cost reductions and hence help meet efficiency targets. This is evidenced by the revised arrangements for leisure services, tourism and museums. However, due to the limitations of the service plans with regard to target setting and measurement of impact, this approach does not yet translate into a co-ordinated planning process to increase the impact on priority groups or to deliver improved value for money. Evidence of this is that specific targets have not been set for the use of the leisure card despite the Council investing an additional £20,000 in the initiative. Similarly, the CDRP contributed money to establish the skate park, but there are no targets or reporting arrangements to identify whether the facility is reducing youth nuisance and anti-social behaviour in the town.

- 88 Leadership of the services is sound. Decisions made by senior managers and councillors have led to a change in the contractor for delivery of leisure services, a revised approach to the management of the museums and a change in the strategic approach to managing tourism. These are producing some efficiency savings for the Council and resulting in improved service provision. Leadership with regard to community cohesion issues has been somewhat limited. Only recently has the Council ensured that managers and staff are fully aware of their responsibilities under section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Reduction Act, while the training in this for members is not due to be delivered until January 2006.
- 89 The Council has a good track record of effective financial management. It has long-term revenue and capital plans in place including a clear measure of how asset management and release of funds from assets will drive improvements to many cultural services premises. However, full accessibility for all premises within the next three years is not guaranteed by the Council's plans.
- 90 The services are open to challenge and comment from outside bodies. Reviews or inspections of tourism, leisure services and museums have led to significant changes in the models of service management and delivery resulting in cost savings and service improvements. The Council has also had its Arts function reviewed as part of an IDEA initiative leading to a focused action plan for improvement which the council is currently implementing.
- 91 User feedback is used in a limited way to shape future service provision. This is generally in terms of the use of comments and complaints forms, comments in visitor books or evaluation forms/user surveys. There is currently little activity with regard to obtaining the views of non-users. As a result, the influence of the community in setting service standards and/or influencing service provision are limited.
- 92 An excellent example of the Council working effectively with a partner organisation to ensure delivery of a series of activities with clearly specified outcomes to help support the core priorities of the Council can be found in the contract to support the Council's funding agreement with the theatre by the lake, this stipulates a number of short and long-term provisions and outcomes including:
- providing workshops, for local work in communities and incorporates targeting areas of multiple deprivation in Allerdale by offering training and participation programmes aimed at sustainable employment;
 - investment in core youth theatre costs: five workers delivering minimum of 210 regular weekly sessions in four locations to 150 young people;
 - two major production projects involving members from all youth theatre groups;
 - one-hundred new participants from areas of multiple deprivation in Allerdale and West Cumbria;
 - fifty people to obtain formal qualifications through training and participation programmes;

26 Allerdale Cultural Services | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- ten participants to move into higher education or arts related employment; and
- programmes of work in selected primary schools in conjunction with Creative Partnerships Cumbria.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 93 The Council is well-positioned to deliver further improvements in cultural services.
- 94 Key to this is the asset management plan for Derwent Valley which schedules the release of over £2.5 million in the period 2006 to 2009 to develop the Carnegie Theatre in Workington and Arts Centre and a replacement for the Civic Hall in Maryport. This plan also schedules the investment of over £10 million for the Derwent Valley scheme with significant development of cultural facilities. The release of this money is planned to support the factoring in of significant other investment funds from outside the Council.
- 95 The plans for Derwent Valley are well underway, the feasibility studies for the Carnegie have already started and preliminary discussions about the future development at Maryport have commenced. The Council is also ensuring it has a presence at the table during the current review of cultural assets across Cumbria being undertaken by Cumbria Vision, this will help ensure that the local plans are well embedded in the wider agenda for the county and the region. In this respect, the Council is well placed to ensure a significant and visible improvement to cultural and arts facilities in the Borough in the next three to five years.
- 96 The Council has a strong, comprehensive programme of staff and manager development which runs alongside a member development programme. All of these are geared to ensuring the right skills in the right place as the Council moves forward into the future. The services have access to appropriate finances and are producing working at an improved efficiency due to the revised management arrangements. The portfolio holders are clear about their roles and there are improved arrangements in place for regular reporting of performance data to councillors.
- 97 The Council has clear plans to develop a revised Corporate Improvement Plan (CIP). This is in the process of being produced and organisational structures and service priorities are due to be reviewed to fit alongside this new CIP. In addition, performance management arrangements are due to be reviewed before April 2006. These factors help ensure a climate where delivery of continued improvement is more likely.
- 98 Financial planning is strong as is training and development and succession planning. (The Council has recently undertaken an analysis of its workforce and considered succession planning and staff retirement/profile issues). It has a long-term plan for capital, revenue and asset management including the realisation of the monies from the Derwent Valley development. The services themselves have conducted a review of assets and are in the process of upgrading premises to provide improved customer service and access.

- 99 Recent savings from the leisure services management arrangements have resulted in £160,000 per year being available for investment in improved premises and facilities. This picture of continued additional resources to drive improvement demonstrates a high potential for further improvement in the years to come.
- 100 The Council, through its approach to partnership working, has improved service provision noticeably across the museums. Keswick museum is attracting inward investment from the Learning and Skills Council to develop a learning centre in the basement. This will improve the facilities and enable the museum to further support group visits and schools' work.
- 101 Plans for the next year include improved customer relationship management systems for leisure services and the development of a customer services hub for the Council. Plans are also in place to utilise an Information Technology based performance management system. This linked to the intention for service plans to contain clearer measures of impact and outcomes will assist the Council to utilise a clearer and more precise monitoring and evaluation framework. When these changes are implemented, then the Council will be in a much stronger position to manage performance and drive improvement.
- 102 The Council has a good track record of attracting inward investment and leveraging in extra resources to support its own budgets. The current regeneration of Workington town centre demonstrates the ambition and capability of the Council, as do the plans for Derwent Valley, the Carnegie and Maryport. The track record of the Arts service demonstrates a consistent pattern of factoring in over £15 for each £1 committed from the Council.
- 103 The services attempt to address sustainability of initiatives and, in general are reasonably successful at this aspect of delivery. Projects such as CA15 ensure sustainability of activities through development of volunteers and increased community capacity, but in other cases, such as the midnight basketball activities, the initiatives run for a short-term period only.
- 104 The prospects for improvement for cultural services in Allerdale Borough Council are judged to be promising.