

Service Inspection Report

February 2006

Customer Access

Mendip District Council

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For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 020 7828 1212 Fax: 020 7976 6187 Textphone (minicom): 020 7630 0421

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

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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.

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

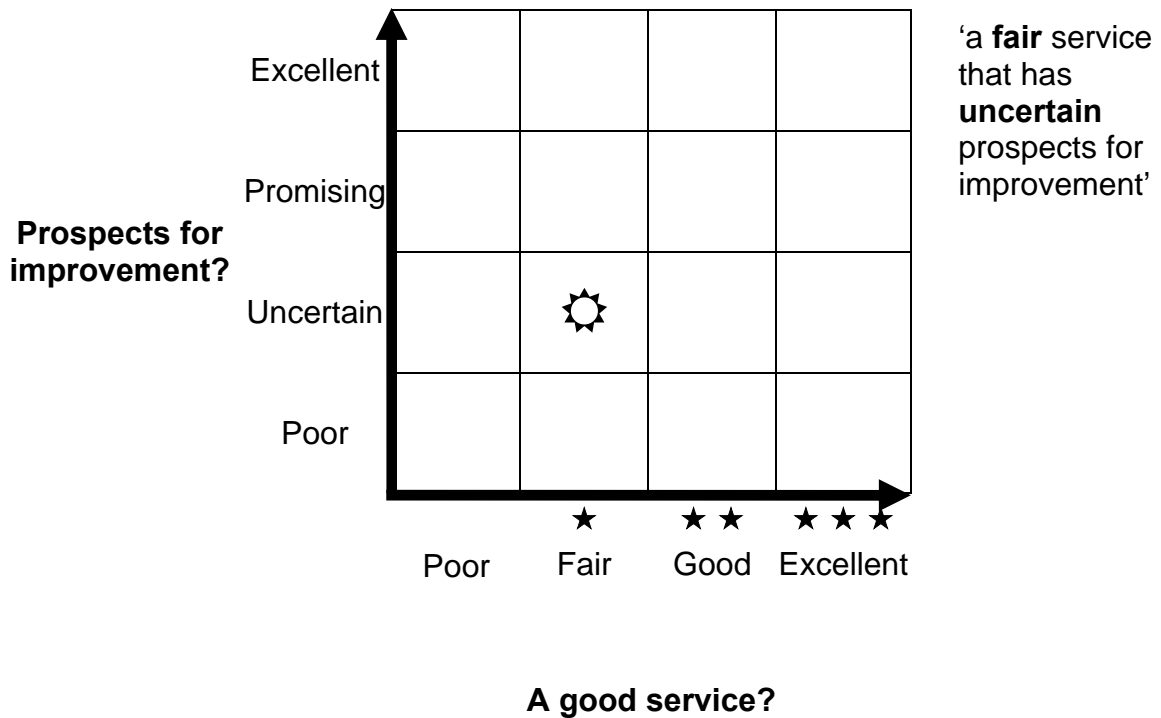
Summary

- 1 Mendip District Council provides **fair** customer access that has **uncertain** prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council does not have a strategic approach or long-term vision for improving customer access. Over the past two years, the new administration has been focused on improving the strategic direction and financial capacity of the organisation. As a result, it has only recently focused its attention and resources at cross-cutting issues including customer access. No customer access strategy is in place and, although plans exist to improve many areas of customer access, it is not clear how these will be co-ordinated, prioritised or resourced. Although customer access has improved this not been strategically planned or implemented. This has resulted in variable customer access.
- 3 Consultation and communication with users and non users of council services is not well co-ordinated and the Council is not adequately targeting its consultation. It has not developed a strategic approach to equality and diversity. The Council, therefore, cannot assess whether it is providing access to its services that matches the needs of the whole community. Understanding of what the Council needs to do to improve physical access to its buildings or the impact of this on the community is incomplete.
- 4 Performance and project management, at a strategic level, are underdeveloped and therefore do not provide an adequate framework for the Council to monitor its performance in providing accessible services.
- 5 However, the Council provides a wide-range of ways for customers to access its services. These include a customer contact centre with a single phone number Improvements to reception and council chamber facilities at the Council's main offices in Shepton Mallet and the provision of local customer information points (CIPS) in the districts four main towns and one city which assist in providing easier contact. Limited outreach and home visits are provided in the districts more rural areas. The Council works well in partnership to provide increased capacity to deliver Council and shared objectives. The Council learns from others and while there is no strategic approach at a service level there is a commitment from staff to provide high quality accessible services which have resulted in high levels of customer satisfaction.
- 6 Improved electronic access allows customers to communicate more conveniently with the Council. The Council's website provides high levels of easily accessible information and there are plans for further improvement. Positive progress is being made towards national e-government targets and the new business support contract provides the potential to improve customer access.

Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed Mendip District Council as providing a **'fair'**, one-star service that has **uncertain** prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

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.

- 8 The service is a fair, one-star service because of:
- poor co-ordination of consultation and communication with users and non-users of council services;
 - limited use of service standards;
 - lack of consistency in addressing diversity issues;
 - no overview of the level of physical access to its buildings to ensure access to all users;
 - lack of engagement with the community to ascertain if access meets customer expectations and needs;
 - variable success of telephone contact, while new contact centre is established, in improving customer access; and
 - no corporate concessionary pricing policy to help increase access for vulnerable and deprived groups within community.
- 9 Strengths include:
- customers can contact the Council using a range of different access points including a contact centre, local customer information points and via the website;
 - the Council has introduced a single number contact centre with high levels of first time call resolution and satisfaction from users of this centre;
 - overall satisfaction with the council is high together with good satisfaction levels in some service areas;
 - website provides good access to information on Council services; and
 - there is strong partnership working which is delivering a seamless range of services to the community.
- 10 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because of:
- a lack of no long-term vision or strategy to improve customer access;
 - the needs of customers are not consistently used to drive the way the Council plans and delivers its services;
 - a lack of clarity of resources required to implement improvements;
 - no prioritisation or co-ordination of identified improvements to customer access; and
 - performance management, at a strategic level, is not used to drive improvement.

11 Strengths include:

- a commitment to improving customer access;
- plans for a large number of projects to improve customer access;
- increased capacity of the Council to carry out and co-ordinate strategic consultation;
- improved financial capacity and the Council is able to demonstrate a robust approach to delivering value for money; and
- the Council demonstrates a willingness to learn from others to improve service delivery.

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 costs² 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 a clear vision for future customer access by:

- *assessing the expectations and needs of the whole community; and*
- *develop a strategic approach to customer access, customer care and diversity.*

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

- clear focus on improving customer access by which progress can be measured;
- a clear understanding of the expectations and needs of the whole community;
- ensuring that customer access matches needs and expectations;
- the council is able to adapt and respond to demographic, cultural and technological changes;
- focus resources in improving customer access; and
- and ensure a more consistent approach to service provision.

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

² 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.

Recommendation

R2 Improve the effectiveness of current service provision regarding customer access by:

- *reviewing the impact of the Council's access points including customer contact centre, CIPs, website, area boards and council publications;*
- *engaging with existing users and potential users to ascertain their views on service provision;*
- *ensuring that service provision and access opportunities take appropriate account of information on customer satisfaction and take up by BME groups and other equalities data; and*
- *and implementing improvements as a result of the reviews.*

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

- service provision is more targeted to meet the needs of all citizens;
- council services and information are more accessible to the community;
- satisfaction with the council and its services if further increased; and
- and the Council achieves value for money through improvements in accessible services.

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

Recommendation

R3 Improve the Council's ability to monitor progress in delivering customer access improvements by:

- *developing performance indicators that enable the Council to monitor its impact in improving customer access; and*
- *and systematically collecting customer feedback on the user experience.*

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

- the Council will be able to monitor progress against agreed objectives for customer access;
- the Council will be able to demonstrate progress against objectives; and
- and resources will be able to moved to support and target improvements in customer access.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 Mendip district is located in the north-eastern part of the county of Somerset. Although mainly rural, it also contains the four towns of Frome, Glastonbury, Shepton Mallet and Street, as well as the city of Wells.
- 14 The district covers 456 square kilometres and has a population of 103,869 (2001 census) living in 43,000 households. The population of Somerset has grown by 7.1 per cent between 1991 and 2001 compared to a national average of 3.1 per cent and a south west regional growth of 5.3 per cent. The majority of the population describe themselves as white British, with black and minority ethnic groups representing 3.6 per cent of the population. There are slightly higher levels of older and younger people than the national average.
- 15 Due to the rural nature of the district, its population is dispersed. The largest town, Frome, has a population of 24,517, Street has around 11,000, Wells has 10,400 and Glastonbury and Shepton Mallet have populations under 9,000 people. The remaining population of around 39,000 live in the many villages covered by 52 parishes.
- 16 The county of Somerset has a low level of unemployment, with Mendip having a rate of 1.5 per cent, which was 0.1 per cent lower than the previous year (NOMIS 2004). This compares to 1.4 per cent in Somerset but 1.7 per cent in the south west and 2.6 per cent nationally (NOMIS January 2004). Of those that are unemployed, Mendip has a relatively high level of long-term unemployed at 14 per cent (NOMIS January 2004) compared to 11 per cent for Somerset and the south west region. Nationally, this figure is 15 per cent.
- 17 In common with many other areas, the affordability of housing is an issue within the district and wider region. The average house in the county now costs 7.1 times the average wage - compared to 7.6 in the south west and 6.5 nationally. The rural nature of the district impacts on transportation with a high dependence on car usage and poor public transport in some rural communities.

The Council

- 18 The Council has been Conservative controlled since 2003 with 28 out of 46 councillors. There are currently 13 Liberal Democrat councillors and 5 Independent councillors. In early 2004, the Council underwent a period of considerable change with the election of 26 new councillors, a new leader, and the appointment of a new chief executive. At the same time, the Council undertook wide consultation and used this to develop three corporate priorities which are: better resource management, greater prosperity and safer cleaner streets.

- 19 An organisational restructure took place in 2004 to focus the Council's services on delivering these priorities. This resulted in the creation of three business units; community and regeneration; corporate finance and resources; and planning and environment.
- 20 The Council employs 215 fulltime equivalent staff. The corporate management team includes the Chief Executive and three business unit managers. The Council's overall revenue budget for 2005/06 is £15.037 million with a capital programme of £3.1 million. The Council has improved its financial position and, for the first time in four years, has increased spending on most services. Over 60 per cent of the Council's activity is contracted out to the private sector including managing the Council's leisure facilities and refuse collection. The Council has recently negotiated a new contract for an external contractor to supply the majority of support services such as information systems. This 'business support' contract will deliver enhanced services at a lower cost for the Council.
- 21 In May 2004, the Council was rated as 'weak' in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). The assessment found that the Council was doing well in housing and benefits services and improving its financial management. However, the assessment found weaknesses in street cleaning and activities for young people. Most significantly the assessment found that the Council was not making the best use of its limited capacity to focus on delivering community priorities. Since then the Council has largely focused on improving its approach to prioritisation, improving performance management and developing its capacity. It has placed an emphasis in improving its financial capacity, ensuring there is a robust budget prioritisation process and increasing staffing capacity in priority areas. However, due to this focus, which was essential in ensuring the Council could improve corporate capacity and service delivery, the council is only now only starting to turn its attention to ensuring a more strategic approach to cross-cutting areas including diversity and customer care.

Customer access – context

- 22 All councils have a duty to provide services to customers, stakeholders, partners and clients - and these services should be easy to access and supported by technology where this is appropriate to meeting customer's needs. In assuring good access to services, councils should be using customer feedback and complaints to improve service quality and customer access. Councils should also be using partnership working with other councils, organisations and businesses to continually improve customer access.
- 23 Council services should be focused on the needs of users, ensure equality of access, take proper account of equality and the diversity of all service users while ensuring value for money. Customer access is a cross-cutting theme applicable to all council services.

- 24 In April 2004, the Council set up a contact centre, Mendip Customer Services (MCS) for people to contact the council via the phone. Its offices in Shepton Mallet and four customer information points (CIPs) are the main means for people to contact the Council in person. These offices provide information on district and county council services. Electronic contact is via the Council's website.
- 25 Mendip District Council completed a self-assessment of its customer access in September 2005 to help inform and guide this inspection.

How good is the service?

How easy is it to access services?

- 26** Services are not consistently easy to access. The Council is not consistently focused on the needs of the customer but there are individual examples of good customer service within some areas of the Council.
- 27** The extent to which the Council systematically focuses on the needs of the customer is limited. Although the Council seeks customer views on current services there is no evidence that it asks the public to determine how and when new services are delivered. For example, the Council has determined the opening hours of the CIPs and customer contact centre without assessing the needs of potential customers or seeking their views on what they would like from the services. The circumstance under which home visits or outreach work are available is unclear. Similarly the area boards, set up by the Council as a means of conducting business more locally, vary in effectiveness. These boards provide access to the Council's committee process to the public in their local areas but are generally poorly attended. The Council recognise this weakness and are working with the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) to improve their effectiveness. As a result, customer access to services is inconsistent.
- 28** The extent to which people are satisfied with phone contact with the Council is mixed. Although the Council has a call centre, a significant proportion of callers (an average of 46 per cent of total callers to the Council between December 2004 and August 2005 against a target of 70 per cent) did not ring the call centre phone number. Instead, they contacted the Council switchboard which transfers calls or takes messages. The experiences of the people in the focus group for this inspection indicated that this means of contact provided a low level of customer care, with reports of calls not being returned and confusion as to who they needed to speak to. The Council has chosen not to publicise the new contact centre number specifically, instead relying on updated letterheads, the website and new publications to highlight the new way of contacting the Council whilst the centre is developed. As a result, customers receive differing levels of service according to whether they contact Mendip Customer Services or phone the switchboard direct.
- 29** Issues in relation to equalities and diversity are not consistently addressed in the planning and activities of the Council. Only 60 per cent of staff and councillors have received training in diversity. The Council is at Level 2 (out of a possible 5) of the Equalities Standard and also subscribes to a phone language translation service. Although services are encouraged to consider diversity issues in developing business plans, there is little evidence of changes to service delivery as a result of such consideration. The Council does not effectively collect and use data from BME or other hard to reach groups to assist it understand the experiences, take up and satisfaction of these groups.

- 30 The process by which services can access translation services or develop leaflets in different formats, for example in Braille, are not well understood by staff. The Council has also not developed a strategic approach to addressing rural access to ensure inequality of access to services from all parts of the community. In relation to physical access to buildings, the Council has a low level (9 per cent) of compliance with the strict requirements of Building Regulations relating to the Disability Discrimination Act. However, there is a confused picture as to whether the Council has an overall view of whether non-compliance in its buildings prevents or restricts access, and if so, how it has used this information to determine a programme of works to address such problems. The focus for this area is largely placed on one officer rather than being viewed as being the responsibility of all service managers and staff within the organisation. This means that the Council does not ensure or know if services are equally accessible to all parts of the community.
- 31 Limited service standards are in place to inform customers as to the level of service they can expect from the Council. The Council has set corporate standards in relation to answering telephone calls and correspondence, but has not published standards in relation to individual services. However, the Council has recognised this and plans to address this in the next year. As a result, currently residents and partners are not aware of the standards of service they can expect to receive.
- 32 The Council has not assessed how effective its customer information points (CIPs) are in meeting customer needs. The CIPs were set up some years ago and provide a local presence for the Council in the four towns and city. However, the opening hours have been determined according to resources available, rather than identifying the needs of customers and then determining the most effective means of meeting them. In addition, the information collected from these points in relation to the enquiries made, is not analysed to provide information which could drive improvements. There is also no information on what users feel about the services offered. As a result, the Council is not ensuring that these centres meet local need.
- 33 No concessionary pricing system is in place to promote equality of access. Some concessionary schemes operate, for example in the leisure centres, but the Council has not ensured that this approach is consistent across all services. The Council recognises that this is a weakness within its own self-assessment. As a consequence, it cannot be sure that its pricing strategy maximises customer access for all parts of the district including vulnerable, deprived and geographically remote communities.
- 34 However, satisfaction levels with the Council and its services are high and compare well with the best performing councils in the country. Residents report a high level of satisfaction with many Council services including waste collection and recycling. Where satisfaction levels are low, the Council has tried to address poor performance, for example in relation to dealing with complaints. This demonstrates that, despite the lack of a consistent customer focus, many areas of service are addressing customer needs.

- 35 The Council has increased the range of ways that people can contact its services. It now provides a minicom service to allow people with hearing impairment to communicate by text phone, a customer contact centre, customer information points in the four major towns and the city of Wells and some services undertake home visits and outreach work for some customers. It also provides a website with information on individual services. In this way, the Council seeks to ensure that it is easy for residents and visitors to get the services or information they require.
- 36 Customers have good access to face to face contact with council staff. The Council has calculated that almost 90 per cent of the community are within five miles of a customer information point, with the furthest distance for any member of the community being 8.26 miles. The main Council office provides private interview rooms, children's play area, and is well signposted. However, customer information points vary in quality, from a modern, physically accessible facility in Glastonbury to a cramped space in community facilities in Street. The Council is, therefore, providing local access but the physical quality of this access is variable.
- 37 Customers that use the customer contact centre receive a high quality service. The contact centre was launched in April 2004 and uses staff who have received specialist customer care training to enhance their skills in this area. In its first year the centre dealt with around 90,000 calls and reduced the level of lost calls from around 9 per cent to 4 per cent. This centre provides information on county council services in addition to those provided by the district council. Of the calls that the centre receives, it resolves a high proportion during the first phone contact. As outlined above, many callers do not use the contact centre; however, of the calls received, around 80 per cent on average are resolved in the first call. Consultation carried out in partnership with other councils and that researched customer needs, indicated that over 70 per cent of customers preferred to contact the Council by phone and so the Council is meeting customer needs through this service.
- 38 In some areas, the Council is targeting areas of the community with higher deprivation levels. For example, the leisure centre contractors have incentives written into their contract which encourage an increased uptake of leisure membership in deprived wards. The Council also provides a resource centre providing sports, arts and recreation equipment which is allocated according to the needs of communities in rural areas.
- 39 Despite the lack of a consistent approach, there is evidence that the Council is effectively addressing access and diversity through some areas of service delivery. For example, cultural services target rural and deprived areas and ensure that these communities can access services effectively. In addition, the Council operates a Shopmobility scheme in the towns and city which increases access for people with mobility problems. The work carried out in relation to leisure has increased levels of participation amongst both people with disabilities and those from black and minority ethnic communities.

- 40 The Council has made some improvements in relation to current physical access. Works have been carried out to improve access to the Council's main offices including improved signage and drop kerbs to improve disabled access. The council chamber has been altered for example to provide automatic doors and access to toilets for people with disabilities. There is also money identified in the capital programme to continue to increase access.

Is the Council using e-government to support access to services?

- 41 The Council is using e-government effectively to support better customer access. The Council has made significant financial investment and is progressing well in achieving its e-government targets. The successful negotiation of the business support contract has delayed completing some initiatives and has contributed to the current information technology (IT) strategy being out-of-date. However, the overall benefits of this contract both in terms of IT and wider issues are already starting to be felt and provide clear potential for significant improvement.
- 42 The Council has invested heavily in technology to support increasing access. In the past three years, the Council has invested £778,423 of capital expenditure. In addition the business support contract will bring an additional £614,580 in expenditure to improve its IT infrastructure. The Council has also introduced a number of corporate systems being introduced including geographical information system (GIS), customer relationship management system (Northgate) and improvements to the Council's website.
- 43 The business support contract has delivered further improvements in electronic access. This newly negotiated contract with a private sector provider is delivering an enhanced service for less money and includes various aspects which relate to electronically enabled access. For example, laptops are being provided for councillors and the new systems provided will allow e-procurement to be delivered. In addition, the Council has built into the contract 'innovation days' where the contractor will provide information on innovative ways to use technology and new products to deliver services. In this way the Council is ensuring it has current and relevant technology to support service delivery.
- 44 The Council has successfully implemented customer relationship management (CRM) in many of its services. This is enabling the Council to provide a more comprehensive and seamless service to customers. Currently, around 70 per cent of services have this means of sharing customer information within the Council, and there are clear plans to roll this out to the remaining areas. However, this has been a fairly recent development and the Council has yet to fully assess the benefits of potential increased back office capacity or better customer response.
- 45 Partnership working on e-government is delivering improvement. By working in partnership, the Council has levered in additional funding as well as providing a means of sharing information and knowledge. The most significant area delivered that is linked to this partnership is the contact centre, which is supported by the sharing of information about county and district council services.

- 46 Technological developments have also enhanced the way customers can access information and services remotely. GIS systems – a form of electronic mapping which allows the plotting of facilities and features on maps of local areas – are available for the public to understand the implications of planning applications. The Council trialled the use of kiosks - an electronic kiosk located in towns and villages through which information on the Council can be gained remotely – but found that there was not a demand for this service. It has also trialled the use of digital television to provide information to the public but again demand for this service has not been high and the trial has been terminated. It has also provided a community portal on its website to allow community groups to link their information to the council website, thereby making it more visible. The Council also increases access through the CIPs which have computer access to many of the Council's systems and information. By constantly reviewing the technological options available, the Council is seeking to ensure that all parts of the community have the means to find the information they require and reduce social exclusion.
- 47 There is comprehensive and up-to-date information on the website. Various forms for requesting Council services can be downloaded or completed on line. The Society of IT Managers (SOCITM) highlighted the Council's website and one of 28 nationally for good practice for the website search facility and was classified as 'very good' for how current information was on the site. However, the website does not meet 'AA' and 'AAA' standards which indicate better accessibility for visually impaired users, is not yet fully transactional and does not allow e-payments, for example, for council tax. Improvements to the website are planned to ensure a fully accessible site.
- 48 Investment in training for staff and councillors is increasing knowledge of technology. The Council has provided European Computer Driving Licence Training (ECDL) for some staff and, as a result of the success of this initiative is now starting the second course of training leading to the qualification. The new business support contract also provides for training councillors in the use of laptops and basic IT skills. This is improving the level of understanding of technology within the Council.
- 49 However, there is no up-to-date information technology (IT) strategy to focus future investment and plans. The IT strategy is out-of-date and does not reflect the business support contract. It also does not provide a strategic direction for the Council on technology. However, as outlined later in the report, the Council is aware of this and plans to address it.
- 50 The Council's investment in information technology (IT) is not based on an analysis of community need. Whilst the investment in the call centre represents a direct response to customer aspirations, other areas of investment are less clearly planned to meet the identified needs of the public. As outlined elsewhere in the report, the Council has not traditionally sought the views of the public formally. However, it is now allocating further resources to consultation to identify needs and this will provide a firmer basis for developing future access to services.

- 51 There have been some delays in delivering against government targets. These delays are largely due to the Council's role in negotiating the new business support contract which in turn will deliver significant benefits to the Council and also support the delivery of the 'priority outcomes' that the government expect. However, at the moment, the Council has not met its targets, for example in relation to e-payments and e-procurement.
- 52 Currently project management of IT customer access projects is ineffective. The CIPs have experienced significant problems with the IT which supports the information systems on which they rely. These problems appear to stem from a lack of clarity on what was expected of the systems originally. In addition, there are a large number of IT projects in existence currently which are not being strategically managed. The Council is aware of these issues and is now setting up a revised approach to project management to ensure it can focus resources and effectively deliver project in these areas.

How is the Council using customers' feedback and complaints to improve service quality?

- 53 The Council does not systematically use customer feedback and complaints to improve the quality of the services they deliver.
- 54 The Council is not aware of the access needs of the whole community. Over the past few years, it has not assessed the needs and views of all parts of the community. There has been an inconsistent approach to consultation, and this has not been co-ordinated corporately by the Council. As a result, the consultation exercises carried out have been service based. The Council has a large amount of information on what the public want, collected through formal consultations, individual project work and community engagement. However, knowledge of the results of this work is often restricted to the service or function which has carried out the consultation. The Council has not consulted with diverse and hard to reach groups and there has been a lack of engagement with communities in establishing local needs for services. As a consequence, the Council cannot be sure it has knows the needs of its community.
- 55 Information on complaints from the public is not systematically collated and used to drive improvements to services. While the Council has the capacity to log all complaints made electronically, it does not identify trends and use these to determine where improvements need to be made. For example, the Council does not use this information to identify the need for additional information on the website or the need for policy decisions. As a result, opportunities to use this information to improve service delivery and performance are being missed.
- 56 The approach to sharing learning from complaints and customer enquiries is weak. Although individual services act on complaints received and a system for logging service failures is in use, they do not share any generic learning from such activities with other parts of the Council. Sharing such information would strengthen service delivery. This restricts the amount to which the Council can use this information effectively to deliver improvement.

- 57 The amount of information that the Council has on people who do not use their services is limited. While the leisure contractor collects information, outside of this service there is no such analysis. This restricts the ability of the Council to assess whether it is effectively delivering services to those it targets.
- 58 The extent to which the Council uses external views and challenge to shape service improvement is limited. The role of scrutiny is underdeveloped and, as a result, the extent to which it has supported a customer focus is limited. Despite additional training for councillors the role of scrutiny remains weak and, as a result, councillors are not driving and championing improvements in customer access. In addition, the Council does not check that the corrective action they take in response to complaints successfully addresses the problems experienced. As an example, the Council has reacted to the poor levels of satisfaction in relation to complaints handling but, having taken such action, has not then checked with the public whether the new system is more effective. As a result, it can not be assured that satisfaction levels will rise or that the root cause of the original dissatisfaction has been addressed.
- 59 However, the Council is responsive to feedback on most individual services. Within services, the Council actively seeks information on customer experience and uses this to improve future service delivery. For example, the Council seeks the views of participants in arts development programmes and through leisure centres. It also used feedback from young people to develop skateparks across the district and general feedback to inform the street cleansing contract. It has also worked to address problems with relationships with parish councils and this has improved. This helps the Council to anticipate future issues and plan services more effectively.
- 60 The Council receives a low level of complaints indicating the low level of dissatisfaction with services. During 2004/05, only 10 complaints were referred to the Council's complaints panel and 18 were referred to the Local Government Ombudsman. No instances of maladministration were found. The Council has invested in a computer-based system for managing complaints and this is being implemented across the Council. When complaints are made the council has improved the way these are dealt with, at a service level, to the satisfaction of the complainant both in terms of resolution and the speed. An example is in the collection of council tax where a fair and flexible approach it taken responding to the complaints of users of the service. As a result the Council is improving satisfaction with the way complaints are handled.

How is the Council improving customer access through partnership working?

- 61 The Council works effectively in partnership at both an operational and strategic level, and this is increasing opportunities for customers to access services. However, it has not evaluated the use made of partnerships and whether continued membership is appropriate.

- 62 The Mendip Strategic Partnership (MSP) is providing an effective mechanism for the Council to plan to meet the future needs of the community. The newly agreed community strategy provides a clear long-term direction for the partnership, and the Council is currently considering how it can contribute towards delivering community objectives. Partners view the Council as a strong partner who have provided invaluable support and assistance in setting up the partnership. As the community strategy has only just been formally agreed, it has yet to have a tangible impact on the community. However, the strength of relationships between partners will help to support joint delivery and the promotion of greater access to services.
- 63 Partnership working is used by the Council to increase the range of opportunities and services available to the public. At both a strategic and operational level the Council works effectively in partnership with other organisations. For example, it works with local organisations to provide a range of leisure, health promotion and arts opportunities. It also has strong partnerships in relation to crime and disorder, e-government, recycling and waste. Working in a multi-agency environment is helping agencies and the Council prepare for local area action plans (LAAs). These partnerships have increased the services or facilities available locally, therefore promoting access.
- 64 Partnership activity extends beyond normal service boundaries. For example, the Council has a well-established record of partnership working with the county council's social services department on tackling health inequalities. This has delivered a number of projects including work to increase physical activity amongst adults with learning disabilities.
- 65 The Council uses partnerships effectively to increase its capacity. The Council has shared skills and knowledge with other partners, for example the e-government partnership, made up of the county council and other district councils, has a range of initiatives being trialled by different partners, who share what they learn with the partnership. It also uses partnership to jointly fund posts, for example a community safety officer in partnership with South Somerset District Council providing access to community safety advice and support for the community. The Council has also worked in partnership with the other four Somerset district councils and the county council on the implementation of the contact centre sharing expertise and project development costs.
- 66 Funding is provided by the Council to ensure that voluntary agencies are active and increase access in the district. Despite the pressure on its budget, the Council continues to fund a large number of voluntary sector organisations including the Race Equality Council, Citizens Advice Bureau and Age Concern. These organisations provide services that complement those provided by the Council, for example the provision of debt advice to those in receipt of benefits. By providing such funding, the Council seeks to allow the community to continue to access valuable services.

- 67 However, the Council is not actively managing its partnerships. It has not formally reviewed its partnership activities to ensure they deliver corporate priorities. It has not evaluated all partnership activity to ensure that it meets corporate priorities and provides the services or facilities that the local community need. The Council is aware of this, and has planned to review partnership activity through its scrutiny function together with a wider review. However, the Council cannot be sure it is currently making best use of partnerships to increase capacity and meet community need.

Summary

- 68 Mendip District Council provides **fair** customer access. The Council is not consistently focused on customer needs and does not successfully engage with all sectors of the community. It does not strategically drive issues around equality and diversity which has resulted in an inconsistent approach to customer access and to ensuring all sectors of the community have access to its services. The Council has not strategically reviewed its partnership activity to ensure it is making best use of capacity to meet community needs. However, there are good examples of where the Council is providing effective customer access in some service areas and customer satisfaction with the Council's services is high. The Council has introduced a customer service centre and is also using e-government to support better customer access through investment in a new business support contract and improvements to its internal systems and the website. Operational partnership working is effective and is improving shared access to Council and partners services.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

Ownership of problems and willingness to change

- 69 The Council demonstrates some ownership and commitment to improving individual services but does not take a co-ordinated or strategic approach to improving customer access across all services.
- 70 There is no long-term vision or direction for customer access. The Council is considering developing a customer access strategy but this is at a very early stage. It is currently developing a number of different strategies, such as communications and consultation and an updated IT strategy, but these are being developed separately and without a clear strategic framework which links the access implications. There is no consistent view of what would constitute customer access in its widest sense or whether a strategy is needed, whether a framework is what is required or whether the communications review will deliver a direction for the service. The Council has prioritised the improvement of internal processes identified in the original CPA. This focus has meant that there has been little capacity available to consider a strategic approach to customer access.
- 71 Although the Council has prioritised improving customer experience in its corporate plan, the impact on service activity of this is unclear. It is also unclear how intentions to improve customer access contained within the community strategy will be supported by the Council. Under the priority of 'better resource management' the theme of 'customers' is set out with actions relating to developing a one-stop shop, effective and responsive consultation, an increase in customer satisfaction and delivery of national priority outcomes for e-government. However, business plans do not systematically set out how they will contribute towards meeting this theme. It is therefore unclear what impact the 'customers' theme is having.
- 72 The Council has an inconsistent approach to identifying and meeting customer needs. While it has set up various mechanisms to improve customer service, it has not consulted with its customers to ensure that this is what they would like or need. For example, it has not consulted customers on whether the CIPs are delivering the right services or are open at the right times. In terms of meeting need, the Council focused solely on those customers who used MCS and did not address the need to ensure that everyone could access that service. As a result, there is no strategic approach to customer care within the Council which impacts on the variable experience the community has in accessing council services.
- 73 There is no effective strategic approach to improving equalities and diversity. Although the Council has developed an equalities strategy, it does not give a clear direction or focus on how equality and diversity will be taken into account through service planning or delivery. In addition, although the Council plans to meet level 3 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government, there is no clear project plan which outlines how this will be achieved.

- 74 As outlined above, the responsibility for equalities issues has been focused too narrowly and, as a result, business plans and appraisals do not reflect these issues and there is an inconsistent approach to ensuring equal access for all.
- 75 The Council clearly demonstrates a commitment to improving issues relating to access. It has plans to review a large number of areas of weakness including: communications; IT projects; complaints; consultation; accommodation; customer information points and service standards. During this inspection, the Council has demonstrated a high level of awareness of the weaknesses in its approach to customer focus and is at varying stages of developing full review projects, outlining briefs to consultants or beginning the review. This will assist in keeping the Councils focus on customer access issues.
- 76 There are many examples which demonstrate the Council's willingness to learn from the experience of others. It encourages service managers to seek out examples of good practice and visit other organisations to see if their experience would bring benefits to the local area. For example, the Council has looked at good practice on recycling and it has sought to learn from the peer mentoring scheme for councillors to develop a greater understanding of roles and responsibilities. These are just two examples of many quoted, where the lessons learnt are improving the way the Council conducts its business and is improving service delivery by learning from others.
- 77 There is now a more effective approach to responding to external challenge. The Council has developed and started to implement an improvement plan linked to the weaknesses highlighted in the comprehensive performance assessment. In this way the Council uses opportunities to learn and improve performance.
- 78 The Council takes and sticks to difficult decisions. For example, the Council has made a difficult decision to close a local community theatre, the Amulet, in the face of local opposition. Although this was an unpopular choice, it was felt to be necessary due to the health and safety implications of keeping the venue open. Another difficult decision was to pursue the business support contract. Despite the consequent delay in delivering other initiatives, the Council decided that the medium to long-term benefits to the Council outweighed these issues.

Proven capacity

- 79 The Council can demonstrate that it has capacity in terms of skills and knowledge to deliver its services. However, it has not established firm plans for moving forward regarding customer access and therefore it is not possible to determine if the Council can achieve what it wishes to do.
- 80 Consultation has been prioritised with additional funding allocated to it. The 2005/06 budget includes £31,000 as an additional amount to increase the capacity of the Council to carry out consultation and policy development. This represents a change in emphasis for the Council, which previously had not felt there was a demonstrable need to collect market information. The Council plans to use these resources to strengthen co-ordination of existing consultation, as well as introduce more corporate consultation which can support business planning.

- 81 In response to previous criticism, the Council has worked hard to improve relationships with parish and town councils. This was highlighted as a weakness in feedback from the previous CPA and, as a result, the Council has started formalising relationships. Some partners report that the Council has become much more open to listening to them and involving them in the early stages of initiatives. However, there is still some way to go in relation to some areas. By working to address this weaker area, the Council is building a stronger foundation for partnership working.
- 82 The Council has strengthened corporate management arrangements. Business planning arrangements have improved, with a closer link developed between service activities and budget and clearer lines of responsibility for actions. There is a proactive approach to contract management and the Council's negotiation of both the business support and cleaning contracts demonstrate a sound approach to procurement. Contracts contain clear performance indicators and these are reviewed on a monthly basis. In addition, it has recognised and acted on the need to link the policy and performance management functions. The stronger corporate arrangements will support service improvement.
- 83 Training and development is effective for both staff and councillors. The Council has maintained its Investors in People status, and uses the appraisal process to identify training needs for staff. The training and development provided is viewed as useful by staff and relevant to the work they carry out. Councillors are supported through an ongoing training programme, in addition to the induction programme. This ensures that staff and councillors are trained and supported in delivering their roles within the Council.
- 84 The Council has successfully attracted external funding to support access. For example, in common with other councils it has received £350,000 from government to address e-government. It has also attracted capacity building monies to support an increase in skills and resources for the Council at a corporate level. These, and other examples, increase the Council's ability to respond to new initiatives.
- 85 There has been good performance in levels of improvement in customer satisfaction. While overall satisfaction with the Council has improved there has been a strong improvement at service level. Areas including recycling facilities, refuse collection, street cleaning, leisure facilities and satisfaction with parks and open spaces are improving.
- 86 The resources needed to deliver all of the Council's intentions have not been identified. The plans outlined above are at various stages – some are about to be implemented, but some are plans to develop comprehensive plans which outline what is needed and how it will be delivered. Many of the intended projects potentially have areas of overlap and the absence of developed plans makes it unclear whether the Council is going to manage the projects in such a way as to deliver an effective outcome. The Council has demonstrated that it has the capacity to deliver improvement in many areas, but without a full set of plans, it is impossible to say whether the intentions are realistic and can be resourced.

The capacity and systems to deliver performance improvement

- 87 The lack of clear aims and objectives for customer access weakens the effectiveness of the performance management framework.
- 88 Performance management is an area of weakness for the Council. It lacks a clear strategic direction for customer focus within its services to highlight areas of priority and those areas that are considered less important. The corporate priorities are very broad and although there is a 'customer' theme, it is not clear what impact this has had on service delivery. The plans for a customer access strategy are at a very early stage and so there is a lack of a clear direction for customer access. As a result, the performance management arrangements in relation to access lack a clear focus.
- 89 The Council does not use local indicators effectively to monitor the quality of customer access. There are few indicators in use which relate to customer access. Although the Council does monitor the time taken to answer telephone calls and respond to correspondence, there are few service related customer focused local indicators in place. The lack of service standards does not assist the Council in determining the areas which would indicate whether the customer experience was positive or not. As a result, it is not possible to determine whether the Council is making progress in meeting its aims for customer service.
- 90 Indicators used by the Council often focus on quantitative measures rather than the impact they have on addressing local issues. For example the Council uses indicators such as increasing user numbers for shopmobility, making grant awards to two village halls, increasing rural satisfaction with service delivery. While these may indicate improvements in service delivery they are not measuring the quality and appropriateness of services being delivered. Often the Council has not set out what it wishes to achieve in carrying out its activities. Clarifying why things are done would assist in determining if the Council is focusing on the right issues for the community.
- 91 Project management is underdeveloped within the Council. This is an area that was reported as a weakness within the CPA report. The Council has responded by developing a more strategic approach to project management but this approach has yet to be fully integrated into the organisation. As a consequence the Council cannot be sure that it will be able to effectively manage the many projects it has for improving access to its services.
- 92 Many of the Council's strategies are weak. For example the ICT strategy lacks specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound (SMART) targets, it is out-of-date and does not provide a clear direction for the service. The strategy also does not look at the wider picture of how electronic access could contribute to other issues such as rural access and community development.

- 93 Risk management is not yet fully embedded into the Council. Risk management is improving with risks identified at a service level and integrated into a corporate risk register identifying the main risks impacting on the Council. However, the Council has yet to fully embed a culture where risks are identified routinely for all its projects and cross-cutting areas and therefore risks associated with customer access are not always identified or responded to.
- 94 While increased financial capacity demonstrates a commitment to delivering value for money the Council does not have a systematic approach. The development of a medium-term financial plan to reflect the corporate plan has begun to assess value for money in individual services and identify efficiency savings. The new business support contact will enable the Council to start to measure value for money in areas directly related to customer access. The introduction of the customer contact centre has the potential to provide cost savings for the Council. However, it has not monitored any impact potential efficiency savings and, therefore, it cannot be certain that this major investment is delivering value for money.
- 95 The Council has experience of highly effective joint working with partners to deliver shared goals. For example, the Council is working with local health services promote access to health services in rural communities The Council are also investing in CCTV systems in town centres improving safety and access. The Council is also working with the youth community and voluntary sector to provide support for minority groups within the wider community.
- 96 Individual staff appraisals contain customer focused targets, helping the council to achieve its ambitions. Staff appraisals link directly with the corporate and service planning process and performance is measured and managed against these objectives. This ensures that all staff broadly understand how they contribute to corporate and service objectives and individual performance can be assessed and action identified. In addition, staff training needs can be addresses to secure improvements and staff development, also skills and training needs for the organisation to move forward can be identified and any gaps filled.
- 97 The Council's business planning is supported by financial planning. Over the past two years the Council has improved its financial position and also developed a medium-term financial plan that supports the business planning process. As a consequence, improvements to customer access contained in business plans are supported financially.

- 98 Some processes within the performance management framework are strong or are being strengthened. The absence of clear objectives driving this framework means that it can not be fully effective, but the Council has improved processes that relate to performance management. For example, it has improved the approach to business planning which now reflects budget more closely and there is regular performance and financial monitoring and reporting arrangements in place. Business units also monitor and report on the proportion of business plan activities completed. Roles and responsibilities in relation to performance are clear, with both portfolio holder and shadow portfolio holders having a close involvement in monitoring delivery. The Council has also adopted a clear means of prioritising different services across the Council. This provides a sound base from which effective performance management can be developed.

Summary

- 99 The Council has **uncertain** prospects of improvement for customer access. There is no co-ordinated or strategic approach to improving customer access. The Council plans to develop a customer access strategy but at present there is no long-term vision for future customer access. The Council has various plans to develop aspects of customer access but these are not co-ordinated and this lack of strategic direction and co-ordinated approach limits the Councils ability to determine if it has the capacity to deliver and use its performance management framework to monitor progress. However, there is recognition of the need for a strategic approach, commitment and willingness to change from councillors and staff. The Council is proactive in learning from others to drive improvements and is investing in corporate capacity to improve its strategic approach to customer access.