

Service Inspection Report

February 2006



Customer Access

South Somerset District Council

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local services for the public. Our remit covers around 11,000 bodies in England, which between them spend more than £180 billion of public money each year. Our work covers local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we ensure that public services are good value for money and that public money is properly spent.

Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0845 056 0566.

© Audit Commission 2006

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

Contents

Service Inspection	4
Summary	5
Scoring the service	7
Recommendations	9
Report	11
Context	11
The locality	11
The Council	11
Customer access - context	12
How good is the service?	13
How easy is it to access services?	13
Is the Council using e-government to support access to services?	16
How is the Council using customers' feedback and complaints to improve service quality?	17
How is the Council improving customer access through partnership working?	19
Summary	20
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	21
Ownership of problems and willingness to change	21
Proven capacity	22
The capacity and systems to deliver performance improvement	23
Summary	26

Service Inspection

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

Audit Commission service inspections should:

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

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements.

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

Summary

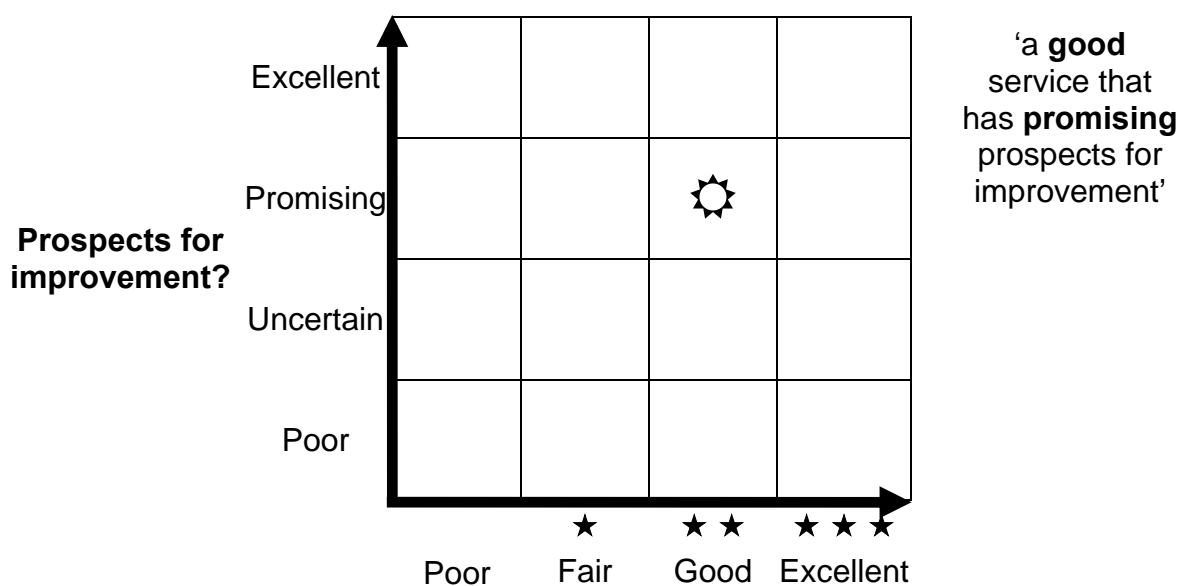
- 1 South Somerset District Council provides **good** customer services which have **promising** prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council has a strategic approach to customer access and care. It has developed an approach to service delivery over a considerable period of time, which supports the expectations and needs of the district. This commitment to customer access is explicitly stated as one of the council corporate objectives, supported by a clear commitment from councillors and staff to improving customer care and a strategic approach to improving customer access.
- 3 Customer satisfaction levels with the Council and many of its services are high and the community recognises improvements made to customer access over the past few years. Services are delivered on a localised area basis, where appropriate. However, the Council has recognised that in some service areas it is more appropriate to manage services on a district-wide basis for consistency and value for money. There is a customer access strategy which has been in place for a number of years which helps the Council remain strategically focused on improving customer access across all its service areas.
- 4 Customers can gain access to council services through a wide range of methods. These include a new customer contact centre which is improving the telephone experience of those who use the single number service by improving the number of calls where enquiries are resolved with at the first point of contact. There are ten offices, either run by the Council or in partnership, that provide local accessibility for the rurally dispersed community. A large proportion of the Council's buildings comply with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and the Council targets services to meet the needs of vulnerable and deprived sectors of the community as well as contributing to sustaining rural communities.
- 5 Services are based on the needs of the community and they are developed using extensive consultation, customer feedback and analysis of complaints. The Council drives improvement using performance management information, which is supported by comprehensive service standards. The Council shares learning internally and learns from others to further improve service delivery. The Council further improves capacity by working in partnership with all sectors of the community.

- 6 The Council's corporate plans are not supported by financial and human resource strategies. The website currently provides limited opportunities to access services and does not present information in way that is easy for customers to access. However, there are plans to improve the website which is supported by appropriate investment. The contact centre capacity is under-resourced and as a result the Council is not achieving targets for the reduction in the number of abandoned calls. When calls are transferred to service departments there is a more variable response and experience for the customer regarding customer care. The area based approach to service delivery has highlighted a number of inconsistencies in service delivery and the Council's policies on equality and diversity are not embedded. A range of local performance indicators to monitor customer access is under review.

Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed South Somerset District Council as providing a **'good'**, two-star service that has **promising** prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹



A good service?

Source: Audit Commission

- 8 The service is a good, two-star service because of:
- high levels of customer satisfaction with customer access to council services;
 - good understanding of community need through consultation, customer feedback and analysis of complaints;
 - a wide range of methods by which services can be accessed;
 - localised area based service delivery;
 - good progress on e-government targets and balancing local and national targets on improving IT; and
 - effective partnership working is improving access to services.

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 Customer Access | Scoring the service

9 Areas for improvement include:

- use of black and minority ethnicity data and another equalities data to understand customer satisfaction and help shape service delivery;
- reducing the level of abandoned calls from people contacting Customers First contact centre;
- service quality when calls are transferred to the service departments;
- website access and quality of information on the site; and
- effective implementation of service standards which are understood by the community.

10 The service has promising prospects for improvement because of:

- a corporate objective to improve customer access which is supported by a customer access strategy;
- a strong commitment from councillors and staff to customer care;
- published service standards;
- the Council learns from external challenge and also learns from others;
- corporate capacity is being strengthened; and
- clear improvements in customer access which are recognised by the community.

11 Areas for improvement include:

- the new corporate plan is not supported by other strategies including human resources and financial;
- local performance indicators are not developed to monitor achievement and to drive improvement in customer access;
- some inconsistencies in service delivery at an area level; and
- the Council's equality and diversity policy is not yet embedded across the whole Council.

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 Improve the Council's ability to provide consistently high levels of customer care in all service areas by:

- *developing the capacity of the Customers First contact centre to increase service provision and reduce abandoned call rate;*
- *monitoring the impact and quality of all service delivery; and*
- *ensuring all frontline staff receive customer care training.*

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

- a more consistent quality of service to customers;
- the provision of extra capacity in service areas as more calls are dealt with at first point of contact;
- increased customer satisfaction across all communities; and
- frontline staff feel more valued and feel they have the skills to undertake their duties.

The implementation of this recommendation will have **high** impact with **medium** costs. This should be implemented by **April 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 ability of the community to access Council service electronically by:

- *improving the transactional capabilities of the website; and*
- *ensuring website information is accessible and well managed.*

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

- higher customer satisfaction with the website; and
- increased usage of the website making services more accessible and increasing capacity in the Council as more enquiries are dealt with online.

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

Recommendation

R3 Ensure effective implementation and monitor the impact of the Council's equalities and diversity policies by:

- *capturing and using black and minority ethnicity data and another equalities data to understand customer satisfaction and help shape service delivery;*
- *ensuring all staff are aware of the policies;*
- *providing all councillors and staff with appropriate equality and diversity training; and*
- *monitoring the impact of these policies on service provision.*

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

- standards of signage and Council publications are improved to meet the needs of the whole community;
- greater understanding by councillors and staff of the diverse needs of the community and the impact of council services; and
- a clearer understanding of potential areas of in equality regarding service provision.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 South Somerset district is located in the south-eastern part of the county of Somerset. Although mainly rural, it also contains several market towns including Yeovil, Chard, Crewkerne, Ilminster and Wincanton.
- 14 The district covers 959 square kilometres and has a population of 155,000. The population density is only 1.6 people per hectare (the average for England and Wales is 3.4 people per hectare). 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 in South Somerset describe themselves as white British, with black and minority ethnic groups representing 1.1 per cent of the population. Although, there has been a rise in the number of migrant workers, particularly from eastern Europe, residing and working in the district. There are slightly higher levels of older people than the national average.
- 15 Due to the rural nature of the district, its population is dispersed. The largest town, Yeovil has a population of 40,812 and Chard has around 12,000, Ilminster, Crewkerne and Wincanton all have populations under 10,000 people. The remaining population live in the many villages covered by 121 parishes. Limited access to public transport along with dispersed communities in a large rural district poses significant challenges for public service provision.
- 16 The county of Somerset has a low level of unemployment, with South Somerset having a rate of 2.3 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). There are only a small number of wards in the district that are in the 20 per cent most deprived with these being in Yeovil and Chard.
- 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 Council

- 18 The Council is Liberal Democrat controlled with 36 out of 60 councillors. There are currently 17 Conservative councillors and 7 Independent councillors. In early 2003, the Council underwent a period of considerable change with the election of several new councillors and a new leader. In autumn 2004, the Council appointed a new Chief Executive.

- 19 The Council had for a number of years embarked on a programme of decentralisation and has a mix of district-wide and area-based service delivery. There is a strong emphasis on local community leadership delivered via area committees. In order to strengthen its corporate capacity, the Council is undertaking further senior management restructuring. Following consultation with residents, the Council has recently produced a new corporate plan supported by a number of key objectives and targets.
- 20 The Council employs 646 fulltime equivalent staff. The current corporate management team includes the Chief Executive and two directors. The Council's overall revenue budget for 2005/06 is £18.5 million with a capital programme of £9 million. The Council has a relatively strong financial position and has reserves of between £2 million and £3 million.
- 21 In May 2004, the Council was rated as 'fair' in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). The assessment found that the Council's strengths included managing its finances well, shifting resources to address improvements in services, engaging with the community and working well with partners. However, the assessment found weaknesses in planning and judged that there was no long term vision for the whole district. Performance information was also not being used to track performance against priorities. Since the CPA, the Council has largely focused on improving corporate capacity and delivering services that match community need.

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, external organisations and businesses to continually improve customer access.
- 23 Council services should be focused on the needs of users, ensure equality of access and take proper account of equality and the diversity of all service users. Customer access is a cross-cutting theme applicable to all council services, while ensuring value for money.
- 24 The Council uses a contact centre, Customers First, its main offices in Yeovil and four area offices together with community centres as the main means for people to contact the Council directly. These offices provide information on district and county council services. Electronic contact is via the Council's website.
- 25 South Somerset 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** A strategic approach to customer access has enabled the Council to develop a wide range of accessible services based on understanding community needs. However, diversity is not fully embedded in service delivery and there is an inconsistent approach in some areas of service delivery.
- 27** There is high satisfaction with customer access and services. Results from customer satisfaction and experience surveys are positive. The quality of life survey in April 2005 showed that 79 per cent of residents were satisfied with the way that the Council operated, an improvement from 71 per cent in 2003/04. Mystery shopper surveys, carried out by the Council, show that customers are broadly happy with their access to the Council. In March 2005, 92 per cent of phone callers expressed themselves as either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the overall service they received over the phone, placing the Council in third place out of 441 councils in England and Wales. The only area of concern is poor satisfaction with youth facilities. Customers are benefiting from good outcomes as a result of the Council's approach to accessing services.
- 28** There is a strategic approach to customer access which is supported by a number of strategies including:
- customer access;
 - equalities and diversity;
 - communications; and
 - consultation.
- 29** These strategies are effectively implemented and helping to deliver services that support the community including hard-to-reach groups. The Council has recognised that community focus is one of its real strengths and has developed an advocacy role in managing relationships with the gypsy and traveller communities. In addition, the housing strategy deals with specific issues relating to alternative dwellings such as caravans. The Council is working directly with many hard-to-reach groups including deaf groups, teenage mothers and low paid workers to increase benefit take up and deprived groups are further supported by concession pricing policies. Street cleaning and gardening teams are easy to identify because of the corporate uniform and vehicle logos, local people find them easy to engage with and are providing useful feedback on local or social issues. The Council is playing a vital role in sustaining remote rural communities and ensuring that all services are responsive to community needs.
- 30** The Council provides its customers with a wide range of access methods. Customers can contact the Council by phone, face-to-face, letter and fax as well as by email, internet and text phone. Area and community offices are provided in the main centres of population and are increasing access to all parts of the community. Residents feel that the area and community offices are helpful and provide a real community focus for service delivery.

14 Customer Access | How good is the service?

- 31 The rural nature of the district means that contact in more remote communities can be difficult due to more limited transport facilities. Outreach services, such as a community bus, also help to improve access. There is a well-publicised out-of-hours emergency service and a 24-hour phone line available for vulnerable people. The range and nature of access to Council services ensures equality of access for both rural and more urban communities.
- 32 The experience of customers contacting the Council by phone has improved. The Customers First contact centre introduced a single contact phone number and has enabled the Council to extend its opening hours by 20 per cent. Although not all calls can be resolved by Customers First, calls are logged and passed on to the appropriate service team and trained staff provide a professional customer-focused service. The IT system used has been implemented in area and community offices to provide the same level of service for customers throughout the district who visit Council offices. After initial problems introducing the service it has been incrementally extended and further improvements are planned. Introduction of the contact centre has improved the experience and access for customers contacting the Council by phone.
- 33 The Council is improving access to services through targeted communication. The Council newsletter '*News and Views*' is distributed by a local newspaper to ensure that it reaches as many residents as possible and information is displayed on supermarket notice boards. ContactPoints service directory is distributed every two years and lists the Customers First single number contact details, individual service numbers and councillor contact information. The Council's entry in the local phone book is good, the main contact number is clearly visible and the website address listed at the bottom of the page. Advice and training to parish councils helps improve their input to council services. Languageline is available to customers to help them communicate with staff. The quality of the information on the Council's standard letter head is good and gives appropriate contact information. The Council is communicating effectively with its residents.
- 34 The flexible, area-based approach adopted by the Council allows service delivery to be tailored to match the diverse needs of the community. Frontline offices, area and community offices provide direct access to Customers First staff. Some offices have multi-agency occupation and provide access to key partners. The community offices are family friendly with well-managed and comfortable waiting areas, play areas for children and private meeting rooms available. This area approach allows for the delivery of local services and provides welcome support for local communities, members of the public can more easily contact the Council near to where they live.

- 35 The Council has invested in improving access to its buildings. Over £300,000 has been spent improving access since 2000 and 86 per cent of council buildings now meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). Improvements have included:
- automated door opening systems;
 - low-level reception counters;
 - automatic hand washing taps;
 - provision of dedicated parking bays close to reception areas; and
 - low-level parking meters in public car parks next to disabled bays.
- 36 In implementing these improvements, the Council has worked closely with the South Somerset Disability Forum and other local disability groups in improving access to buildings and services. Induction loops for the hard of hearing have been provided in all Council meeting rooms and portable induction loops are available in community offices. The Council is targeting investment at improving the customer experience for all members of the community.
- 37 However, the Council is aware that further improvements are required to ensure that diversity and equalities are fully embedded. The Council has only achieved level 1 (out of a possible 5) of the Equalities Standard for Local Government. Equalities and diversity training has been provided to most members of staff and councillors. Training was well-received by staff who recognised that it served to reinforce the ethos already embedded within the Council. Customer care training has also been provided to staff and first impressions guidance has been published and circulated to staff. However, not all staff have been trained, some frontline staff were unable to attend training sessions due to workload and lack of cover. The principles of equality and diversity are not fully embedded into policies and procedures but the Council is starting from a strong customer-focused base.
- 38 The customer experience when contacting the Council by phone is inconsistent. Abandoned calls are exceeding Council targets, averaging 18 per cent, and calls not resolved at the first point of contact are passed to relevant service department staff. It is not possible to monitor or manage the call to resolution when that happens and the customer experience varies. Residents noticed an improvement when contacting the Council following the introduction of the contact centre. They also reported a variable customer care experience when transferred to service departments. The Council plans to improve the information systems and staff resources to address these issues by March 2006. Variable levels of customer care are having a negative effect on the service provided by Customers First when people contact the Council by phone.
- 39 The delivery of services at an area level has resulted in some inconsistency in the quality of service delivered. Some customers receive different levels of service or access to a different range of services depending on their location within the district. Currently there is not a common baseline of service quality in all area offices that customers can recognise. Therefore some customers may be less satisfied with their local level of service.

- 40 Signposting on Council information leaflets and signage does not follow national guidance. Signage near to community offices and on printed material does not consistently follow Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB) guidance regarding, size, location, font and colouring. The Council letterhead includes useful contact information and refers to other formats available, however the font size is small and not suitable for the visually impaired. Although Braille and large print formats are available this information is difficult to locate for visually impaired customers.
- 41 Key documents such as the ContactPoints do not include contact information in the most common other languages spoken in the district such as Portuguese, Polish or Chinese. Signage and printed material are not fully accessible to the whole community.
- 42 The Council's customer charter is not readily available to all members of the community. The Council has recently published a corporate customer charter supported by separate service charters/standards but the format of the documents is inconsistent. Residents do not fully understand the level of service to expect. There is no mention of the customer charter being available in a range of formats or different languages. Some customers could be excluded from contacting the Council due to difficulties in understanding documents.

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

- 43 The Council is making good progress towards achieving e-government targets taking a strategic approach to the development of information and communication technology (ICT). The Council works well in partnership to increase ICT capability. However, the Council recognises the need for further improvements to its website to meet user's needs.
- 44 The Council is making good progress towards achieving e-government targets on all priority outcomes and change management areas. Specific, measurable, appropriate, realistic and timebound (SMART) plans are in place to meet the remaining targets. The Council is aiming for 96 per cent compliance with the best value performance indicator (BVPI157) for electronic service delivery (ESD) by 31 December 2005. Progress against these plans is well managed, monitored and reported monthly to the senior management team (SMT) and Audit Committee. The information systems service group plan has clear links to corporate aims and priorities and sets specific aims and priorities for e-government and improving access to services. The e-government programme is well supported by the Chief Executive and the Leader as a champion for e-government. The Council is well-placed to meet the e-government targets by the 2006 deadlines.

- 45 The Council's website is promoted on Council literature and signposted on the Somerset portal. Links to other website sources of useful information are provided to both public sector and private sector partners, such as Somerset OnLine, Somerset Gateway and parish and town councils. The Council's website address is displayed on vehicles, publications and advertising including thousands of beer mats distributed to local pubs. Promotion of the Council's website is being managed carefully to coincide with planned improvements.
- 46 The Council is playing a lead role in partnerships aimed at improving customer access to services through e-government. The Council originally led elements of the Somerset OnLine project culminating in the implementation of a standard customer relationship management (CRM) system across the county. When councils share the same systems then opportunities to work together are being exploited. The strategy adopted across the county has been to learn from national projects such as Planning and Regulatory Services OnLine (PARSOL). The Council has worked with partners to improve public broadband facilities and councillors have access to PC's with broadband connections. Libraries, area offices and other Council buildings have PCs providing public access to Council services and the Council has piloted digital TV (DiTV). Users are consulted about ease of use and facilities provided with results informing future provision. As a result, the Council has increased access to services electronically through partnership working.
- 47 However, the Council's website currently provides limited opportunities to access services online and does not present information in way that is easy for customers to access. Users felt that the website was difficult to use and it received a poor assessment in the Society of Information Technology Management's (SOCITM) *'Better Connected'* 2005 report. Consultants were subsequently engaged by the Council to review the existing facilities and produced a specification for a new website and intranet. Improvements planned to enhance the information and services provided via the Council's website have the potential to improve the customer experience.
- 48 Website information is not easily accessible. There is a lot of information on the Council's website but presented in a way that makes it difficult for customers to find what they are looking for and does not provide a wide range of transactions online. Website content is regulated corporately but editorial responsibility for keeping information up-to-date is delegated to service managers. The content management system is difficult to use and has contributed to the poor availability of information. The website was only assessed as a 'content' site in the SOCITM *'Better Connected'* 2005 report and ranked 432 out of 441 (with 441 the worst) council websites in a mystery shopping report carried out by SiteMorse in January 2005. The Council's website does not comply with the national standards for accessibility and information is not well-presented or well-managed.

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

- 49 The Council's published complaints procedures are comprehensive and implemented consistently. A corporate complaints procedure is well-established and has led to a number of service improvements.
- 50 Corporate complaints are regularly monitored at all levels throughout the Council. The performance of Customers First staff dealing with enquiries over the phone or face-to-face in community offices is continuously monitored and assessed to help ensure that the quality of the customer experience is consistent. Reports on customer feedback and complaints are discussed every six months by SMT and Audit Committee. Feedback from customers is monitored and actions taken to improve access to services.
- 51 The Council has undertaken extensive consultation and regularly surveys and canvases feedback from users and non users of services. Customers' views on access to services are obtained using a wide variety of methods. The Quality of Life survey looked at residents' views about the Council, the quality of services provided and how residents' access those services. The number of enquiries, type of enquiry and the satisfaction of customers who use area and community offices is obtained from customers using Council contact points. The Council regularly measures the use of these remote offices to ensure that the service is worthwhile and continues to provide value for money. Other methods of obtaining feedback include:
- postal questionnaires;
 - reply paid cards;
 - door to door surveys;
 - phone surveys;
 - mystery shopping;
 - focus groups; and
 - Somerset Public Opinion Panel.
- 52 The Council has a good understanding of community needs required to establish accessible services that meet customer expectations and needs.
- 53 Extensive public consultation has been employed by the Council to inform its corporate aims and priorities and in the development of the new corporate plan. The corporate plan outlines the needs and aspirations of residents and the subsequent objectives and targets try to balance these requirements to create internal and shared targets. Customer focus and access are clearly addressed within the plan and demonstrate a direct link to the consultation and allowed the Council to target its priorities at community need. Councillors, parish and town councils are also actively engaged in feeding back customers' experiences of accessing council services. The Council has up-to-date information about customers' needs and demands.

- 54 The Council is learning from customer feedback in a number of areas. There are many examples of where services have been changed after receiving feedback. For example the Streetscene service where the Council is actively monitoring performance by using its own staff, customer feedback and mystery shopping. All applicants for Council grants are sent a feedback form and the results are analysed and reported annually. The Council's grants policy has been updated to reflect feedback from organisations who requested earlier warning of whether or not existing grants would continue in the next financial year. The Council is using customer feedback to change and improve access to services as a result of complaints and feedback from residents and users.
- 55 However, the Council is not maximising the information it receives from feedback. Surveys do not always capture sufficient information about the customer or the original service issue or concern. For example, the Council cannot identify how any particular office is performing from its customer satisfaction survey, neither can it identify customers using the contact points by age, sex, race or disability. Without key information on the use and take up of its services by BME or other equalities data the Council cannot be clear that it fully identifying and responding to all the needs of all its communities.

How is the Council improving customer access through partnership working?

- 56 The Council works effectively in partnership to improve customer access. However, partnerships are not being strategically managed.
- 57 The Council is working across traditional boundaries and has developed strong and effective partnerships with all sectors, including some local businesses. The Council helped form the Somerset Compact, a partnership of voluntary organisations throughout the county, and has developed strong links with organisations such as the Council for Voluntary Service (CVS) and CAB. The social inclusion team works with hard-to-reach groups like the South Somerset Disability Forum to develop policies, practices and practical solutions to issues like the DDA. Welfare benefits officers work effectively across many agencies and have set up multi-agency working groups and landlord groups to ensure that there is good communication across the sector. This work will help these agencies and the Council to prepare for local area agreements (LAAs). Although not fully implemented or delivering effective outcomes, the foundations are in place and the potential for collaborative working is significant. Partnership working is improving access to both Council and externally provided services.

- 58 The Council is working effectively across traditional boundaries to deliver services. Area development teams provide support for local communities and are broadly generic. The delivery of welfare advice is good and relies on good cross-service working. Relationships between staff involved in benefits, housing, advice and links with the voluntary sector are strong, providing effective support for vulnerable people. Internal office procedures are changing to allow more enquiries to be resolved by Customers First. As a result of changes in the revenues and benefits team, processing of housing benefits claims has been reduced significantly from 53 days in 2003/04 to 36 days in 2004/05. The Council is working in partnership with other Somerset councils in a countywide project to introduce new five year bus passes in order to reduce administration for customers and the Councils as well as providing efficiency savings. The Council is working across traditional service lines in support of local and diverse communities.
- 59 The Council is sharing information with external stakeholders and working in partnership to improve consultation. Information is being shared with districts, county and police through the joint Somerset consultation group, the Somerset Public Opinion Panel and through parish councils. Partners feel that the Council shares information effectively such as working with the county to share local information and sharing information with voluntary groups. As a result, the Council is maximising capacity by sharing research and is able to make more effective use of consultation and to minimise duplication.
- 60 A collaborative approach has been adopted to partnership working to improve customer access. The area approach taken by the Council supports local communities and the Council is seen as a good partner. The long-established customer culture is demonstrated by the Council's willingness to proactively work in partnership and is supported by its Beacon Council status for community cohesion.
- 61 However, not all partnerships are strategically managed by the Council. The Council does not ensure a consistent approach to strategic partnership working. The Council plans to agree a corporate approach to partnership working through the scrutiny committee and align existing arrangements with the corporate plan and priorities. Working with the wider business community is not always successful and some residents expressed concern that there was not an informed and healthy partnership between the Council and the small business community. Access to information and Council support for small businesses was seen as weak and impacting on sustaining small businesses in rural communities. The Council is not maximising the benefits of partnership working.

Summary

- 62 South Somerset District Council provides **good** customer access. The Council has developed a wide range of accessible services based on understanding community need which has resulted in high levels of customer satisfaction. There is a strategic approach to providing good customer access which is reinforced by a strong area approach which reacts well to differing local needs. The Council has a strategic approach to developing ICT to support customer access and uses customer feedback and complaints to drive improvement. The Council works well in partnership but needs to manage its partnerships more effectively to ensure that capacity in this area is maximised. However, BME and other equalities data is not systematically used to understand customer satisfaction and access opportunities. The website is underdeveloped and some inconsistencies in service delivery remain.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

Ownership of problems and willingness to change

- 63 Within the Council, the commitment to customer care is strong and is supported by a strategic approach delivered through a customer access strategy and service plan priorities. However, the impact of the equalities and diversity strategy is not fully maximised to ensure improvements in customer access are in line with these strategies.
- 64 The Council is focused on the need to improve access to services. The South Somerset Community strategy and the Somerset County Community strategy reflect this focus. In addition, South Somerset's new corporate plan also identifies the need for improvements in customer access to services within its objectives and sets clear targets. For example, the pledges, to 'seek to provide local and accessible services'; to 'work with partners to provide joined up services'; and, to 'work closely with communities'. Councillors, staff and partners understand the commitment to providing improvements in customer access and is based on a culture and willingness to continually improve. This ensures that the Council and its staff develop and improve services by placing customers' needs at the heart of improvement.
- 65 The Council has an up-to-date and comprehensive customer service strategy. The strategy has been in place since 2004 and, together with a clear action plan, is guiding the development of the Council's improvements in customer access. In 2006, the Council will review the strategy to ensure that it continues to develop customer-focused service improvements.
- 66 A strong commitment to improving customer care exists across all Council staff and councillors. This is evident from the Council's service planning priorities and from the behaviour of staff and councillors. There is a culture within service groups that encourages staff to respond to customers needs and to make service improvements at a local level. For example, providing additional seating areas for customers in response to requests. This enables small service improvements to take place quickly and demonstrates that the Council is listening to customers needs.
- 67 Some parts of the Council have benefited from external challenge and can demonstrate learning from others. For example, the Council has acted positively to address some of the weaknesses identified in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment 2004. It has made particular progress in developing a more robust performance management framework. In addition, the Council is benefiting from the county-wide Somerset Direct initiative which has brought new investment opportunities and a chance to work in partnership with adjoining councils.

- 68 There are some examples of the Council taking difficult decisions, for example, developing an advocate role when dealing with the travelling community. This has been successful in reducing some of the tensions with the settlement community and helped increase access to council services for this section of the community. Another example is the approach the Council took when implementing the new licensing act. Here, the Council worked with licensed landlords and local communities to resolve issues and review licenses effectively particularly targeting businesses from ethnic minority communities to ensure equality of access. However, the Council is struggling with other local issues such as introducing car park charging across the district. Clear robust leadership and learning from past experience has the potential to help the Council make difficult decisions in the future.
- 69 The future impact of the Council's equality and diversity strategy supported by the customer service strategy is reduced because not all managers are engaged in the implementation, monitoring and review of these policies. They do not have a clear view of the impact of the equalities and diversity strategy on the service areas they manage. The impact of these strategies on ensuring customer access is improved consistently for all sectors of the community is reduced.

Proven capacity

- 70 The Council is developing the capacity required to deliver further improvements in customer access. Resources are prioritised and focused using the Council's planning process. However, capacity is weakened through tensions between the Council's contact centre and service based staff.
- 71 The Council's corporate objective to improve customer access is developed and supported in individual service plans. Each service plan refers to the corporate plan objectives and develops individual service contributions, identifies actions and allocates resources to support the delivery of each improvement. This ensures that the Council identifies the capacity it needs to deliver and this has already successfully supported the development of the Customers First initiative.
- 72 Target setting at the Council is used effectively to identify the capacity needed to deliver improvements. Actions and targets in corporate and service action plans are generally SMART, identifying the resources, capacity and timescale for delivery. This enables the Council to plan for improvements in a logical way making sure services can accommodate planned improvements.
- 73 The Council makes effective use of its communications and consultation policies. A variety of methods are employed by the Council to communicate with local people. The Council has a good understanding of local needs and of what matters most to local people. This is reflected in the positive feedback the Council receives from the community and its partners. A clear understanding of the community's needs helps the Council to target future services effectively.

- 74 The sustained improvement in customer access in most areas of council activity is reflected in clear outcomes that are recognised by local people. High levels of customer satisfaction with the Council's activities and with specific services highlight the quality of service delivery to local people. For example, the high and improving levels of satisfaction with the phone service offered by the Council and high levels of satisfaction with the service delivered at area offices.
- 75 A dedicated customer relations group helps the Council to focus on improving access to services at a strategic level. This group provides capacity within the Council to develop initiatives to address customers' needs and to maintain the focus of the Council to address the changing access and service needs of local people.
- 76 The Council has created additional capacity to support its ambitions for customer accessibility. The appointment of a dedicated equalities officer supports the drive to develop services and access for customers that meets the needs of all local residents. The Freedom of Information Act officer enables the Council to deal with requests for information quickly without taking service staff away from service delivery.
- 77 However, there is tension between Customers First staff and service based staff which is undermining the effectiveness of the Council's service to customers. Action is underway to address these tensions but customer service within services is generally of a lower quality compared to Customers First. There are cultural differences between those staff with a specific duty to service customers and service based staff. All Council staff have a duty to serve the public and customer care is a corporate priority. The potential for the Council to meet its ambition for fully accessible services for all customers is weakened as a result of this tension.
- 78 The Council's recently developed corporate plan is not currently supported by other strategic plans. For example, the Council does not have a human resources strategy or training plan to support the ambitions in the corporate plan. This reduces the Council's ability to maximise the implementation of its corporate strategy and meet its ambitions.
- 79 The Council is planning a management restructuring to ensure that it is an effective, modern council capable of meeting future challenges. However, the current uncertainty is limiting the effectiveness of senior management in planning and delivering future improvements. The speedy conclusion of this phase of the Council's evolution provides the potential to reduce the risks to the Council.

The capacity and systems to deliver performance improvement

- 80 Performance information is used to improve service delivery and customer access. Information at a service and individual level is used to drive improvements and there are clear examples where services have responded to customer feedback. However, the Council does not use local performance indicators to help drive further improvements in customer access.

- 81 The Council monitors performance against its corporate and service objectives through the council's developing performance management framework. Key performance indicators and local performance indicators are used to identify performance and monitor the Council's progress against its objectives. There are examples of active performance management leading to improvements in the planning service and in waste management.
- 82 Levels of customer satisfaction are also monitored and action taken to address issues that arise from customer feedback. For example, customers requested extended opening times and the Council has responded by operating some area offices for longer and offering a phone service from 8.00am until 6.00pm Monday to Friday and an emergency contact number for other times. This indicates that the Council is listening to customers in a formal and informal manner and takes action as a result.
- 83 Councillors with portfolios are accountable for these service areas through the use of portfolio statements. This responsibility is due to be reinforced through the developing role of scrutiny which will scrutinise each portfolio and assess performance across Council services. This ensures that the Council has a clear view of performance and that councillors are actively engaged in monitoring and managing this performance and driving improvements.
- 84 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 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 addressed to secure improvements and staff development. Skills and training needs for the organisation to move forward can also be identified and any gaps filled.
- 85 Information systems are central to the Council's ability to deliver performance improvement. The Council has recognised weaknesses in these systems and in investing in improvements. Particularly important systems are the internet and intranet information systems which are necessary to support the Council's ambitions to resolve enquiries at the first point of contact in the majority of cases. The improved internet will enable customers to access Council services themselves at times that are convenient to them. The range of services with electronic transaction facilities will improve and the range and presentation of information enhanced to meet more customers' needs.
- 86 The Council supports its priorities with targeted investment. For example, the roll out of the 'Sort it!' campaign to increase recycling rates has been very successful. There have been some location specific problems relating to business waste collection and understanding of the new scheme. However, with targeted action to address these teething problems, phase three of the scheme has been successfully implemented. The experience from the early phases of the scheme have been used to change elements of the scheme for future phases. Monitoring of recycling levels is also highlighting areas where more investment may be needed, such as use of neighbourhood recycling facilities.

- 87 The Council has experience of highly effective joint working with partners to deliver future shared goals. For example, the Council is working with local health services, leisure and youth service to improve access to health by creating healthy living centres in three of the larger market towns in the district. These are a focal point for service delivery and voluntary sector support for local people in need of advice and support. Particular successes have been the targeted support for minority groups within the wider community.
- 88 The Council has begun to introduce a systematic approach to ensuring that it is delivering value for money. 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. Examples include the delivery of Somerset Direct in partnership to reduce service delivery costs in handling enquiries. The Council shares facilities with town councils, Somerset County Council and other agencies reducing the running costs of these facilities. However, specific savings, in terms of staffing costs and the impact of extra capacity in service departments, have not been monitored and as a result efficiency savings are not identified.
- 89 However, the new performance management framework is not embedded, and a performance management culture does not exist across all Council services. Therefore, the full benefits of effective performance management have not been achieved. In addition, project and programme management is not yet fully effective. There are examples of successful project management but these are seen in isolation rather than part of an accepted performance management culture.
- 90 Baskets of local performance indicators to monitor and management performance in cross-cutting areas are not currently in place. Baskets of local indicators to support the Councils cross-cutting activity have not been developed and so the Council is not able to monitor or manage its impact in these areas. For example, understanding the impact its services have on the quality of life of all local people including minority groups, the disabled and young people.
- 91 Relatively high levels of sickness absence and turnover in frontline service delivery, such as Customers First and areas offices, are reducing the Council's capacity to deliver improvements. The Council has recognised the stressful nature of customer access officer's roles and the Council has already implemented a programme of job rotation, enforced breaks while answering phones and improvements to the absence management system. These improvements are recent and while levels of sickness are actively monitored there has been little impact on overall levels of sickness.

Summary

- 92 The Council has **promising** prospects of improvement for customer access. The Council has a long established strong commitment to customer care which is supported by a strategic approach to delivering improvements through a customer access strategy. There are clear plans and targets for improvement and progress against these targets are supported by a robust performance management framework. The strategic approach taken by the Council has enabled resources to be focused ensuring the Council has the capacity to deliver future improvements. However, a performance management framework is not embedded and the Council lacks an appropriate range of local performance indicators relating to customer access. Weaknesses remain in the strategic approach to diversity. Service levels differ in relation to the use of either the contact centre or department.