

Service Inspection Report

February 2006



# Cultural Services

**Mendip District Council**

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# Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Service Inspection   | 4         |
| <b>Summary</b>   | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Scoring the service</b>   | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>Recommendations</b>   | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>Report</b>  | <b>11</b> |
| Context  | 11        |
| The locality   | 11        |
| The Council  | 12        |
| The Council's cultural services                                    | 12        |
| <b>How good is the service?</b>                                    | <b>15</b> |
| What has the service aimed to achieve?                             | 15        |
| Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users? | 17        |
| Community focus  | 17        |
| Diversity  | 19        |
| User experience and satisfaction with the quality of the service   | 22        |
| Economic vitality  | 23        |
| Quality of life  | 25        |
| Is the service delivering value for money?                         | 28        |
| Summary  | 29        |
| <b>What are the prospects for improvement to the service?</b>      | <b>30</b> |
| What is the service track record in delivering improvement?        | 30        |
| How well does the service manage performance?                      | 32        |
| Does the service have the capacity to improve?                     | 34        |
| Summary  | 36        |

## Service Inspection

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

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

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

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

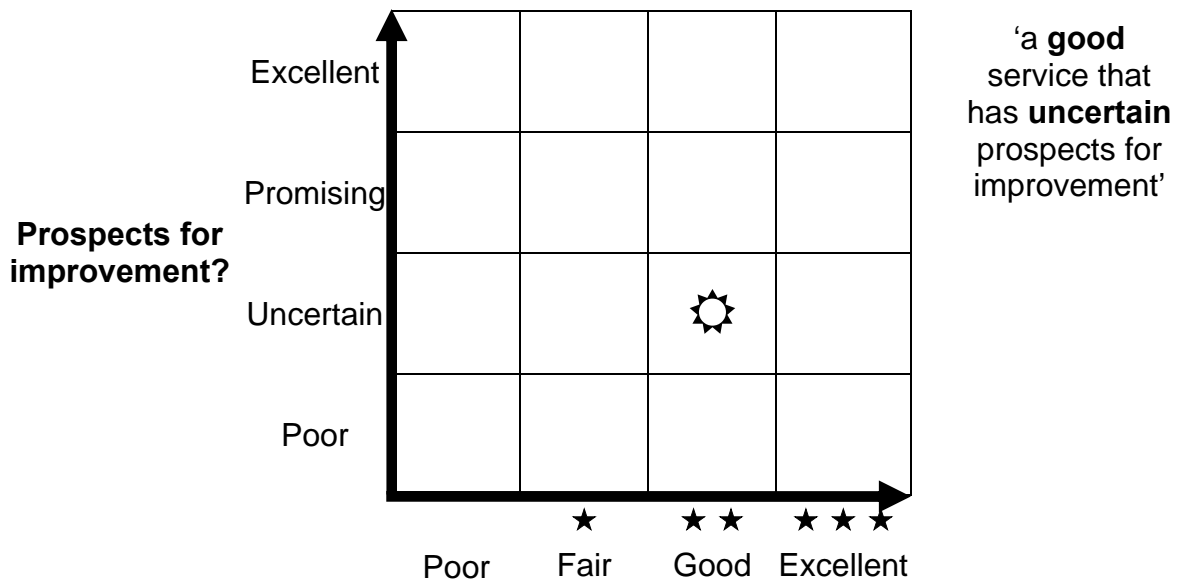
## Summary

- 1 Mendip District Council provides **good** cultural services which have **uncertain** prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council provides good cultural services because it is meeting community needs through its cultural activity. It also supports many local and regional priorities as set out in the community strategy and in the plans of its partners. All cultural services have a strong customer focus and respond well to local needs based on extensive consultation and engagement. Mendip can demonstrate improved outcomes for residents from the range of cultural activity and initiatives it supports. Outcomes contributing to improving the quality of local life and promoting healthier lifestyles can be identified as a direct result of the Council's efforts. In particular, this relates to increasing participation by people living in rural areas, older people, young people, people with disabilities and people from black and minority ethnic communities. User satisfaction with many individual service areas is high and improving and the Council is taking an effective approach in delivering and managing value for money in cultural services. People's experiences of cultural services are good. Most significantly, the Council is delivering good value for money by delivering cultural services in a variety of ways that maximises their impact on the community.
- 3 However, services are not maximising the use of consultation exercises by sharing the results with the rest of the Council, or making the best use of its understanding of local needs. Significant achievement is being delivered despite the lack of a clear vision for cultural services. The Council has recognised some shortcomings in fully measuring the impact of large-scale cultural events such as the Glastonbury Festival and has found gaps in understanding the wider impact of external funding. The Council understands these shortcomings and plans to address them.
- 4 Prospects for improvement are uncertain because the Council lacks a clear, long-term vision and objectives for cultural services. As a result, there is confusion both within and outside the organisation about the Council's role and what it is trying to achieve in the future. Even though cultural services have a strong track record in delivering improvement and improving capacity, the Council has shortcomings in the way it manages its performance. Most importantly it is finding it difficult to measure how successful it has been in meeting all its objectives because many of these objectives are too broad and there are few outcome focused, longer term targets for cultural services.

## Scoring the service

- 5 We have assessed Mendip District Council as providing a **good**, two-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 chart<sup>1</sup>:**



### A good service?

Source: Audit Commission

- 6 The service is a **good**, two-star service because of the following.
- Cultural services have a good understanding of local needs based on widespread service consultation and engagement.
  - Services are responding well to these needs, in particular for people from target groups such as the elderly, young people, and those from rural communities.
  - The Council is addressing diversity issues through its cultural services.
  - Cultural services are effectively delivering many local, regional and national objectives and meeting community needs consistently well across all services.
  - The Council is improving the quality of local life and promoting healthier lifestyles as a direct result of cultural services.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

- User satisfaction with many individual service areas is high and improving.
  - The Council is taking an effective approach to delivering and managing value for money in cultural services.
- 7 However, weaknesses include the following.
- Not maximising the results of consultation by sharing them with the rest of the Council, or making the best use of its good understanding of what people in Mendip need from cultural services.
  - Service standards are limited.
  - Shortcomings in measuring the impact of large scale cultural events and the wider impact of external funding.
  - The Council's procurement strategy has not provided a good framework for negotiating value for money in cultural services.
- 8 The service has **uncertain** prospects for improvement because of the following.
- It lacks a clear, long-term vision and objectives for cultural services.
  - Many county-wide strategies and plans are not well integrated.
  - There are few outcome focused, longer term targets for cultural services;
  - There is confusion both within and outside the organisation about the Council's role and what it is trying to achieve.
  - Business planning still has some shortcomings, in particular in integrating diversity issues and in showing how key risks will be managed.
  - Some key future plans lack clarity such as for long term asset management planning, and resources have not been identified to deliver them.
- 9 Strengths include the following.
- A strong track record of delivering improvement in individual service areas leading to high satisfaction levels.
  - Improving the performance management framework by linking business planning with financial management arrangements.
  - Partnership working to enable and facilitate further improvement.
  - A positive approach to learning from external challenge and the experience of other councils.
  - Increasing resources available in most areas of cultural activity based on a number of reviews.
  - Well regarded service leadership due to enthusiastic and committed staff, councillors and managers.

## Recommendations

- 10 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 costs<sup>1</sup> 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 its cultural activity and facilities with local and regional partners by:*

- clarifying its longer term role in delivering cultural activity; and*
- ensuring this role is affordable and consistent with community need.*

- 11 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:
- clearer focus for cultural activities against which progress can be measured;
  - improved business planning and financial management;
  - improved asset management by making firm decisions about which assets will be maintained and which may be disposed of;
  - reduced risk of duplication between services and partners; and
  - improved clarity and ownership by partners and staff about the Council's future role and objectives for cultural services over the next ten years.
- 12 The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by September 2006.

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

**Recommendation**

*R2 Maximise the use of knowledge and understanding of local needs based on current and future consultation and communication exercises by:*

- *sharing knowledge and learning from consultation and communication exercises within cultural services and with the rest of the Council;*
- *improving the co-ordination of all consultation and communications;*
- *clarifying any gaps in consultation; and*
- *addressing those gaps by targeting consultation and communication more effectively.*

13 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- making the best use of the knowledge of local needs and maximising opportunities for consultation and communication;
- addressing any gaps in service provision;
- raising awareness of cultural activities to tourists and the wider community;
- improving satisfaction rates with services and the Council overall;
- increasing participation and income levels in leisure centres;
- improving the potential for better health and quality of life of non-users; and
- reducing duplication of effort and additional costs of unnecessary consultation.

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

**Recommendation**

*R3 Further develop and formalise the Council's approach to delivering value for money in cultural services by:*

- *developing the draft procurement strategy to explain the Council's policy and approach in securing value for money;*
- *improving the Council's approach to benchmarking by selecting similar organisations and learning from them; and*
- *thoroughly investigating the potential for sharing staff and resources with neighbouring councils and organisations.*

## 10 Cultural Services | Recommendations

- 15 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:
- ensure a consistent approach to procurement and reduce duplication of effort;
  - learning from other organisations to help manage costs and prove that all aspects of cultural services provide good value for money; and
  - building capacity by improving the recruitment and retention of key staff by sharing the costs of employing them.
- 16 The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by September 2006 and ongoing.

# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 17 Mendip District Council is located in the north-eastern part of the county of Somerset and is predominately rural in character. The district covers 456 square kilometres, with approximately 60 per cent of the population living in the four towns of Frome, Glastonbury, Shepton Mallet, Street and the City of Wells.
- 18 The number of people living in Mendip has been steadily increasing since 2002. The district has a population of 103,869 (2001 census) who live in 43,000 households. Frome is the largest town with a population of 24,517 and there are also many villages covered by 62 parishes. The majority of Mendip's population describe themselves as white British, and black and ethnic minorities represent 3.6 per cent of the population. The district has a slightly higher percentage of the elderly and young people when compared to the national average. Access to public transport and health care are important local issues.
- 19 Between 2001 and 2004, there was an improvement in Mendip's deprivation levels and in life expectancy. Although the district has pockets of deprivation, no wards are in the 10 per cent most deprived across the country. Only 6 per cent of wards are in the 25 per cent least deprived. Most deaths in Mendip are due to cancer and coronary heart disease, and in 2003, nearly half the people in Mendip considered themselves overweight or obese. Unemployment is 1.3 per cent and is marginally below the regional average, but this increases significantly in the winter months. The district has close economic links to the cities of Bristol and Bath and most of the local economy is comprised of small companies.
- 20 The district contains a varied landscape ranging from the Mendip Hills to the Somerset Levels in the south and west. The Mendip Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) covers 198 square kilometres and nearly 12 per cent of the district. Mendip also contains a high number of sites of scientific and archaeological importance, conservation areas and listed buildings.
- 21 Tourism is an important employer in the district attracting £170 million into the local economy and employing up to 4,000 people. Key attractions include the Bath and West Showground near Shepton Mallet with over one million visitors, and the annual Glastonbury festival which attracts over 150,000 people. The district includes many of the region's best known tourist attractions, such as Wells Cathedral, Wookey Hole Caves and Glastonbury Abbey. Clarks retail outlet at Street is also an increasingly popular attractor.

## The Council

- 22** 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. Between the elections in 2003 and 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. 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.
- 23** The Council employs 172 full-time 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, refuse collection, and the majority of support services. The net budget for cultural services for 2005/06 is £3.4 million, which is approximately 23 per cent of the total budget.
- 24** 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 room for improvement in street cleansing, 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 focused on improving its approach to prioritisation, improving performance management and developing its capacity.

## The Council's cultural services

- 25** The Council's cultural services are spread across the three business units and comprise: arts development, community sport and leisure, rights of way, tourism, leisure facilities, parks and open spaces, including children's play, and elements of regeneration, including heritage conservation, health promotion, and linked to this is the management of markets and licensing of cultural events. Staffing across all services amounts to the equivalent of 24 full-time staff (FTEs).

26 Mendip District Council is engaged in delivering and enabling cultural activity in a variety of ways. Some of the activities directly provided by the Council are sports, tourism and arts development; children's play areas; and parks and open spaces. The Council owns no arts buildings, theatres or tourist information centres but plays a facilitating and influencing role through partnerships with other organisations and by using grant aid. In 2004/05, the Council awarded 47 cultural, arts and play grants. The Council owns three leisure centres and one outdoor swimming pool, provides 162.5 hectares of open space, 49 play areas, four skate parks and provides 10 'kick about' spaces for casual games and activities. Significant local partnerships include the following.

- A charitable leisure trust which operates and manages the Council's three leisure centres and outdoor swimming pool in Shepton Mallet.
- Working with regeneration organisations such as Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) and Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme (HERS) committees in Glastonbury and Shepton Mallet. The Council provides an area regeneration officer in each of the five towns who co-ordinates a range of cultural activity such as public art and engages with the community on specific issues.
- Strode theatre, the Merlin theatre, and the Black Swan Arts centre are grant funded and share facilities with schools, and the local college.
- Working with the two AONBs to manage and protect the landscape, and managing a large network of public rights of way through an agency agreement with the highway authority.
- Supporting and joint funding five tourist information centres (one in each town).
- Supporting town and parish councils with funding and engaging with them on a wide variety of projects. Town councils give grant funding and distribute external funding to community groups on more local projects such as parks and playing field refurbishment. In 2004/05, Frome Town Council supported 39 organisations with up to a total of £100,000 of funding.
- Encouraging parish and town councils to take an active management role in maintaining the patchwork of public rights of way under a devolved agreement with the highways authority. Grants are offered under the Parish Paths Maintenance Scheme.
- Administering and regulating events such as Glastonbury festival, open air concerts, and a wide range of music, food and arts festivals, carnivals.
- Working with organisations, such as the Mendip Primary Care Trust on healthy living initiatives.

- Significant county-wide partnerships include the following.
  - Somerset Physical Activity Group (SPAG) which co-ordinates and implements physical activity such as health promotion activity at a county and local level.
  - Somerset Activity and Sports Partnership (SASP) which co-ordinates sports activity at a strategic level across Somerset and works with the Council to avoid any duplication of effort and to share facilities. The county council owns sports centres in Wells and Glastonbury which are used as adult learning centres and provide a focus for wider community development activity.
  - Somerset Arts Officers Group on new arts programmes, and working with local and regional tourism partnerships.

27 This inspection of the Council's cultural services considered the effectiveness of the above service activity and approaches in meeting local needs, achieving value for money, delivering improvement, managing performance and ensuring there is sufficient capacity to improve services.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 28** A number of culture related themes are highlighted in the existing and draft community strategy. Mendip's Local Strategic Partnership is called the Mendip Strategic Partnership (MSP) and is responsible for delivering the Mendip community strategy. This strategy was based on wide consultation carried out in 2003 and 2004 and included an exercise called *'The Great Cake of Life Challenge'* which was a series of qualitative consultation exercises carried out across the district. It sought to provide information on what matters now and in the future for people in Mendip and identified what needed to improve. The consultation exercise gathered views on 11 quality of life themes and this information resulted in Mendip's first community strategy in June 2004. A number of cultural related themes were highlighted, including the need for high quality leisure facilities, and the need for council support for tourism and the arts. This consultation also formed the basis of the Council's three corporate priorities.
- 29** Mendip's first community strategy has now been updated, and approved on 4 October 2005. The MSP Board is made up of representatives from a wide variety of organisations, including the public sector, faith communities, youth groups, the voluntary sector, and business organisations. The aim of the MSP is: *'to work together to help create healthy, just, vibrant and sustainable communities in Mendip'*. The Council is currently working towards delivering its responsibilities within the new community strategy.
- 30** In April 2005, the MSP reduced the number of priority themes from 11 to 5 following an assessment of progress by the MSP board. Cultural services are not explicitly identified. These key priorities are:
- investing in children and young people;
  - strengthening the Mendip economy;
  - strengthening the voluntary and community sector;
  - tackling climate change locally; and
  - affordable, decent housing for all.

- 31 The Council carried out reviews of its corporate priorities in 2005 and used the findings of these reviews to inform the current corporate plan. The corporate plan for 2005/06 is structured around the three corporate priorities and includes 17 broad objectives. The plan has a broad objective for culture under the corporate priority of greater prosperity and aims to: 'provide, support and encourage opportunities for sport, leisure and culture for all.' Other objectives in the corporate plan related to cultural activity include: 'develop tourism in a sustainable way', 'improve the sense of wellbeing', and 'improve the prosperity and vibrancy of towns, villages and the countryside'. The respondents to the 2003 best value general survey indicated that activities for teenagers were one of the most important things that needed improving.
- 32 Service aims and local priorities for cultural related activity are contained in business unit plans and reflect objectives in the corporate plan. The leisure contractor has its own service plans for each facility. Leisure service plans explicitly link with local health improvement plans and to the regional Sport England strategy. In addition, actions in the business plan for community services directly relate to the Shared Arts Strategy for Somerset, Somerset Activity and Sports Partnership (SASP), the Somerset Crime Reduction and Drugs Strategy, and other regional plans. For example, the Council is aiming to raise physical activity levels by 1 per cent per year over the next 15 years, to reach the national Sport England target of 50 per cent by 2020.
- 33 The Council endorsed the county-wide cultural strategy '*Celebrating Somerset, Something to Declare*' in 2002. This strategy reflects the regional cultural strategy '*In search of Chunky Dunsters*'. The Council's own draft cultural strategy has not been approved. Mendip is responsible for a number of actions in the county-wide strategy, including support to the Glastonbury Festival, supporting the plans of the AONBs, supporting community based arts projects and widening participation, and protecting the county's built heritage. The Council's business plans contain a number of links to these actions, for example in the community services action plan there are actions to: 'target rural disadvantage through arts, sport and leisure initiatives', and 'work with our partners to deliver a programme of sports and arts activities for all ages'. In addition, an action for the area regeneration service mirrors the Council's objective for culture.

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

### Community focus

- 34 The Council's cultural services have a good understanding of the local needs of the majority of the population. Decisions relating to planning, managing and delivering cultural services are based on a mix of regular and ad hoc surveys, needs analysis, feedback and local research. In addition, councillors, managers and staff have a broad and high level of awareness of local needs and ensure that these are represented in the plans, range, and provision of services provided or funded by the Council. The understanding of local needs is based on the following.
- A detailed survey of social needs in Mendip undertaken by the Somerset Health and Social Needs Analysis Group (HSNAG) in 2003. The Council then selected six priority wards to target outreach activity, community transport and concessionary schemes.
  - The Council's '*Great Cake of Life*' community planning exercise in 2003 and consultation from the new draft community strategy in 2005.
  - Working with community groups such as 'Shepton 21' on the regeneration of Shepton Mallet which aims to address the needs of disadvantaged groups.
  - A number of tourism surveys and annual mystery shopping exercises.
  - Annual leisure user and non-user surveys, feedback from leisure customer forums who meet every three months, and from customer suggestions.
  - Feedback from partners at regular meetings with county-wide officer groups, and engaging with stakeholders on events such as Glastonbury Festival.
  - A detailed audit and consultation exercise on play areas in partnership with parish and town councils which resulted in a children's play facilities strategy.
  - Feedback from art and sports and development activities from formal questionnaire surveys and feedback from key strategic organisations (KSOs) as part of the annual review of grants.
  - A review of market trading and support to traders such as local artists and food producers along with formal feedback from regeneration officers.

- 35 Cultural services are responding to local need based on widespread consultation and engagement. Feedback is encouraged in all service areas and there are many examples where the Council has responded well. Research on social needs is incorporated into the Leisure Management Contract. For example, residents from priority wards are targeted with discounts as part of the leisure concessionary scheme, the Mendip Leisure Passport (MLP). Following a number of comments from its leisure contractor that they were not meeting its targets for widening participation, the MLP was reviewed in 2005. The MLP is being relaunched in October with a standardised membership card for all users, a wider choice of discounts, and better promotion. The contractor also receives a financial incentive from the Council for every new member from a priority ward. As a result of such approaches, the Council is well placed to improve access and widen participation of cultural activity.
- 36 The Council is actively addressing the needs of young people and has widened participation in cultural activities. In particular, it has supported and funded the development of a community and children's centre for Frome. This project has been successful in securing funding from a number of partners and is due for completion in 2006. The facility will provide a variety of cultural activities including youth development projects and support to parent and child groups. The Council is also engaging young people in the MSP and has successfully encouraged youth groups to speak at council meetings. The Council has responded by involving them in the design and delivery of activities ranging from new sports facilities to arts activities. The Take Arts Pre School programme specifically targets rural areas and in 2004, nearly 40 per cent of the parents or guardians of attendees were unwaged. Over 71 per cent of participants thought that events supported a sense of community and 81 per cent highly valued the events held in their village hall. In addition, the Council and SRB are joint funding 12 digital arts projects and has trained over 200 young people, many from disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition, the Somerset youth games are hosted by Mendip and attract an increasing number of participants, in particular from young people with disabilities. This is helping deliver community priorities and the community strategy priority of 'investing in children and young people'.

- 37 However, services are not maximising the results of consultation by sharing them with the rest of the Council, or making the best use of its good understanding of local needs. In addition, communication with users and non-users of cultural services is not well co-ordinated. As a result, public awareness of cultural activities is mixed. Awareness of arts activities and large-scale cultural events is generally good but awareness of leisure activities is limited. In addition, information on the Council's website is basic and does not yet have the capability to carry out electronic booking or payment for activities. The website contains basic information on activities, and contains no service standards, or all types of grant application forms. Despite having a well-developed understanding of local needs, it is not clear how information gathered on the needs of black and minority ethnic communities has been shared within the Council. These communities are very small in the district, so increasing the risk of exclusion. The Council financially supports a number of groups such as the Chinese Association who are based in Yeovil, the Somerset Racial Equality Council, and uses contacts with the travelling community, but this knowledge and understanding could be shared more effectively. The Council is not fully exploiting the opportunities to further improve the use of information and learning.
- 38 Service standards within cultural services are limited. While corporate service standards for general customer service exist, such as for answering the telephone, specific standards for cultural activity are not well-developed. The exception is in leisure where users are involved through customer forums and some changes have been made in opening hours, in widening the range of activities and to cleaning regimes. These have improved, as a consequence resulting in wider participation. Some town and parish councils have also been involved in agreeing standards for play areas. However, this is not consistent across all aspects of cultural services and, as a consequence, the Council is finding it difficult to measure how effective its services are in delivering what it has aimed to achieve.

## **Diversity**

- 39 Mendip is effectively addressing diversity issues through its cultural services and broadening participation. Cultural services are targeting vulnerable and isolated groups through concessionary schemes, pricing policies and promotions in leisure centres. As a result, participation by minority communities has increased with 6 per cent of leisure users coming from black and minority ethnic communities. In addition, the Council has secured attendance from 12 per cent of people with disabilities. Participation levels among elderly people have also increased. Overall participation rates of non-users are also increasing and, in 2003/04, Mendip achieved top 25 per cent performance for attendance in sport and leisure facilities. As a result, the Council is ensuring fair and equal access to cultural activity.

- 40 Users of all ages, disabled people and those from target groups are involved in planning and delivering cultural services. This is, for example, through customer forums, involving parish and town councils in setting service standards for play areas and spending plans for heritage schemes, through access audits by disabled people, using regular feedback and surveys, and involving young people in spending plans. Cultural services are making significant progress in embracing diversity issues by the following.
- Targeting young people from the travelling community or those with a nomadic lifestyle through its digital arts projects and this is raising the profile of a minority community that is generally not well understood by the community.
  - Delivering its responsibilities in the three year Arts and Disability Action plan which is managed by the Somerset Arts Officers Group. In particular the Council has delivered a number of arts projects such as supporting 15 young people from Avalon Special School in Street who took part in a music project that helped them communicate ideas and build confidence.
  - Making a positive impact to engage non-users and embrace equal access across the community such as through the Stepping Stones Learning Disability Project. This project is delivered in partnership with Somerset County Council Social Services and enables adults with learning difficulties to take part in organised sport and physical activities.
  - Supporting projects promoting a better understanding between older and younger people. The Rusty and Not so Rusty Musicians Project attracted 100 participants aged between 12 and 80 and feedback was very positive.
  - Working with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and Jackdaws Educational Trust providing a variety of projects for disabled children.
  - Improving staff training on diversity issues, agreeing a more appropriate child protection policy, and employing more disabled staff.
  - Providing resources through the Community Crime and Disorder Partnership (CDRP) to support the 2BU Group to offer support to young lesbian and gay people within a safe and secure environment.
  - Improving participation in leisure centres from a very low number with 6 per cent of users now stating they are from a black or minority ethnic (BME) community. Activities such as swimming have been designed to better accommodate disabled people and in 2005 over 12 per cent of users considered themselves to have some type of disability.

- 41 The Council is improving services for people from rural communities. As a result, more people are involved in healthier activities and in community groups. Services are being designed and delivered to target rural locations through outreach activity, partnership working and linking this work with community transport scheme. A varied range of holiday activities is provided for young people. Over 50 young people were supported by community transport schemes in 2004 to give them better access to leisure facilities. Playgroups and community groups in rural locations are given priority for loans of equipment at affordable rates from the Council's sport and arts development resource centre. In addition, the Council has improved access to cultural activity through its support for village halls. There are 34 village halls in Mendip which are funded by community groups with some grant funding from the Council. A range of outreach activities are carried out with sporting activity co-ordinated at a county level by the Somerset Activity and Sports Partnership (SASP). In 2004 the Council helped secure funding for multi-use games areas in three larger rural communities to support the national programme for after-school activity. This has resulted in greater participation in activities and early indications show that the use of village halls has increased. This is helping deliver regional and local objectives for increasing participation in physical activity.
- 42 The Council is steadily improving physical access to cultural buildings but from a low starting point. In 2004/05, only 9 per cent of all council owned buildings were fully accessible to the public and this has not improved since the previous year. However, the Council does not own all the buildings it operates from. The Council has 12 buildings from which it delivers its services to the public. Of those 12, 3 are county council owned libraries, one is provided by a private landlord, 4 are leisure facilities, one is a listed building, and the rest are situated at the Council's headquarters in Shepton Mallet. The Council recognises its limitations and disabled people have been involved in auditing leisure centres and the Council has responded by prioritising its improvement work and encouraging its partners to take more robust action in upgrading their facilities. The Council now provides fully accessible wet changing facilities at all of its leisure centres as well as a pool hoist at swimming pools. Waterproof wheel chairs are also available. The Council has upgraded the main council chamber and has embarked on a programme to improve physical access to all play areas. Access to tourist information centres and leisure centres is now generally good. The Council estimates that at least 30 per cent of cultural service buildings are now compliant with legislation.

## User experience and satisfaction with the quality of the service

- 43 User experiences of cultural services are generally good and improving. The Council provides a range of opportunities to improve participation in physical activity. This is through leisure facilities, dual school and community use facilities in partnership with the county Council and school, grant aid and healthy living programmes. Swimming lessons are available for all abilities in all swimming pools and swimming clubs are actively encouraged to make good use of all three pools. For example, Strode Pool is home to the Mallards club whose membership is mainly comprised of swimmers with physical disabilities. Bus routes are provided to all leisure centres and opening hours have been designed to widen participation on bank holidays and in the evenings. Increased opening hours at theatres the Council supports have been achieved due to additional Council funding. The average opening hours of Strode theatre increased from eight hours to ten hours a day in 2003/04. Sports and arts outreach activity has been refocused on accessing rural communities, the elderly and young people. As a consequence, the Council is delivering its objectives for culture to: 'provide, support and encourage opportunities for sport, leisure and culture for all.'
- 44 Services are located in appropriate locations and settings, and opening times are generally convenient for users. Leisure facilities are located in the main towns, are generally well signposted, and are easily accessible by bicycle. Opening times of leisure centres were extended in the evenings and on bank holidays following user consultation. Most cultural services buildings are in good condition and are near to regular bus routes. Despite having some areas of poor disabled access, the Council is trying to compensate for this by improving its outreach activity. Feedback from various formal and informal surveys of outreach activity indicates users are well satisfied with these services.
- 45 Consistently high service performance has been recognised by industry standards and facilities have been rated highly by external accreditation. The Wells and Frome Leisure centres and Strode swimming pool are QUEST accredited, the Sport England quality scheme for sports and leisure. Frome Leisure Centre received a 72 per cent rating which places it in the top 25 per cent of facilities nationally. Four out of five Tourist Information Centres in Mendip are consistently rated in the top 25 per cent of tourist information centres participating in South West Tourism's mystery shopping campaign. Such recognition helps the Council assess the quality of its cultural activity.
- 46 User satisfaction with individual service areas is high. In 2004 and 2005, all leisure facilities were rated as either excellent or good by 87 per cent of users. Satisfaction with tourist information centres is also consistently high at 96 per cent. A survey by Southwest Tourism to visitors to Mendip indicated 95 per cent satisfaction with upkeep of parks and open spaces, and 96 per cent of visitors felt welcome. A high proportion of young people and older people are well satisfied with the range and quality of services available to them. Leisure customer forums represent a fair cross section of the community and consistency rate services highly. Stakeholders are generally very positive about the staff working in cultural activity and consider them friendly and welcoming.

- 47 The latest survey in 2004 to inform national performance indicators shows moderate but increasing satisfaction in Mendip. Surveys show 59 per cent of people were satisfied with sports and leisure facilities compared with 54 per cent nationally, and 65 per cent satisfaction with parks and open spaces compared with 70 per cent nationally. However, satisfaction with parks and open spaces has increased significantly since the previous survey in 2000/01 when it was only 52 per cent. The 2004 best value survey also indicated that residents think that community activities have improved and overall council satisfaction is in the top 25 per cent.
- 48 The Council makes a strong contribution to many local, regional, and national priorities. Cultural services effectively target locally identified health needs and understand the role that they play in developing safer and stronger communities. In 2004, 93 per cent of tourists felt safe when visiting Mendip, overall crime rates are falling in the district, and the numbers of crimes has reduced significantly in large scale events, such as the Glastonbury Festival. Cultural services support the voluntary sector through grants, outreach activity, advice, and financial support to organisations, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and healthy living partnerships. This is strengthening the local community. Multi-cultural events and faith events are publicised in Council publications, in tourist information centres and in council buildings. Many arts activities promote self development and skills training and the Council has been particularly successful in targeting young people and those from disadvantaged groups. This is meeting the Council's corporate objectives for cultural activity and is achieving a variety of service aims.
- 49 The following sections show how cultural services effectively contribute to two local, regional and national objectives; economic vitality, and quality of life.

### **Economic vitality**

- 50 Cultural activity is improving the economic vitality of Mendip and supporting local businesses. The Council's cultural services understand the value of their contribution to local economic objectives. Glastonbury Festival attracts 140,000 visitors a year and employs 34,000 people. In 2005, the festival generated £15 million of income on ticket sales with £5 million of this made or donated to local businesses within 25 miles of the site. Over £400,000 was paid to local people employed on the site. The Council helped secure financial support to local sports clubs and businesses by ensuring that these businesses paid the festival management company a lower percentage of their income from managing an area of the site. The Council is aware of any gaps in its understanding, such as the wider economic impact of the Glastonbury Festival and is commissioning a study into its effect on prosperity in Mendip.

- 51 The Council has improved its understanding of the impact of its cultural activity on the economy by working with its partners. The Council has used the results of various reports, such as *'Somerset Creative Industries Mapping and Impact Study 2004'* and *'Valuing Voluntary Arts Dorset and Somerset 2004'* to review its support to Key Strategic Arts Organisations (KSOs) in 2005. The Council concluded that grant funding was delivering good value for money and funded an additional organisation within available resources. In addition, the Council understands the wider economic impact of many aspects of cultural activity. For example, an average of £96 is spent on food, drink and accommodation per person attending folk festivals in Mendip and 46 per cent of Strode Theatre's audience is from outside Mendip. This has convinced the Council to continue to support cultural services despite identifying them as a lesser priority. The Council's contribution to these activities is small but highly valued by partners and, as a result, the Council is delivering good value for money from its investment in cultural activity.
- 52 Tourism is a major contributor to the local economy and supports a high number of jobs. The Council supports tourism by funding a dedicated tourism officer, funds tourist information centres and pools resources with regional partners to target marketing and gather information. The Council is working in partnership to meet its corporate objective of 'sustainable tourism'. It has contributed £40,000 towards the Somerset E-Tourism project, intended to make much better use of ICT for tourism, and along with investment from other council secured an additional £500,000 from the Regional Development Agency. The new E-Tourism system is improving access and tourism is being developed in a more sustainable way. Following its review of its strategic priority of 'greater prosperity', the Council found that £164 million was spent by visitors to Mendip in 2004, with an additional £8 million being spent on other tourism related activity such as transport. The tourist industry creates an estimated 5,667 jobs locally, with approximately 4,000 of these being full-time posts. As a consequence of this review, the Council has increased funding for tourism in 2005/06 and has improved the quality of its tourist information leaflets.
- 53 There is a clear understanding of the role of cultural heritage of the area as an attractor for tourism and as a good place to live. Despite a lack of evaluation of the overall impact of external funding on economic vitality, the Council is attracting significant funding and using this to target areas of greatest need. In addition, the Council has had some success in town centre regeneration. The Council has secured funding such as from the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) for Glastonbury of £713,250, and Market and Coastal Towns Initiative funding in Shepton Mallet. The impacts of these government funded schemes are monitored closely. More recently, £381,000 has been secured for heritage schemes in Shepton Mallet. Local community groups have decided where the money is being spent and over 50 shops across the district have been improved through grant aid together with a number of environmental improvement schemes. Arts projects, youth offending projects, and community gardening schemes have also been successfully delivered resulting in high levels of local satisfaction and fewer instances of ant-social behaviour.

- 54 The Council is using character appraisals and local planning guidance to improve its heritage assets and plan improvements using external funding. The Council has successfully worked in partnership to increase the area's potential to attract inward investment and is negotiating planning applications with large national and regional businesses which will help create at least 400 new jobs. Partners speak highly of the Council's efforts and early indications show that these schemes will boost economic vitality and make Mendip a more desirable place to live. In addition, this is meeting the community priority of 'strengthening the Mendip economy'.
- 55 Creative industries are actively and positively encouraged through ongoing support. Mendip offers grants of £500 to small businesses that are less than 18 months old and most of these grants have been awarded to creative industries. The number of creative industries in Mendip has increased by 2.3 per cent in 2003/04 and by 7 per cent between 1998 and 2003. In 2004, Somerset Artweek attracted an estimated 36,500 visitors to Mendip and sales amounting to £250,000 in the district. The Council effectively works in partnership to ensure the viability of a number of arts venues, such as theatres through grant funding. Skills in the creative industries are developed through targeted arts outreach activity and working in partnership. For example, the Council and SRB is joint funding 12 digital arts projects and has trained over 200 young people, many from disadvantaged backgrounds. Local markets support a number of local businesses and are an outlet for local artists and food producers. Following a review of market trading in the five towns in the district, the Council decided to retain the management of the market trading contract. As a consequence, the numbers of market stalls has increased in Glastonbury from 8 stalls to 31. Leisure centres and theatres are also encouraged to sell the work of local artists. An arts and crafts trail has been established in Frome and has resulted in more shops of this nature opening supporting local artists. The Council also sponsors the Mendip Food and Drink Festival and is seen as an important cultural event. In 2004, the festival generated over £400,000 in sales and increased tourism. This represents good value for money from the Council's efforts.

### **Quality of life**

- 56 The Council is making a strong contribution to improving the quality of life for people in Mendip. The Council has started to work with the county council in trying to measure people's quality of life and despite not being able to fully quantify the overall effects in Mendip there are indicators that have been agreed for Somerset. These economic, social and environmental indicators show that between 1999 and 2004 the quality of life for people in Somerset has improved in many areas, in particular in mortality rates, education, crime reduction, and reducing health inequalities. Indicators that relate to Mendip, such as recycling, deprivation, life expectancy, and overall environmental show that the quality of life for people in Mendip is improving.

- 57 The Council's cultural activity is making a strong contribution to the plans and strategies of its partners on quality of life issues. This contribution is well regarded by partners. There are clear links between the Council's own plans for cultural activity with the strategic plans of partners to improve people's quality of life and well-being. For example, the Council is a key partner of SASP; their vision is that all under 5s in Somerset will have improved co-ordination skills on starting school, which will enable them to adopt more active lifestyles and enjoy playing sport. One of the actions in the SASP strategy 2004 to 2007 is to ensure that all nurseries and playgroups will be able to have sufficient physical activity. Since 2004, 23 playgroups have used equipment from the arts and sports development resource centre and 8 Health Visitors have been trained in delivering physical activities. As a consequence, the Council is improving access to the wider community and meeting the community strategy priority of 'strengthening the voluntary and community sector'.
- 58 The Council acts well as a facilitator to support the improved health and quality of life of local people. It has helped develop a number of initiatives in partnership with others. This approach enables more to be achieved than the Council could do by itself. The Council works successfully with the Mendip Primary Care Trust (PCT) and supports a health promotion post. Initiatives include the following.
- Physical activity referral schemes available at all leisure centres offering exercise programmes and monitoring improvements in participants health.
  - Promoting the benefits of healthy eating and regular exercise on coronary heart disease and obesity programmes. All GP practices in Mendip can refer patients to these programmes and this has resulted in a reduction in obesity levels for those people on programmes.
  - Providing facilities and assistance on a wide variety of schemes to reduce health inequalities and have helped 467 people stop smoking in 2004 which exceeded the joint target of 319.
  - Establishing a back pain network for Mendip which is based in leisure centres and has resulted in over 20 users returning to work. Council staff are also referred to this scheme and has helped reduce sickness absence.
  - The Flexercise scheme provided training for 105 staff and carers to provide activity for people living in care. This is receiving positive feedback from participants on improved mental and social health. This is helping meet the community strategy priority of strengthening the voluntary and community sector.

- 59 Older people are benefiting from opportunities created by the Council to promote mental and social health through physical activity. Participation and satisfaction in leisure by people aged over is increasing and there are a range of arts activities that aimed at older people. The healthy walks initiative is well regarded and participation has steadily increased over the last two years. Volunteers are trained to lead walks aimed at people who wish to be more active. Healthy walks initiatives are linked to existing rural walking routes and are widely available across the district. In addition, there are a number of designated routes for people with limited mobility and the Council has been working closely with the local wildlife trust to provide walks that stimulate the senses, such as walking through areas containing scented plants. Walks are being extended to Wells and Frome where heritage and craft trails have been established. These are now linked to the Council's shopmobility scheme and promoted in the tourist information centres. A number of walks in rural areas are also combined with community clean up days and fund raising events. These initiatives are building community capacity, as well as encouraging communities to work together.
- 60 The Council works well with partners to enhance the local environment. Local regional partners have a high regard for the effectiveness of Council's approach to partnership working. The outdoor environment is generally well maintained by the Council and public open spaces for events, recreational, sporting, and casual use are well used. The Council maintains its built cultural heritage to a good standard and maximises opportunities for people to use and access appropriate facilities. For example, in finding new uses for older buildings and using grants and external funding to make improvements. The Council places high value on its cultural heritage and fully understands its potential to contribute to the quality of the environment for local people and visitors. The Council is also proactive in providing design advice. Six out of ten winners of the Somerset Building Preservation Trust Awards in 2004 were from Mendip and the Council made direct financial contributions to four of them. As a consequence, the Council is making a good contribution to people's quality of life in targeted communities and meeting its objectives in its corporate plan.

## Is the service delivering value for money?

- 61 The Council is demonstrating good value for money by effectively managing its contracts and through partnership working. The Council carried out a best value review of leisure in 2002 and concluded that leisure services needed improving. A detailed options appraisal was carried out and, as a result, the Council entered into a ten year contract with a charitable Leisure Trust starting in 2003. The process resulted in a reduction in the cost of the service of over £200,000 a year. In 2005, 87 per cent of customers surveyed were satisfied with the overall quality of services and value for money of leisure centres. In the same year, 66 per cent of customers thought that leisure prices were satisfactory. QUEST assessments have scored leisure centres highly on financial management, marketing and pricing. A new ground care and play area contract was also evaluated using a price and quality of ratio of 60:40, with a much stronger emphasis on quality. Satisfaction with parks and open spaces is increasing as a result. A new street cleansing contract has also commenced and despite not directly involving cultural services, clean streets do affect tourism and people's quality of life. In response the Council has agreed a local performance indicator of public perception and satisfaction with cleanliness. Positive relationships with partners are helping deliver better value for money.
- 62 The Council takes a robust approach to delivering value for money in cultural services. Partnership agreements are made for all grant funding and service level agreements are made annually with all tourist information centres covering issues such as ICT support. In 2003, a survey by Southwest Tourism judged Mendip as the best value for money for tourists compared to all destinations with 90 per cent satisfaction. For arts funding, an agreement was made between the county council, Strode theatre and Mendip which included some local performance indicators for opening hours and participation. In addition, each event is assessed for value for money. Leisure centres have a pricing strategy and a marketing plan and the Council has commissioned reports into feasibility of new leisure facilities. The Council is also working closely with SASP to further identify any gaps in provision across Somerset. The Council uses a scored value assessment model for capital funding bids and Invest to Save principles are used. In 2004, the Council approved a loan to the Trust to fund a programme of improvements to leisure centres. All income is kept by the Trust, but the Council retains ownership of the buildings. Participation in new fitness suites in Strode and Frome leisure centres have increased significantly as a result. As a consequence, there is a more systematic approach to delivering value for money.

- 63 The Council's costs in delivering cultural services compares favourably with others. This is despite very limited cost data. Direct council spending on the arts is less than any district council in Somerset, but receives consistently high satisfaction from users and is highly regarded by regional partners. This is due to effective partnership working at a local and regional level, and good targeting of small amounts of funding that lever in larger sums. Cost per swim is consistently reducing from £1.37 in 2000/01 to £1.28 in 2003/04, and tourism costs compare favourably with other authorities. In 2003/04, the cost per visitor to a Tourist Information Centre (TIC) was 24 pence which compares with an average of £2.31 in neighbouring authorities. TICs are managed by volunteers and jointly funded by the Council, tourist organisations and town councils. The Council's new support services contract commenced on 1 July 2005 and is worth nearly £32 million over a 12 year period. This contract secures a higher quality of service linked to an agreed set of performance indicators, savings of £160,000 this year rising to £600,000 in 2008, and secures an additional 35 jobs locally. Value for money is one of the main principles of that contract. As a consequence, the Council is delivering its strategic priority of 'better use of resources'.
- 64 The Council has only a basic procurement strategy which has not provided a good framework for negotiating value for money. The Council has recognised its limitations and has produced a new draft although this does not explicitly refer to value for money and it is not clear how consistently some procurement decisions can be reached. Joint procurement such as sharing staff with neighbouring councils in cultural services is weak and the use of benchmarking as a tool to evaluate costs and learn from others is underdeveloped. As a result, the Council has had to rely on the expertise of individual officers and councillors to make the right decision in each case.

## Summary

- 65 Mendip District Council provides **good** cultural services. The Council is meeting community needs through its cultural activity and is supporting many local and regional priorities as set out in the community strategy and in the plans of its partners. All cultural services have a consistently strong customer focus and respond well to local need based on extensive consultation and engagement. Mendip can demonstrate improved outcomes for residents from the range of activity and initiatives it supports. People in Mendip have a better quality of life, are healthier and safer as a result of the Council's efforts. Satisfaction is high, diversity issues are being addressed and people's experiences of cultural services are good. Most significantly, the Council is deliver good value for money by delivering cultural services in a variety of ways that maximises their impact on the community. This is despite a lack of a clear long-term vision for cultural services and some minor shortcomings in measuring the impact of large scale cultural events such as the Glastonbury Festival and understanding the wider impact of external funding. The Council understands these shortcomings and has plans to address them.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

### What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 66 The Council's cultural services have a strong track record in delivering improvement. It uses audits, internal reviews and other forms of challenge to improve services. Key performance indicators relating to satisfaction are improving as are participation rates for minority communities. However, there are areas where the Council has not yet adopted a more formal approach to achieving value for money.
- 67 Mendip's cultural services are effectively addressing weaknesses in services and managing change. At a corporate level, the Council has now started to deliver its improvement plan, drawn up in response to the Comprehensive Performance Assessment. The Council is strengthening corporate management arrangements and this is supporting improvement within cultural services. For example, through prioritising its capital programme and in councillor training. Improved prioritising of capital investment has led to reducing the number of 'at risk' historic buildings by 18 per cent between 2003/04 and 2004/05. The Council has developed its approach to financial planning, making a closer link between budget and service delivery and responsibilities for each task are much clearer. In addition, the Council now actively manages contracts to ensure that they are delivering value for money by setting clear performance standards and meeting contractors on a monthly basis to review performance. By strengthening these areas, the Council provides a firm base from which further improvements can be delivered.
- 68 The Council has improved the way it identifies and meets local needs. It has carried out a comprehensive audit of provision of play areas across the district, covering both its own provision and that of town and parish councils. Using this information, it has mapped play areas and, using demographic information, identified gaps in provision within the district. As a result of this mapping, the Council has identified funding to develop two new play facilities in areas where there is a need. The leisure concessionary scheme, tourism, allotments, the arts, and market trading has also been reviewed. Buildings have also been audited for disabled access and a programme of improvements has been prioritised and is well underway. This aims to address the very low number of buildings that meet the national standards for disabled access. The Council is also working with partners to ensure they upgrade facilities in buildings that are shared and not owned by the Council. By learning from experience and adopting a strategic approach the Council is ensuring that weaker areas are being addressed.

- 69 Partnership working in cultural services is strong and improving. The Council has facilitated many community events by grant funding partner organisations, including work with rural communities. In addition, the Council has effectively worked with partners to help to improve the safety of the Glastonbury Festival. After deciding to not grant a licence in 2001, the Council worked with the organisers and partners to review safety arrangements and, as a result, the festival now continues to reduce levels of crime. As a result of more effective partnership working, there has been a dramatic reduction in the number of reported crimes from 2,367 in 2000 to 478 crimes in 2004.
- 70 Levels of participation in sport and leisure are increasing and this is helping meet the Council's broad objectives for culture. Most significantly, participation by minority communities has increased from a very low base. Six per cent of leisure users are from black and minority ethnic communities. In addition, the Council has secured attendance from 12 per cent of the disabled community. Participation levels among the elderly have also increased slightly. Attendances in the two theatres that the Council supports have increased by at least 20 per cent from 2001 to 2005. Participation in various health initiatives hosted by the Council is increasing, such as healthy walks and health programmes. Attendance in fitness suites in leisure centres has increased between 2004 and 2005 following investment in new facilities. This indicates that the Council is successfully working with its partners to ensure that activities are more widely accessible.
- 71 Satisfaction with cultural services is improving. In a survey for national performance indicators in 2000, 52 per cent of people were satisfied with the leisure facilities provided. By 2003, this had risen to 59 per cent. The leisure contractor carried out further surveys in 2004 and 2005 and these show satisfaction levels of 87 per cent and particular improvements in relation to opening hours, satisfaction with staff and range of activities. Leisure facilities have also achieved high external accreditation scores that are amongst the highest in the country. Satisfaction with tourist information centres, arts programmes and sports development activities remain high. Partners also believe that the Council has maintained and improved services for people from more isolated and rural communities and for young people. This is despite a clear strategic approach to cultural activity and communication. As a consequence, the Council's efforts are being increasingly recognised by users.
- 72 While the Council has a strong record of delivering value for money, the Council lacks a formal approach to managing value for money in some areas. The Council has systems in place to deliver value for money and has made strategic and operational decisions to maximise the impact of its resources. Procurement decisions take into account the full short and long-term costs and contracts have terms built in to ensure that services are delivered efficiently and effectively within resource constraints. However, the Council relies on the culture of the organisation and experience of managers to promote this, rather than explicitly setting out principles for managers to follow, for example, in the Council's procurement strategy. This lack of formalised guidance has not had an adverse impact on the Council's work, but would reinforce the message to ensure that all opportunities are explored.

## How well does the service manage performance?

- 73 This is an area of weakness for the Council. There is no clear strategic vision in place for cultural services. There are shortcomings in performance management arrangements and, as a result, the Council is finding it difficult to measure how successful cultural services have been in meeting all its broad objectives.
- 74 Managers, councillors, staff and partners are unclear about the longer term strategic direction of cultural services. Although the Council has had a draft strategy for cultural services for the last two years, this has never been approved and is recognised as needing a significant update. The Council has adopted county-wide strategies but their objectives are very broad and success is not well monitored. Measuring impact is more difficult where objectives are too broad. In addition, the three corporate priorities are so broad they do not provide a clear strategic direction for the services. This makes the need for an overarching cultural strategy or vision more important because it can help with measuring progress against clear aims, prioritising effort, reducing duplication and targeting resources where they matter the most.
- 75 Strategies and plans for cultural services are not well integrated. The Council has a number of draft strategies for cultural services including a play area strategy, open space strategy, tourism strategy and a draft cultural strategy. These have been written without a strategic framework for culture and the linkages between them are not strong. Because cultural activity is spread over all three business units, there is a risk of poor co-ordination of effort. As a result, the Council may not be maximising its impact from cultural activity across all Council services.
- 76 The Council does not consistently monitor the impact of the work it is doing. Despite making a positive impact in many areas and achieving good value for money, the Council cannot be assured that services are having the desired effect on community priorities over the longer term. As a consequence, it is not clear what the Council is aiming to achieve in the future and if it is directing resources to the right areas.
- 77 Target setting and measuring success against objectives is weak. The Council's business plans set out broad statements of what the Council wants to achieve but lack clarity. The targets in place for cultural services are short to medium-term only and are activity rather than outcome-based. The business plans outline key actions for the next three years and for each outlines how the Council will judge success. These actions are not very specific. For example, one activity in relation to targeting rural deprivation will be judged by positive feedback from rural communities but there is no indication of what percentage of satisfaction is acceptable or how those activities will reduce deprivation. Similarly, some measures do not state the impact the Council want to achieve. For example, the Council aims to support community and village hall committees to develop and improve facilities, but the measure relates solely to the number of grants provided. The lack of clear measures of success limits the Councils ability to understand how much progress it is making in relation to corporate and service priorities.

- 78 Diversity issues are not yet fully integrated into business planning. The Council is currently achieving Level 2 of the equalities standard for local government but has not systematically considered equalities issues into service delivery and planning. There are a few examples of where services have made changes to service delivery as a result of diversity and human rights training. One example is the production of guidance on leisure services for people with learning disabilities but there are few other examples. The Council is aiming to address this and aims to achieve Level 3 by 2006 which will require the Council to set equality objectives which are translated into service action plans.
- 79 The Council does not systematically use complaints to learn and improve service delivery in cultural services. The Council and the leisure contractor has a complaints system in place, which is publicised on its website and through leaflets. Services respond to complaints on an individual basis and seek to resolve them but learning from complaints and trends are not shared across the organisations. This is a missed opportunity to improve service delivery.
- 80 Business plans only contain limited information on risk management issues. The community services business plan highlights only two risks, in relation to the leisure contract and CCTV funding, despite providing the framework for delivery of a range of cultural activities including arts development, community sport and leisure and leisure health promotion. The lack of a comprehensive approach to risk management can place the Council in a vulnerable position.
- 81 The Council's wider cultural leadership role is unclear. This is linked to the lack of a clear vision for cultural services. The Council does not regard itself as a cultural leader, nor does it aim to be one although many partners consider the Council as a driver and leader of cultural activity in Mendip. Most partners believe that the Council provides a valuable role in supporting and funding voluntary organisations that would otherwise not be economically viable. However, this role is not well communicated or widely understood.
- 82 At an operational level, cultural activity is well managed and well regarded within the organisation and by partners. Managers are viewed as being accessible and approachable by officers and councillors and there is a culture of mutual respect within the Council. The Council is striving to improve fair access to cultural services and support communities sustain themselves through grant aid and involvement in decision-making. Councillors provide officers with support and encouragement and have made difficult decisions in prioritising spending in delivering cultural services. The Council decided to withdraw support for the Amulet theatre due to high maintenance costs and safety issues, and is now working with partners to find a suitable long-term future for the building. The Council demonstrates strong leadership in making difficult decisions.

- 83 Performance management is improving slowly and the Council is more aware of performance issues. Despite the absence of clear objectives for cultural services, the Council has improved processes that relate to financial management and business planning. For example, it has improved the approach to business planning which now more accurately reflects the Council's budgeting process. There is regular performance and financial monitoring and better 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 the delivery of services. The Council has also adopted a clear means of prioritising different services across the Council. In addition, the Council is piloting a performance management framework known as TAES (Towards an Excellent Service) to leisure centres. This is aimed at improving eight specific areas such as community engagement, improving the range of service standards, and performance measurement. This provides a sound base from which effective performance management can be developed.
- 84 The Council has a positive approach to learning from experience. It uses learning from other organisations to inform what it plans to do. For example, it visited other councils to inform how the strategic review of priorities was carried out and, as a result, are looking to increase promotion of their achievements. Within cultural services, the county-wide officers groups of officers in arts and sports development are used to share learning and using this to improve delivery. For example, by joint funding arts organisations to ensure their economic viability, and avoiding duplication of effort. Within the Council, experience is shared on an informal basis although there is recognition that this could be improved, for example in relation to complaints. The Council is also self aware about areas of weakness and is working to develop plans to address many of these areas.

## Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 85 The Council has increased capacity within cultural services. This is by active partnership working, increasing resources, securing external funding and developing existing staff and councillors. However, a lack of a clear vision for cultural services or integrated future plans means that they may not be directed in the right direction.
- 86 The Council provides ongoing training and development opportunities for its staff and councillors. The Council has secured and maintained its Investors in People accreditation by ensuring that appraisals are used as a means of identifying training needs in line with Council objectives, as well as monitoring performance. Training needs are then integrated into a service training plan and delivered over the year. Staff are generally positive about training and opportunities for development in cultural services. In addition, there is an ongoing councillor training programme which has covered specific service areas such as heritage issues and diversity awareness training. By delivering effective training, the Council ensures that it provides staff with the tools to do their job more effectively.

- 87 Staff and councillors are enthusiastic and committed to service improvement. They are knowledgeable about their subjects and are continuously looking for different and more effective ways of ensuring that provision is continued, whether by themselves or through an enabling role with partners and other organisations. This willingness and enthusiasm can help drive improvement.
- 88 The Council is successful securing external funding to increase capacity. The Council has received significant capacity building funding to increase officer and councillor capacity. This is being used to deliver a change management programme, improve staff communication, and has identified rising stars within the organisation for development, alongside existing managers. In addition, the Council has secured external investment to maintain and protect the districts heritage and in order to regenerate areas of deprivation. By effectively working in partnership and taking a strategic approach to funding bids, the Council helped secure funding from the Community Access Fund for improvements to footpaths. Four Mendip projects were awarded a total of £8,338 and spent on community based projects and to train volunteers to maintain the footpath network. This further extends the Council's ability to deliver cultural services.
- 89 Investment in cultural services is improving. The Council now prioritises capital expenditure in line with its stated objectives. Despite being a lesser community priority, the Council has increased funding for most areas of cultural activity in 2005/06, including increases in arts funding and a £35,000 increase in tourism expenditure. This helps compensate for recognition of under funding from previous years and the decision to increase funding is based on the corporate reviews of corporate priorities and the importance of cultural services in improving people's prosperity. Additional funding is also being invested to help improve consultation and communication, ICT and website development, disabled access, and in new children's play areas. The Council has developed a customer relationship management (CRM) system for the majority of its services and has a rolling programme of introducing this across the Council. This is planned to increase efficiency and provide customers with a first stop approach for enquiries. New contracts are also in place to improve corporate support, street cleansing, grounds maintenance, and market trading. The Council has also recognised areas of weakness in its strategic approach to cultural activity and has an intention to review this in the future. Some plans and investment is at an early stage, but will place the Council in a better position to drive improvement.
- 90 Some key plans are incomplete and resources have not been identified to deliver them. Strategies relating to cultural services lack a clear statement of the resources needed to deliver them. For example, the resource implications of the tasks outlined in the county wide arts strategy are not clear. Key long-term asset management plans are not in place. This gap is particularly acute in relation to leisure facilities where buildings will require increasing maintenance in the future. The Council is aware of this gap and is starting to prepare an approach to developing such plans. Most significantly, the lack of a strategic approach to cultural services restricts the amount of strategic human resource planning which can be undertaken. It is unclear, therefore, whether the Council has allocated sufficient resources to deliver all its plans.

## Summary

- 91 The Council's cultural services have **uncertain** prospects of improvement. Despite having a strong track record in delivering improvement and improving capacity, the Council has shortcomings in the way it manages its performance. Most significantly, there is no clear strategic vision in place for cultural services and many strategic objectives lack clarity. Some key plans are incomplete and resources have not been identified to deliver them. Despite meeting community needs and delivering significant outcomes, the Council is finding it difficult to measure how successful cultural services have been in meeting all its objectives.