

Service Inspection Report

March 2006



# Cultural Services

**Forest Heath District Council**

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## Service Inspection

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

Audit Commission service inspections should:

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

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's 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.

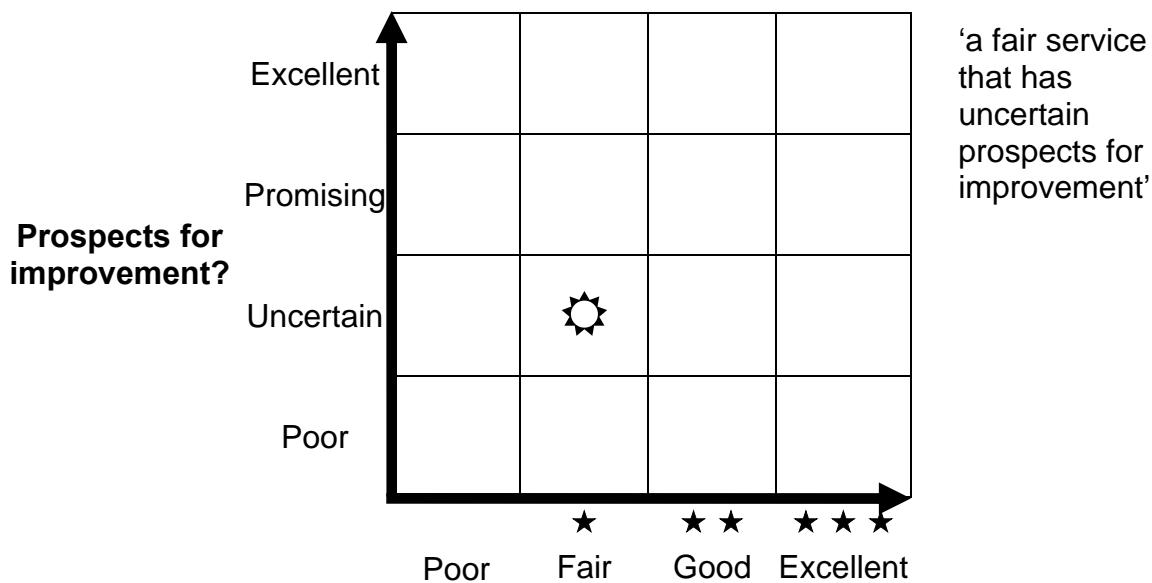
## Summary

- 1 Forest Heath District Council provides 'fair' cultural services which have 'uncertain' prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council directly provides and supports a range of cultural facilities and services within the district. These are focused in the three main towns. Facilities are physically accessible and opening hours have been extended. The service delivers a range of health activities, including through some effective partnership working. Satisfaction levels for users and residents, where measured, are good overall.
- 3 However, whilst the Service has some knowledge of local needs this is not comprehensive. The impact and outcomes of all activities and services are not measured. Service standards are not articulated and communicated and currently there is limited ICT access. Equalities work within the Council is underdeveloped and it is not clear how value for money is monitored and managed.
- 4 Over the last two years the Council has made significant progress in a number of key developments which include the new swimming pool at Newmarket Leisure Centre, currently being built, which will bring together leisure facilities onto a single site, the redevelopment of Palace House Mews and investment in fitness equipment.
- 5 Within the service performance management is effective, service planning is leading to improvements such as new skate parks and external investment is being attracted and invested.
- 6 But capacity within the service has not been maximised due to a lack of effective cross-departmental working, service planning within the Council is inconsistent and some deadlines are not being met. A robust corporate medium-term financial plan is not in place and a review is underway. Until this is completed the Council cannot show progress and cannot remain focused on important activities.
- 7 The contribution that cultural services make to the Council's priorities is not clear or understood within the Council. The service has its own vision and plan but links to the delivery of corporate priorities are not explicit. Whilst there is strong operational leadership from the Head of Service, who has a strong committed team, there is a lack of cultural leadership at strategic and political levels.

## Scoring the service

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

**Table 1 Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>**



### A good service?

Source: Audit Commission

- 9 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- service decisions are based on some understanding and knowledge of local needs;
  - facilities are physically accessible for people with limited mobility;
  - a wide range of facilities and services are provided primarily in the main towns;
  - a range of activities are provided; and
  - overall good user and resident satisfaction with facilities.

<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.

**10** However:

- knowledge and understanding of existing use, non-use and systematic ways of engaging with users is not comprehensive;
- equalities work is underdeveloped;
- service standards are not well articulated or effectively communicated;
- there is limited measurement of the impact of activities and services on local people;
- the Council is unable to identify whether its services are cost effective or represent value for money; and
- the Council is unable to clearly identify the impact the current configuration of cultural services has on access and non-use for example in rural communities.

**11** The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- improvements in performance indicators are mixed;
- the Council is slow to achieve some milestones and deliver projects;
- value for money over time cannot be demonstrated;
- lack of clarity over role of the Service in delivering corporate priorities;
- strategic cultural leadership within the Council is lacking;
- performance management is not effective, is not driving improvement in services or delivering improved value for money and is not focused on the delivery of corporate priorities;
- capacity within the Service is not being maximised through a lack of understanding of the use of partnerships and cross-departmental working; and
- a robust medium-term financial plan is not in place.

**12** However:

- improvements have been made to the service which can be seen by users;
- further improvements are being implemented such as the new swimming pool, expansion of Palace House facilities and expansion of Brandon Country Park visitor centre;
- there is effective operational management and leadership of the service;
- ICT is being used to deliver service improvements; and
- the Council is investing and attracting investment.

## Recommendations

- 13 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>2</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 clear strategic focus for the service by:*

- *clarifying at a strategic level the focus of corporate priorities and how these will be met by the service;*
- *identifying appropriate local performance indicators for the service which clearly measure how it meets corporate priorities;*
- *engaging councillors effectively in developing the strategic direction for the service.*

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

- clarity over how corporate priorities will be met;
- improved performance management through focusing on key performance indicators to meet corporate priorities;
- improve councillors' service knowledge; and
- make partnerships more effective, in line with the clearer focus on the objectives the Council wishes to meet through its partnerships.

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

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<sup>2</sup> 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 Develop future plans for the service alongside the leisure option appraisal by:*

- *ensuring that it is based on a clear understanding of the strategic vision for the service;*
- *clarifying how any agreement will be managed to meet existing and future needs of local people; and*
- *identifying the capacity required if the existing management of the Service becomes part of a new Trust.*

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

- an approach based on achieving value for money rather than one just focused on financial savings; and
- ensuring a focus on identifying and meeting local needs.

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

**Recommendation**

*R3 Ensure financial stability within the Council by:*

- *developing a robust medium-term financial strategy;*
- *involving all councillors in identifying non-priorities and developing a disinvestment strategy; and*
- *developing methods to measure value for money.*

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

- clarity over future direction of Council; and
- improved investment decisions.

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

***Recommendation***

*R4 Strengthening the understanding of local needs by a range of ongoing work:*

- *identifying gaps in consultation;*
- *addressing those gaps by targeting consultation more effectively;*
- *communicating more effectively with hard to reach groups;*
- *developing the Council's approach to equalities/diversity; and*
- *developing improved cross-departmental working.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better prioritisation;
- improving access by raising awareness of cultural activities;
- improving satisfaction rates with services and the Council overall; and
- increasing participation in cultural activities.

The implementation of this recommendation will have **high** impact with **medium** costs. A plan should be implemented by **September 2006**.

- 14 The Audit Commission will undertake a follow-up inspection of the service during 2006/07 to identify what progress has been made.

# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 15 Forest Heath is in north west Suffolk in the eastern region of England, bordering onto both Norfolk and Cambridgeshire counties. The district covers nearly 38,000 hectares and has three main towns, Brandon, Mildenhall and Newmarket. The rest of the population is spread across 22 small rural villages. The district was part of the London overspill relocation programme with a significant influx to Mildenhall and Brandon. Two large US Air Force (USAF) bases are located in the district, RAF Mildenhall and RAF Lakenheath. The US community living in the district, associated with these, is over 9,000 people.
- 16 According to the mid-2003 population estimates, there are 59,100 people living in the district. The population is made up of 19.8 per cent under 15 years of age, which is the same as the regional and national average, and 17.3 per cent of pensionable age, which is 1 per cent lower than the regional and national average. Six per cent of the population are from black and minority ethnic communities compared to 10.3 per cent in the country as a whole. But 23.57 per cent are not white British, compared with a regional average of 8.55 per cent and national average of 13.01 per cent. This high figure is due to the US air base staff, European migrant land workers, Middle Eastern horse trainers and stable staff and a high number of Irish communities connected with the racing and bloodstock industries.
- 17 Apart from the air force bases, the other major economic drivers in the district are tourism, with the Center Parcs Holiday Village at Elveden Forest, and the horseracing and bloodstock industries in Newmarket. Average earnings are relatively low with gross weekly pay for all employees at £331.60 in 2004, compared to an average of £410.40 for the region and £418.60 for the UK as a whole. Unemployment is low at 0.7 per cent, compared to a regional average of 1.7 per cent and national average of 2.3 per cent. The district is ranked as the 275<sup>th</sup> most deprived out of 354 English councils, where first signifies the most deprived council.

### The Council

- 18 The Council has a history of Conservative control. Following the election in May 2003, the Conservatives increased their majority to hold 22 of the 27 seats. The remaining seats are held by four Independents and one member of West Suffolk Independent Alliance. The Council operates a scheme under the alternative arrangements provided for by the Local Government Act 2000. There are six committees: community services, corporate services, planning, licensing, standards and overview and scrutiny.

- 19 The Chief Executive is supported by two strategic directors, one responsible for services and one for resources. There are currently five heads of service, with two further posts being advertised. This team forms the Council's management team. The organisation employs 307 fulltime equivalent staff (FTE).
- 20 The Council's gross revenue spend for 2005/06 is £32 million, with a net revenue budget of £7.73 million. The gross capital budget for the next four years is £19.5 million. General fund balances at 1 April 2005 stand at £2.43 million.
- 21 In December 2004, the Council was rated as 'fair' in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). The assessment found that the Council provides some good quality services; public satisfaction is above average and it provides a good range of activities for young people. However, the assessment identified areas for improvement including performance management not being used to drive improvement in all services, a lack of measurable targets and outcomes and some services not performing well.
- 22 An Audit Commission inspection of sport and leisure services in July 2001 rated the service as 'fair' and 'unlikely' to improve. Recommendations included:
  - to develop a cultural strategy;
  - undertake an options appraisal;
  - review the charging policy;
  - introduce a leisure card scheme, and;
  - address the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).

### **The Council's cultural services**

- 23 The Council currently provides three leisure centres, two in partnership with Suffolk County Council, two swimming pools, two community centres, a sports ground and youth drop-in centre within the district's three main towns. Mildenhall and Newmarket leisure centres are owned by the County Council. The Service also provides arts development, parks and countryside management, three local nature reserves, equipped play areas, two skate parks, sports development, fitness and health improvement, tourism and tourist information. A tourist information centre is provided at Palace House, Newmarket and two tourist information points at Mildenhall museum and Brandon Country Park.
- 24 The Council grant aids and supports the National Horseracing Museum, Mildenhall Museum and Brandon Heritage Centre and works in partnership with Suffolk County Council to manage Brandon Country Park. Grants are also available for sports, countryside, arts and local events.
- 25 Support for services provided through other organisations include High Lodge Country Park (Forest Enterprise), Memorial Hall Gardens, Newmarket (Newmarket Town Council), Brandon Remembrance Playing Field and local parish council play facilities.
- 26 The Service employs 87 full time equivalent staff and approximately 250 casual staff. The revenue budget for 2005/06 is £2.1 million.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 27 The Western Suffolk Local Strategic Partnership (WSLSP) covers the geographical area of Forest Heath, St Edmundsbury and part of Babergh. It has produced an overarching community strategy which sets out its strategic goals for improving the quality of life:
- make life safer;
  - make life healthier;
  - make a clean and green environment;
  - make a prosperous community;
  - make a learning community;
  - make life active and creative;
  - make an inclusive community; and
  - engage the community.
- 28 The pilot Suffolk Local Area Agreement (LAA) has been made between Go East, on behalf of central government, and Suffolk County Council, on behalf of service providers in Suffolk including Forest Heath District Council. This is structured around three high level priorities, children and young people, safer, stronger and sustainable communities and healthier communities and older people. A fourth priority, economic development and enterprise, will be added from April 2006. The WSLSP will be the lead body for ensuring delivery against the LAA in Forest Heath.
- 29 The Council's vision, as set out in its corporate plan, 'Flightpath to Success' is: *'to be a modern, highly regarded organisation, enabling and providing high quality services that continuously improve the quality of life for the whole of the Forest Heath community'*. This will be delivered by overarching corporate objectives of:
- corporate excellence;
  - sustainable economic wellbeing;
  - social wellbeing; and
  - environmental wellbeing.

- 30 Consultation resulted in the adoption of four corporate priorities in June 2004. As stated in the best value performance plan 2005/06 these are as follows.
- Vibrant town centres: to work actively with retail, business and leisure providers to create attractive, flourishing and bustling town centres which are welcoming and accessible to local people and visitors. The centres will provide a range of facilities for consumer choice throughout the day and night, and during the different seasons of the year, to stimulate individuals and enliven communities.
  - A cleaner environment: to actively educate and involve communities in improving and preserving the cleanliness of the district's natural and built environment for sustainable growth. Environments will be proactively managed, protected and cared for to increase people's pride in their surroundings and reduce the anti-social behaviour that results in graffiti, fly tipping, litter and dog fouling.
  - A healthier Forest Heath: to work proactively and collaboratively with partner agencies to create healthy, safe environments for people to live, work and visit as part of the district's wider economic development. The Council will act as an advocate for health provision, using education and promotion to tackle some of the barriers to active living and better health (for example: affordability of services and entitlement to benefits) with the aim of creating the seamless, timely and accessible services people require to live healthier lifestyles throughout all ages of their lives.
  - Accessible affordable housing: to work collaboratively with partner agencies to create a range and choice of genuinely affordable, decent homes of various types, and in a variety of locations, throughout the district. The provision of accessible, affordable homes will be programmed over time to meet current and future needs and will be appropriately integrated with other aspect of economic, social and environmental development.
- 31 In order to measure Council progress on delivering its priorities a priority delivery plan has been developed for each priority which includes aims, measures and an action plan. It is intended that service plans from 2006/07 will also identify how individual services are contributing to these priorities.

- 32** The service aim set out in its cultural strategy, the leisure and cultural services plan (LCSP), is 'to provide high quality leisure and cultural services that continuously improve the quality of life for the whole of the Forest Heath community'. To deliver this there are eight service objectives.
- To encourage and assist in the appreciation of and access to quality arts and entertainment.
  - To preserve the district's natural and built heritage and support the development of museums and other associated heritage attractions, and to promote their educational value.
  - To improve public awareness, appreciation of and access to the countryside through participatory environmental management, visitor sites and centres.
  - To promote and facilitate the development of children and young people, through play, active pursuits and creativity.
  - To provide directly or in partnership with the private and voluntary sectors a wide range of quality sport, recreation and community facilities, available to the whole community and visitors to the area.
  - To develop and co-ordinate activity and participatory programmes, in partnership with education and health agencies and voluntary sector in particular, to maximise achievement in sport, encourage personal fitness and healthy lifestyles, particularly in young and older people.
  - To attract and service visitors to the district and wider area through quality promotion and information and to support the further development of existing and new tourist attractions.
  - To promote the benefits of and increase participation in leisure and cultural activity as a significant contributor the quality of life of the whole community and visitors to the area.
- 33** The service produces an annual service plan which identifies key actions for the forthcoming year and the service has linked these to the appropriate strategy or objective or priority. This includes links to the community strategy, e-government, Gershon efficiency and access to services as well as to corporate objectives and priorities. Each area of service produces an annual service statement which sets out priorities which will deliver the service objectives.
- 34** However, the LCSP predates the Council's corporate plan and service priorities and tasks are not linked to the corporate priorities. Although service priorities are grouped under the corporate objectives.
- 35** The Council supports a number of county-wide partnerships and working groups, and specific health and economic vitality partnerships. This includes Suffolk Sports Partnership. National and regional priorities also feed into relevant strategies. Other key strategies which complement cultural services work include the youth action plan and community safety strategy.

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

- 36** Decisions relating to planning, managing and delivering services are based on some understanding and knowledge of local needs but engagement with some local stakeholders could be improved. Consultation for the community strategy, the town health checks and specific consultation completed for the best value review of leisure fed into the LCSP. The 'Your Shout' consultation with young people in 2004 fed into the youth action plan. Partners recognise that the Council has a good overview of its community and links into a number of networks. But partners also identified a reliance on consultation through correspondence and limited involvement of stakeholders in the development of plans.
- 37** Improvements and changes to some services are made in response to specific feedback and user comments but there is a lack of co-ordination and consistency across the service. For example improvements have been made to shower facilities at Mildenhall swimming pool following a user request for a grab rail and fitness equipment is being updated at the leisure centres following user feedback. Comments are recorded by staff in comments books at facilities and these plus written comments are regularly discussed in team meetings. But no formal co-ordinated analysis is carried out of the feedback and comments received which makes it difficult to assess whether services develop and respond fully to user needs and comments.
- 38** Facilities are physically accessible for people with limited mobility. In 2004/05, the percentage of council buildings accessible for disabled people was 85 per cent. Outstanding work has been completed in 2005/06 and the only two buildings not physically accessible are exempt due to rebuilding and redevelopment plans. Leisure facilities have fully accessible changing facilities and pool hoists. Opening hours have been extended at leisure facilities. Improvements have also been made to outdoor play provision with new skate parks and play equipment.
- 39** The service focus is on the three main towns. Facilities are located in the main population centres. Each of the three main towns of Brandon, Mildenhall and Newmarket has a leisure centre and the latter two also have swimming pools. There are museums in Mildenhall and Newmarket and a heritage centre in Brandon. There are also two community centres in Mildenhall and Newmarket. Tourist information is provided via Palace House in Newmarket and through two tourist information points at Mildenhall Museum and Brandon Country Park. Whilst the focus is on the towns; activities are undertaken in rural areas primarily through the Council's enabling role in sports development and arts.
- 40** Knowledge of local needs is not comprehensive. Management information within leisure centres through an Active Card database is currently limited to age, gender and where users live. Also some of the consultation data used is old and mechanisms for engaging all sections of the community are not in place. Less data on local needs is available for other cultural services.

- 41 The Council has some understanding of the reasons for non-use of some hard to reach groups but this is not comprehensive. A survey was undertaken in 2001 which is being repeated in 2006. More recent data is acquired through the ongoing work of specific officers, such as the community youth development officer. But the integration of this data into service planning is not consistently achieved.
- 42 The Service is overcoming some barriers to non-use. An Active Card was introduced in April 2005 along with a range of payment methods; pay and play and direct debit. A six month review identified that 19 per cent of users have taken up direct debit, 5 per cent an annual fee and the remaining 76 per cent have registered for play and pay cards. Income from direct debit in the first six months has exceeded the target for the first year. Discount rates are available for a range of individuals including those receiving state pension, job seekers allowance, incapacity benefit and carers allowance. Concessionary rates are available for individuals including those receiving income support, child tax credit and housing benefit. The service also joined the national scheme of the Racing Welfare Trust which allows stable and stud staff to use the Council's leisure facilities free of charge. Numbers of stable staff accessing facilities are available but not a breakdown of usage.
- 43 Engaging with users in a systematic way is underdeveloped. The Quest review at Brandon leisure centre identifies that there is no primary research programme and that more feedback could be gained from block hirers of the facilities. Facilities do not have user groups, although groups such as the disability forum for sports and leisure do input into specific areas when requested.
- 44 Access through ICT is limited. The website is informative but electronic transactions are limited. A booking form to hire a hall can be downloaded but it is not possible to directly book a venue or activity and electronic payments are only available at Palace House.
- 45 Service standards within cultural services are not effectively articulated and communicated. While corporate service standards for general customer service exist, such as answering the telephone, specific standards identifying the level of service a user can expect from the service are not well known. The exception is in the leisure centres and pools where a customer charter is in place, but even this is general. Users and local people have not been involved in setting standards and are not sure about what levels of service to expect.
- 46 Equalities work is underdeveloped. The Council adopted its current diversity strategy and race equality scheme in March 2004. Work to embed the implications of this has been slow but is progressing. A self-assessment on progress against the equality standard was completed in March 2005 with level one being achieved. Further work to embed diversity and equalities has been undertaken since then. Diversity is a standing item at senior managers meetings, briefings have been completed for staff and a service impact audit process is being used and has been completed in cultural services and strategic housing. But the service does not have comprehensive management information on usage of services. Councillors' awareness of equalities issues is limited.

- 47 The implications of equality, diversity and human rights are not integrated across all service areas. Policies are currently not risk assessed for diversity and equalities implications. Committee reports do require a statement about impact on human rights and racial equality, but in practice few reports seem to have considered this in full. The Council has a human rights group who review and monitor human rights within council activity.
- 48 A range of effective partnerships are in place with private, public and voluntary sectors to deliver and enable services. For example work with Suffolk Sport is helping to meet the service objective of 'promoting and facilitating the development of young people through active pursuits'. A range of specific sports activities are provided across the district including athletics, badminton, hockey and triathlon as well as 'come and try' sessions. But there is no formal review of partnerships and clarification of how some partnership work links to corporate priorities.
- 49 Satisfaction levels, where measured, are good overall. 2003/04 resident satisfaction is above average for sport and leisure facilities (second quartile) and parks and open spaces (second quartile). However resident satisfaction is below average for museums and galleries (third quartile), although the Council does not directly deliver a museum service. Annual surveys undertaken in all the leisure centres and pools show good user satisfaction with facilities. The average for all sites in 2004 and 2005 is 74 per cent. However, Newmarket pool achieved 47 per cent and Newmarket leisure centre 68 per cent. This is primarily due to the condition of the pool and gym equipment. Work is currently in progress to improve facilities with a new pool being built at the leisure centre and improvements to gym facilities being made.

### **Healthier communities**

- 50 A range of activities aimed at improving health are undertaken by the service but the targeting of specific groups and geographical areas is not explicit. The impact of the work is also not measured.
- 51 The Service is trying to address health issues through its activities. Health indicators show a relatively good standard of health in the area, 72.6 per cent of people described their general health as 'good' in the 2001 Census, although this does vary at ward level, ranging from 63.7 per cent in Brandon East ward to 83.4 per cent in Ereswell and the Rows. Although higher than regional figures, latest mortality data for cancer, circulatory disease and suicide are lower than national figures. The service is focusing on participation and health improvement through exercise on referral, healthy walks and its range of sports activities. Individuals are referred to the exercise on referral scheme by health professionals, including GPs, physiotherapists and nurses. The role of arts is less well developed and understood.

- 52 A range of opportunities are provided to help deliver health improvements. The Council has run an exercise on referral scheme: Active for Life, since 1994 and more than 3,500 have participated since its launch. This is delivered from the leisure centres together with the use of the Aquagym facilities at Mildenhall pool. Evaluation of this work, in 2003, highlighted that 74 per cent of participants were continuing to use the facility 26 weeks after completion of the programme. But numbers on the exercise on referral scheme have declined over the last three years, reported to be primarily due to turnover of GPs. Since January 2004, the scheme has improved contact with health professionals. Healthy walks are delivered through partnership. Keystone and Wayland Walking for Health Initiative (national initiatives set up by British Heart Foundation and Countryside Agency) is supported by the Council, Breckland Council and Norfolk County Council. This provides walks in the Brandon area run by volunteers. An evaluation of the scheme after a year of operation found 88 per cent of those attending regularly felt their health has improved. Ninety-four per cent were satisfied with the pace of the walks.
- 53 External partnerships and funding is used to deliver health work. The Active for Life work is funded totally by the Council. The primary care trust (PCT) provides support to the Council through training its staff to deliver smoking cessation and provides sessions on childhood obesity. Healthy walks are provided through volunteers. The Council is a partner in projects which increase access and participation and wellbeing. These include with Suffolk Artlink to develop creative opportunities such as a samba music day at Palace House for young disabled teenagers and a youth club for young disabled teenagers.
- 54 The service encourages an understanding of healthy living across communities, although this is not targeted. Two annual health and wellbeing fairs aimed at residents have been organised and delivered in Newmarket and Brandon, with the aim of increasing awareness and education on a number of important health issues. The first fair attracted thirty different health related organisations and 150 local people. Active for Life staff regularly speak to community groups about their work and promote healthy living, although this work is not targeted at particular groups or in particular areas. The service also promotes its work through its 'Out and About' section of the Council's magazine: 'Forest Heath News'.
- 55 The Council is not measuring the impact of all its health work. Whilst work links to service objectives and targets for participation, number of events, and numbers undertaking exercise on referral; it is more difficult to identify how it is delivering corporate priorities and meeting national targets. Most of the data collected by the Council is about participation numbers, cost of service and number of events rather than qualitative data. Where the Council has qualitative data it may not be up to date. The Council does not know if its work is improving the health of the district.

### **Economic vitality**

- 56** The service can measure the impact of some of its tourism work on the local economy, but not other areas of its services. There are examples of effective partnership working to deliver outcomes.
- 57** There is a clear understanding within the service of the value of its contribution to the local economy. This is particularly strong in the tourism work undertaken. The Council commissioned a report on the volume and value of tourism to the district in 2003. This report identified 'staying visitor' spend of £30 million and day visitor spend of £135.6 million, with total employment related to tourism spending of 2,676 fulltime equivalent and 3,798 actual jobs. A further report commissioned by the Brecks Sustainable Tourism project identified the volume and value of tourism in the Brecks in 2003. Within Forest Heath Brecks area staying visitors make 179,700 trips, spending £28.75 million and day visitors make 1,845,500 trips, spending £54.6 million. Estimated actual jobs are 1,794 direct and 235 indirect. Tourism is, therefore, generating a significant amount of money and jobs within the area.
- 58** The cultural heritage of the district is harnessed as a strong element in the area's tourism product. Through strong partnership working with the Brecks Sustainable Tourism project, the County Council, county tourism partnership, Mildenhall in bloom and others the service is focusing on Newmarket and its racing and royal links, its countryside and forests, and trying to promote its towns.
- 59** Some encouragement of creative industries and development of skills is being made, largely through partnership working. For example the county-wide Amplifier project, a three-year project funded by all the Suffolk councils, Arts Council and European Social Fund to provide over 2,000 music workshops and gigs across the county, has trained 30 experienced musicians from within the county to be the tutors to deliver the workshops. Discussions are currently taking place on the possibility of a creative industries course at the new university. The Profit through Productivity project operating through the Suffolk tourism partnership is also providing mentoring and business skills to a number of local tourism businesses. Seven businesses in the district have taken part so far.
- 60** The impact of the Service's work on economic vitality, aside from tourism, is not being measured. The Council is beginning to measure the number of visitors to its town centres and plans to measure their level of satisfaction with the town centres. But qualitative measures have not been identified.
- 61** Some stakeholders do not recognise and value the contribution cultural services make to economic vitality. People are unclear about how arts and entertainment can contribute to the local economy. They have a better understanding of the contribution of tourism activity.

### Is the service delivering value for money?

- 62** There is clear and accurate information on service and unit costs. Through the Service's leisure management system and Council's Agresso reporting system financial and performance information is monitored. There is clear understanding within the Service of any changes to cost. This information is discussed monthly at the department's senior management team. The Service measures service costs such as cost per visit as a local performance indicator and management indicators include spend per head on arts, community facilities and sports facilities and activities.
- 63** The Council is not clear on how its costs compare to other councils and how its costs reflect quality of service. The Council does not regularly benchmark with other authorities on costs. The Audit Commission value for money profiles identify that the Council spend is above average in its nearest neighbour group. This compares favourably to the satisfaction data where two out of three indicators are above average. But it is difficult to measure if costs are commensurate with outcomes achieved elsewhere.
- 64** The focus for decisions is cost. There is no clear link between priorities and resource allocation. The reductions in arts and countryside programmes reflect the reprioritisation of service delivery. But both have potential to provide health improvements and increase participation. Capital spending decisions are taken with full information on revenue implications, for example the recent acquisition of EPOS (electronic point of sale) for the leisure facilities.
- 65** It is not clear how value for money is monitored and managed within the Council. Councillors and senior managers are clear about costs but information highlighting costs versus quality of service is less available. The Council is unable to identify whether its services are cost effective and represent value for money.

### Summary

- 66** The service makes some use of consultation and other data. But a comprehensive understanding of local needs, existing usage and non-use is not in place. There is no formal, co-ordinated analysis of comments undertaken, although individual comments are acted upon.
- 67** The Council has a wide range of leisure provision in its three towns for the size of the district. Partnership working is helping to deliver service priorities. Access to services is improving through the introduction of a leisure card and physical access to facilities is good. But ICT access is limited. Equalities work is in its infancy. Overall satisfaction levels are good for both users and residents and the Council is making improvements to those facilities where satisfaction is not as high.

## 22 Cultural Services | How good is the service?

- 68 The service is undertaking a range of work to address health issues, but there is a lack of clarity over who it is targeted at and the impact of the work. There is greater clarity over the role and impact of tourism in achieving economic vitality. The service is focused on using its cultural heritage as part of its tourism product, particularly Newmarket and its countryside and forests. But the role of other parts of the service in delivering economic vitality is not understood.
- 69 The Council is unable to identify whether its services are cost effective or represent value for money.

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

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

- 70** The service is implementing changes, following the leisure and sports inspection in 2001 and best value review, some of which are delivering benefits for users. The accessibility of facilities has been improved, the Active Card introduced and charges reviewed. These are all delivering benefits for users. Other planned changes include carrying out an options appraisal of different procurement methods for the future delivery of the service, developing a user database and developing the community centres. But these are not complete and therefore still to deliver benefits for users.
- 71** Service planning has led to improvements in service delivery. The leisure and cultural services plan (LCSP) developed following the best value inspection, has delivered changes: an arts and heritage officer post has been established, resulting in increased arts events such as the annual summer professional concert programme developed with High Lodge Country Park; the current restoration of Palace House Mews which will provide additional gallery and exhibition space and increase the viability of the site; and other improvements are targeted such as the new skate parks for young people.
- 72** Improvements for users have been achieved which meet identified service objectives:
- new community-based groups established at the two new local nature reserves;
  - participation in swimming courses has increased by 17 per cent between 2003 and 2005; and
  - tourism enquiries increased by 11 per cent in the last year.
- 73** But the impact of these improvements is not explicit. Local performance indicators focus on usage numbers, numbers of events, and cost which makes it difficult to establish outcomes relating to user experience.

## 24 Cultural Services | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 74 The service has delivered variable quality of improvement as reflected in national and local performance indicators. Performance has remained the same in the national satisfaction performance indicators between 2001/02 and 2003/04 with the percentage of residents satisfied with the Council's parks and open spaces and with the Council's sport and leisure facilities remaining in the second quartile when compared to other councils. Resident satisfaction with the Council's grant aided museum remained in third quartile. Other indicators show a mixed picture. In the last two years, where indicators have only been in place for that period, performance is increasing for the number of arts events and audiences and for numbers attending countryside events or walks. But there is declining performance for visits to museums, exercise on referral and number of swims or visits. Action is being taken in some areas to reverse decline in performance, for example, by introducing new activities in facilities and increasing the promotion of the exercise on referral scheme.
- 75 The Council is slow to achieve some of its milestones and targets and this is linked to constraints on and the use of its capacity. A number of actions in the LCSP and CPA improvement plan have not been completed. Key weaknesses identified in the best value review and inspection are still being addressed and some recommendations such as the introduction of a leisure card have taken four years to implement. The Council had a long standing commitment to build a new pool and this has taken many years to achieve. The Council has a number of key decisions to make and implement over the next few months, but whether these deadlines will be met is unclear based on its performance on other projects.
- 76 Improved value for money over time cannot be demonstrated. The service is clear on how costs have changed over time but does not clearly demonstrate how value for money principles are embedded within its service objectives. The Active Card will deliver value for money for individual service users through providing discounts and concessionary rates enabling people on low incomes to access provision at reduced rates. The focus for the Council is on reducing costs.
- 77 Investment decisions take account of short and long-term costs. The Council use the Gateway model for capital investment which identifies the revenue consequences over a five-year period. A business case was developed for the Newmarket swimming pool.

### **How well does the service manage performance?**

- 78 The vision for the Service is set out in the LCSP. This is based on a range of consultation which was primarily for other strategies and reviews. It is translated into the eight objectives and links to the annual service plan which identifies progress on the previous year's key actions and sets out this year's key actions, plus performance and targets against indicators. This feeds into service statements which set out priorities and actions for the year ahead. The LCSP predates the Council's corporate plan and its priorities are grouped under the corporate objectives rather than the corporate priorities. Some links to the priorities are made in the service plan. Plans link to national and regional priorities.

- 79 There is a lack of clarity over the role of the service in delivering the Council's priorities. Corporate priorities include 'vibrant town centres' and 'a healthier Forest Heath' and although the corporate plan has a commentary on what the district will be like in 20 years; it is not clear how the service will help deliver this vision. The Council has developed priority delivery plans to measure progress on delivering corporate priorities; these focus on a small number of targets and actions which cover a small element of the work undertaken by the service. These plans do not clearly identify what the Council wants to achieve in each of its priorities, making it difficult to see how the service contributes to the corporate priorities. The staff satisfaction survey undertaken in 2004 found that only 50 per cent of staff agree or tend to agree that leisure services has a clear plan for the future.
- 80 The service has an uncertain future. It has to make a decision on the leisure options appraisal in the next few months but it has not addressed the strategic issues identified in the report and the impact on the Council if a Trust is created. The Council's future financial position means that maintaining current arrangements within the Service are unsustainable beyond 2006/07. But the Council has not identified the provision and services required in the district to meet current and future needs in cultural services. It is also not clear what outcomes it requires from the service.
- 81 Aims are not all challenging and robust. There is a lack of clarity over how the corporate priorities are turned into tangible outcomes at strategic level. Plus, priorities are not linked to an agreed financial plan. In addition, local performance indicators are not always challenging.
- 82 Service planning is developing. There are plans to identify how individual services are contributing to corporate priorities within service plans from 2006/07. Currently they are led by budgetary considerations and weaknesses in the corporate planning process have been acknowledged.
- 83 There is a lack of strategic cultural leadership within the Council. Stakeholders identify effective operational leadership from the Head of Service and active, visible and effective management by service managers. Members of staff are clear about the short term priorities and objectives for the service, either identifying with the LCSP or the annual service statements. But there is a lack of strategic focus and drive for cultural services. This is in part because of a lack of clarity over the strategic role of councillors within cultural services. Councillors have been identified who have an interest in elements of culture, such as tourism, sport and health. These councillors attend groups and partnerships covering these areas representing the Council across the district, thus giving continuity across aspects of the service. But these councillors do not have a clear role or responsibilities in these areas and do not all sit on the community services committee. This is recognised and the Council is examining the possibility of establishing councillor champions. But without this clear strategic focus for cultural services it is difficult to see how the service can meet local needs and how it will develop in the future.

- 84 Effective performance management arrangements are in place to drive and monitor progress at service level. The leisure management system provides extensive performance information used to monitor costs and performance. Activities identified in the service plan are monitored by the councillor performance management working group and the corporate management team. Other activities are monitored within the service on a monthly basis.
- 85 However, the corporate performance management system is not embedded and an effective performance culture is developing. Currently performance management is making a limited impact on improved performance within the Council. The Council has invested in and is working to improving the performance management arrangements. But the implementation of new performance management software has been delayed and its use has been limited to national performance indicators. Recommendations following a recent review of Overview and Scrutiny Committee are being put into place and work is being undertaken to develop challenge by councillors at the performance management working group. But it is too soon for these to have an impact on performance management arrangements.
- 86 Effective performance management arrangements are not fully in place to drive and deliver improved value for money. There is clear understanding within the Service of cost information but there is limited use made of benchmarking to compare and evaluate processes, costs and outcomes. Where this has been used there have been benefits, for example the Tourist Information Centre shop at Palace House was redeveloped following access to benchmarking information which resulted in significant increase in income. But this approach isn't systematic across the service. Councillors are more focused on cost reduction rather than managing cost and quality. The introduction of the Vanguard Method of systems thinking is aimed at lowering costs and improving quality of service and this has been used in a number of services, including benefits, resulting in improved performance.
- 87 Performance management is not wholly focused on the delivery of corporate priorities. The Council monitors a comprehensive list of targets from key documents and has developed a number of local performance indicators. But it is difficult to clearly identify how the Council is meeting its key priorities from this raft of information. This may improve as the priority delivery plans are monitored but as these are not comprehensive there will still be gaps.
- 88 Service planning deadlines have not been met. The service planning framework is set out in the best value performance plan but deadlines in 2005/06 have not been met which is resulting in the budget setting process occurring without service plans in place for the forthcoming year. The focus is therefore on cost reduction rather than strategic direction and quality of service.
- 89 Also, service planning is inconsistent. Service plans are not SMART and are produced by individual services without reference to those of other services. Planning currently is finance led. Risk management in service planning is at an early stage of development. Assessment of risk is being used in new developments such as EPOS but not in service plans.

- 90 Sharing of learning is not systematically undertaken although there are some examples of good practice. The Service is working closely with St Edmundsbury Borough Council on developing its options for the future of the Service. Local arrangements exist for the use of complaints and other comments but there is no analysis of this data to systematically use it to improve services. Similarly there is no high level monitoring or analysis of trends taking place across the Service. This does not allow the Service to spot key common issues or trends and use these to improve services as a whole or feed into corporate improvement.

### **Does the service have the capacity to improve?**

- 91 Constraints on capacity have been acknowledged within the Council and capacity has not been maximised. Leisure service is the focus for cultural work within the Council with strategic tourism, youth development, health improvements and community safety based in other service areas. But the Council does not have effective mechanisms in place to ensure that the cross-departmental working required to meet both corporate and national priorities is utilised. Within the Council there is a lack of awareness of cross-cutting issues and how staff can deliver these. Service planning does not effectively ensure that cross-cutting issues such as equalities, community safety, health improvement and young people are fed into all relevant plans. A number of tasks within the CPA improvement plan which have missed deadlines are attributed to capacity issues.
- 92 Capacity within the Council is developing. Two of the cultural service managers are taking part in the Council's management development programme. This has been set up to develop managers to influence and improve weak areas highlighted in CPA and because the staff survey showed that basic management skills were lacking. The Council make high use of external consultants to undertake work where the Council does not have capacity to do it itself. In many cases this may provide expertise that the Council could not afford to maintain in-house. The Council is also building its corporate capacity through the appointment of a head of corporate services and the recruitment of a head of community development.
- 93 A robust medium-term financial plan is not in place. The current medium-term financial plan is being reviewed and the current draft identifies the difficulties there will be in sustaining budgets. Work is continuing to identify solutions to address these difficulties. Currently it does not link to service plans or agreed priorities. The Council has identified it will need to make significant savings by 2007/08. Work is underway to identify savings and some proposals have been agreed, such as car parking charges in Newmarket, but there isn't an agreed savings or disinvestment plan. The Council recognises that the current level of expenditure for cultural services is unsustainable and sees the options appraisal as the key to reduce costs. Without an agreed plan current service levels may be unsustainable or future improvement unlikely.
- 94 Consideration of equalities and human rights issues in all policies and service delivery cannot be demonstrated. This is recognised by the Council. An audit is underway to identify the diversity implications within the Council's policies. The Council has responded late to the equalities agenda and is trying to catch up.

- 95 The achievement of value for money through effective procurement cannot be measured. The Council developed a procurement strategy in 2004 which stresses the need to base procurement decisions on a variety of considerations apart from the lowest cost. But the implementation of the strategy is not being formally monitored and the impact of the policy on practice is not known across the Council. The Council is not able to demonstrate improvements in value for money as a consequence of the action taken so far and the actual practice within services has not been assessed to check against good value for money.
- 96 Partnerships are used to varying success to deliver services and meet corporate and service priorities. There are examples of good partnerships where the Council is involved because of the clear benefits, for example the developments at Brandon Country Park. There are a range of county and geographical partnerships which are delivering services which the Council could not deliver alone, such as healthy walks, sports development and tourism development. The Council has successfully brought together a range of representatives from the horseracing industry to deliver the Home of Horseracing project which is at the early stages of its physical development. The impact of other partnerships is less clear. For example partners awarded grants without being set explicit targets or outcomes. This results in some partners not being clear about the priorities and focus of the Council.
- 97 ICT is beginning to be used to deliver service objectives and improvements but not to improve customer access. Planned ICT improvements such as the investment in EPOS will improve management information about service users and non-users and enable the service to better target its services. The new system will also provide greater financial management as it will enable electronic income to be received and allow for electronic bookings in all services. But currently ICT is not used as part of an integrated approach to improving access to services for users and potential users.
- 98 Continued improvement can be delivered through the existing staff. Members of staff are enthusiastic, energetic, committed, and there is evidence of strong team working. Capacity to deliver health improvement work has been increased through the appointment of a health improvement officer in environmental services. Sickness levels and turnover are low within the service.
- 99 Human resource planning is effective. HR practices support service needs through training and development and address limitations on staff resources such as sickness absence. Training and development needs are identified through the appraisal process and staff reported that the training they require to undertake their jobs is available, although access to training to maintain and develop technical expertise is more difficult. An action plan is being put into place following the staff survey of 2004.

- 100** The Council is investing and attracting external investment. Fitness facilities at the leisure centres are currently being improved following internal investment. The Council has started building a new swimming pool at Newmarket with £3 million from Sport England and £5 million of its own funds. The expansion of Brandon Country Park visitor centre and restoration of the mausoleum and walled garden is being achieved through funding from the County Council and Forest Heath plus £500,000 from Heritage Lottery Fund. The Council have also funded the redevelopment of the Palace House Mews. But without a clearer definition of strategic priorities and a lack of cultural leadership it is not clear if this investment will meet current and future needs.

## Summary

- 101** The service has a track record of delivering improvements, but some have taken many years to achieve. Performance indicators show variable improvements across services and improved value for money over time cannot be demonstrated.
- 102** A vision is in place for the service within the LCSP but the future direction of the Service, regarding how it delivers corporate priorities, is unclear. A lack of cultural leadership and strategic direction means an uncertain future for the service. The Council is about to make decisions on the future management of the service without being clear about what they want the service to look like and deliver. This is difficult without a robust medium-term financial plan in place.
- 103** Performance management within the service is effective but corporately it is not embedded or effective. It is not clear how the performance management framework drives value for money. There is also a lack of focus on how corporate priorities are being delivered in the current performance management arrangements.
- 104** Capacity is an issue for the Council, but it is failing to maximise the capacity within the Service through effective cross-departmental working, through good service planning and through effective partnership working. But the Council is building its corporate capacity through the addition of two new posts. The Council is attracting external financial investment.