

Service Inspection Report

March 2006



Cultural Services

Sefton Council

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Contents

Service Inspection	4
Summary	5
Scoring the service	6
Recommendations	9
Report	11
Context	11
The locality	11
The Council's cultural services	12
How good is the service?	14
What has the service aimed to achieve?	14
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?	16
Access, customer care and user focus	16
Diversity	18
Service outcomes for users and community	20
Healthier communities	21
Quality of life	22
User experience and satisfaction	25
Is the service delivering value for money?	25
Summary	27
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	28
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	28
How well does the service manage performance?	30
Does the service have the capacity to improve?	32
Summary	35

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.

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

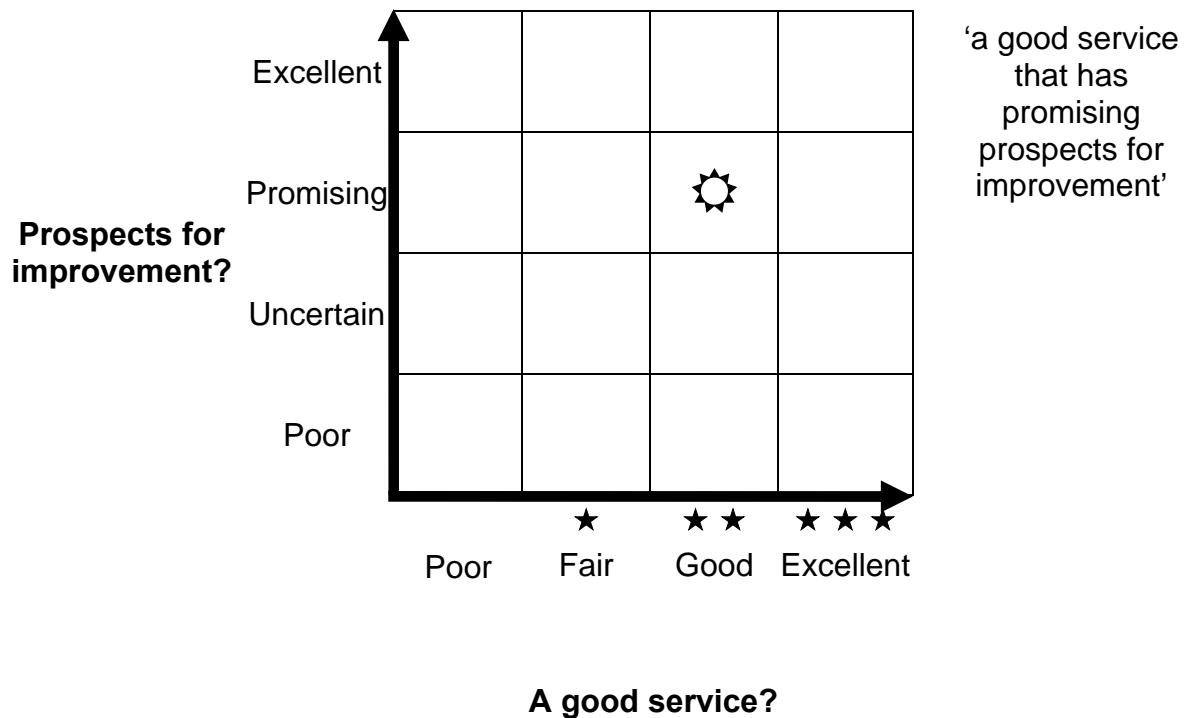
Summary

- 1 The borough of Sefton is one of five metropolitan boroughs in the county of Merseyside. It covers an area of 150 square kilometres and has a population of 282,000 of whom 1.6 per cent are from minority ethnic communities.
- 2 The borough is economically diverse with a wide spread of deprivation and affluence. Some wards in the south of the borough in Bootle and in the central area of Southport are in the 10 per cent most economically deprived in the country whilst some wards in Formby and Crosby are in the country's 5 per cent most affluent. The borough has comparatively poor health with levels of heart disease and cancer being amongst the highest in the country. Levels of crime are below the national average although there are 'hot spots' in the south of the borough.
- 3 Economically, Sefton also has a diverse mix of businesses ranging from companies of regional/national importance such as Liverpool Freeport/Alliance and Leicester based in Bootle, through to the agricultural areas around Formby and Maghull. Tourism is important to the borough and is primarily concentrated on the resort town of Southport but also includes 20 miles of outstanding coastline.
- 4 The borough has a range of cultural assets which include Royal Birkdale Golf Club, one of many outstanding links course in the area and Aintree racecourse, home of the Grand National steeplechase. Much of the coast is of high environmental importance and as such is subject to regulations designed to protect the environment, its plants and animals including red squirrels. Most recently, Sefton has become known internationally through the installation of Anthony Gormley's statues known as 'Another Place' on the seafront at Crosby.
- 5 The Council comprises 66 members and for many years, no party has had overall control. The Council has a cabinet system with ten portfolios shared between the political parties. Day-to-day management of the Council is under the control of a management board comprising the leaders of the three political parties plus the Chief Executive and strategic directors.
- 6 The Council's cultural services are currently located in the Council's social and community services directorate. The Council is planning to move the service to the regeneration directorate from April 2006. The services included in this inspection are divided into two closely related sections.
 - Leisure services department: libraries and information services, landscape development and management, arts and culture, coast and countryside, sport and recreation, cemeteries and crematoria.
 - Tourism division: events, conferences and resort management and Southport Partnership for Regeneration.
- 7 Planned expenditure on cultural services in 2005/06 is £27.5 million gross which is 5.3 per cent of gross council spending. Income is £7.6 million, giving a total net spending of £19.9 million.

Scoring the service

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

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

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

- 9 The service is a good, two-star service because of the following.
- It recognises the geography and diversity of the borough and designs facilities and programmes to meet local needs. Consultation is generally good and leads to service improvements.
 - The Council is working to meet national health improvement objectives through a range of activities under the 'Active Sefton' brand. This has led to the development of nationally recognised programmes for physical activity and cardiac rehabilitation and the creation of mental health support programmes.
 - The Council works to improve the quality of life for residents not only through its general leisure services, but also by improving community safety through diversionary leisure opportunities for young people, and providing temporary employment for long-term unemployed to improve their prospects.
 - The Council's tourism service successfully promotes the borough, and Southport in particular, to visitors. It has used European funding to develop both marketing and the local tourism infrastructure. As a result, visitor numbers, spending and job support have increased.
 - The Council's coastal management service is recognised as being of the highest standard. The service has external validation of this quality through ENCAMS seaside awards.
 - The parks service delivers high-quality horticulture as shown by continuing success in the Britain in Bloom competition and two Green Flag awards.
 - There are examples of the service working with minority communities to develop leisure services to meet their needs. These include the Arabic community in Southport and asylum seekers in Formby.
 - Overall, the Council's cultural services offer good value for money.
- 10 However:
- satisfaction levels, as measured by the three-yearly best value performance indicator surveys are low for parks and open spaces and for sport and leisure facilities, though local surveys indicate improvements since the last survey in 2003;
 - the Council meets only three of the ten Public Library Service Standards although it falls only marginally short on another two;
 - access for disabled people is difficult in some buildings and there is no consistent departmental approach to improving access; and
 - notwithstanding the generally good approach to consultation, the Council does not systematically gather market intelligence about customers or the views of non-users and does not systematically engage with hard-to-reach groups. In addition, although there are service charters for some parts of the service, neither the standards themselves nor performance against them are prominently displayed. Only one small part of the service is systematically monitoring the ethnicity or disability of its users.

11 The service has promising prospects for improvement because of the following.

- The Council has made an explicit commitment to improvement of the service and allocated additional resources to achieve improvement. For example, additional indoor and outdoor leisure centres are under construction and the Council has improved the specification for a new grounds maintenance contract. It has committed additional revenue funds to meet these developments.
- The Council has a clear vision for the development of tourism especially concerning the marketing of Southport as a 'classic resort'. This has already led to the development of a five-star hotel and a four-star hotel is in the later stages of planning.
- The Council has a strong track record in attracting external funds for both capital and revenue expenditure.
- The leisure services and tourism departments have strong management teams in place and have recently gained the Investors in People award.
- The Council has a strong track record of adding to its internal capacity through partnerships with the private, voluntary, health and educational sectors. Partners speak highly of the Council's partnership working.
- Customer satisfaction is increasing within sports and recreation, and with parks and open spaces.
- The best value review of libraries has resulted in service improvements.
- Electronic point of sale equipment in leisure centres will enhance the Council's ability to track patterns of use and better identify underrepresented groups.

12 However:

- some time-limited funding streams are coming to an end and so some activities may not be able to continue at the same level;
- performance management systems are improving only from a low base and there is limited challenge of performance, no clear priorities are set by members;
- some plans and strategies do not always have clear targets and timetables; and
- recruitment and retention of staff is difficult in some areas of the service.

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 costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

Recommendation

R1 The Council should improve its work with minority communities by:

- *undertaking systematic consultation across all its leisure services with older people, BME communities and other hard-to-reach groups; and*
- *introducing systematic monitoring of usage and satisfaction of minority groups.*

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

- improved access to the service by hard-to-reach groups; and
- improved service development to meet their needs.

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

Recommendation

R2 The Council should compile and publish comprehensive plans to comply with its obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act.

The expected **benefit** of this recommendation is:

- improved service delivery to people with a disability.

The implementation of this recommendation will have **medium** impact with **medium** costs. This should be implemented by **March 2007**.

² Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 percent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendation

R3 The Council should improve the value for money of its cemeteries and crematoria service by increasing charges towards the national average.

The expected **benefit** of this recommendation is:

- improved value for money within the service.

The implementation of this recommendation will have **medium** impact with **low** costs. This should be implemented by **March 2007**.

Recommendation

R4 The Council should prepare plans to increase aggregate opening hours and visits in libraries to move towards the Public Library Service Standards.

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

- to provide increased access to the library service; and
- improved education, skills, health and cultural awareness in a wider proportion of residents.

The implementation of this recommendation will have **medium** impact with **medium** costs. This should be implemented by **financial year 2008/09**.

Recommendation

R5 The Council should improve performance management by ensuring all numerical targets in strategies and plans are both challenging and realistic and all tasks are SMART³.

The expected **benefit** of this recommendation is:

- improved service efficiency and effectiveness through better service planning.

The implementation of this recommendation will have **medium** impact with **low** costs. This should be implemented **during the current round of service plans**.

³ Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Resourced, Timetabled

Report

Context

The locality

- 14 The Borough of Sefton is one of five metropolitan boroughs in the county of Merseyside. It covers an area of 150 square kilometres and has a population of 282,000 of whom 1.6 per cent are from minority ethnic communities. Those of retirement age make up 22.1 per cent of the total compared with 18.4 per cent for England as a whole. Sefton's population is expected to decline to 264,000 by 2021.
- 15 Sefton is a coastal authority made up of five major conurbations stretching from Bootle in the south (on the northern edges of Liverpool), moving up to Crosby, Formby and Southport (bordering West Lancashire) along the coast, with the town of Maghull to the east of the Borough.
- 16 The Borough is economically diverse with a wide range of deprivation and affluence. Some wards in the south of the borough in Bootle and in the central area of Southport are in the 10 per cent most economically deprived in the country whilst some wards in Formby and Crosby are in the country's 5 per cent most affluent. Unemployment is 2.6 per cent compared with 2.4 per cent for the country as a whole. Rates of crime for Sefton as a whole are below the national average although there are crime 'hot spots' in the south of the borough.
- 17 Due to the high deprivation in the south of the borough and central Southport, these areas receive funding from a number of government initiatives such as Neighbourhood Renewal Fund, Single Regeneration Budget, Children's Funds and Housing Market Renewal Initiative. Amongst the targets being addressed by these funds are the borough's poor health indicators. The rate of long-term illness is 22 per cent compared with 18 per cent for the country as a whole and rates of coronary heart disease and cancer are both in the worst 5 per cent in England. Rates of infant mortality and incidence of stroke are also well above the national average.
- 18 Economically, Sefton also has a diverse mix of businesses ranging from companies of regional/national importance such as Liverpool Freeport and Alliance and Leicester in Bootle to the agricultural areas around Formby and Maghull. Tourism is important to the borough, primarily concentrated on the resort town of Southport, but also including 20 miles of outstanding coastline which has one of the largest sand dune systems in the country. There are also significant proportions of light industrial and service businesses spread throughout the borough.

- 19 The Borough has a range of cultural assets including Royal Birkdale Golf Club, one of many outstanding links course in the area and Aintree racecourse, home of the Grand National steeplechase. Part of the coast is designated as an EU Special Protection Area for birds and is one of the few remaining habitats for red squirrels. Most recently Sefton has become known internationally through the installation of artist Anthony Gormley's statues known as 'Another Place' on the seafront at Crosby. Each year the Council and its partners promote and support a range of events including the Southport Air Show, Southport Flower Show and Musical Fireworks displays.
- 20 The Council comprises 66 councillors and for many years, no party has had overall control. At present there are 27 Liberal Democrat councillors, 20 Labour councillors and 19 councillors from the Conservative Party. The Council has a cabinet system with 10 portfolios shared between the political parties.
- 21 Day-to-day management of the Council is under the control of a management board comprising the leaders of the three political parties plus the Chief Executive and three strategic directors.
- 22 The Council employs 11,000 staff in six directorates plus support services. The 2005/06 budgets show revenue spending of £523 million gross, £340 million net. The capital budget for 2005/06 is £67 million.
- 23 The Audit Commission judged the Council overall to be a 'two-star' authority that is 'improving well' in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) in 2005.

The Council's cultural services

- 24 The Council's cultural services are currently located in the Council's social and community services directorate. The Council is planning to move the service to the regeneration directorate from April 2006. The services included in this inspection are delivered by two departments.
 - Leisure services department:
 - libraries and information services (13 static libraries, 1 mobile);
 - landscape development and management (30 urban parks, 180 open spaces, 70 play areas, 90,000 trees; maintains 600 acres);
 - arts and culture (including Atkinson Arts Gallery, Southport Arts Centre);
 - coast and countryside (22 miles of coastline);
 - sport and recreation (six leisure centres operated by the Council plus one operated by a PFI contractor to a council specification) and health, physical activity and sports development teams; and
 - four cemeteries and two crematoria.
 - Tourism Division: events, conferences and resort management, and Southport Partnership for Regeneration.

- 25 Planned expenditure on cultural services in 2005/06 is £27.5 million gross which is 5.3 per cent of gross council spending. Income is £7.6 million, giving a total net spending of £19.9 million. Leisure services accounts for £16.9 million of this total, and tourism accounts for around £3.0 million. This is an increase of 14 per cent on 2002/03 spending.
- 26 The service has a number of capital projects underway or at the advanced planning stage. The total approved for these schemes is £27.7 million with planned spending in 2005/06 amounting to £5.0 million. These include £19.1 million of leisure projects and £8.6 million of tourism projects. Planned spending in 2005/06 was £4.9 million for leisure, £0.1 million on tourism.
- 27 The Council uses a range of methods to manage these services. It directly employs the equivalent of 440 full-time people in delivery of these services. These range from staff in the Tourist Information Centre, coastal management workers, librarians and library assistants, museums and gallery staff, sports development workers, lifeguards and gym instructors. In addition, private contractors deliver grounds maintenance and horticultural services and manage the Southport Theatre on the Council's behalf. Crosby Leisure Centre is operated to a council specification under a private finance initiative (PFI) scheme.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 28 The aims for Sefton's cultural services are set out in a number of documents. These include the borough cultural strategy 'Most Efficacious in Every Case' which was produced by the Sefton Borough Partnership (the local strategic partnership, or LSP) in 2002. This provides an overall vision for future cultural development. The cultural strategy draws links with the North West Cultural Consortium and with the Merseyside Cultural Forum. It aims to:
- get more people involved in cultural activities throughout the Borough of Sefton;
 - strengthen pride, ability and citizenship in the people of Sefton;
 - make the best use of existing facilities and develop new facilities in response to the changing needs and expectations of the visitors and residents of Sefton;
 - improve access to culture and cultural activities for all people visiting and living within the area; and
 - improve the quality of life of Sefton residents through the cultural sector.
- 29 The cultural strategy then influenced the development of the LSP's 2004 to 2009 community strategy for Sefton 'A Vision for Sefton'. Cultural services are put in the context of Sefton's general development and regeneration and are acknowledged as an important part of the nine key themes which are:
- neighbourhood renewal;
 - creating a learning community;
 - children and young people;
 - creating safe communities;
 - jobs and prosperity;
 - improving health and well-being;
 - environmental sustainability and housing;
 - voluntary and community sector development; and
 - mobility and transport access.
- 30 The Council's Corporate Plan echoes the themes of the 'Vision for Sefton' and sets out six service principles, including:
- to lead ... initiatives ... to create an economically prosperous centre for tourism and ..., with opportunities for all;
 - to address the ... cultural needs of the borough by the provision of relevant services at appropriate levels of cost and quality; and
 - to provide ... recreational facilities designed to enhance the quality of life in the borough.

- 31 The plan sets out the strategic objectives cultural services will lead on:
- develop sports and leisure and cultural facilities in Sefton;
 - make the borough a more attractive and vital place to live, work and visit through strategic projects including leisure and culture; and
 - safeguard and enhance Sefton's natural heritage and cultural/historic environment.
- 32 The strategic objectives that cultural services will contribute to are:
- improve the health of Sefton children and young people;
 - ensure that Sefton children and young people enjoy and achieve success in learning;
 - provide opportunities for Sefton children and young people to make a positive contribution to society;
 - ensure that all Council services are inclusive and are informed by effective consultation and engagement with users;
 - reduce youth offending and anti-social behaviour; and
 - increase the feeling of safety in community areas.
- 33 The work of the leisure services department is guided by the leisure services department service delivery plan for 2005/06. The service aims to:
- work toward making all facilities and services available to everybody on an equitable basis;
 - seek to deliver a high-quality service that is valued by the community;
 - work with the community and others to improve facilities and services;
 - use existing resources effectively and seek to attract new resources to maximise leisure/cultural opportunities;
 - develop and promote the role of leisure services as a key contributor to the health, social, environmental, economic and educational well being of the community; and
 - value staff, recognise their achievements, support and develop them to deliver the departmental/corporate objectives.
- 34 The tourism department's service delivery plan for 2005/06 sets out the following aim:
- 'to continually improve services and attract increasing numbers of visitors to the borough'.*

- 35 Individual services are guided not only by the major strategic plans and the work plan but by a range of additional strategies sometimes drafted in partnership with external agencies and partners. These include the physical activity strategy (written with the two local NHS primary care trusts (PCTs)), sports facilities strategy, library plan, sefton beach management plan, the skate strategy and a developing plan to guide Southport's night-time economy in the light of the 2005 licensing changes.
- 36 These strategies feed into the work plans of the various service units and then down to individuals' work plans. These contain cross-references to the corporate objectives.

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

- 37 This section assesses the extent to which cultural services meet the identified needs of the community of Sefton, how cost-effective they are and how well they contribute to wider outcomes for the community. By agreement with the Council this inspection has focused on two of the priorities shared between central and local government namely, healthier communities and quality of life.

Access, customer care and user focus

- 38 The service makes the needs of residents central to its services and offers good access to them. It works hard to break down barriers to participation. Consultation is generally good and leads to service improvements.
- 39 The Council's services reflect the geography of the borough and facilities and programmes are spread across the borough. The services recognise the differences between the communities within Sefton and managers fine tune them to meet the needs of the communities they serve. For example, libraries in Bootle stock more books on naval history to reflect the maritime heritage of the area whilst libraries in Southport stock more aviation history volumes based on that area's past. This approach ensures sensitivity to local needs.
- 40 The service makes good use of consultation and engages well with local people to improve services both at the planning stage and operationally. Stakeholders praise the Council highly in this regard. Strategies such as the cultural strategy involve detailed consultation as do the plans for new facilities, which take particular account of the needs of people with disabilities. All aspects of the service have consultation mechanisms in place. There are regular consultation groups at all leisure centres, 'friends' schemes in 15 parks, and the Council has helped establish the Southport Tourism Business Network as a vehicle to engage with local businesses in the tourism sector. Examples of where consultation has directly led to service improvement include the new tourism guide for Southport, details of access to Litherland Sports Park and the installation of new lighting and CCTV to increase safety at Bootle Leisure Centre. This has increased satisfaction and customers' ownership of the service.

- 41 The service provides feedback to its consultees on the results of its consultations. Sport and recreation has also contributed to corporate newsletters for all 3,000 Citizens Panel members, giving feedback on survey results. The Sefton Sports Council is one of the largest in the Country, representing over 100 clubs and organisations and, therefore, thousands of participants. Its regular meetings provide opportunities for the Council to provide information and reports on progress. Similar feedback mechanisms are in place for the arts service. The service aims to reply to complaints within ten days, in line with council policy for dealing with complaints. Some areas of service such as sport and recreation have 100 per cent achievement in this respect. This ensures that customers are kept up to date with service developments and their comments replied to efficiently.
- 42 The Council makes use of resident and user surveys to gather data to plan service development. This is best seen in the tourism division where very detailed surveys are commissioned for major events, conferences and general visitors. Other parts of cultural services make use of the annual Citizens Panel and occasional surveys of customers. This ensures that developments across the range of cultural services are based on sound information.
- 43 The Council uses a flexible approach to charging at leisure centres. They offer free induction sessions in all centres to those seeking to become gym members. There is a leisure passport scheme in place for those on low income and a leisure pass is given to all looked after children, those with special needs and their carers. These minimise the risk of price becoming a barrier to participation.
- 44 The Council offers a wide range of services to young people across all areas of the service. These include play areas in parks, multi-use games areas for teenagers, reading sessions for children in libraries, craft workshops at the Ainsdale Discovery Centre, formal coaching sessions at leisure centres and school holiday activity sessions. This is in addition to the events programme, much of which has direct appeal to families. Many of these programmes are offered free of charge. This means that children have access to a range of varied and affordable leisure opportunities within easy reach of their homes.
- 45 Similarly, there are some programmes offered to older people. These range from computer classes and reading groups in libraries, 50+ physical activity groups in leisure centres and educational and walking programmes in nature reserves and at the coast. This means that older people are catered for across the range of leisure services.
- 46 Where the service is weaker is in engagement with hard-to-reach groups other than young people and disabled people. This is not systematic and relies on local action by managers. There is no use of socio-economic data to compare the profile of customers with that of the community (though libraries are currently compiling branch level profiles). As a result, managers can not be sure that services are being accessed by the population as a whole.

- 47 Although customers feel that the Council valued comments and complaints and acted upon them, feedback is limited to the individual complainants. Consolidated reports on complaints are not recorded nor are the outcomes publicised. In addition, although there are service charters for some parts of the service, neither the standards themselves nor performance against them are prominently displayed. This means that customers cannot know whether the service is meeting its targets and standards.
- 48 Electronic access to the service is limited and variable in quality. There is a tourism website which provides plentiful information about Southport, links to Merseyside and the north-west and through which accommodation enquiries and brochure requests may be made. The Council's main website provides detailed information, including an annual report, and on other aspects of the service such as libraries, arts and parks. The website does permit online viewing of the libraries catalogue, reservation of books and renewal of loans and provides a link to an online booking service for Southport Arts Centre. However, it does not allow electronic bookings for other aspects of the service. This limits access to the service for customers.

Diversity

- 49 The Council engages with minority communities in an ad hoc manner and there are examples of good practice. There are imaginative programmes in place for young people. However, access for people with disabilities is inconsistent and difficult in some places and the service does not systematically gather and use data on use and participation by minority communities.
- 50 The Council has a clear corporate commitment to equality and to meeting the diverse needs of users. It has reached Level 1 of the Equality Standard for Local Government and is working to achieve Level 2 in the near future. New staff members with specific responsibilities for equalities have been appointed at both corporate and departmental levels and the leisure services department has begun to produce equalities impact assessments for its services.

- 51** There are examples of good practice in working with the diverse communities in Sefton. These include the following.
- In Formby the library service has set up outreach programmes to work with gypsies and travellers.
 - The library service hosts courses on English for speakers of other languages at Bootle library and support for Eastern European migrant workers at Churchtown library.
 - The department has given grant aid to the British Arab Association to establish sessions at a local community centre.
 - The library service maintains contact with the 'Embrace' group for gay/lesbian/bisexuals and libraries display publicity posters on behalf of this group. The service was most recently in contact with Embrace about the 'Big Gay Read' and at the group's request liaised with the Sefton Council for voluntary services on their behalf.
 - The cemeteries and crematoria section offers burial services that can meet the needs of many faiths.
- 52** These have enabled the service to improve use by the diverse communities in Sefton.
- 53** However, the service does not systematically engage with hard-to-reach groups and service development programmes are left to the local knowledge and initiative of site managers. With the exception of the Active Sefton GP Referral scheme, the service does not gather data on the ethnic background of customers. As a result, it cannot be sure to what extent it is meeting their particular needs.
- 54** The department has initiatives in place for people who are economically disadvantaged. In addition to free access to the parks, libraries, galleries and coast the Council offers the leisure passport scheme mentioned above and the Youth Only Zone scheme - which provides weekend evening activities for young people at four leisure centres. In addition the sport and recreation, coast and countryside and parks services each operate an intermediate labour market scheme whereby full-time employment and a range of training opportunities are offered for twelve months to local people who have been unemployed for long periods of time. These work to ensure that access is maximised for people on low incomes and that the service works to develop social inclusion.

- 55 Access to cultural services is very variable for people with disabilities and ranges from very good to poor.
- Leisure centres generally have good access for people with disabilities with all facilities being wheelchair accessible and having necessary changing and toilet accommodation. The newer leisure centres at Bootle and Southport are fully compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). Bootle Leisure Centre has invested £90,000 to provide fitness equipment which is accessible for people with disabilities under the Inclusive Fitness initiative, and the centre has recently been modified to improve access to changing rooms and toilets.
 - The coast and countryside management service has hard paths in place for people with impaired mobility at some of its sites including the Queen's Jubilee Nature Trail and Lifeboat Road local nature reserve.
 - However, only one library out of thirteen is fully DDA compliant (though a further five meet Part M of the building regulations) and only five out of six arts venues are fully DDA compliant.
 - There is poor promotion of facilities for minority users. For example, although buildings are fitted with induction loops for the hard of hearing and the Council subscribes to Language Line for telephone interpretation, these facilities are not well advertised. There is very limited interpretation in the outdoor services in any other medium than printed signs such as Braille or recorded tapes.
- 56 The department has no overall and consistent approach to disability access and to meeting its obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act. No single officer has responsibility for ensuring compliance and although there is a departmental budget to fund improvements in this area, no expenditure on this has been made for 18 months. This means that the needs of disabled customers are not sufficiently at the forefront of service planning and delivery. However, recently the service has invested in a new post to contribute to improvements in this area.

Service outcomes for users and community

- 57 The service is most effective in linking its work to the national objectives of improving health and improving the quality of life. In addition to high-quality horticulture and coastal management, the Active Sefton programme offers a range of health related activities across all areas of culture and has been commended as an example of national good practice. The service's work with vulnerable young people through the Positive Futures is also highly regarded as best practice.
- 58 These are described in detail in the following paragraphs.

Healthier communities

- 59 The Council has worked with partners such as the local PCTs to put in place an imaginative programme to address some of the highest incidences of stroke, coronary heart disease and cancer in the country. This began with the drafting of a physical activity strategy for Sefton by the health improvement team. This ensured that there was a strong strategic framework in place linked to the national agenda outlined in the Government white paper 'Choosing Health'.
- 60 The Council has developed a range of programmes and activities under the brand of 'Active Sefton' to implement the strategy. These include the following.
- A GP referral scheme for those whose doctors consider they would benefit from physical activity. This covers all GPs in the Borough. Specialist staff are employed by the Council with expertise in diabetes, mental health, cancer, coronary heart disease and nutrition. Another officer has expertise in the needs of older people.
 - In partnership with the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, the Council has developed the 'Green Gym' initiative that offers participants the opportunity to take part in outdoor exercise at an allotment site rather than a gym. This scheme is funded by a grant of £250,000 from the New Opportunity Fund.
 - A programme of healthy walks organised by sports staff with colleagues in parks and coastal management. These walks can be undertaken within organised groups with qualified leaders or on an informal basis following signs and using leaflets. In addition, the libraries service publishes heritage walks packs for local areas, to encourage people to walk, pointing out places of historical interest.
 - A programme of 'Artistic Ambles' - series of 30-minute walks has been prepared that start with a tour of the Council's Atkinson Art Gallery in Southport. Galleries and exhibition spaces are also used to host promotions and discussions on health and physical activity.
 - Smoking cessation advice and classes are held at locations across the borough.
 - Private gym sessions are held for people, (such as those who are overweight), who might not attend a public session.
 - The Council joined with the Sefton Health Improvement Support Service to develop a skin cancer awareness project called 'Be Sunsible'. This aims to increase awareness of skin cancer and to encourage preventative measures amongst people using the Council's beaches and attending open air events. The scheme achieved national publicity through its free sun block spray service available from beach patrol staff.

- Recently the Council was awarded a grant of £50,000 by Sport England to develop a staff health pilot project under the title 'Active Workforce'. This will monitor the health of up to 100 employees; it is aimed at providing evidence to demonstrate the benefits of health and wellbeing programmes including physical activity.

- 61 This shows that the service is working imaginatively to address local health issues and it is fully aligned with the national agenda set out in 'Choosing Health'. Work is not confined to the sports and leisure section but involves colleagues in all areas of the department.
- 62 The outcomes of the health programmes demonstrate success. People referred by the GPs to the Active Sefton referral programme are given a detailed screening and induction and an individual plan and targets worked out for the 14 weeks of the programme. Targets may be for weight reduction, improved heart and lung capacity, reduced stress or lower blood pressure. Progress is monitored at all stages and plans tuned to meet changing needs. An overall measurement of an individual's health is made at the beginning and end of the programme using a tool known as 'The COOP Function and Health Status Measure'. Using this method 93 per cent of clients demonstrated an overall improvement in their health. This ensures that programmes based on individual needs have a real impact on their health.
- 63 The Council also uses external validation to assess the quality of its health work. For example, the department of sport and exercise sciences at Liverpool John Moores University undertook an evaluation of the Council's 'EXCEL to Health' programme (now called 'Active Sefton') and improvements were made based on their findings. In this way the Council looked not just at the benefits to an individual but at the success of the programme as a whole.
- 64 The quality of the Council's work in the health field has been externally verified by a number of bodies. The British Heart Foundation's publication 'Let's Get Moving - a physical activity handbook for developing local programmes' cites Sefton as an example of best practice, as did the Northwest Health and Physical Activity Forum at a conference in autumn 2005. The Green Gym project was commended by the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management's Open Space Innovation Award in 2005. This means that both clients and partners can be confident of the quality of the active programmes.

Quality of life

- 65 Sefton's leisure services contribute effectively to a range of improvements in the quality of life for local people. There is evidence of high-quality provision in many areas of activity and of specific initiatives to improve the local environment through parks improvement, work with young people at risk of offending and support for the local voluntary sector. This means that there are real benefits to local residents through the work of the service.

- 66 The Council's parks service delivers high-quality horticulture in its formal parks. The service has achieved many awards for the quality of its horticulture including winning the 2005 North West Britain in Bloom award of the best coastal resort, and being nominated to enter the national contest in 2006. In addition, the service has gained Green Flag awards for two parks. This demonstrates that the service has the ability to deliver parks and horticulture of the highest standards.
- 67 The parks service also works with local residents to address crime and disorder in parks. A case study in this approach can be seen at Victoria Park in Crosby which was subject to vandalism and anti-social behaviour including drug taking. The park was the centre of a local crime hotspot. To address this, the Council encouraged the creation of 'Friends of Victoria Park' who carried out a survey that indicated that 60 per cent of people did not feel safe in the park and 70 per cent thought that facilities were poor. The Council then worked with the friends and other partners, including the police, to create an action plan for improvement. This included improving the children's play area, providing a better sports area, refurbishing the pavilion and clearing overgrown areas. Importantly, the Council agreed to the grounds maintenance contractor having staff dedicated to the park. The effect has been to increase use and public satisfaction with the park and to greatly reduce anti-social behaviour.
- 68 The service makes a significant contribution to the quality of life in the borough for both residents and visitors. The service operates an integrated beach management system with education, conservation, cleansing and patrol. The service manages the Council's land holdings and works with partners such as English Nature, the National Trust, RSPB and the Mersey Forest to provide an attractive and well managed resource. It includes local nature reserves, sites of local biological interest, cycle paths, picnic areas and the 23 mile long Sefton Coastal path. Three of the Council's beaches have been awarded ENCAMS beach awards. Sefton provides an important educational service through the Ainsdale Discovery Centre, which runs a programme of events, displays, conservation work and opportunities to view rare species such as red squirrels and natterjack toads. Coast and countryside management is also heavily involved in the Council's health and social inclusion work through its walks programme, involvement with Positive Futures and training for the long-term unemployed. This combination of programmes and facilities means that the service makes an important contribution to quality of life.

- 69 The Council works well with other providers and agencies to deliver effective services to young people aimed at meeting the agenda set by Every Child Matters. Projects are in place with Positive Futures, Connexions, SureStart and Positive Activities for Young People (PAYP).
- Connexions – a programme was devised for young men at Netherton Activity Centre. It involved an intensive support programme using leisure and sports activities aimed at improving social inclusion and backed up by a programme of personal development. The programme was deemed a success in that it stopped instances of the young men's anti-social behaviour and thereby improved the quality of life for residents in their area.
 - Positive Futures – the LINCS project aims to improve the quality of life for children and young people at risk of social exclusion by providing leisure opportunities. The project was originally targeted at young people in residential care but is now extended to support those in foster care, adopted children, young offenders, young people attending pupil referral units and children with disabilities. The benefits to the young people include environmental work based education and employment training with the Coast and Countryside service, holiday programmes and an annual awards ceremony to celebrate the achievements of young people in care.
 - Positive Activities for Young People – working with Sefton Council for Voluntary Services to provide specialist coaches and training for volunteers to increase local capacity to run neighbourhood initiatives such as sports and arts programmes aimed at reducing young peoples involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour such as drug misuse.
 - Surestart - working in target areas in Sefton to promote libraries and reading to pre-school children and their families. The benefits have been to increase library membership and attendance at story times, leading to increased confidence and enjoyment of books and reading by children and their parents.
- 70 These programmes of work ensure that the Council is fully addressing the national agendas concerning young people.
- 71 The Council's work with young people can demonstrate success. Anecdotal evidence from stakeholders such as the police and Sefton CVS supports the view that interventions have positive effects on the young people and the areas in which they live. One example given by the police is of a major reduction in 5 November incidents because of a young people's event organised by the Council on that night.

- 72 The Council's tourism service supports the quality of life in the borough by a range of initiatives designed to attract visitors and the associated economic benefits to Sefton and to Southport in particular. The service works with partners such as the Southport Tourism Business Network and the Northwest Development Agency to develop the tourism infrastructure in Sefton and the associated information systems. The service manages the Tourist Information Service, organises events and generally promotes and develops the attractiveness of the area. The service has successfully applied for European funds to support this work. This has led to increases in visitor numbers, spending and jobs supported. Between 2001 and 2004, visitor numbers have increased by 13 per cent, spending has increased by 25 per cent (unadjusted for inflation), conferences have increased by 250 per cent and an approximate 750 additional jobs supported, an increase of 25 per cent. This demonstrates the success of the Council's tourism development work.

User experience and satisfaction

- 73 Although there are many examples of good practice in the service, user satisfaction as measured by the 2003 best value performance indicators does not demonstrate this across all services. Additionally the library service meets only three of the ten national standards.
- 74 Impressions of service quality seen during the inspection and commented upon by stakeholders are not matched by best value performance indicators of satisfaction. Based on the three-yearly resident survey, last undertaken in 2003, public satisfaction with libraries and with 'theatres/concert halls' is high but satisfaction with parks and open spaces and with sports facilities is poor. This shows a very variable picture of satisfaction although local surveys indicate improvements since the last best value performance indicator survey in 2003.
- 75 The Council's library service meets three of the ten Public Library Service Standards, namely, the percentage of static libraries connected to the internet, the number of internet stations per 10,000 population, and adult satisfaction. It partially meets the standard for speed of requests met and does not meet the standards for opening hours, visits per 1,000 population, under-16s' satisfaction, annual purchases per 1,000 population and time taken to replenish stock. It also does not meet the standard for the proportion of the population living within two miles of a library, though it comes very close to meeting the standard and the mobile library service fills some gaps left by the static libraries.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 76 The service delivers good value for money to local residents. It makes very good use of external funding to bolster its own resources and uses cost comparisons effectively. Generally, it is a low cost service that delivers good satisfaction, although satisfaction is low for some functions.

- 77 Sefton has made good use of grant aid from the European Union and the National Lottery together with external funding streams from the Sefton PCTs, Connexions and PAYP to develop both its facilities and programmes in all areas of the service. For example, the sports service calculates that it has achieved over £30 million pounds of investment in facilities through a direct contribution by the council of only £3.5 million. This means the Council achieves value for money by extensive use of external funds for capital works and revenue which has been used for the benefit of Sefton ratepayers.
- 78 Comparisons of levels of spending with customer satisfaction as measured by the Best Value Performance Indicators show most services demonstrating value for money. Overall, Sefton's spending per capita is lower than the average for metropolitan boroughs. Despite this low spending, satisfaction with theatres/ concert halls is good, demonstrating very good value for money. Similarly, the satisfaction ratings for parks and open spaces and for libraries show good value for money. However, by the same comparative method, the sports and recreation service shows poor value for money as it delivers low satisfaction at low cost although local surveys indicate improvements since the last best value performance indicator survey in 2003.
- 79 National comparisons show that Sefton's cemeteries and crematoria charges are well below the national average in almost all categories. This is, therefore, an opportunity to increase income. This is important as the service must make investment to meet the new more stringent environmental standards for mercury emissions. Value for money could be improved by raising fees; the Council is planning to raise fees to be at the national average by 2008/09, but not before.
- 80 The Council uses a mixed management economy to develop competition and achieve efficiency. Some years ago, the Council externalised its ground maintenance operation and Southport Theatre is also managed by a private contractor. Crosby Leisure Centre is operated externally through a PFI contract, Formby Leisure Centre will be managed by a local sports trust but the other leisure centres are managed in-house. The coast management service took the beach cleansing operation back in-house to improve efficiency and raise standards. This shows that the Council is able to identify the most appropriate management mechanism and to use external contractors or its own staff where appropriate.
- 81 The Council uses the voluntary sector to manage facilities in a cost-effective way. Local management agreements have been put in place with local football leagues and bowling clubs to manage facilities lettings on the Council's behalf. These organisations have improved the facilities through investment of voluntary labour and are able to access grant aid not available to the Council. This delivers an improved service to local clubs at a lower cost to the Council.
- 82 The Council is willing to use new funding mechanisms to provide value for money. Crosby Leisure Centre was the first leisure centre in the country to be built using the PFI system. This provided an £8 million leisure facility at no capital cost to the Council and with the trading risk transferred to the private sector over a 27-year contract. The business planning and benchmarking elements of the PFI process enabled the Council to demonstrate value for money to residents.

- 83 The Council makes good use of benchmarking groups to compare costs and drive improvement. The Council's membership of a cemetery benchmark group demonstrates awareness of external comparators and the sports service uses APSE benchmarking to compare income and costs. The APSE data was used to set income targets for each leisure centre and to drive down costs. The Council has used benchmarking to improve value for money.

Summary

- 84 The service generally meets the needs of the community well.
- There is good geographical access to the service with facilities and programmes well spread across the borough. The Council works to reduce the price barrier to reflect the comparatively high levels of deprivation in some areas.
 - There is good use of consultation across all aspects of the service and there are many examples of in partnership working.
 - There is good access to leisure centres and outdoor facilities for people with disabilities but some libraries do not have good access. There is a lack of a systematic approach to improving disabled access to the service.
 - There is effective work on meeting the national agendas of health and quality of life. The service delivers GP referral and physical activity programmes which are nationally recognised as examples of best practice. The Council's LINC'S project for children and young people at risk of social exclusion by is also recognised as national best practice.
 - There are many external validations of the quality of the service to customers.
 - The tourism service not only offers an attractive programme for local people but support jobs through their benefit to the local economy.
 - Satisfaction levels with the service as measured by the best value performance indicators are good for arts and libraries; for parks and sport they are poor but improving.
- 85 Overall, the service can demonstrate good value for money.
- The Council has made extensive use of external funds to provide facilities and services. Services are generally low cost. There are many examples of value for money being obtained through working in partnership with the private, educational, health and voluntary sectors.
- 86 Therefore, we judge cultural services in Sefton to be 'good'.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 87 The service has a very strong record of delivering improvements. It has used both internal investment and external funding to build new facilities and deliver new programmes. These have led to increasing opportunities for residents and increased levels of satisfaction.
- 88 The service has a good record of securing external funding. The Council has used National Lottery and PFI funding to procure leisure centres, ERDF grants to fund tourism development and significant revenue support comes from the local PCTs to support the Active Sefton programme. This means that the Council has added to its own resources and thereby improved its local services.
- 89 The Council has used annual satisfaction surveys to improve services. Low levels of satisfaction with sports and leisure and parks and open spaces were identified in the 2003 BVPI survey. The Council used these as a spur to improvement and put in place a range of service enhancements. These included capital expenditure on new facilities and improvements in customer care, staff training and information. It has measured the impact of these through similar surveys which show improved impressions of the service. As a result, the Council can demonstrate that identification of poor performance leads to action and improvement.
- 90 The Council's internal review system is effective in driving service improvement. The service reviews of grounds maintenance and arboriculture being carried out under the supervision of the scrutiny committee identified problems of low quality in horticulture and an insufficient tree maintenance budget. As a result, the new grounds maintenance contract is intended to raise standards and additional resources have been allocated to work on street trees. The impact will be improved standards and a better service to residents.
- 91 Similarly, the agreed actions arising from the best value review of libraries are almost complete. This includes a staffing restructure which has increased capacity and is already improving the service to customers. There has been a steady improvement in library service's total opening hours and speed of response to book requests, moving towards the Council's stated commitment to meeting the Public Library Service Standards. These will improve access and quality of service to residents.
- 92 The Council uses the results of external inspections to improve its leisure services. The recommendations of a previous best value inspection of recreation management have all been acted upon. This has contributed to increased visitor numbers and customer satisfaction.

- 93** The Council has worked with the community and friends groups to improve and develop its parks. In addition to the work at Victoria Park detailed in paragraph 67, there has been a programme of development at other sites such as the high-quality Hesketh Park and the local park at Hatton Hill. These include a £2.6 million programme of improvements at Hesketh part-funded by a Heritage Lottery fund grant of £2.0 million, which has restored the park to its character just prior to World War II. The programme included development of a 'safe space' by young people involved with the Youth Only Zone project. At Hatton Hill, improvements have been made to the pavilion, play area and the general standard of maintenance has been improved. This has led to improved use and greater satisfaction with these parks.
- 94** The tourism service has increased visitor numbers to Southport. The Council has worked with local businesses to improve marketing and services to attract additional conference business to Southport. The result has been that the number of conferences has increased by a factor of 2.5 since 2003. This has been part of an overall improvement in attracting visitors to Southport through the Southport Tourism Business Network. It has been successful in improving visitor numbers by 13 per cent and spending and jobs by 25 per cent.
- 95** The Council can demonstrate increased financial efficiency. The annual Air Show began by being totally organised by the Council and requiring a subsidy in the region of £50,000. The event is now managed by a partnership of local businesses and the Council, and operates at no cost to the Council. Elsewhere, the Council has entered an income share arrangement with an external supplier to replace fitness equipment at no cost to the Council.
- 96** The Council has made good progress in implementing its sports facilities strategy. New facilities are being constructed at Litherland, Southport and Formby in line with the strategy. The Litherland Sports Park will also include a health centre. These will improve the range of sporting opportunities available to local people and allow the Council to implement its physical activity and other health strategies.
- 97** However, there are a number of negative factors to set against a generally positive track record of improvement.
- 98** A number of reviews and improvements have been delayed in completion. The parks review has been delayed by the work involved in letting grounds maintenance contracts and the completion of the libraries staff restructuring has taken longer to finish than anticipated. The impact has been a delay in delivering service improvements and, in the case of libraries, some loss of morale.

- 99 Whilst it is a strength that there is a cultural forum in place, there is little evidence that it has made a difference to service delivery. The forum was set up following adoption of the cultural strategy to direct its implementation and monitor progress. A key role will be linking Sefton's strategy to neighbouring Liverpool's development as Capital of Culture in 2008. The Council has indicated a willingness to commit around £0.5 million to support Capital of Culture projects, and plans to use the forum as a vehicle to liaise with the community over these. However, despite meeting regularly, the forum has yet to demonstrate real benefits to the Sefton community. This means that Sefton may not be deriving full benefit from the cultural strategy.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 100 The service's performance management systems are improving but need to be more efficient and robust. Systems are being put in place to improve but at present there are too many un-prioritised targets and it is sometimes difficult to see if targets and objectives are being met. There are examples of strong target setting and monitoring of performance in the sports and tourism sections but work is weaker in other service areas.
- 101 Key strategic documents give an inconsistent picture of the importance of cultural services. Leisure and cultural aims are linked to those of the Council as a whole as cultural services feature significantly in corporate strategic objectives and as set out as key actions in the council plan. However, the community strategy makes little mention of the contribution cultural services can make to achievement of its objectives, although individual service areas are mentioned. In addition, the cultural strategy does not appear to be driving service improvement. This means that it is hard to identify the importance of culture in Sefton and for the public to understand the strategic priorities for cultural services.
- 102 The large number of un-prioritised targets makes it difficult for members to engage with performance management. The service has a large number of targets and performance against these targets is reported to members on a quarterly basis. The performance cabinet member challenges service portfolio-holders on performance against the targets. However, there is no indication of which of these targets are priority measures of success nor is there evidence of how challenge drives performance. The half-yearly report on performance against targets was presented during the week of the inspection. It was accepted without comment, question or discussion. The effect is to demonstrate a weakness in the public scrutiny and challenge of performance which lessens the public understanding of priorities.
- 103 Performance management is inconsistent across the various areas of the service. All sections have service delivery plans which they update and report upon every quarter. There are examples of good target-setting and working to these targets in the tourism and sports sections. However, in other fields it is of a lower standard. The impact is to reduce the efficiency and effectiveness of the department as a whole.

- 104** Performance management is hampered by a lack of sound numerical targets. The key performance indicators set out in the council plan are poor measures of realisation of strategic objectives and departmental strategies and plans are often not SMART⁴: those for tourism and sport being notable exceptions. There is little use of local performance indicators. As a result, it is often difficult to assess the intended outcomes of a particular action in a strategy or service plan or to monitor progress.
- 105** Where numerical targets do exist they are sometimes unrealistic and their basis unclear. For example, some libraries targets are unrealistic with the result that they are recognised but not acted on.
- 106** There are examples of service strategies and plans being successfully implemented and brought up to date. The sports facilities strategy has been updated and is making a difference. For example, plans have recently been agreed to build a new leisure centre in Maghull to meet an identified need. The completion of this facility will see the fulfilment of the aim to have appropriately sized facilities in each of the main towns. Likewise, the tourism plan has a target to grow Southport bed-nights by 35 per cent and create 150 jobs by 2006/07. The 'classic resort' branding is being developed; this has led to a five-star hotel now being constructed and a four-star hotel being planned. This shows that the Council's plans can be successfully managed to deliver real improvements.
- 107** The service has some robust mechanisms in place to monitor spending and the impact of investment. These systems are particularly apparent when looking at those required by the European Union's ERDF-funded tourism project which uses the STEAM econometric model to calculate the employment benefits of visitor spending. It can also be seen in the Active Sefton monitoring of the PCTs' funding. This allows the service to soundly manage performance in these areas.
- 108** Corporately, some enhanced performance management systems have been put in place to address recognised weaknesses. The SPRINT system is already in place and will be mainstreamed for 2006/07 plans. This will enable all plans and performance data to be brought together facilitating both planning and progress review. The impact of these will be to continue to improve performance management systems and the efficient working of cultural services.
- 109** The Council is working to improve performance management of its work with young people. It has commissioned doctoral level research from Liverpool John Moores University and from Sheffield Hallam University to measure the effect of its intervention work with young people at risk through the Positive Futures programme. This will enable the anecdotal evidence of the effectiveness of interventions to be placed on a sound evidential basis.

⁴ Specific, Measurable, Agreed, Resourced, Timetabled.

- 110 There are some examples of the service identifying priorities and using these to concentrate management time and resources. For instance, in leisure centres there is a strong emphasis on raising attendance and income in such areas as gym membership in order to cross-subsidise socially beneficial activities. This provides a clear focus for staff and a performance measure that is easy to understand. The concept of a 'cultural centre' combining the art gallery, library and arts centre in Southport is being developed for funding bids. This is also an easily understood priority as are the tourism service's performance measures of visitor numbers, spend and jobs created and supported.
- 111 There are some weaknesses.
- The arrangements to review and improve value for money are not formalised. Although some services subscribe to benchmarking data clubs, not all do so. Furthermore, the evidence from those sources are not regularly reviewed and interpreted.
 - There has been slow progress in completing the Sefton Obesity strategy which is important in the light of poor local health indicators. The Council has built a very constructive and generally effective partnership with the two Sefton PCTs. This is reflected in the Council's partnership work with the PCTs to develop an obesity strategy, which recognises the contribution the Council and other partners will be able to make in this important area. However, despite this relationship, production of the strategy has stalled. As a result, planning of the contribution the service can make to improving the health of Sefton residents is delayed - and so is the ensuing delivery of better services.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 112 The Council has good capacity to deliver its planned improvements. Councillors are committed to the service and there is strong leadership in place. Additional capital and revenue finance has been made available. As a result, new facilities are under construction and a new grounds maintenance contract has been drafted to improve standards. Some time-limited funding is coming to an end which creates uncertainty for some important programmes such as the GP referral scheme. However, the Council is confident that these can be maintained through prudent financial management.
- 113 The Council is committed to cultural development in Sefton. Despite some weakness in the Council's strategies they do indicate an agenda for cultural improvement. This commitment is demonstrated by councillors of all political parties and by the most senior officers of the Council. The Council has backed this commitment by additional funds for these improvements; budgets have risen by 12 per cent in leisure and significantly in tourism over the last three years. This demonstrates that resources will be available to fund planned improvements.

- 114** There are a number of leisure projects under construction. These include:
- Litherland Sports Park (football, athletics, rugby and health facilities) which is due to open in spring 2006;
 - Formby Leisure Centre (swimming pool and dry sports) due to open in autumn 2006; and
 - the Aquapark - the final phase of the redevelopment of Dunes, Southport's main swimming complex, due to open in early 2007.
- 115** The impact of these facilities will be to greatly enhance the sporting opportunities available in the borough.
- 116** Resources are being devoted to parks and open spaces improvements. Following the service review of grounds maintenance, councillors agreed to raise standards of maintenance and horticulture and the levels of staff presence in parks. This will primarily come about through the enhanced specification issued for renewal of the grounds maintenance contract. This output-based contract seeks an improved relationship with the contractor; it is based on ODPM guidance and industry best practice. The Council recognises that this enhanced specification will be more expensive than the current contract and has agreed to increases in excess of 33 per cent.
- 117** Financial resources will increase for cultural services. Big increases in capital and revenue budgets for the new and improved facilities and services outlined above are contained in the Council's medium-term financial plan. The plan indicates that 'prudential borrowing' will be used to fund the Aquapark development and the now committed Maghull Leisure Centre. This shows that the Council's improvement commitment is driving spending decisions.
- 118** There is a strong management team in place to drive improvements. Councillors, external partners and senior council staff in other departments recognise the experience and expertise of leisure department staff, who are regularly invited to address conferences and seminars. This means that the necessary leadership is in place to achieve improvement. The re-structure of the library and information service enhances the capacity to deliver service improvement, with teams established to target national and local priorities.
- 119** The service is improving its staff capacity. Leisure Services has recently been awarded 'Investors in People' status and is using this as a framework to improve staff skills and competence. Training budgets have increased. There is also increased officer capacity through the appointment of additional staff for example a Community Liaison Officer and an Arboriculture Officer. Staff capacity to handle equalities issues has been improved in the last few months with recruitment of officers tasked to take this forward. These include the recruitment of a principal officer to handle leisure inclusion at departmental level and an arts inclusion officer.

- 120 The Council's strategies and systems are developing to support future improvement. These include the Council's people strategy, procurement strategy and equalities impact assessment toolkit. These will be supported by enhanced electronic systems which will not only provide improved customer access to the service but also improve internal data gathering. These include an electronic point of sale system currently being installed in leisure centres, an improved tourism website and booking system which will go-live in spring 2006 and e-booking systems also going live in 2006. The benefit of these systems will be increased customer access, additional capacity to manage improvement and the ability to capture more robust data on a day-to-day basis.
- 121 The service is working to improve financial efficiency. For example, its membership of the Merseyside stock purchasing consortium is expected to enable it to save £100,000 per year from next year. In addition the new sports facilities will allow older, less efficient centres in the vicinity to be closed. The impact will be flexibility in budgets to meet general financial pressures despite the cost of increased provision and higher standards.
- 122 The Council enhances its internal resources with effective partnerships. These include a wide range of organisations such as the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, the Southport Tourism Business Network and primary care trusts. The Council also works with other bodies including the Sefton Sports Council, NW Regional Development Agency and the Merseyside Cultural Consortium. The libraries service is proactive in its contributions to, and participation in, regional developments and initiatives.
- 123 However, in managing improvement the service has some obstacles to overcome.
- Staff numbers and skills could limit the capacity to improve. The service acknowledges a low complement of managers - they describe this as an 'hourglass' staffing structure. In addition, there is a difficulty in recruitment of staff in museum, parks, sports development and libraries. Where appropriate the service is adopting a flexible approach to professional skills. For example, the library service has removed the professional librarian qualification requirement for some posts. Investors in People is intended to provide a mechanism for combating these pressures.
 - Some time-limited funding streams are coming to an end or are likely to contract. European Union structural funds are expected to be only about 50 per cent of current levels from 2007 onwards. This could impact on funding for tourism development. In addition there is some uncertainty about the level of ongoing PCT funding for Active Sefton. These could mean the Council having to look for alternative sources of funding including increasing charges to customers.
- 124 However, the service has experienced these uncertain fundings for several years, so is used to planning in this environment. The council is confident that services can be continued through prudent financial management.

Summary

- 125 The service has a strong track record of service improvement in recent years and has proved adept at accessing external funding for both facilities development and to support revenue projects.
- 126 The Council has plans in place to drive cultural improvement and councillors are committed to this improvement. The commitment has led to new facilities and parks being built or in the late stages of planning. The medium-term financial plan shows additional money being available to operate these new centres. Resources have also been allocated to improvements in grounds maintenance and horticulture. Against this must be set weaknesses in performance management and a lack of universally SMART targets.
- 127 The service has the staff and systems to improve and uses extensive external partnerships to enhance its own capacity. Management and leadership are strong. However, there is some uncertainty about the effect of the expiry of time-limited funding streams.
- 128 Overall, we judge the prospects for improvement to be 'promising'.