

Service Inspection Report

March 2006



Cultural Services

Bedfordshire County Council

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

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

Copies of this report

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

© Audit Commission 2006

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

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

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

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

Contents

Service Inspection	4
Summary	5
Scoring the service	7
Recommendations	10
Report	12
Context	12
The locality	12
The Council	13
The Council's cultural services	14
How good is the service?	15
What has the service aimed to achieve?	15
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?	16
Diversity	19
Service outcomes for users and the community	19
Is the service delivering value for money?	22
Summary	24
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	25
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	25
How well does the service manage performance?	26
Does the service have the capacity to improve?	28
Summary	30
Appendix 1 – Judgement scores	31

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 Bedfordshire County Council provides 'fair' cultural services which have 'uncertain' prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council directly provides a range of services including libraries, archives, countryside access, heritage and environment, archaeology, sports, arts, music and tourism. The Council spends approximately £7.6 million annually on these services.
- 3 The Council has recently agreed a vision for culture but this has not been developed in partnership with stakeholders, district council partners or local people. The Council is developing a view of what it wants to deliver from its cultural services. However, whilst it has developed transparent corporate priorities, it is not clear where culture fits in. The Council has not developed its community leadership role to balance local, regional and national cultural priorities or developed a clear role for culture in delivering its overall objectives.
- 4 The Council is providing a range of well-managed services for local people. Young people receive good quality sports and music tuition in schools and local people benefit from a range of country parks and facilities for walking and cycling. Heritage and arts opportunities are more limited and tourism is underdeveloped.
- 5 Access to services is inconsistent with some services providing good access such as countryside access whereas others are more limited such as archives. Access to services through ICT is good with a comprehensive 'virtual library' website and a good tourism website. Other service areas, such as countryside access, are developing their websites to provide better access and more interactivity. Physical access to buildings is good in libraries but poor in archives. Users are generally very satisfied with cultural services but residents who do not currently use the service are less satisfied, and the Council has not taken steps to understand the reasons behind this.
- 6 The Council is providing some good targeted initiatives with young people such as the summer reading scheme and increased participation in school sports. Provision for adults is more limited. The Council does not know who its users are and does not have plans in place to ensure that users reflect the diversity of the local area.
- 7 The Council does not adequately monitor or measure value for money within cultural services. It has some information on costs but does not compare this with service quality or service outcomes. The overall value for money of cultural services is relatively weak with above average costs and below average resident satisfaction rates. However, countryside access and archaeology represent better value for money due to significant external funding levels.
- 8 Some aspects of cultural services have improved, such as better electronic access, particularly the virtual library; and new countryside and heritage initiatives. There are improvements to public rights of way and better access to sports provision in schools. However, because the Council is not clear about its plans for culture it is difficult to measure progress.

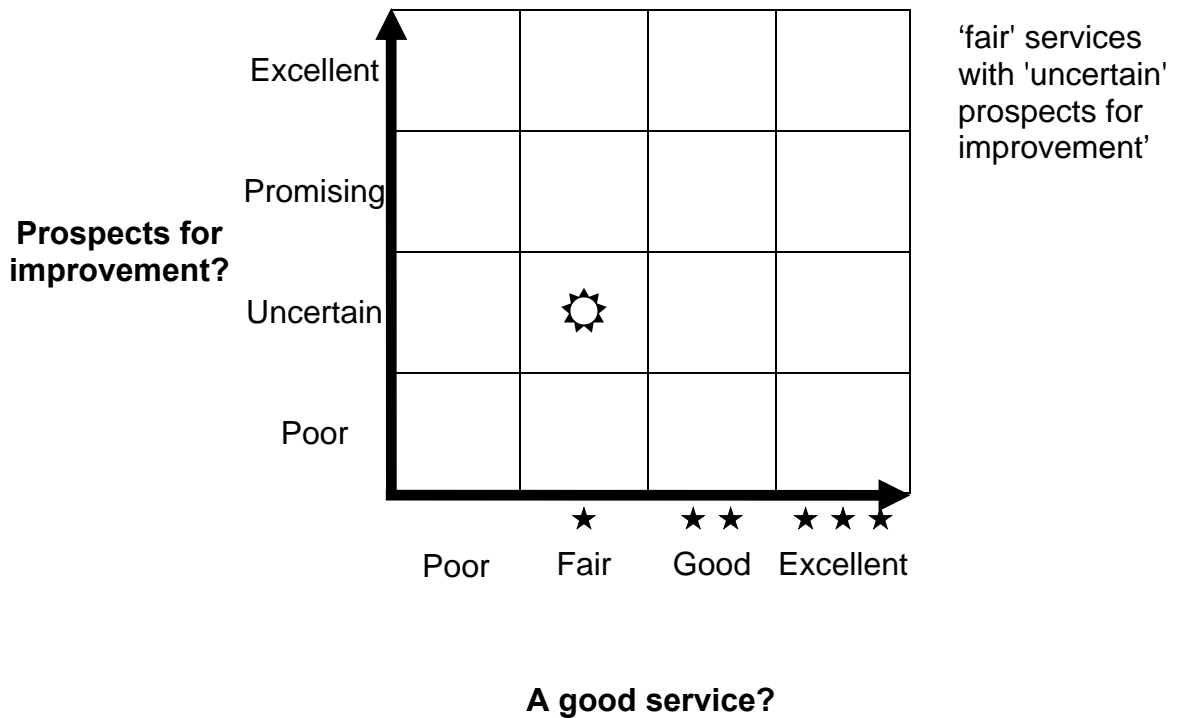
6 Cultural Services | Summary

- 9 The Council has identified some aspects of cultural services for efficiency savings over and above those prescribed by central government. It has taken steps to prioritise cultural services. As a result some aspects of cultural services are at risk of service reduction such as rights of way whilst others may experience growth such as tourism.
- 10 The Council understands the issues affecting its ability to deliver continuous improvements in cultural services and is taking steps to address its lack of capacity. It is beginning to manage performance more effectively and has a new financial management system in place. However, these have had little impact on cultural services and there remain a number of challenges to be met.

Scoring the service

- 11 We have assessed Bedfordshire County Council's cultural services as providing 'fair', one-star services that have 'uncertain' 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.

- 12 The services have been scored at fair, one-star because of the following.
- The Council is not clear what it wants to deliver from its cultural services.
 - The Council has not developed the strategic links between its corporate priorities and the objectives of key partners and other agencies in the delivery of cultural services.
 - The overall contribution to corporate priorities of cultural services is unknown.
 - Performance management is weak meaning that outcomes in areas such as health, social inclusion or education are not consistently measured and evaluated.
 - Access is inconsistent. Not all cultural buildings are accessible to disabled people and opening hours do not always reflect demand.
 - The Council's approach to diversity is underdeveloped and whilst there are some measures in place to address diversity the Council is not monitoring the impact of its approach.
 - Overall, cultural services in Bedfordshire offer relatively weak value for money with relatively high spending and below average resident satisfaction.
- 13 However:
- the Council has some successful initiatives targeted at young people such as the summer holiday reading scheme, good usage of ICT in libraries and high physical activity levels through its school sports colleges;
 - user satisfaction rates are good;
 - access to services through ICT is good within cultural services - the library service has a 'virtual library', there is a good tourism website and a developing archives site, all of which are showing high and growing levels of usage; and
 - procurement is being successfully used to enhance value for money in some areas specifically in countryside access through a community forestry trust, and the archaeology unit which operates at a zero cost to the Council.
- 14 Cultural services have uncertain prospects for improvement because of the following.
- Performance management within cultural services is weak.
 - The Council has not had a clear vision of what it wants to achieve in cultural services and this lack of clarity of purpose has hindered planning for the future.
 - Plans are mostly operational and not forward-looking or setting a clear strategic direction for the services.
 - Information about the performance of Bedfordshire County Council's cultural services is insufficiently developed for the Council to assess and monitor impact or track progress towards delivering improved value for money.

15 However:

- there are some improvements in cultural services, such as improved electronic access to services, new public open spaces and significant improvements in the way the sports service engages with young people in schools;
- most of the individual services within culture have service plans which provide a sound operational framework for their day to day management;
- the Council is developing its performance management systems and starting to specify clearer targets through the local area agreement (LAA). It is improving its approach to financial management and there is some evidence to show that it is beginning to allocate resources in line with high level policy decisions. But this is not embedded and its implementation is at a very early stage; and
- the Council is taking steps to improve capacity through two new key senior posts but the recruitment process has only just begun and it will be some time before this additional capacity has an impact on the services.

Recommendations

- 16 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 develop a strategic approach to the delivery of cultural services in Bedfordshire, which:

- *is shared with partners and contains joint priorities and targets;*
- *is based on a detailed needs assessment for all cultural services which engages with non-users as well as users;*
- *clearly shows which agency is responsible for specific actions;*
- *prioritises services within the control of Bedfordshire County Council;*
and
- *is a working strategy which is regularly monitored.*

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

- to provide a clear strategic direction for cultural services in Bedfordshire;
- maximise all opportunities to contribute to corporate aims; and
- enhance cultural services' impact throughout Bedfordshire.

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

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

Recommendation

R2 The Council needs to develop a performance management framework for cultural services which:

- *dovetails into the corporate performance management system and shows the extent to which the services are contributing to corporate priorities;*
- *tracks progress against the vision for cultural services and new emerging strategies; and*
- *encompasses national and local indicators which measure the effectiveness of cultural services.*

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

- greater focus for cultural services to enable them to more effectively contribute towards strategic objectives;
- providing managers and councillors with a clear picture of financial and non-financial performance of cultural services; and
- enable services to monitor and improve value for money and impact.

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

Recommendation

R3 The Council needs to carry out work in positioning its cultural services in terms of value for money. This includes:

- *the use of benchmarking;*
- *assessing the balance between costs and service outcomes; and*
- *setting targets to improve value for money and integrating them into the new performance management framework.*

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

- clearer understanding of value for money in the short-term; and
- improved value for money in the medium-term.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 17 Bedfordshire is sited on the northern fringe of London and is one of the smallest counties in England. According to 2004 population figures from ONS, there are 392,200 people in Bedfordshire. Its location places it 'on the edge' of other regional groupings such as the east midlands, south east and eastern regions. It is part of the eastern region.
- 18 The county has a local airport (Luton) and good north to south road and rail links (the A1 and M1 go through the county). But east-to-west travel is more difficult, and there is concern that the county is seen as a place to travel through or commute from, rather than to stay and work in. Recent population growth has put pressure on transport infrastructure and the county is directly affected by the communities' plan which proposes a 35 per cent increase in the number of homes across the Milton Keynes/south midlands area by 2031. This equates to around 80,000 new homes in Bedfordshire and a subsequent requirement for 50,000 new jobs by 2021.
- 19 Bedfordshire is diverse. Although it is largely rural, 60 per cent of the population lives in larger towns such as Bedford and Dunstable. Over 5 per cent of people are from black and minority ethnic groups (in Bedford this is 15 per cent) and 8.5 per cent of residents were born outside the UK. There are around 49 different spoken languages with the largest ethnic minority groups being of Asian and Italian descent. Although the area is relatively affluent, four wards in Bedford are in the 10 per cent most deprived wards in the country. It has areas of outstanding natural beauty but years of extracting clay for brickworks have left the county with large land-fill sites and major financial commitments for restoration.
- 20 GCSE success is lower than that of the region and the country - 51.3 per cent of pupils achieved 5+ GCSEs at grade A to C in 2003/04, compared to 54.5 per cent for the region and 53.7 per cent for England.
- 21 Health indicators indicate an overall good standard of health in the area, 72.5 per cent of people described their general health as 'good' in the 2001 Census. Latest mortality data for cancer, circulatory disease and suicide are lower than regional and national figures, and have shown a steady decrease since 1999 to 2001 figures.

- 22 Average earnings are relatively high in Bedfordshire; gross weekly pay for all employees was £402 in 2004, compared to the median of £365 for the region and £353 for England. Major companies in the area include Cranfield University, Box Clever Holdings Ltd and Autoglass Ltd, and there is significant number of employers in the advanced automotive engineering and research sector. The area has a good level of VAT registrations in comparison with the regional and national average. Bedfordshire is also in the highest 25 per cent in the country for the percentage of the economically active population aged 16 plus in employment (2003/04), although this has declined slightly from 2002/03 figures.

The Council

- 23 Bedfordshire County Council has been Conservative-led since 1997. There are 36 Conservative councillors, 9 Liberal Democrat and 7 Labour. A new leader was confirmed at full council on 26 May 2005. The Council has a cabinet of nine councillors, including the leader and deputy leader, and five select committees: Overview and Scrutiny Committee, Children and Young People Select Committee; Community Wellbeing Select Committee, Environment and Economic Development Select Committee, and Joint Health Scrutiny Committee.
- 24 The Council has undergone a number of recent management changes. The Council agreed a further restructure in December 2005, which creates a range of new posts and refocuses the role of some departments. The new structure, from March 2006, will consist of a Chief Executive, Assistant Chief Executive and five directors. A new department of community services has been created and the director will be supported by an Assistant Director of Cultural and Community Services. A new children's services department has been created.
- 25 The Council's 2005/06 revenue budget is £391.3 million and its capital budget £42.17 million.
- 26 The Council has been monitored by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister since 2002 when it received a CPA rating of 'poor'. At the same time children's services was put into special measures. Following a corporate assessment review in December 2004 the Council improved to a CPA rating of 'weak'. Children's services are no longer under special measures. The Audit Commission assessed the Council as 'improving well' in its assessment of the Council's overall Direction of Travel in December 2005.

The Council's cultural services

- 27 The Council provides the following services.
- Libraries – 17 libraries plus a mobile library service, prison library and schools library service.
 - Records and archives – Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Office is located in Bedford and provides a range of services.
 - Archaeology – the Council has established a separate trading company, Albion, to provide archaeology fieldwork services across the county.
 - Countryside access – the Council manages 2,200 kilometres of public rights of way and over 50 countryside sites, including Dunstable Downs, Sundon Hills, Stockgrove Country Park, Harrold-Odell Country Park and Bromham Mill.
 - Heritage and environment – historic buildings (including managing four ruins), historic environment, bio-diversity, landscape, trees and conservation.
 - Arts – the Council owns and manages a theatre at Leighton Buzzard which largely focuses on film. New arts officer is in post.
 - Music – the service employs 100 tutors providing instrumental music tuition to 5,500 young people. There are five music centres across the county, five youth orchestras, three wind bands and a youth opera company.
 - Sports – four sports colleges and six new school sports partnership to provide increased opportunities for young people to participate in quality sports and PE. The Council also has two outdoor activity centres, one in the county and the other, Blue Peris, in Wales.
 - Tourism – tourism development such as leaflets, brochures and guides.
- 28 The combined budget for these services (excluding music) for 2005/06 was around £7.6 million.
- 29 The Council undertook a best value review of cultural services in 2005. The review had three main objectives:
- to identify the community benefits and opportunities for Bedfordshire offered by cultural services, through consultation and comparison;
 - to challenge the effectiveness of the Council's strategic planning processes in enabling cultural services to realise these benefits; and
 - to identify shared opportunities for service improvement across cultural services.
- 30 The review highlighted a lack of strategic direction for the service - no cultural strategy and no golden thread linking culture and corporate priorities. An action plan was produced focusing on leadership, strategy development, partnerships with districts, external opportunities (eg LAA), internal partnerships, performance management, excellence, promotion and marketing and targeting specific groups.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 31** The Council has strong ambitions for Bedfordshire and has focused improvement on the delivery of priorities via the Transforming Bedfordshire programme, partnership vision and recently updated strategic priorities 2005 to 2008. These key documents are supported by a single delivery plan and 15 short-term priorities.
- 32** The Council has short, medium and long-term priorities which are set out in 'Making Bedfordshire Thrive, Strategic Objectives 2005 to 2009'. The four objectives are:
- build strong, prosperous and sustainable communities;
 - help those who need our help most;
 - help children and young people to achieve their full potential; and
 - transform Bedfordshire County Council into a high achieving council.
- 33** The short-term priorities are largely focused around improving the way the Council manages its services but with a specific focus around improving children's social services. The medium-term priorities focus on improving recycling, road and pavement maintenance and children's exam results at age 11 and 16. The long-term priorities focus around effectively managing growth (up to 80,000 new homes and 50,000 new jobs) and making infrastructure and transport improvements.
- 34** The Council has worked with partners to create a partnership vision which has been signed up to by district and borough councils, criminal justice and health partners and the chamber of commerce. The partnership vision replaces the previous community plan. The countywide local strategic partnership (LSP) has not met for over a year and has effectively been replaced by the local area agreement (LAA) partnership group.
- 35** The current budgeting process for 2006/07 is being based on the alignment of investment to priorities. Officers are also being asked to consider potential efficiencies for the next budget round and identify where areas of priority can deliver more for the same or less. However, given the Council's improvement ambitions, the budget for 2006/07 is challenging. The Council is proposing a 4.88 per cent increase in council tax for 2006/07 to enable it to balance its budget. Cuts are proposed in the music service, archives service and countryside and heritage.

- 36 Cultural planning in Bedfordshire is weak. The Council has not worked with district councils, other cultural providers, agencies and community and voluntary sector organisations to establish a clear vision for culture in the county that meets local needs whilst taking account of regional and national priorities. The regional cultural consortium for the eastern region, Living East, has recently launched a new regional cultural strategy for consultation. The Chief Executive of the Council has been closely involved in its development as a Board member and since the inspection week the Council has prepared a response based on discussions with staff and councillors of the Community and Wellbeing Select Committee. The Council has not engaged with district councils in the development of their respective strategies for cultural services. This is particularly important given some of the cultural ambitions for the area, such as the proposed new National Institute for Research into Aquatic Habitats (NIRAH), a new Center Parcs holiday park and ideas for a cultural quarter in Bedford.
- 37 It is not clear what the Council is trying to achieve through its investment in culture. There is no strategic plan in place for culture which links cultural priorities and plans to the corporate priorities, although clearly aspects of cultural services do have a significant contribution to make. The draft LAA has a number of proposed cultural targets largely around health and exercise but this is at a very early stage of development. Whilst some aspects of culture have formal plans in place such as libraries and countryside access these have, to an extent, been driven by external factors or legislation. The Council has recognised this gap and has taken the first step in clarifying its role in providing cultural services by agreeing a vision for culture in November 2005.

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

Access, customer care and community focus

- 38 The Council's cultural services are only partially driven by the needs of service users and citizens. The services are fragmented resulting in an inconsistent approach to service delivery and engagement with users and non-users. The countryside access service has a positive approach to community engagement and regularly consults with residents to gain their input into new projects. However, the archives, libraries, sports and arts services can only evidence significant contact with users of the services through surveys and customer comments. Also, the Council does not have a systematic approach to targeting consultation with young people and older people. Given that non-users are the majority of the population this is a major shortcoming.

- 39 Physical access to cultural services is inconsistent. The key buildings from which services are delivered have been in place in excess of 30 years and the Council is unable to demonstrate that they are located in the most appropriate place for the needs of today's communities. The Council has not completed a supply and demand analysis of cultural services with the exception of the countryside access service which is more strategically driven. A review of countryside accessibility was carried out in 2002 by the Fieldfare Trust which has guided the development of access improvements to countryside sites. The library service and many parts of the countryside services are fully compliant with DDA regulations following significant investment. The archives service, however, is not compliant. Also, the library service does not currently comply with three out of the four library standards access indicators. Overall, there are some shortcomings with the current service with regard to physical access for those with disabilities.
- 40 The opening hours of cultural services are traditional in approach with an emphasis on weekdays. The library service has increased late night opening and has one library open on Sundays although a need for more widespread Sunday opening has been identified through consultation. The archives service does not currently open in the evenings or weekends at all but is planning to pilot late night opening. The Council is not maximising on the opportunities for enabling access to its cultural service buildings and has not fully taken into account the community need when setting opening hours. The approach to pricing is inconsistent. There is no overall charging policy linked to a strategic approach to supporting inclusion and whilst concessions are in place in libraries this is not part of an overall approach to ensuring that everyone has equal access to cultural services.
- 41 Access to services through ICT is generally good and the Council can demonstrate through website hits that electronic access to its cultural services is significantly increasing. The library service has a well-developed website including a 'virtual library' enabling users to find and reserve books and carry out a range of other library functions on-line such as using reference material, reading book reviews or local history material. It is possible to search for references for the archives service and the Council has recently developed a special local community section of the website. The Bedfordshire and Luton tourism partnership has developed a 'www.visitbeds-luton' website which contains comprehensive tourist information and enables users to make bookings and request accommodation and places to visit guides. Web access to information about the Council's sports and arts provision is very limited.

- 42 The Council has some successful initiatives targeted at young people. The library service had over 10,000 participants on its summer holiday reading scheme and has an increasing number of visits from young people to use ICT facilities and six homework centres. The PE and sport section is engaging with a significant number of young people. The Council is exceeding the PSA target of 75 per cent of young people taking part in a minimum of two hours high quality PE and school sport. It has successfully set up School Sports Partnerships (SSP) with all schools in the county which have resulted in an increasing number of hours of PE delivered in schools and improved training for teachers. For example, all pupils in Key Stages 1 to 4 are currently receiving between 101 and 134 minutes of physical exercise per week. Over 200 Bedfordshire music teachers engage with 6,500 students each week in county schools and music centres. The Council is now engaging with a significant number of young people through cultural services and in some cases is able to demonstrate how this is having a positive impact on their behaviour.
- 43 Service standards are in place within most of Bedfordshire County Council's cultural services but are not consistently informed by users or extensively communicated to the public. There are comprehensive standards for the library and archives services which clearly state areas such as response times, codes of conduct regarding staff and complaints. Service standards within the countryside access service are developing within some of the major parks such as the Millennium and Harold Odell Country Parks although there are no over-arching standards for areas such as access or what customers can expect in terms of litter clearing. Whilst the PE and sports service are clear about quality standards in terms of child protection and quality of teaching/coaching, there are no clear standards which set out what other users might expect in terms of service quality, for example availability of community use, cleanliness or quality of facilities. In general, the Council's service standards are not high profile within facilities or on its website. Users are involved in setting standards within the countryside access service and within archives, but this is not a consistent approach.
- 44 User consultation across cultural services is good but non-user consultation is limited. All the services carry out annual user surveys and there is specific consultation with target groups. For example, the library service has carried out significant consultation with young people to gauge what this group would like to see in the libraries. A particularly strong area is the countryside access service which positively engages with local communities where there are proposed developments for woodland parks. Local people have an opportunity to have a say in the type of service offered including the type of planting, seating and pathways. However, information about non-users is limited to the triennial MORI poll of residents. The Council does not have clear information about why people do not participate in cultural services in the county or particular groups that are not being reached. Consultation is mostly focused on existing users of cultural services who are the minority of the population in Bedfordshire.

Diversity

- 45 The Council delivers a number of positive initiatives to address diversity through its cultural services but their impact is unclear. At corporate level the Council has an equality policy and race equality scheme, which was updated in July 2004. The learning directorate has completed an equality impact assessment which was presented at its management team in November 2005. The Council has achieved Level 2 of the Equality Standard and was placed in the bottom quartile for BVPI 2b, score on the promoting equality checklist. The Council's approach to the human rights legislation is underdeveloped which may expose the Council to risk of legal challenge.
- 46 Cultural services staff within libraries, sports and arts have received training through the 'diversity workbook'. There is a dedicated 'Asian Bedford' page in the libraries website and the library service has a range of material in different languages. Also, the archives service has been highlighted for best practice from its Chartermark assessment for its ethnic minority's source list. Within the countryside access service there is a diversity and equality working group to ensure that the services are accessible to all. Although further examples can be found the Council does not evaluate the success or otherwise of these initiatives and as a consequence their impact is uncertain.

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 47 Cultural services are delivering service objectives but their contribution to strategic priorities is unknown. The library plan and national standards are the key drivers for the library service which is reaching most of its targets. The countryside access service has a comprehensive Outdoor Access Improvement Plan which is driving improvements and is being delivered. The PE and sport section is able to demonstrate that it is delivering its targets in relation to physical activity in schools. These services have service plans which are monitored and showing few exceptions. The weaker areas are for music and arts development which have less clear plans. The Council's strategic priorities and the new vision for cultural services are relatively new and not yet embedded into the services. Consequently, the strategic role that cultural services play in 'Transforming Bedfordshire' has not been clarified. The Council is unable to evidence how cultural services contribute to corporate priorities.
- 48 Local people are generally less satisfied with cultural services than the average for all councils. The 2003/04 general satisfaction survey carried out by MORI showed that resident's satisfaction rates for cultural services to be below the national average in most areas. This survey takes the views of all residents rather than just users of the service. Sport and leisure and libraries are below the median. Arts activities and venues and museums/galleries are in the bottom 25 per cent of all councils. Only parks and open spaces are above the national median. However, the Council carries out annual user surveys across cultural services which show that satisfaction rates are consistently above seventy five per cent of respondents being very satisfied or satisfied. The Council has not carried out any additional research to uncover the reasons for these differences.

- 49 There are some examples where the Council can demonstrate that it is delivering outcomes for service users, but weaknesses in performance management do not provide robust evidence of impact. The following two areas of focus were agreed in advance with the Council.

Economic vitality

- 50 The service has a limited understanding of the value of its contribution to economic vitality. There is no evidence that partners and stakeholders value and recognise the Council's contribution in this area.
- 51 The county's growth agenda identifies the need for 50,000 new jobs to support the planned housing growth. A significant proportion of these jobs are identified within the regional economic strategy as leisure and tourism jobs. Two major tourism developments are currently being proposed which will contribute to some of these jobs. Center Parcs is planning a new holiday centre and the Council is part of a partnership exploring the feasibility of a national aquatics centre in the county (NIRAH). There is a tendency to focus on large scale projects without developing a clear understanding of the 'soft' infrastructure required to support and sustain such projects, such as skills and a strong voluntary and community sector.
- 52 The Council does not have a long-term strategic view of what it wishes to achieve in tourism. It has worked with Bedfordshire districts and boroughs to produce an interim strategy to guide funding bids and it plans to work with a newly established industry led steering group to develop a sub-regional tourism strategy based on the regional tourism strategy recently launched. The Council has increased its investment in tourism services and delivered a range of tourism projects which has increased the range of information available to potential visitors as well as local people. For example, a guide to quality local food and crafts will be of interest to both visitors and local people. However, it is not clear how the Council will achieve the 7,000 jobs target for leisure and tourism identified in the regional economic strategy.
- 53 Creative industries are not considered a priority area although it is not clear what research has underpinned this view. However, the Council has increased its investment in Screen East the regional film agency to promote Bedfordshire as a location for film and TV production. It commissioned a study into the feasibility of developing Cardington Hangars as a commercial film studio following the successful use of the site by Warner Bros. for the filming of Batman Returns.

- 54 There are other examples of cultural services having an economic impact but the overall approach is fragmented and inconsistent. For example, investments in heritage and conservation projects are aimed at improving the attractiveness of the area but this is not linked to tourism objectives. The Council works with a number of partners on a number of regeneration projects such as Arts Generate, which is an estate regeneration programme, Marston Vale Community Forest, and the establishment of a new Groundwork Trust. The countryside team have done some research into the economic impact of country parks on local use and inward investment and has received funding from DEFRA to undertake a research project with Cranfield University to investigate the social and economic impact of countryside access. Again, this focus on countryside access is not featured in tourism objectives.

Quality of life

- 55 Cultural services provide some improvements to quality of life for local people but lack the evidence to quantify this impact consistently across the services.
- 56 There are a range of initiatives aimed at improving the built environment, parks and open spaces and developing a green infrastructure for the county which will reduce the adverse impact of the proposed housing growth in the area. There are strengths in the way the Council has approached the environmental issues through its countryside access and heritage and environment teams. There are also potentially some good outcomes of, for example, the healthy walking initiative but these are not evaluated although numbers of participants is monitored.
- 57 The Council has been less successful in opening up opportunities for adults to participate in sports and arts activities, although most children have opportunities to take part in quality sports activities through the school sports partnership and Active Sports. Some good outcomes are reported by teachers and parents arising from participation in sports. However, the Council is not measuring the health impacts from sports participation or working holistically to address other health issues.
- 58 It is not clear how cultural services work to improve the quality of life of vulnerable or excluded groups, such as older people. Libraries provide services for elderly people's homes and have restructured their mobile library provision around the needs of elderly users and children have access to schemes such as Bookstart, storytimes and homework clubs. There is no evidence, however, that cultural services dovetails in a holistic way with other services such as social care and health to complement and add value to schemes to support, for example, independent living.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 59 Value for money is under developed within Bedfordshire County Council's cultural services. The Council collects information on costs but does not equate this with service outcomes to make policy decisions. Officers and councillors have not in the past positioned services in relation to comparative costs and service outcomes. The Council, in preparing its 2006/07 budgets, has categorised its services in terms of those which will be targeted to deliver savings over and above Gershon efficiencies. For example, the countryside access and archive services fall into this category. However, this decision has been arrived at from cost information as opposed to an overall assessment of value for money. The 2005 Audit Commission's Comprehensive Progress Assessment report indicates that value for money is not well-developed in the Council. The Council is starting to address this and has appointed an Assistant Director for efficiency but this will take time to have an effect on services.
- 60 The top line assessment of value for money for Bedfordshire County Council cultural services reflects comparatively weak value for money. 2004 national indicators show that spend per head is amongst the highest 25 per cent of councils in England for culture and heritage and above the median for sport and leisure. This is in the context of 2003/04 national satisfaction and usage indicators for those services being below the median and in some areas amongst the lowest 25 per cent of councils. Whilst this does not cover services such as the countryside, arts or libraries in detail it gives some initial diagnostics which indicate weaknesses in value for money.
- 61 The Council's historical approach to financial planning has not been conducive towards promoting value for money. Until this year, financial planning has been on an annual basis which has made it difficult to make medium to long-term plans to improve value for money by, for example, investing to save.
- 62 The library service offers overall value for money below its comparator group. Public library statistics for 2004/05 show that the service is a comparatively high spender with net revenue expenditure per 1,000 population at £15,484 against the nearest neighbours average of £14,857. However, usage is comparatively low with 4,553 visits per 1,000 population compared with the average for similar councils of 5,654. User satisfaction levels are comparatively low for adults at 87 per cent but the highest in the group for children at 97 per cent. The Council's library website is successfully attracting 5.6 million hits against the comparator group average of 2.9 million. Staffing costs are relatively low and the cost per book purchased is around the average for county councils.

- 63 The archives service delivers below average performance, in terms of efficiency, with above average customer satisfaction. CIPFA data for 2004/05 shows expenditure per 1,000 population at £921 against the nearest neighbours average of £899. This is against overall enquiries which show 1,958 against the nearest neighbour's average of 8,269. Whilst there are issues with the data in terms of under recording enquiries and, services' comparatively high support costs, the Council has not completed an alternative efficiency position statement for archives. In relation to outcomes, the 2004 National Archives Survey shows that the service performs significantly above the national average in 8 out of the 10 satisfaction indicators. The service has also achieved a Charter Mark for customer service and standards.
- 64 The Council is unable to demonstrate value for money within tourism. It can identify that the value of tourism is increasing but it does not carry out benchmarking and monitoring is limited. Income from tourism reflects the Council's investment. 2004/05 data indicates that the Council spends 11 pence per head on tourism against the nearest neighbours average of 44 pence. The United Kingdom Tourism Survey 2004 highlighted that volume and spending of tourists in Bedfordshire were the lowest in the east of England when compared to the other counties in the region. The spending of tourists in Bedfordshire was £106 million in 2004. Value for money is not an integral part of the way the service is managed.
- 65 The Council is able to demonstrate value for money within its countryside access services. The services have low financial gearing with less than 25 per cent of the revenue budget being financed by the Council due to large scale external funding. Value for money has also been enhanced by a significant number of volunteers that work on its rights of way network and sites. This has been estimated to be in excess of 30,000 man hours per year which would cost in the region of £150,000 if the individuals were paid employees. The countryside access service utilises key cost ratios and can demonstrate, for example, that access to pathways has increased and the cost per metre to maintain these rights of ways have decreased. The Archives service has used prisoners to input data to allow greater public access to lists of archive material. This has generated a non-cashable saving of £3,500 based on the equivalent cost of using agency typists to undertake the work. At the same time the prisoners are gaining ICT skills towards a CLAIT qualification.
- 66 Cultural services within Bedfordshire County Council are using procurement to enhance value for money in some areas. The countryside access service has a partnership with a trust to run the Marston Vale visitor centre and its forestry projects. This is delivering high profile outcomes in terms of transforming former industrial sites into woodland and green spaces. The archaeology fieldwork service is delivered through a trading company, Albion, at zero cost to the Council. Partnership working with Luton Borough Council and other authorities has helped deliver tourism projects. Modern procurement solutions are less visible in the music, archives and operational library services. Overall, there is some good procurement practice although it is not consistent throughout the Council's cultural services.

Summary

- 67 The Council is not clear what it wants to deliver from its cultural services. Whilst it has developed transparent corporate priorities it is not clear where culture fits in. The Council has not developed its community leadership role to balance local, regional and national cultural priorities and develop a clear role for culture in delivering its overall objectives.
- 68 The Council is providing a range of well-managed services for local people and visitors. Young people receive good quality sports and music tuition in schools and there are a range of country parks and facilities for walking and cycling. Heritage and arts opportunities are more limited and tourism is underdeveloped.
- 69 Access to cultural services is inconsistent with some services providing good access such as countryside access whereas others are more limited such as archives. Access to services through ICT is good with a comprehensive 'virtual library' and a good tourism website. Other services are developing their websites to provide better access and more interactivity. Physical access to buildings is good in libraries but poor in archives. Users are generally very satisfied but residents who do not use the service are less satisfied and the Council has not taken steps to understand the reasons behind this.
- 70 The Council is providing some successful initiatives targeted at young people such as the summer holiday reading scheme, increased usage of ICT in libraries and high physical activity levels through its school sports colleges. Provision for adults is more limited. The Council does not know who its users are, or have plans in place to ensure that users reflect the diversity of the local area.
- 71 The Council does not adequately monitor or measure value for money within cultural services. It has some information on costs but does not compare this with service quality or service outcomes. The overall value for money of cultural services is relatively weak with above average costs and below average resident satisfaction rates. However, countryside access and archaeology represent better value for money due to significant external funding.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 72** The lack of clear priorities and focus for cultural services at strategic level make it difficult for the Council to evidence progress. As described in the earlier sections of this report the Council has not yet aligned cultural services to its corporate priorities developed in 2005. Although there is an emerging vision for cultural services and a draft LAA they have yet to be embedded in service delivery. The Council does not have a shared strategic framework such as a cultural strategy which focuses the work of the Council and partners on key outcomes for cultural services. As a result, improvements tend to be at service level or informed by national drivers. This fragmented approach reduces the potential impact that the Council can have on cultural services throughout the county.
- 73** The Council cannot demonstrate improvements to overall value for money within cultural services. As discussed in the last section the approach to value for money is underdeveloped within cultural services. Officers and councillors do not routinely assess services in terms of value for money and as a consequence do not have a baseline position from which to track improvement. There are some isolated exceptions to this such as the countryside access service.
- 74** The libraries and archives services show an overall static performance over the last three years. CIPFA returns indicate that library visits have remained static with visits per 1,000 population in 2004/05 at 4,553 compared to 4,521 on 2002/03. Enquiries in the archives service increased to 1,958 from 1,519 in the same time period but the annual revenue cost of the service increased to £515,000 from £469,000. This indicates that parts of the services have not progressed in terms of usage and cost.
- 75** There are some significant improvements to ICT access to Bedfordshire County Council's cultural services. ICT access has improved for the library service through the development of the 'virtual library' resulting in comparatively high levels of website hits and transactions such as book reservations. In the archives service ICT access has been enabled for reference material and is attracting a large and increasing number of hits. The tourism website has also been improved in partnership with Luton Borough Council. All services are experiencing significant increases in website usage and transactions.
- 76** The countryside access service has developed a good track record of delivering improvements. The Council can demonstrate improving value for money for rights of way. According to unaudited national indicators in 2003/04, 57 per cent of the network was easy to use and projections for 2005/06 show that this will increase to 68 per cent. The cost of the pathway network was 58.4 pence per metre in 2003/04, reducing to projected 40.7 pence in 2005/06. There have been a number of key industrial sites such as mineral extraction pits which have been restored with good access for walking and outdoor recreation. Overall opportunities for local people to experience the countryside are increasing.

- 77 The PE and sport services deliver and enable improvements in physical activity levels of young people at school. In the three school sports partnerships, set up in 2004, the average number of minutes of physical activity of pupils in Key Stages 1 to 4 increased from 109 minutes for the academic year 2004/05 to 123 minutes in 2005/06. Further, the Council has now extended the scheme to three other schools resulting in total coverage throughout the county. This work has been supported with teacher training as part of CPD training. The Council have been able to assess the results of this in the schools which include more lunchtime activities and improvements to the way PE is delivered. Physical activity has improved in terms of quality and participation within Bedfordshire County Council's schools.
- 78 The Council's music education service is engaging with more young people. In the academic year 2004/05 there were 5,496 pupil teaching sessions held increasing to an average of 6,063 for 2005/06. More young people have access to extra curricular music teaching.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 79 Leadership of cultural services is beginning to develop but has been historically weak. The best value review (BVR) highlighted a lack of strategic leadership of the service which the Council has started to address through the action plan arising from the BVR. It now has a councillor and a senior officer as 'sponsors' of cultural services. There are also plans to restructure the Council which will place cultural services within the community services directorate potentially giving it a greater profile.
- 80 The Council has not had a clear vision of what it wants to achieve in cultural services although this is now developing. There is no overarching strategic approach which combines the Council's aspirations with those of partners such as a cultural strategy. Strategic plans for aspects of the service are patchy. There is a statutory requirement to have a library plan and the Council has developed a comprehensive outdoor access improvement plan and, with partners, a Strategic Green Infrastructure Plan. However, there are no strategic plans for key areas such as tourism, physical activity or the arts. Without this clear strategic direction there is a lack of clarity of purpose and planning for the future is limited. Whilst the Council has recently developed a vision for culture, it is going to take time for this to be embedded to a point where it is informing service delivery.
- 81 Performance management of cultural services is insufficiently developed for the Council to assess and monitor impact. Baseline information is patchy for both outputs and outcomes within services and focused around current users. There is limited engagement with non-users and the services do not have a sense of the level of community penetration. For example, the library and archives services monitor usage and enquiries but do not relate this to the number of potential users. Similarly, the concessionary pricing policy within cultural services is not monitored in terms of the uptake against the total number of residents eligible for the scheme. The monitoring of outcomes is limited within the services. The Council is unable to assess the difference its services are making to key areas such as the life chances of young people, health, quality of life or social inclusion.

- 82 The Council is unable to track progress towards delivering improved value for money within cultural services. Whilst costs are rigorously monitored and the services have a good track record of keeping within budgets this is not compared with service performance as a whole. Thus the services monitor costs, satisfaction and usage but do not bring them together to give a position on value for money and set targets for improvement. The countryside access service is an exception to this. Overall, value for money is not driving cultural services in Bedfordshire County Council and the Council is not currently in a position to set targets for improvement within its current performance management arrangements.
- 83 There are some strengths in performance management at service level. The majority of areas have service plans which are designed mostly to deliver operational improvements. Service plans are monitored quarterly and reviewed annually. There is also some good practice in managing service improvements. For example, archives have clearly defined targets for telephone answering and can track, year-on-year, improvements going back to 1993. The countryside access service can demonstrate that it is jointly managing performance with partners. For example the Ivel and Ouse Countryside Project has an improvement plan steered and reviewed by a monitoring group which includes key stakeholders. Service planning is, however, weakened by a lack of an overarching strategy that focuses on contributing to corporate objectives and provides a sense of priority.
- 84 The Council has demonstrated a good understanding of what outcomes it is seeking to achieve and these are largely user-focused and will be recognised by local people. The outdoor access improvement plan sets a clear strategic direction for countryside access in Bedfordshire. It is linked to other statutory plans and frameworks and supports the Council's overall aims and priorities. The plan itself contains specific actions, is realistic and time bound. However, some of the actions are not measurable and targets have not been set.
- 85 The Council is improving its approach to financial management and there is some evidence to show that it is beginning to allocate resources in line with high level policy decisions. It has put in place a process of resource allocation which is based on an analysis of corporate priorities and improvement targets. It has introduced three-year budget planning for revenue and five-year planning for capital spending and has undertaken a public consultation to identify priorities. However, service planning and financial planning are not yet in line. This means that identifying priorities at a service level are more difficult and service plans are not yet driven by the medium-term financial strategy.
- 86 The Council is improving its performance management system but this is not embedded and its implementation is inconsistent across the Council. The Council is rolling out a new performance management system which includes improved financial monitoring alongside service performance information. It also plans to include unit costs once a benchmark has been established for each service. This will improve the information available to managers and councillors and enable them to understand how each service is performing against corporate priorities and improvement targets.

- 87 There are few formal arrangements in place to learn from others, either from within the Council or from other councils or partners. This means that the service is not benefiting from the experiences of others when planning projects or service improvements. There are some exceptions, for example senior officers participate in a range of professional groupings at a regional and national level which gives them access to best practice. There are also examples of the Council participating in joint projects and initiatives from which learning outcomes are inevitable but it is not clear how this learning is captured and disseminated across cultural services or the Council as a whole. This reduces the service's ability to make the most of opportunities to learn from others.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 88 The Council has recognised key capacity issues within cultural services and is taking steps to address them. It has completed a senior management restructure and is currently recruiting two key posts, the Director of Community Services and the Assistant Director Culture and Community Services. In parallel with this, the councillors' organisational structure has been changed and there is now a portfolio holder for cultural services. There is recognition within the Council that it needs to develop its community leadership role and steps are being taken to address this. The Council has started to improve its leadership and strategic positioning of cultural services and has recently produced a vision statement for cultural services. However, this vision was not developed in partnership and partners feel that the county has not developed its leadership role with regard to culture. Cultural outcomes are identified within the draft LAA but there are some concerns amongst partners about whether the capacity exists to deliver the outcomes required. This is critical because much of the reward grant is linked to achieving cultural outcomes such as increased participation in sports and recreation.
- 89 Cultural services have good human resource capacity. All services have experienced, committed staff who are mostly positive about change. A particular area of strength is training and development which is reviewed annually for each employee and monitored bi-annually. Staff interviewed during this inspection were positive about training and the resources available to them to help them progress. The people delivering cultural services are a key building block towards improvement.
- 90 The Council is securing high levels of external funding for cultural services. In 2004/05 there was an inward investment of over £15 million which was used to enhance the countryside access, PE and sport and library services. This is having a visible effect on services particularly for countryside access and electronic delivery of services.

- 91 Partnership working is adding capacity within cultural services. The Council has a partnership with a trust to deliver the Marston Vale Community Forest and its forestry improvements. It is working in partnership with Luton Borough Council to deliver tourism initiatives including a website and participation in travel trade fairs. A new partnership with the districts and Arts Council England (East) has created a community arts organisation called 'Happen' which will deliver arts opportunities across the county. The Council is actively working with the private sector to develop the NIRAH project, for which it has allocated a £1.5 million development fund to explore the feasibility of the project and develop outline plans. The library service works in partnership to secure improved procurement as well as co-operative services between neighbouring library services. The countryside access service has a significant volunteer workforce created as a result of partnership working with local conservation groups and communities. Residents are beginning to see results from these partnerships particularly in the countryside access services.
- 92 Strategic partnerships are under developed within Bedfordshire County Council's cultural services. There is no live partnership which has developed a strategic approach to cultural services with shared priorities and targets. This means that resources across local authorities, health authorities, education and other agencies are not being maximised and focused on key priorities. The scope of cultural services in Bedfordshire County Council is narrow and the Council has some way to go before it becomes the main community leader. Most of the district councils have cultural strategies in place and are working to a common set of themes within their community plans, but there has been little input from the county council into the cultural planning process at a district level and the county does not have an overview of cultural planning or act as a broker to identify common goals. The Council recognise the need for a strategic approach and intend to make this the initial focus of the new Assistant Director. The absence of a binding strategy delivered by all key stakeholders means that delivery of cultural services is fragmented running the risk of not maximising the use of existing resources.
- 93 There are some financial risks which could impact on cultural services. The budget round for 2006/07 has resulted in cuts to the revenue funding of the archives and countryside access services over and above Gershon efficiency savings. This is likely to result in a slowing down of countryside access and archives ICT improvements. There is also an incomplete approach to asset management due to the fact that detailed condition surveys have not been completed for all cultural services buildings. This means that maintenance issues may not be picked up or resourced, although since the inspection week the council has begun corporately to develop its approach to asset management. Financial planning is inadequate and does not focus on the medium and long-term needs of the services.

- 94 Key building blocks are not fully embedded within the Council. The corporate priorities and 'Transforming Bedfordshire' were finalised in 2005. The corporate performance management system and procurement strategy are both draft documents. Whilst the Council intends to lead on a sub-regional tourism strategy and work on a cultural strategy, it will be some time before they are in place and driving the services. The Council is going through a major transition period and how this will impact on cultural services and when the service will improve is uncertain.

Summary

- 95 Cultural services lack clear priorities at strategic level which make it difficult for the Council to evidence overall progress or demonstrate improvements in value for money.
- 96 Some aspects of cultural services have improved, such as better electronic access and new countryside and heritage initiatives. There are improvements to public rights of way and better access to sports provision in schools.
- 97 Performance management within cultural services is weak. The Council has not had a clear vision of what it wants to achieve in cultural services and the lack of clarity of purpose has hindered planning for the future.
- 98 Information about the performance of the Council's cultural services is insufficiently developed for the Council to assess and monitor impact or track progress towards delivering improved value for money.
- 99 Some of the individual services within culture have sound service plans. The outdoor access improvement plan sets a clear strategic direction for countryside access in Bedfordshire.
- 100 The Council is developing its performance management systems and starting to develop more specific targets through the LAA. It is improving its approach to financial management and there is some evidence to show that it is beginning to allocate resources in line with high level policy decisions. But this is not embedded and its implementation is inconsistent across the Council's services.

Appendix 1 – Judgement scores

- 1 The descriptors for judgement one scores have been agreed by the Local Services Inspectorate Forum (LSIF). Members are the Commission for Social Care Inspection, the Audit Commission, the Office for Standards in Education, the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, HM Fire Services Inspectorate, Department for Education and Skills and the Healthcare Commission.

Table 1 Judgement 1 – How good is the service?

Score	AC labels and stars	LSIF descriptors
4	Excellent ⚙️⚙️⚙️	A service that delivers well above minimum requirements for users, is highly cost-effective and fully contributes to the achievement of wider outcomes for the community.
3	Good ⚙️⚙️	A service that consistently delivers above minimum requirements for users, is cost-effective and makes contributions to wider outcomes for the community.
2	Fair ⚙️	A service that delivers only minimum requirements for users and is not especially cost-effective, nor contributes significantly to wider outcomes for the community.
1	Poor (0 stars)	A service that does not deliver minimum requirements for users, is not cost-effective and makes little or no contribution to wider outcomes for the community.

Table 2 Judgement 2 – Prospects for improvement

Score	AC labels	Descriptors
4	Excellent prospects	A service with improvement arrangements and capacity well above the minimum requirements needed to deliver continuous improvements in outcomes for users and/or the wider community and in value for money. Few, if any barriers to improvement exist.
3	Promising prospects	A service with improvement arrangements and capacity consistently above the minimum requirements needed to deliver continuous improvements in outcomes for users and/or the wider community and in value for money. Enablers of improvement strongly outweigh barriers to improvement.
2	Uncertain prospects	A service with improvement arrangements and capacity such that delivery of continuous improvements in outcomes for users and/or the wider community and in value for money is uncertain . Enablers of, and barriers to, improvement are finely balanced.
1	Poor prospects	A service with improvement arrangements and capacity that do not meet the minimum requirements needed to deliver continuous improvements in outcomes for users and/or the wider community and in value for money. Either barriers to improvement strongly outweigh enablers of improvement, or few, if any, enablers of improvement are in place.