

# Street Scene

**South Gloucestershire Council**

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# Contents

Service Inspection	4
<b>Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Scoring the service</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Report</b>	<b>12</b>
Context	12
The locality	12
The Council	13
The Council's street scene service	13
<b>How good is the service?</b>	<b>14</b>
What has the service aimed to achieve?	14
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?	15
Customer access and experience	18
Is the service delivering value for money?	21
<b>What are the prospects for improvement to the service?</b>	<b>24</b>
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	24
How well does the service manage performance?	25
Does the service have the capacity to improve?	28

## 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 web site at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk).

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

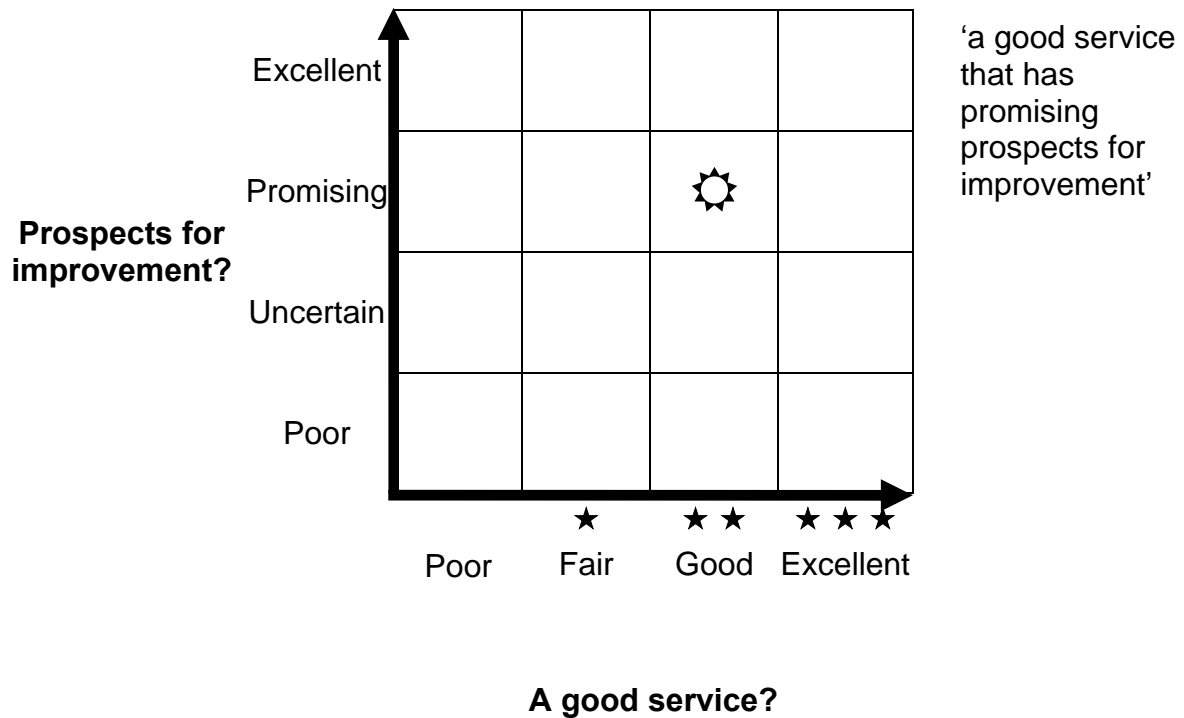
## Summary

- 1 South Gloucestershire Council provides a good Street Scene Service with promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 South Gloucestershire is generally clean and tidy. The service has low costs and generally strong performance and provides local people with good value for money. The service has effectively tackled local problems around town centre cleaning and highway weeds and responds quickly to drug litter, graffiti, fly-posting, fly-tipping and abandoned vehicles. This is recognised by the high level of satisfaction among local people with the service.
- 3 The Council has combined the separate service areas involved in street scene work to ensure a seamless and accessible service that has strong community links and is responsive to community needs. Staff demonstrate a customer focussed approach to their work and there are a number of mechanisms to ensure effective communication with local people. There are protocols for staff who provide services for travellers. However, service standards are not well developed or communicated and systems are not yet developed to identify and use customer feedback information. In addition, not all staff have had training to raise their awareness of equalities and diversity issues.
- 4 The service's approach to enforcement and education is underdeveloped and there are only limited actions to improve its approach to environmental sustainability. In addition, there remain risks to the Council and its residents because of the low frequency of its highway safety checks and because of the condition of street lights.
- 5 The service is a clear corporate priority and there is a visible commitment from both senior managers and a wide body of councillors to drive improvements. There is a good track record of investment, of responding positively to external challenge and of delivering improvements. The service is well managed and there are strong high level arrangements in place to manage performance. There is openness to learning and a high level of self-awareness about the strengths and areas for improvement. The Council's investment in ICT offers a solid base from which to deliver improvements in the service for example, through the new performance management and customer relationship management systems and internet development.
- 6 The Council is developing a longer-term vision and shorter-term priorities for the service and the draft Local Public Service Agreement already includes targets for service improvement. It is good that the Council has safeguarded the services budgets for 2006/07, but there are significant financial pressures affecting the Council and it is not clear how these will impact on the service in the longer term. It is also not yet clear how the strategic review of the Council's management arrangements and the review of the current client/contractor relationship will impact on the service.

## Scoring the service

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

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



Source: Audit Commission

- 8 The service is a good, two-star service due to the following reasons.
- South Gloucestershire is generally clean and tidy and there is a particularly good response to drug litter, graffiti, fly-posting, fly-tipping and abandoned vehicles.
  - The service has effectively tackled local problems including town centre cleaning and highway weeds.
  - There is a high level of satisfaction among local people with the street cleaning service and anti-social behaviour is not perceived as a significant issue for the area.

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

- The Council has combined the separate service areas involved in street scene work to ensure a seamless and accessible service that has strong community links and is responsive to community needs.
  - The arrangements to deliver services locally, working with local community groups and developers helps to provide strong community links and a more responsive service.
  - The performance of the service compares well with other councils in most areas.
  - There are good initiatives to improve community safety.
  - The service is developing its translation service and there are protocols for staff who provide services for travellers.
  - A number of mechanisms to ensure effective communications with local people are in place and staff demonstrate a customer focused approach to their work.
  - The service is providing local people with good value for money. The service has comparatively low costs and generally strong performance.
- 9 However, certain areas still need attention, including the following.
- The frequency of routine patrols to check highway safety and the condition of street lights poses a risk to the Council.
  - The service's approach to enforcement and education is underdeveloped and there are only limited actions to improve its approach to environmental sustainability.
  - Service standards are not fully developed or communicated to local people and the service does not yet have systems to identify and use customer feedback information.
  - Not all staff have had training to raise their awareness of equalities and diversity issues.
- 10 The service has promising prospects for improvement due to the following reasons.
- The service is a clear corporate priority and there is a visible commitment from both senior managers and a wide body of councillors to drive improvements.
  - The developing Local Area Agreements include many aspects of the service as a future priority and targets are set for improvement.
  - There is a good and continuing track record of investment and of delivering improvements in key areas of the service.
  - The Council has responded well to address weaknesses identified in previous inspections and address weaknesses identified during this inspection.
  - The service is well managed and there are strong high-level arrangements in place to manage performance in the service for example, through six monthly performance board meetings.

## 8 Street Scene | Scoring the service

- The service demonstrates openness to learning and a high level of self-awareness about the strengths and areas for improvement.
- The Council has begun a fundamental review of the current client/contractor relationship led by the Chief Executive to be completed by September 2006.
- The Council's investment in ICT offers a solid base from which to deliver improvements in the service for example, new performance management and customer relationship management systems and internet development.
- The service is taking steps to increase management capacity and develop the skills and capacity of its staff through training and managing sickness absence.

11 However, there are some areas for improvement, including the following.

- The longer-term vision and shorter-term priorities for the service are still emerging and there is currently no overarching strategy which sets out what the Council plans to do to improve the service, although there are clear plans to develop a strategy by September 2006.
- There are significant financial pressures on the Council and it is unclear how this will impact on the service in the longer term.
- It is not yet clear how the strategic review of the Council's management arrangements and the review of the current client/contractor relationship will impact on the service.
- There are gaps in the Council's future plans and weaknesses in the service's approach to target setting and review.
- The service currently has limited capacity focused on key strategic issues for example, modern procurement.
- Front-line supervisors currently lack the skills to be fully effective in their roles, but training needs have been assessed and development needs are to be addressed.
- Sickness levels are increasing and impacting on the effectiveness of the service.

## Recommendations

- 12 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the council. In addition we identify the approximate costs<sup>2</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

### ***Recommendation***

*R1 Define a long-term vision and overarching strategy for the service with clear and challenging targets that reflect the needs and aspirations of customers, local communities, and other stakeholders.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- enhanced community leadership;
- improved standards of service delivery; and
- greater focus on Council priorities and improved links with partners priorities to drive service efficiencies.

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

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

**Recommendation**

*R2 Improve the service provided to local people by addressing the weaknesses outlined in this report, particularly by:*

- *developing mechanisms to identify and use customer feedback information and ensuring that information about the service is clear, uses plain language and is available widely in appropriate alternative formats;*
- *ensuring all supervisory staff have been trained on all key Council procedures and raising awareness within the service about equality and diversity issues;*
- *taking a more proactive approach to changing the attitudes and behaviour of local people and local businesses through better education, promotion and enforcement activity;*
- *actively addressing risks to the Council arising from both highways and the condition of street lights; and*
- *improving future plans for example, by developing an action plan to address the weaknesses identified in the service level agreements (SLAs);*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better service provision for users and local communities;
- better 'fit' between the needs of local people and the service provided;
- cleaner streets and public spaces;
- improved public safety; and
- better value for money.

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

**Recommendation**

*R3 Ensure adequate resources are allocated to maintain current service levels and that the service improves through the better utilisation of existing resources by:*

- *reconsidering the effectiveness of the client and contractor roles;*
- *allocating the LPSA reward to the service;*
- *regularly testing the service's value for money; and*
- *developing better procurement.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved standards of service delivery;
- a greater focus on service delivery rather than on internal processes; and
- better value for money for local people.

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

# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 13 South Gloucestershire Council is a unitary authority in the west of England with a diverse mix of urban and rural population. It covers an area of 497 square kilometres, which includes extensive urban areas around the northern fringe of Bristol, parts of the Cotswold area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB) and the Levels along the Severn Estuary, as well as significant areas of open countryside.
- 14 The 2001 census shows that the resident population of South Gloucestershire was 246,000 and is estimated to have grown at an average rate of 2,000 people per year since then. Between 1991 and 2001, the population of the district increased by 10.7 per cent, much higher than the national average increase of 2.7 per cent. The population is projected to grow by 20 per cent between 1996 and 2011 with 24 per cent of the population being over 65 years. While the majority of the population live in urban areas, there is a significant minority of people living in rural wards.
- 15 The proportions of young people, people of working age and people of pensionable age are close to the national averages. The proportion of people from ethnic groups other than 'white British' is 4.1 per cent. This compares with 4.6 per cent for the south west, and 13.0 per cent for England.
- 16 South Gloucestershire is among the least deprived districts in England, ranked 298th out of 354 English councils in terms of the ODPM's indices of deprivation, where one is the most deprived. Employment is mostly within the service sector and there are very low levels of unemployment -1 per cent compared with the national average of 2.5 per cent. This creates competitive pressures for staff and earnings are above the regional average.
- 17 The district is crossed by the M4 and M5 motorways and contains a major motorway intersection at Almondsbury. The main rail lines to London from Wales and the west county run through the area and these link to rail lines running to the Midlands and the west coast of England. Approximately 30,000 people leave the area to work in Bristol and another 30,000 people come into the area on a daily basis to work. There are high levels of car ownership and traffic congestion is a major issue in urban areas particularly around the Bristol area.
- 18 The area has experienced significant new development in the last decade including large areas of housing development while some of the older urban and rural areas need investment. These factors result in a complex mix of needs which the Council has to respond to.

## The Council

- 19 The Council comprises 70 councillors. No single political party controls the Council. The Liberal Democrats are the biggest party with 33 seats, the Conservatives have 21 seats and the Labour party have 16 seats.
- 20 The Council has adopted the executive and scrutiny model of governance. With an executive of seven councillors drawn from all the political parties. The Council employs 7,800 staff across all services. The two main Council offices are in Thornbury and Kingswood with other smaller satellite offices across the South Gloucestershire area.
- 21 The Council's revenue budget for 2005/06 is £256 million, an increase of approximately 9 per cent from 2004/05.
- 22 The Council's Corporate Service Plan 2004 – 2007 identifies six key improvement priorities:
- 'strengthening our communities;
  - meeting the needs of and providing opportunities for our children and young people;
  - understanding and meeting the aspirations of our older people;
  - improving and managing travel and transport;
  - reshaping our housing services; and
  - a well managed council.'
- 23 The service is principally aligned to the 'Strengthening Communities' priority although it also contributes to the 'a well-managed council' and 'children and young people' priorities.

## The Council's street scene service

- 24 South Gloucestershire's street care service as the 'client' is responsible for the service and is within the Community Services Department. The Council's Direct Services Department (DSD) acts as in-house contractor and is responsible for delivering most of the street care services. The Council's Planning, Transport and Strategic Environment (PTSE) Department is also involved in some aspects of the service such as street lighting and footways.
- 25 The scope of the inspection included street cleaning which includes litter and dog fouling clearance, highway weed control, graffiti, fly-posting, fly-tipping and abandoned vehicles removal, street lighting, footway maintenance, grounds maintenance and the provision and maintenance of play areas. This inspection did not include highways maintenance, traffic control, public toilets or car parks.
- 26 The budget for the service for 2005/06 is approximately £10.18 million; this represents nearly 4 per cent of the Council's total net expenditure.
- 27 The Executive member for Communities has overall political responsibility for the street care service and the Executive member for Traded Services is responsible for the Direct Services Department.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 28** There are good high-level ambitions for the service that link well to community and corporate priorities and targets are set to improve performance.
- 29** The service clearly contributes to the aims of the South Gloucestershire Community Strategy. The strategy which was adopted in March 2003 has seven goals including 'an environment that is protected and enhanced for future generations'. As part of this goal there is a strategic aim to 'conserve and enhance the natural and built environment', with a supporting aim to 'improve the quality of the built and street environment and local neighbourhoods'. Other goals which impact on the service include 'strong communities where needs are met locally', 'improved health and well-being for everyone' and 'communities with low levels of crime and disorder where people feel safe'.
- 30** Targets for improvements in the service have been included in the local public service agreement<sup>3</sup> (LPSA) for 2004-2007. This agreement sets twelve targets for improved performance, one of which relates to a three day response to reports of fly-posting and graffiti.
- 31** The Council identifies its aims for the service in its Corporate Service Plan 2004–2007. There are six priorities for improvement including 'strengthening our communities'. Within this priority there are eight promises which include: actions to improve the environment; enhance safety; improve street lighting; identify high litter areas and provide additional cleansing services; establish new standards to remove graffiti from council buildings in three days; and delivering the Councils public rights of ways improvement plan. Other cross-cutting priorities and actions which impact on the service include providing for children and young people, delivering cost effective services, and improving access to services.
- 32** Targets for improvement to the service are contained in the annual performance report for 2004/05 and in departmental and service specific plans. These targets for improvement include the following.

**Table 2 Targets for improvement**

Service area	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Satisfaction with street cleaning	75%	n/a	n/a	68%
Satisfaction with parks and open spaces	60%	n/a	n/a	78%
Land with significant litter	30%	20%	18%	17%
Streets without weeds	70%	75%	80%	85%

<sup>3</sup> LPSAs are agreements between councils and central government which are designed to improve service delivery in return for a performance reward grant.

Service area	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Graffiti removal in three days	10%	70%	90%	100%
Fly poster removal in three days	15%	70%	90%	100%
Pedestrian crossings with disabled facilities	70%	75%	80%	85%
Footpaths that are easy to use	38%	40%	47%	48%
Footways in need of repair	35%	33%	30%	28%

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

**33** The service is performing well and it is meeting the needs of the local community. This is confirmed by comparing the Council's performance with a family group of councils' with similar characteristics.

- The standards of street cleanliness in South Gloucestershire are the second best when compared to a family group of 16 councils.
- Local people's satisfaction with street cleanliness was fourth highest in the family group in 2003 and since that time there have been additional resources allocated to further improve the service.
- Local peoples' satisfaction with the parks and open spaces is above the family average.
- The levels of use of the parks and open spaces is above average.

There are, however, areas of weaker comparative performance.

- The condition of footways is thirteenth in the family group.
- The percentage of crossings with disabled facilities is 15th. The Council has, however, previously invested in its pedestrian crossings to make them accessible, but the standards have recently been lifted so necessitating additional work to meet the new standard.

**34** Anti-social behaviour has not been highlighted as a significant issue in South Gloucestershire. Surveys conducted in 2003/04 showed that local people do not think that rubbish and litter lying around, graffiti, or abandoned cars are a problem for the area. And local people are also less concerned about teenagers hanging around the streets, drunkenness and rowdiness in public places than other areas.

**35** The arrangement of the separate service areas involved in street scene work into the street care service in 2000 has contributed to improved outcomes. This new arrangement has resulted in closer working between the separate services, especially street cleaning, minor highway works and grounds maintenance. This has brought a more consistent and seamless service delivery. For example, routine maintenance operations are combined to carry out all cyclical maintenance on major routes which require lane closures.

There are joint initiatives between street cleaning and grounds maintenance operatives during the winter months to remove visible litter from hedgerows, shrubberies and trees. And there are common grass cutting regimes on all amenity grass areas regardless of which department owns the land. Such initiatives not only improve the service provided for local people, but it also improves its cost effectiveness.

- 36** There are good arrangements to deliver services locally, to engage with community groups and to provide a responsive service. The ten street care inspectors' work in five geographic areas around the district and work closely with the area based forums<sup>4</sup>. They have a combined annual resource of £150,000 to respond to local issues and there are area based teams of operational staff who carry out routine maintenance and small improvement works within the defined geographical areas. These measures help to provide a more tailored response to local circumstances and it also allows staff to become more closely engaged with service users.
- 37** The Council is using learning to improve the service. The Council is required to routinely assess the cleanliness of its public land. As a result of its early surveys the Council identified problematic areas and this together with a review of complaints led to improvements such as:
- additional late afternoon cleaning in the town centres;
  - additional weed control on the highways and pavements;
  - 'deep cleans' of congested streets to allow for co-ordinated maintenance; and
  - the additional clearing of litter from hedgerows and landscaped areas.
- 38** The service has developed a code of practice and takes action to improve the safety of members of the public who use the Council's roads and footways. There are two safety inspectors who routinely patrol the area to identify problems and to organise responsive repairs and as a result of this proactive approach the numbers of claims for compensation have reduced. The Council is to review its code of practice to check its consistency with the new national code and to evaluate the cost benefit of additional inspections against the cost of claims. However, the Council does not yet fully meet the new national code of practice. This could expose local people to unnecessary risks and it could expose the Council to risk of insurance claims. And there are no cyclical maintenance programmes for cleaning highway signs.
- 39** Access for pedestrians and cyclists is improving. The Council is spending £50,000 a year to improve the accessibility of its pedestrian crossings, the network of cycleways continues to develop and there is good signposting. However, the standards of cleaning of the cycleways are inadequate with no regular cyclical maintenance to remove debris and this results in punctures and complaints from service users.

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<sup>4</sup> The area forums are locally based groups which include representatives of the town and parish councils.

- 40 The condition of the street lights in South Gloucestershire represents a risk to the Council and an ongoing safety risk to members of the public. Over 65 per cent of street lights are at least 25 years old and there have already been a number of collapses. Although there has been recent additional investment in the service, this has had limited impact on improving what is an escalating problem. There are however routine patrols to ensure that the street lights are working effectively, the response to bulb failures is good and there are bulk changes of lamps to provide a planned response and limit the need for repetitive lane closures.
- 41 The Council is working with its communities, service users and developers to improve its parks and open spaces. There are 15 'friends of parks' groups and some of these have successfully levered in external funding to improve the parks. The Council is working towards green flag awards for its two historic parks and it is using financial contributions from new housing developments to improve its provision of parks and playgrounds. The Council has a 'one per cent for art' policy which requires developers to contribute towards improving the street scene through the provision of works of art and it requires payment of 15 years maintenance costs from developers for adopting new areas of public open spaces within developments.
- 42 The Council maintains its 68 children's' playgrounds in a safe condition and the playgrounds all have safety surfacing and dog proof fencing and risk assessments have informed the frequency of routine safety inspections. The number of sites has fallen from over 100 and the play strategy proposes further rationalisation of sites together with significant investment to refurbish the remaining sites. It is good that when the Council provides new equipment it does so in consultation with local children and it also makes some provision for disabled children.
- 43 There are excellent initiatives to improve community safety. There are joint protocols between the police and fire services and the service to respond to 'dangerous or at risk' vehicles within 24 hours and the Council participates in a 'car clear scheme' to remove unwanted vehicles. There are joint agency 'walkabouts' to take action in problem areas and the service provides an excellent response to drug litter and racist or obscene graffiti and these are reported to community safety action teams who respond to local hotspots. The Council contributes to improved community safety by providing a proactive service which in the last year has proactively removed 97 per cent of all reported incidents of fly-posting, 43 per cent of all graffiti reports and 40 per cent of all fly-tipping. And the Council allocates £50,000 a year to make improvements to street lighting in problematic areas.
- 44 There are some actions within the service to improve biodiversity. The Council employs a Biodiversity Officer, it contributes to the Avon Community Forest initiative which is included in the Local Plan and the Council has a policy to replant a tree if one is removed. There are also some areas of grass which are left uncut to develop as wildflower meadows and the Council is taking positive action to identify and treat notifiable weeds such as Ragwort.

- 45 Despite the service delivering many good outcomes, the service is not uniformly meeting its targets for improvement. The service met its targets in 2003/04 for local people's satisfaction with parks and open spaces and in 2004/05 it met its targets for the reducing littering on public land, the amount of weeds on the streets, the speed of removal of fly-posters and the ease of use of footways. But, despite its comparatively good performance it failed to meet its targets for local people's satisfaction with street cleaning in 2003, and in 2004/05 it failed to meet its targets for the percentage of footways in need of repair, the speed of removal of graffiti and the percentage of pedestrian crossings with disabled facilities.
- 46 Actions to manage the service in a more sustainable way are limited. The Council uses contact rather than residual herbicides to treat its highways weeds. It purchases some recycled materials such as street nameplates and street benches and it recycles its own green waste, but there are no co-ordinated approaches to sustainability and the service does not yet have an environmental management system to monitor and reduce its environmental impact.
- 47 The service's approach to enforcement and education is underdeveloped. Targeted information and education can make a positive impact in raising public awareness, promoting a change in behaviour and reducing the need for enforcement action. The Dog Warden is involved in some important work including micro chipping of dogs, dealing with strays and re-homing, educational work and patrols of problem areas, but the Council has only served five enforcement notices. An externally funded part-time education officer has given talks to six secondary schools and has run some small campaigns. Enforcement can play an important role in raising standards but there has been no enforcement action for littering and promotional campaigns have been limited in their effectiveness. There are no overall strategies or campaigns to focus action on changing attitudes and behaviour over the longer-term to reduce the extent of littering in South Gloucestershire. This was highlighted as an area for improvement by the local people we spoke to.

### **Customer access and experience**

- 48 The arrangement of the separate service areas involved in street scene work into the street care service demonstrates the Council's customer focused approach and staff working within the help desk demonstrate a customer focused approach to their work. Most people contact the service by telephone and the Council has arranged its street care service so that it can be accessed by telephone or electronically through a single point of contact. The help desk deals with 400 to 500 calls per day. Our reality checks and feedback from local people we spoke to confirmed that help desk staff identify themselves clearly, are polite and helpful and deal effectively with service requests.
- 49 The service has taken steps to ensure that staffing levels on the help desk are sufficient, particularly at peak times. Performance is improving but, at present some services calls are still not answered promptly and there is an unsatisfactory level of calls being 'lost' at peak times, for example because customers get frustrated waiting for the call to be answered.

- 50 The Council has recently introduced a new customer relationship management system which offers the potential to improve customer service and should contribute to improvements in call handling. However, at present it cannot be accessed by many operational staff. This means that operational staff cannot easily access and update information on the system. This represents a potential risk to the Council and is creating problems and additional work for both operational and help desk staff because help desk staff cannot easily provide updates to customers about ongoing problems.
- 51 The service has a number of mechanisms to ensure effective communications with local people. The service uses local media well to promote its services and publicise success particularly on waste and recycling. All publications are checked by a dedicated communications team who work in the service to ensure that they use corporate branding and the Council logo consistently. Information is generally easy to read and available in a range of languages and formats. This is publicised the first time a customer is sent a letter by the service. However, not all staff have had training in the use of plain English.
- 52 It is the Council's policy not to publicise the out-of-hours service. As such information about the service is not easily accessible, or well publicised. Customers we spoke to told us that they were unclear as to what services were available and what number to ring. This decision potentially impacts on the Council's partners. For example, some customers said that because of this lack of clarity they would probably call the police to deal with problems that the Council has responsibility for.
- 53 The Council has recognised that it needs to make the service more accessible to minority communities and plans to launch a new language line service which will include providing a link from its website to information about local services. The service also works with the Council's traveller's liaison officer who has developed a protocol for staff when dealing with travellers. Staff – including those who routinely meet members of the public – have not had training to raise their awareness of equalities and diversity issues.
- 54 The Council is planning to improve internal communication through improvements in the intranet. A recent staff survey identified that currently 57 per cent of staff in Community Services and 49 per cent of staff in Direct Services Department (DSD) are satisfied with internal communication. Internal communication between operational and help desk staff is currently not effective. This is exacerbated by the absence of clear processes and systems to ensure that help desk staff clearly understand who does what on the operational side.
- 55 The service has a good approach to consulting local people on its projects such as environmental improvements or improvements to play areas. The service has a dedicated consultation officer who works with operational staff to ensure effective consultation with local people. The service works closely with the area based forums to ensure that it is responsive to local issues. It also uses customer feedback and complaints to improve service quality and access to services. For example, it focused resources at different times of the day to help reduce complaints.

- 56 However, although there are regular surveys carried out by elements of the service such as the Dog Warden, the service does not currently have a system in place to identify and use information on different levels of satisfaction or complaints among different groups within the local community for example, customers from minority communities. In addition, the service does not have mechanisms for ongoing consultation with a representative cross-section of the population. This means that the Council is missing opportunities to improve service quality and access to services.
- 57 The service has developed some service standards which are available on the Council's website. However, some of these are not always clear, easy to understand and used or focussed on outcomes. They are not easily accessible or well publicised to all customers and staff are sometimes unclear about what is expected of them. Importantly customers and partner organisations may have no standards against which they can judge the quality of services they receive. This can cause difficulties in managing customer expectation and help desk staff do not routinely advise callers when they could normally expect to receive a service.
- 58 The Council has invested in its website to develop 'self-service' options for customers, which allows customers to resolve queries with little or no direct contact with staff. These are the most cost effective ways of communicating, consulting and transacting with local people. The website provides a range of useful features for local people including making service requests. The service has also used the website to obtain feedback and consult local people. Local people we spoke to value the Council's website. Positively, the service is also promoting use of its website to people who contact the service by telephone.
- 59 The Council does not currently charge for many of its services, while many other councils routinely do so, such as for bulky waste collections and pest control. While this is positive in terms of customer access, it does mean that the Council may be missing opportunities to create income, which could be used to support service improvement. The Council is currently consulting local people on the principle of charging for some services and charges for some services are likely to be applied from April 2006.
- 60 The service is providing a visible and recognisable service. The frontline DSD staff wear branded uniforms and the maintenance vehicles are well kept and display the Council and DSD logos. However, the vehicles do not all include information reinforcing the Council's anti-littering message which can contribute towards changing the attitudes and behaviours of local people. The service has introduced a successful campaign targeting one of the areas most littered roads. Road signs have been used to reduce littering and report instances to the Council.
- 61 The Council appears to have good systems to ensure the health and safety of staff. Staff are aware of systems to ensure the health and safety of 'lone workers' and when carrying out activities such as dealing with sharps or manual handling. The Council also recognises the need to improve accommodation for help desk staff.

Currently staff work in a noisy environment which means that some staff may have to increase call volume to an unacceptable level. In addition, procedures for sharing information across the organisation on potentially violent persons in the community are currently unclear.

### **Is the service delivering value for money?**

- 62** Overall the service is providing local people with good value for money. The costs of the service are comparatively low. Service costs are contained in several different cost centres. These include environmental services where the cost per resident is £64.57 - this is the seventh lowest spend in the family group, highways at £29.22 is fifth lowest, parks and open spaces at £13.43 is also the fifth lowest and street cleaning at £ 6.18 per resident is the third lowest of the 16 councils in the family group.
- 63** There are a number of local factors that place a high level of demand on the service and can contribute to higher costs. These include the following.
- Significant new development that increases the extent of the service that is provided. For example, more streets and more areas of open space requiring maintenance.
  - The very significant traffic congestion which impacts on the costs of maintenance, through the need for traffic management when undertaking maintenance.
  - The increasing volumes of traffic travelling through the area, to get to and from Bristol, increase the volumes of littering on the highways and verges, especially from fast food outlets.
  - The terms and conditions of staff having been merged to remove differences in terms and conditions of employment (single status).
  - Very low levels of unemployment which create competitive pressures for staff and which in turn drives up salaries and so increases the Council's costs.
- 64** When considering value for money we consider not only the comparative cost of the service, which in all cases is low, but also the outcomes being achieved from that expenditure. Within the service, when comparing the Council's performance to the family group of 16 councils with similar characteristics the overall conclusions are as follows.
- For street cleaning that the service is clearly providing value for money. The cost is the third lowest in the family group, local people's satisfaction was fourth best and the areas cleanliness is second best in the family group.
  - For parks and open spaces the overall conclusion is less clear, but on balance is considered to be providing value for money. The costs are the fifth lowest in the family group, although satisfaction is lower than the average at tenth in the family group.

- For footpath maintenance the picture is not so clear, as these costs are included in the overall highways costs. These overall costs are the fifth lowest in the family group. But the outcomes are generally poor with the percentages of footways in need of repair being thirteenth and the numbers of pedestrian crossings with facilities for disabled people at 14th place.
- 65 The Council has taken policy decisions in the last two years which have increased the service's costs. Additional resources have been allocated, because some aspects of the service were not performing to the required standards. These included additional resources for town centre cleaning, fly-posting and graffiti removal and weed control. As a result of this additional investment the services comparative costs have increased, but there have been corresponding improvements in outcomes.
- 66 The Council has not yet demonstrated that it is providing value for money in delivering the service. It has a policy of awarding all work to the Council's in-house direct services department; provided that they want the work and that they can demonstrate that they are providing value for money. In the criteria for determining value for money the Council's procurement policy says that it should include a comparison with 'comparable/equivalent market providers'.
- 67 The Council determined in October 2005 that service level agreements (SLAs) are the best procurement tool for the service. But the SLAs do not currently demonstrate that the service is providing value for money. They do make reference to benchmarking through the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) organisation. But the results of this benchmarking exercise (which are not contained in the SLA) do not give a good comparison because most of the councils in the benchmarking group do not have similar characteristics to South Gloucestershire and there is also no direct comparison with external providers to compare costs. The SLAs make reference to schedules of rates in some service areas, which it claims demonstrates value for money, but no direct comparisons are made and in its current form therefore the SLA does not give Councillors a robust comparison which they can consider to determine if the in-house service is providing value for money.
- 68 The client and contracting arrangements that are used in the Council are outdated and do not provide value for money. There is no requirement to have separate client and contracting roles and the performance management arrangements of the service level agreements (SLAs) are cumbersome and rely on costly and unnecessary client and contract monitoring which deflects resources away from delivering and improving the service.

- 69 The Council does not routinely challenge its services to ensure that it is delivering value for money. The Council does not yet make good use of joint procurement either within the Council or with neighbouring councils to improve value for money and it has not challenged its use of annual contracts for its major highway contracts to ensure that this is providing the most cost effective solution. But the Council has improved value for money through its partnership working with an adjacent council to provide the out-of-hours emergency service. This arrangement appears to be working well and is providing a cost effective service for local people.

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

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

- 70 The service has a good track record of delivering improvements. Performance is improving in key areas and there has been good progress in addressing the recommendations from previous inspection work.
- 71 The service has a good track record of responding to external challenge. The Council has responded quickly to address areas for improvement identified during this inspection. In addition, the waste management and highway maintenance services were inspected by the Audit Commission in July 2001 and August 2002 and both were judged to be providing a 'good' service, with 'promising' prospects for improvement. Following our inspections, the Council has ensured that it has addressed areas of weakness and responded to our recommendations. Such as by taking a more proactive approach to addressing problems rather than waiting for local people's complaints. However an area which still requires attention is ensuring that help desk staff have information about complaints feedback to them so that they can track the progress in resolving complaints and service requests. The Council has been slow to resolve this weakness, but plans are in place to address this during 2006.
- 72 The creation of the street care service in 2000 was innovative and demonstrated a clear commitment to providing a more customer focused, consistent and seamless services. This new arrangement which brought together most of the separate service areas involved in street scene work has resulted in closer working. Good outcomes for this include a common grass cutting regime across all areas of land regardless of departmental ownership, better co-ordination between maintenance operations, such as litter collection and grass cutting and combined maintenance operations in road and lane closures.
- 73 The Council has a good track record of providing additional resources to improve the service. Over £100,000 has been moved within the department budget to provide additional resources for highway weed control and for the clearing of debris. Additional resources of £240,000 have been allocated to the base budget to improve the standards of street cleaning in the town centres in the late afternoon, to carry out 'deep cleans' in streets with heavy on-street parking and to remove litter from hedges and landscaped areas.
- 74 The Council has also included a target to improve its response to graffiti and fly-posting in its Local Public Service Agreement (LPSA). The government has allocated a 'pump priming' grant of £52,000 to enable the Council to provide a better response in this area and if the Council is successful in meeting the target to remove graffiti and fly-posting on Council property within three days of notification by April 2007 then it will receive an award of £478,000. It is however, not yet clear what will happen when the pump priming grant runs out, if the additional costs of providing the service will be mainstreamed into the service's base budget and how the Council will utilise the reward grant.

- 75 There is a strong track record of improvement in the service and the direction of travel of key performance indicators is good. The increased recognition of the importance of the service and the increased investment has resulted in significantly improved outcomes for local people. This includes improvements to the cleanliness of the streets which improved from 15 per cent with significant litter in 2003/04 to 12 per cent in 2004/05. The percentage of streets without significant weed growth improving from 42 per cent in 2001 to 90 per cent in 2004/05 and the percentage of footways in need of repair improving from 35 per cent in 2003/04 to 22 per cent in 2004/05. There has also been improvement in street lighting, satisfaction with parks and open spaces, the ease of use of footways and the numbers of pedestrian crossings with disabled facilities. While local people's satisfaction with the cleanliness of streets fell from 76 per cent in 2000 to 67 per cent in 2003. This reflects the national trend and there have been significant service improvements since the last survey.
- 76 The Council also has an improving track record of working with developers to secure improvements in the service. New housing developments require the provision of public open spaces and developers are required to pay a capitalised sum for the first 15 years maintenance costs. The Council also requires developers to contribute 1 per cent of profit towards works of art in public spaces.
- 77 The Council has made slow progress in embedding good equalities practice and remains at Level 1 of the Equalities Standard and the Council did not meet its own target for progress with the duty to promote race equality. The service is undertaking equality impact assessments and has completed a Race Equality Action Plan for 2005/06 to improve the way it provides its services. The service believes that it has now reached Level 2 of the Equalities Standard.

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

- 78 There are clear links between the work of the service and national agendas including Community Safety. There is a consistent understanding among staff and councillors about what the Council wants the service to achieve and how this fits with the Council's overall priorities.
- 79 The draft 'Cleaner South Gloucestershire Strategy' outlines many of the positive aspects of the service and identifies the challenges it faces. It identifies the need to focus attention around three key themes - 'Operational', 'Education' and 'Enforcement'. Councillors received a copy of the draft strategy in December 2005 and were asked for comments by the end of January 2006. At the Council meeting held on the 25 January 2006, councillors received a presentation and covering report about the strategy and councillors were advised that 'the current resources are unlikely to sustain an acceptable level of cleanliness in the future'.
- 80 However, the longer-term vision for the service is still emerging and there is no overarching strategy which sets out what the Council plans to do to address its priorities and challenges although there are clear plans to finalise a strategy by September 2006. The absence of a clear vision and strategy means that there are risks that the service will not be adequately resourced and the Council and its partners are not working collectively towards a common purpose.

- 81 The future community aims for the service are good. The South Gloucestershire Partnership is developing a Local Area Agreement (LAA) which should be completed by April 2006. These new agreements will provide opportunities to work with the government to agree a common purpose improve services and the quality of life for local people in South Gloucestershire and will in the future incorporate the LPSA targets. The draft LAA outlines seven themes for South Gloucestershire including safer and stronger communities. Under this broad theme there are aims to improve the quality of life of those people and communities in greatest need through targeted service delivery and targets are set for improvement in many aspects of the service.
- 82 The service has benefited from the 'Review of the Select Committee on street scene' in September 2005. This review reinforced the importance of the service among a wider group of councillors and recommended 'to secure the budget to ensure that services are retained'. However, the Select Committee failed to meet its objective to 'establish how effectively the service was performing within available resources' and it focused more on operational matters. It is good that the Select Committee is to continue and have an ongoing role in monitoring the service's response to this inspection.
- 83 There is a clear and visible commitment from both senior managers and a wide body of councillors to improve the service as part of the 'Strengthening Communities' priority. This is demonstrated by the Council's recent track record of investing in the service and its recent decision to safeguard the service from budgetary cuts in 2006/07.
- 84 The Council has a well developed service planning and performance management framework, which clearly links between the community strategy, corporate and service plans and cascades down through services to individual staff plans. The departmental service plans are, however, very detailed and descriptive with the Community Services plan focusing on strategic issues and the DSD plan focusing on cost issues. Neither plan gives a clear overview of what the immediate priorities are for the service.
- 85 There are also gaps in the Council's future plans to help support improvement. For example, while it is positive that there are SLAs which defines the relationship between the 'client' and 'contractor' and which identifies weaknesses in its current arrangements, the service had not until very recently developed an agreed action plan for improvement.
- 86 In addition, there have also been weaknesses in the service's approach to target setting and review. Targets set for the service are in a number of important areas not challenging and have not been adjusted to reflect recent performance. For example, targets for standards of street cleanliness, the extent of weeds on the highways and the speed of response to fly-tipping are lower than current performance levels. There is a risk that without challenging targets, the service will not improve and it will not be possible for councillors or local people to monitor the rate of improvement. Positively the Council has responded quickly to address weaknesses in this area and has set challenging targets for the service for the future.

- 87 There are strong high-level arrangements in place to manage performance in the community service department. Senior managers and councillors are actively involved in leading the management of performance, for example, through six-monthly performance board meetings. The benefits of this are recognised by both staff and councillors. The service has increased its capacity to support managers and provides useful budget and performance management information to managers on a regular basis. Service plans are developed using the EFQM Excellence Model to identify improvements within the service.
- 88 The Council has also recently procured a new performance management system. The benefits of the introduction of a single performance management system across the Council are recognised by both staff and councillors. It will enable the service to manage performance more effectively and allows councillors to scrutinise and challenge performance in 'real time'.
- 89 Staff understand what is expected of them and how this links to the Council's priorities. The service is ensuring that all staff have regular Personal Development & Performance Reviews. However, staff still are not consistently clear how their work fits with others for example, between the help desk and operational staff. Accountability and ownership of issues is also difficult where there is more than one 'stakeholder' department. For example, the Council's approach to street lighting is split between three separate departments.
- 90 Staff feel the service is well managed, senior managers are respected by staff and are viewed as supportive and open to staff's views. Senior managers are both capable and credible as individuals. However, staff identify that the Council is not dealing effectively with operational staff who are not pulling their weight. There have been improvements in the way the service deals with sickness absence, but although the training needs of the newly appointed front-line supervisors in the Direct Services Department (DSD) have been assessed they have not yet been trained on all key Council procedures and this limits their ability to effectively fulfil their roles in a consistent way. For example, dealing with performance issues.
- 91 The service demonstrates openness to learning and a high level of self-awareness about the strengths and areas for improvement. The Council has used specialist resources to provide external challenge, compare performance and share best practice for example, through the Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) reports.
- 92 The Council has recently introduced a new project management framework, PRIME (Projects Run in a Managed Environment) which will apply to all projects by April 2006. At present many staff who manage projects have not been trained in project management. In addition, the Council's corporate approach to the set-up of the project to introduce a new customer relationship management system was weak. The project did not identify accurate baseline information from which to measure improvements and efficiency savings, for example, call volumes and unit costs and it did not adequately involve service staff in its development or installation. There are ongoing concerns about the effectiveness of the new system which requires further development.

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

- 93** The Council's investment in ICT offers a solid base from which to deliver improvements in the service. The Council's new performance management system will allow the service to manage performance better. The new customer relationship management system has the potential to allow the Council to provide improved customer service and develop a clearer understanding of patterns, volumes and types of customer contact. The Council has also invested in 'self-service' options through its website. This is the most cost effective way of communicating, consulting and transacting with local people. The Council also plans to redevelop its intranet to improve communication with staff.
- 94** The Council's HR strategy 'Valuing Staff and Improving Performance' is focussing on improvement in a number of important areas affecting the service. The service is taking steps to develop the skills and capacity of its staff. There is an employee development group and training has been provided to help support customer-focused improvements. For example, front line staff have all had customer care training within the last two years and street cleansing operatives are completing NVQ training that includes training on dealing with customers. There has also been a management development programme. However, staff identify that beyond 'core job' training there are limited training budgets available in the DSD to support staff development. The Council has made slow progress in embedding good equalities practice although the service believes that it has now reached Level 2 of the Equalities Standard. It is undertaking equality impact assessments and has completed a Race Equality Action Plan for 2005/06.
- 95** In the last year the Council has seen an increase in the average number of days sick per member of staff from 9 to 9.5 days (target of 8.3 days). In 2004 the number of days sick in the Community Services Department was 8.6 days while for the DSD it was 11.1 days. There have been improvements in the way the service deals with sickness absence particularly in the DSD where over 75 per cent of absences are due to long term sickness. But this increasing level of sickness has a negative impact on the service and reduces its cost effectiveness.
- 96** The Council has taken steps to increase management capacity. Across the Council, service managers have recently undertaken a programme of leadership development and the recent restructuring in the DSD created a new tier of supervisors to help enhance management capacity. However, the service currently has limited capacity to focus on key strategic issues such as the development of its future plans and issues such as introducing modern procurement methods across the service.
- 97** The Council recognises the need to review the current client/contractor relationship to create new arrangements that minimise duplication and increase organisational effectiveness and capacity through closer working across existing departments. To this end the Council has now begun a fundamental review of the client/contractor relationship. This is seen by the Council as a high priority project and will be led by the Chief Executive and completed by September 2006.

- 98 Positively, staff across the service are open to change in this area and support the need for it. However, relationships between the corporate centre and the service are not always positive. Staff often feel that change is something that is imposed on them rather than being involved in it. This could be a barrier to change if it is not led effectively.
- 99 The Council also recognises the need to undertake a strategic review of its management arrangements following the decision to transfer the Building Services Direct Labour Organisation to the Housing Department, in advance of a possible stock transfer. These changes will impact on the DSD and other central services, but the scale and nature of the impact is still uncertain.
- 100 The Council has in recent years provided additional financial capacity to support improvement in the service. For example, by increasing the base budget and by allocating capital resources for street lighting and playgrounds. The Council is also currently consulting local people on the principle of charging for some services. It is likely that some charges will be introduced from April 2006 that could create additional income for the service. In addition, if the Council meets its local public service agreement (LPSA) targets then significant additional funding could be directed to support further improvements in the service.
- 101 The service is increasing capacity through partnership working for example, with 'friends groups', some of whom have successfully levered in external funding and through working with neighbouring councils for example, in the provision of an out-of-hours emergency service. The Council also works with developers to ensure public open spaces on new housing developments funded for 15 years.
- 102 However, at present the service is faced with a number of significant financial pressures. The Council's medium-term financial plan identifies significant budget pressures over the next two years and at the present time it is unclear whether this will impact on this service's base budgets. The Council recently decided to safeguard the service from budgetary cuts in the coming year (2006/07) and has committed itself to a further substantial investment of approximately £0.5 million to improve the condition of the street lights.
- 103 The Council's future financial forecasts do not currently include any allocations to mainstream budgets for either the limited educational work which is currently going on, or for the good work which is being done on graffiti and fly-posting removal, with funding for both projects ending in 2007. And while there is recognition that more education and enforcement activity within the service is desirable, there are no allocations in future financial plans to allocate resources to facilitate any improvements in these areas. In addition, the area has experienced significant demographic and development pressures in the last decade which will continue to create additional pressure on the service and financial plans do not include any allowance for this growth.