

Service Inspection Report

May 2006



Cultural Services

Mid Bedfordshire District Council

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Service Inspection

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

Audit Commission service inspections should:

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

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

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

Summary

- 1 Mid Bedfordshire District Council provides 'good' cultural services which have 'uncertain' prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council directly provides a range of services including leisure centres, sports development, arts, and holiday activities for children and young people. It also provides grants to community organisations and has invested in skate parks and multi-use games areas in various locations around the district. The Council spends approximately £700,000 annually on these services.
- 3 The Council has successfully positioned its cultural services to deliver on key agendas such as crime reduction and improving health and understands the contribution that culture can make to delivering outcomes for local people.
- 4 Residents of Mid Bedfordshire have access to a range of good quality sports and arts provision in their community and the Council has particular strengths in providing activities for young people and in actively encouraging young people to engage positively with their communities.
- 5 However, whilst users of services are very satisfied with the Council's provision, there is a significant difference in satisfaction rates when the views of non-users are taken into account. The Council has not taken steps to find out why satisfaction rates for residents are amongst the worst 25 per cent of councils and it does not currently have an accurate picture of who its users are and whether they reside in the district or neighbouring areas.
- 6 Service standards for cultural services do not give users a clear understanding of what level of service they can expect although the Council does actively use customer feedback to improve services.
- 7 Access to services is mostly good and the needs of different users such as older people and people with disabilities have been taken into account. The Council has not consistently applied its pricing policy across cultural services to support its access aims which may mean that some people may be less able to access services because of the cost.
- 8 The prospects for improvement are uncertain because the Council is currently facing very difficult financial circumstances. Already a low-spending Council, it has had to make significant cuts to balance its budget for 2006/07. This has meant that some cultural services have been discontinued although the Council has worked hard to avoid any adverse affect to customers by negotiating with partners to provide the service. However, local people will notice that some activities are no longer available, such as events previously organised by the tourism section.

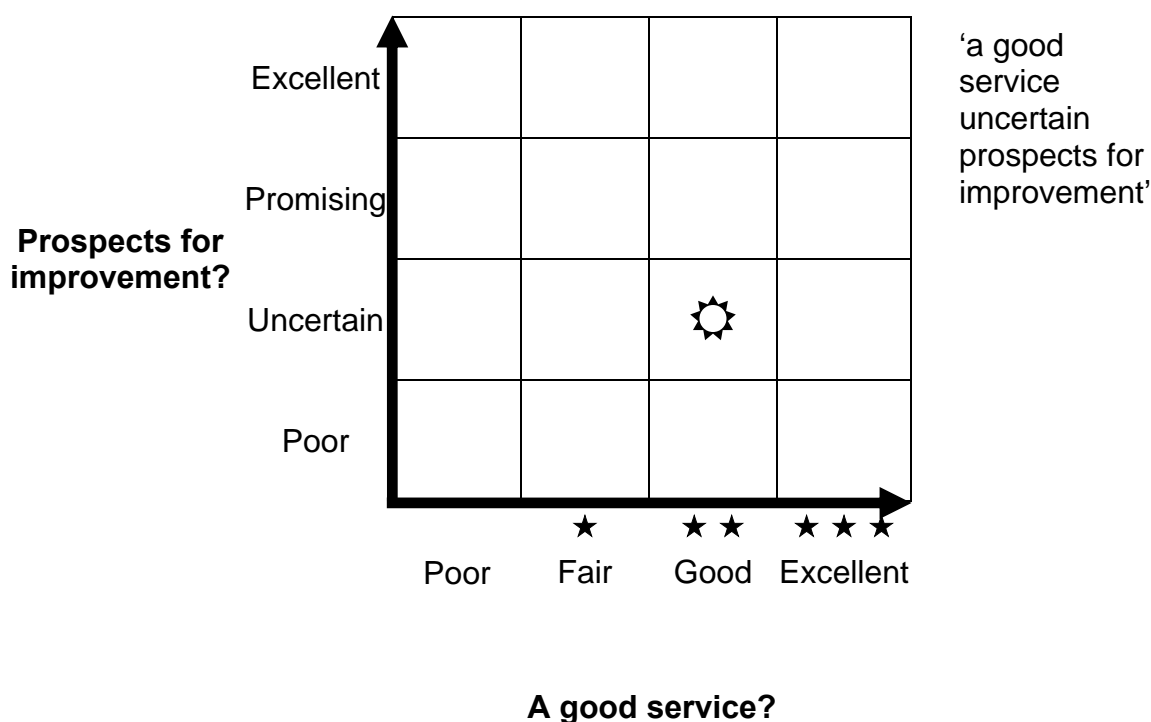
6 Cultural Services | Summary

- 9 The Council's investment in recent years in new facilities and enhanced cultural provision demonstrates a track record of improvement. The quality of sports provision has improved year on year and participation is increasing. However, the current performance management arrangements are insufficient for the Council to track progress or analyse whether it is having an impact on priority areas such as reducing crime or improving health.
- 10 The Council works well in partnership to enable cultural activities to take place and to draw in external funding such as Lottery funding.
- 11 Whilst there are some strategic plans in place for aspects of culture it is not clear what the Council plans to do next. It has invested heavily in new facilities such as leisure centres, games areas and skate parks and has some plans for further investment. However, it is not clear what its priorities are in terms of cultural services or how it intends to deliver its ambitions given its financial situation.

Scoring the service

- 12 We have assessed Mid Bedfordshire District Council as providing a ‘good’ two-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 13 The service is a good, two-star service because of the following.
- The Council has positioned cultural services to deliver on other agendas such as health and crime and understands the contribution made by culture.
 - It provides a range of good quality sports and arts provision across the district with strengths in activities for children and young people.
 - Most leisure facilities are well maintained and provide good opportunities for sports and leisure participation.
 - Customer satisfaction is good and the Council uses feedback from customers to improve services.

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.

8 Cultural Services | Scoring the service

However:

- service standards are weak and do not help local people to understand what level and quality of service they can expect;
- satisfaction amongst all residents (users and non users) is amongst the worst 25 per cent of all councils for sports and leisure facilities and the Council does not engage with non users to find out what would encourage them to use service; and
- the Council is not effectively measuring value for money of its cultural services. There is limited evaluation of costs related to performance and outputs across the service except for the leisure centres.

14 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because of the following.

- The Council has a track record of improving facilities and investing in leisure and has been successful in attracting external funding and partnership working.
- The Council has demonstrated continuous improvement in sports provision by improving its scores against quality standards and reducing subsidy levels.

However:

- the current performance management arrangements do not enable the Council to track progress and continuous improvement or analyse the impact of its activities on its stated priorities;
- the overall strategic direction and future plans for cultural services are not clearly articulated and priorities within the service are not clear; and
- there is a risk of service reduction due to the Council's overall financial position which has placed considerable pressure on all services to reduce budgets.

Recommendations

- 15 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 Mid 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 links to the Councils strategic priorities such as crime reduction and health; 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; and
- maximise the impact of cultural services on delivering against key priorities such as crime reduction and health.

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

Recommendation

R2 The Council needs to develop a range of performance indicators for cultural services which:

- *links to the corporate performance management framework and shows the extent to which cultural services contribute towards the Council's objectives and High level Targets;*
- *tracks progress against strategic objectives and plans; and*
- *encompasses national and local indicators which measure the effectiveness of cultural services.*

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.

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 medium 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

- 16 Mid Bedfordshire is located in the heart of Bedfordshire between Buckinghamshire and Cambridgeshire and is geographically the largest district in Bedfordshire. There are a large number of rural villages as well as the towns of Biggleswade, Flitwick, Sandy, Ampthill, Shefford and Stotfold. A small part of the district's 50,000 hectares falls within the Chiltern's Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- 17 Mid Beds is one of the larger districts in England with 127,000 residents and further growth is predicted over the next ten years. Over the last three years the number of households has increased by 1,350. Most residents are aged between 30 and 59 but there is an above average number of under 14-year-olds.
- 18 Mid Beds is the least deprived of all Bedfordshire districts. It is a generally prosperous and affluent area, although there are some pockets of relative deprivation in towns and some rural communities. Unemployment is low at approximately 1.1 per cent. The index of multiple deprivation ranks Mid Beds as 334 out of a total of 354 English council areas.
- 19 Based on the 2001 census information, Mid Beds has a black and ethnic minority population of 2.4 per cent compared with a county average of over 5 per cent.
- 20 The people of Mid Bedfordshire enjoy comparatively good health though health indicators show a higher than average circulatory disease mortality rate.
- 21 In terms of employment, Mid Beds is a high technology growth area located within the Oxford/Cambridge 'Arc'. Farming also remains an important industry. There is a high level of 'out-commuting' due to the good north-south communication links and proximity to London.

The Council

- 22 Mid Bedfordshire District Council has been Conservative led since 1999. As of May 2005 the Council has a political membership of 38 Conservatives, 9 Liberal Democrat and 5 Independent Councillors. The Council has an executive of 9 Members which includes portfolio holders for Leisure and Culture and Safer Communities.
- 23 Overall there are 300 full time equivalent (FTE) staff working within the Council. The Chief Executive is supported by two Strategic Directors and seven Heads of Service. Cultural Services is located in the Community Services, Leisure and Tourism Division. Currently, there is a senior management structural review taking place which is being facilitated by an external consultant.

- 24 The Council's net revenue budget for 2005/06 was £12.2 million and the Council is one of the ten lowest taxing districts in the country. Historically, the Council has had significant balances which have been used to maintain low council tax levels. The Council recognised that this was not sustainable and identified a High Level Target to achieve a balanced revenue budget without recourse to balances. To this end the Council has made significant savings over the last three years. However, in 2005 the Council's council tax increase was capped by central government. As a consequence the Council has needed to reduce its budget more than it planned and this is resulting in a reduction or cessation of some services. In order to identify where these reductions should take place the Council has implemented a process of evaluating services against a priority matrix. In Cultural Services the Council has already decided to reduce its tourism service and some elements of sports development and arts outreach.

The Council's cultural services

- 25 There are four sports centres in the District at Flitwick, Biggleswade and Sandy managed as a Trust partnership with Stevenage Leisure Limited.

They are:

- Flitwick Leisure Centre and pool;
- Saxon Leisure Centre and pool; and
- the dual use facilities of:
 - Sandy Sports and Community Centre including athletics track; and
 - Biggleswade Recreation Centre.

Other elements of the service are:

- sports development;
- arts development; and
- tourism - management of the Tourist Information Centre located at Sandy is being taken over by the Town Council from 2006/07 with a grant of £15,000 from Mid Beds to assist with the transition costs in the first year.

- 26 The budget for Cultural Services for 2005/06 was £711,286.
- 27 The Council does not manage any significant areas of parkland or open spaces including multi-use games areas (MUGA) and play areas. These are managed by town and parish councils, community organisations or partner organisations such as Marston Vale Community Forest and the Greensand Trust.

- 28 The District has several visitor attractions within its boundaries, most notably Woburn Abbey and Safari Park. There are also significant potential future developments. Interest is being expressed by Center Parcs and Nirah³ in locating within the area, though plans are in the early stages. In addition, the 2012 Olympics may impact on the District and provide development opportunities.

³ Center Parcs provide forest-based holiday centres with a focus on leisure activities such as swimming, cycling and walking. The National Institute for Research into Aquatic Habitats (NIRAH) is an ambitious proposal to redevelop a former clay extraction pit into a major new visitor attraction modelled on the Eden Project in Cornwall.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 29** The Council has a vision aims and objectives which are clearly set out in its corporate plan. It has set a range of High Level Targets (HLT) most of which are measurable although not all relate to clear outcomes for local people. The draft plan for 2006/07 reaffirms the vision, aims and objectives.
- 30** The Council's vision is to improve the quality of life in Mid Beds. Its aims are:
- to support our community;
 - to care for the environment; and
 - to deliver quality services.
- 31** The Council's objectives are:
- to champion community interests and ensure all sections have an opportunity to be involved/participate in decision-making;
 - to help create a safer, stronger, healthier and more prosperous community;
 - to ensure that the development of the district is in accord with the Local Plan;
 - to minimise waste, prevent and control pollution and encourage sustainability; and
 - to improve the delivery and responsiveness of council services to our customers.
- 32** Beneath these objectives are ten HLTs which are reviewed annually. These targets reflect very closely the priorities identified through consultation with local people. For 2005/06 these included delivering the seven priority actions in the Community Plan, achieving the targets of the Crime and Disorder Reduction Strategy, achieving a balanced revenue budget by 2007/08 and completing the move to centralised offices and establishing two new customer service points. Targets are set for recycling, affordable housing and departures from the Local Plan. A target of 60 per cent is set for overall public satisfaction by 2007 and 100 per cent of appropriate transactions available by electronic means.
- 33** Some of the Community Plan priority actions which contribute to the Council's HLT noted above relate to cultural activity. For example, increasing the number of young people attending or participating in a leisure activity. Another was to provide three additional community facilities. Targets for 2006/07 have not been set pending the finalisation of the Local Area Agreement (LAA) and the Children's Plan. Both are county-wide partnership documents which are likely to contain targets around cultural outcomes.

- 34 The Community Plan action plan 2003 to 2006 indicates that the Council was the lead on Cultural Service related actions that supported the wider partnership ambitions of improving access to community facilities, activities for young people and rural diversification. The focus for the Council for this period was increasing and improving leisure facilities and increasing participation in leisure activities.
- 35 The Council has clearly understood the contribution that culture can make to other agendas and has positioned its cultural services to deliver particularly towards its priorities around community safety, young people and health. However cultural planning is weak. The Council does not have a clear vision for cultural services. Whilst some aspirations are located in various plans and strategies, it is not possible to see an overall direction or aspiration for culture other than its role in meeting other agendas.
- 36 Partners recognise the need for greater cultural leadership but see this as a county wide issue rather than a local one. Mid Beds has been proactive in bringing together cultural partners through the sports and arts forums and has been supportive of calls for the development of a county wide cultural forum and strategy.

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

Access, customer care and community focus

- 37 Cultural services in Mid Bedfordshire are based on a good understanding and knowledge of local needs from surveys and other consultations. The Council has undertaken research to underpin its sports provision and consulted with young people to identify their needs. The Community Plan is underpinned by a sound research base.
- 38 Cultural services are user focused and the Council can show how services have been reviewed and changed in direct response to feedback from customers. The Council has a range of consultation mechanisms to identify local needs such as user groups, the citizen's panel and community liaison forums. However, the Council has limited arrangements in place for consulting and engaging with people who do not currently use cultural services. Nor has it consistently examined take-up rates in relation to the local population to identify whether it is reaching a representative number of, for example, young people, older people, people with disabilities or those from ethnic minority communities. The exception to this is leisure centres where usage by target groups is monitored.
- 39 The Council has worked effectively with partners to address transport issues by supporting community transport schemes and providing taxi tokens for youth groups so that they can access organised cultural provision. However, young people feel that the scheme does not address all of their transport needs particularly for those who do not want to take part in group activities or sports clubs. The scheme is being extended to older people through a pilot scheme which will run for three months. It is funded through the Mid Beds Health Living Initiative and administered through Age Concern.

Older people in particular also feel that the Council works hard to provide services and events in local facilities such as village halls and community centres. However, transport remains a barrier to access for many.

- 40 Physical access to facilities is generally good although there are issues with Flitwick Leisure Centre which is not currently DDA compliant. The Council provides corporate information in a range of community languages and has access to language line translation services but most cultural services leaflets and information is only available in English with large print manuscripts on request.
- 41 The Council has worked with partners to increase provision of facilities across the District for example the Multi Use Games Areas (MUGAs). It used the Sport England facilities planning model to map gaps in provision. However, the management and access arrangements vary across the facilities. It is unclear if they are meeting the needs of the public or fulfilling their original objectives.
- 42 Opening hours for leisure facilities are excellent with Flitwick Leisure Centre and Sandy Sports Centre open from 6am until 11.30pm during the week. Saxon Pool closes slightly earlier at 10pm. Biggleswade Recreation Centre is only open to the public after 5pm due to school use during the day but as the facilities are mostly aimed at group activities (sports hall and multi use halls) this is unlikely to be an issue. All centres are open at weekends with opening hours varying from centre to centre but most are open between 9am and 8pm. This means that local people have access to a range of facilities at convenient times.
- 43 Service standards are weak. Whilst the Council has published service standards for tourism, arts and leisure on its website they do not enable local people to understand what level of service to expect. For example, the service standards for leisure state that the Council will benchmark its leisure facilities and use the results to develop its plans. This is not sufficiently clear to enable users to judge whether the Council has provided a good service. The Council is currently undertaking work at a corporate level to develop a more consistent and meaningful approach to setting service standards.
- 44 The Council is working towards a consistent standard and quality of management of its leisure facilities. Two of the four centres have reached the required standard for Quest accreditation with a third being assessed in 2006/07. Quest is an industry standard for sports and leisure provision.
- 45 The Council has not consistently applied its pricing policy, which aims to improve access to disadvantaged groups, across cultural services. Concessionary prices are offered for leisure centre users. For example, families and individuals who receive a means tested benefit are given free membership and half price session costs. The user is issued with a swipe card which cannot be distinguished from other users reducing any potential embarrassment which might be a barrier to taking advantage of the scheme. Whilst reduced prices may be offered for other activities such as arts events this appears to be on a case by case basis rather than guided by a specific policy.

- 46 Access to cultural services through ICT is limited. The Council's website provides some information on activities available and links to the websites of the four leisure centres. There is no interactivity other than the facility to download booking forms or leaflets. The website provides information on play areas and open space, but these are just links to the relevant page of the Open Space Strategy. There is no information on where facilities are located or how to access them which would be more useful to potential users.
- 47 The Council is providing some successful initiatives targeted at young people. The holiday play schemes provide arts and sports taster opportunities for children. The Council's youth participation officer works with groups of young people to promote their interest and engagement in local democracy as well as inter-generational projects aimed at removing negative stereotypes of young people. This work is highly regarded by partners and the young people involved, who felt that the Council is supportive, provides appropriate help and enables them to get involved as well as being responsive to their needs.
- 48 The Council is taking steps to safeguard children and young people through its child protection policy. It has instigated criminal records bureau disclosure checks for all existing and new staff who may in the course of their work come into contact with children. The policy and procedures follow good practice guidelines and the Council requires its leisure contractor to screen all its staff. There is scope to improve implementation of child protection procedures within the leisure centres, for example by better promotion of policies prohibiting the use of cameras and camera phones within the centres. No signs were obviously on display during our visit.

Diversity

- 49 The Council is developing its approach to diversity. There is a Member champion for equalities and sessions have been held to raise awareness on diversity issues such as the needs of travellers.
- 50 The Council's approach to promoting race equality is developing. The Council has achieved level 2 of the equality standard and scored 47 per cent in 2004/05 on the Promoting Equality Checklist (BVPI 2b-District Council average is 49 per cent). Guidance is in place to allow managers to access policies and services for discrimination and the Council is making good progress on its three year programme of impact assessments. Whilst the local population of ethnic minority communities is lower than the county average, Mid Beds is surrounded by diverse communities such as Bedford and Luton, many of whom may access cultural services in the district. However, this has not been adequately taken into account in service planning.
- 51 Cultural services have taken steps to ensure that services are provided equitably and have undertaken work to consider the needs of specific groups such as people with disabilities, older people and travellers. Some of these initiatives are monitored such as usage by target groups at leisure centres where data is compared both to similar centres and also to the local population.

This enables the Council to monitor whether users are representative of the local population and could enable the Council to set targets that aim to secure over-representation of typically under-represented groups. The Council does not currently set such targets. There is no overall evaluation of the impact of cultural services on addressing equality and diversity.

- 52 The Council has put in place a system to undertake a risk assessment of policies and committee decisions against Human Rights and Equalities legislation. At a corporate level it has a track record of successfully defending proceedings brought against them and as a result is mindful of the implications. However, it is less clear how cultural services assess and mitigate against such risks in terms of service planning and delivery.

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 53 The Council provides a wide range of activities for local people to participate in cultural activities through its investment in facilities such as sports centres, and through its enabling role. By working in partnership the Council also provides outreach activities such as sports and arts development. It is helping local organisations through its grant aid and securing new provision through partnerships and using its planning powers to extract developer contributions.
- 54 The Council provides a good range of quality sports and leisure facilities across the district. It has undertaken a programme of investment in facilities over the past ten years. Users consider that they have access to good sports facilities in Mid Beds such as swimming pools, gyms, skate parks and holiday activities for children. The Council provides good support to sports clubs and voluntary groups by providing play equipment and resources as well as helping with the organisation of sports, tournaments and providing access to information on coaches and courses.
- 55 However, some users feel that their needs are not being met, particularly older age groups such as people over 50 and there are relatively few opportunities for teenagers to take part in organised activities other than through sports clubs. This means that there may be gaps in provision that are not being met or that the Council has not effectively promoted the opportunities it provides to local people.
- 56 The Council has a good understanding of how culture contributes to shared priorities⁴ and has refocused much of its cultural provision around the themes of Every Child Matters, the statutory framework for children and young people, particularly the themes of Enjoying and Achieving and Making a Positive Contribution. There are also links to the Staying Healthy and Staying Safe themes. However, this is a relatively new focus and as yet the Council has not demonstrated clear evidence of having made an impact or identified clearly how it will measure impact.

⁴ In 2002 central and local government agreed seven shared service delivery priorities. These were; raising standards in schools, improving quality of life, promoting healthier communities, creating safer and stronger communities, transforming the local environment, meeting transport needs and promoting economic vitality.

- 57 Partners recognise that the Council has focused on the needs of children and most young people, and that it has worked hard to consult with young people and listen to their views. Where possible it has strived to meet their requests and is seen to be committed to providing the facilities and services that young people want.
- 58 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. It has focused cultural services around delivering against the aims of the Community Plan and the Crime and Disorder Reduction Strategy but has yet to clearly articulate desired outcomes for local people and put in place systems that will allow it to evaluate progress.
- 59 The triennial survey undertaken to provide data for BVPI 119 shows that Mid Bedfordshire is currently amongst the worst 25 per cent of councils for satisfaction with sports and leisure facilities. The survey was undertaken in 2003/04 and takes the views of all residents rather than just users of the service. The survey found that less than half of residents (47 per cent) were satisfied. The Council hopes that its programme of investment in new facilities will result in an increased score when the survey is repeated in 2006/07. The Council's residents' panel were consulted in 2005 and only 37 per cent were satisfied with sports/leisure/tourism. The Council's own surveys of users show high satisfaction rates with the arts service achieving satisfaction rates of 85 per cent and tourism of 95 per cent. Leisure centres monitor customer satisfaction using the Sport England National Benchmarking Service. As would be expected the newer or refurbished facilities achieve above average satisfaction rates but overall satisfaction is good. The Council has not undertaken any additional research to uncover the reasons for the differences between user and non user satisfaction rates.
- 60 Two out of the four leisure centres have received Quest accreditation. This is an industry standard applicable to sports facilities. The Council has based its contract with its leisure contractor, Stevenage Leisure on achieving a consistent standard of quality across leisure centres. Quest can also be applied to sports development and the Council is one of comparatively few who have chosen to assess their sports development services against the standard. Whilst there still remains some room for improvement the Council is improving its scores year on year. The Council also uses the Sport England National Benchmarking Service to monitor performance in its leisure centres. This provides a wide range of data against which to measure performance and forms the basis of reports to the management committees of the various centres along with financial information.

61 The following two areas of focus were agreed in advance with the Council.

Safer and stronger communities

62 Overall crime rates are low and falling in Mid Beds and youth crime is also on the decline which is against the trend for the rest of the county. When compared with its family group of Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (CDRPs). Mid Beds' performance is around the middle of the group. The percentage change between 2003/04 and 2004/05 crime rates is worse than average in four out of six key crime categories compared with the family group.

63 Cultural services undertake a range of activities to contribute towards the Crime and Disorder reduction strategy. Much of their work around youth participation is aimed at fostering improved relationships between generations and encouraging young people to engage with local democracy. It produces a youth newsletter, Hurricane and runs a variety of youth projects including dance and theatre groups and provides taxi tokens to enable young people to access organised group activities in the district or further afield.

64 The Council is active in a range of partnerships and is the lead partner for the community safety theme of the Local Area Agreement which is a county wide partnership.

65 However, the Council's performance management system does not currently enable it to track progress towards achieving desired outcomes. Whilst overall targets for crime rates are set through the CDRP, the current system monitors Home Office figures rather than the more detailed targets set out by the CDRP.

66 It is clear that outcomes are being achieved but it is not clear whether the activities carried out by the Council and its partners are having the desired impact. In common with many councils, Mid Beds cannot currently demonstrate that by targeting initiatives on a particular area there has been a resulting reduction in crime. It is planning to invest in a GIS mapping system for the CDRP which will enable more sophisticated mapping of both crime hot spots and interventions.

67 The Council can provide information on cost, take up and satisfaction for its activities, but does not routinely evaluate the impact of its activities. For example it spent £2,000 working with 30 young people many of whom were identified as at risk of offending. The young people produced two short films as a result of the project. It is not clear whether the young people changed their behaviour as a result of the project and are subsequently less likely to offend or re-offend.

68 The Council has provided skate parks in six towns/villages across the district. It has some information on usage but does not know whether anti-social behaviour has decreased in the areas where skate parks have been located or whether the skate parks have had the desired impact. The skate parks appear to be well used indicating that they are perceived as safe environments.

69 Young people were positive about the work of the youth participation team. They appreciated the opportunities to take part and the support of the team in helping them to get involved in community projects.

Healthier communities

- 70** On the whole Mid Beds residents enjoy comparatively good health. Figures for poor health or long term limiting illness are below national averages. However, deaths from circulatory disease are slightly higher than the regional average. Teenage pregnancy is around half the national average.
- 71** The Council understands how the breadth of its cultural services contributes towards the achievement of health objectives. This is a relatively new area of focus for the Council and it has begun to develop projects to target locally identified health issues and national targets.
- 72** There is evidence of increased participation in sports and leisure activities which will contribute to national targets for healthy living. The Council has set targets to increase youth participation in particular and can demonstrate that more young people are getting involved in sports and leisure activities.
- 73** The Council has recognised the role of physical activity in rehabilitating patients who have suffered heart problems or weight-related ill health. It is currently piloting an 'exercise on prescription' scheme which started in October 2005 and has currently delivered approximately 330 exercise sessions for 40 individuals who have been referred by their GP as a result of health problems such as strokes or heart attacks. It is unclear whether targets have been set for increasing participation, retention rates on the exercise scheme or evaluation of impact such as reduction in Body Mass Index (BMI) or continuation of regular exercise after the completion of the 12 week course. In addition, firm plans are not yet in place to roll out the scheme to other GP practices.
- 74** The Council is also a partner in the Mid Beds Healthy Living Initiative which has received £1 million funding from the New Opportunities Fund (NOF) to support projects to improve mental health, parenting skills, income maximisation, strengthening social networks and increasing use of the countryside. For example Mid Beds is part of the county wide Healthy Walks Initiative which trains walk leaders and works with groups to enable them to take up walking to improve their health.
- 75** It also sees its investment in sports centres as part of the healthy living agenda and is monitoring usage by target groups such as older people, disabled people and children and young people. It is working with De Montfort University and one particular school to identify the degree of child obesity. This will establish a baseline for further targeted activity.
- 76** The Council is not evaluating the success of its initiatives in terms of their impact on health. For example, whilst numbers of participants in projects such as healthy walks or exercise on prescription are monitored, there is no evaluation of impact such as weight loss or changes in lifestyle observed.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 77** Cultural services in Mid Bedfordshire represent a mixed picture of value for money. The Value for Money Profile prepared by the Audit Commission, which uses data supplied through Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) and CIPFA, shows that the Council is a relatively low spending authority compared with similar councils. It is in the bottom 25 per cent in terms of its overall investment in culture. Councils should be able to demonstrate a link between the resources that they invest and the extent to which residents are satisfied with those services. Surveys of residents carried out in all councils in 2003/04 demonstrated that the single biggest factor explaining variation in satisfaction in cultural services was the extent to which those services were used by the local population. The 2003/04 resident survey showed that satisfaction with sports and leisure facilities in Mid Beds was amongst the worst 25 per cent of councils and that usage of sports facilities in the last six months by survey respondents was comparatively low. The Council has not undertaken research to identify whether its service users are in fact local people or taken steps to understand apparent discrepancies in relatively high satisfaction rates for users and comparatively good usage rates when compared with similar facilities in its benchmarking group. It is not clear whether the Council has established what percentage of users are residents and how often people use facilities, ie to what degree it has penetrated the local market.
- 78** The Council's approach to the procurement of the management of its leisure centres should be recognised as an example of effective practice. The Council undertook a robust options appraisal in relation to the leisure contract and the decision to award the contract to an existing not-for-profit trust has resulted in a decreasing level of subsidy. The Council negotiated a leisure management contract with Stevenage Leisure which is based on reducing subsidy but maintaining a consistent level of quality across the four centres. The projected subsidy for 2006/07 is nil meaning that the provision of the leisure facilities will be at no cost to the Council. Usage is increasing at all four centres.
- 79** The Council has allocated resources in line with policy decisions. Recent budget pressures led the Council to develop a methodology for assessing services based on their contribution to local, regional and national priorities. However, this fell short of also comparing the desired and actual performance levels. Some of the subsequent service reductions will impact on service delivery in areas described as priorities by the Council such as outreach activities and tourism.
- 80** The Council has been successful in attracting external funding for culture projects linked to other agendas such as NOF funding for the Healthy Living Initiative, and Sports Lottery and Arts Lottery funding for outreach projects. This means that the Council's own resources work harder by leveraging in additional funding from other sources.

- 81 Cost benchmarking is undertaken for the four main sports facilities operated by Stevenage Leisure but not routinely across all aspects of cultural services. This means that the Council is unable to demonstrate whether its current arrangements for providing, for example, sports and arts development, are cost effective.
- 82 The Council has been successful in securing efficiency savings by working in partnership to combine resources, reduce duplication and has been open and transparent with partners about its financial difficulties and the need to make further savings. Partners feel that the Council is willing to explore options but is honest about what it can achieve.
- 83 The Council is not measuring value for money through its service planning process. There is no evaluation of costs related to the performance and outputs of the service to identify whether value for money is being provided or how it could be improved in the future.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 84 The Council has a track record of improving cultural services. There have been a range of new facilities provided to meet local needs and user satisfaction rates are improving. The Council has a good track record of providing play facilities and green space through planning policy guidance. This has reversed the position in the late 1990s of inadequate facilities and those facilities that were in place were not up to National Playing Fields Association standards. Since then it has made significant improvements and is now securing developer contributions to provide new facilities. For example 34 new play facilities have been provided over the past three years.
- 85 The Council can provide evidence of having implemented changes derived from the recommendations of strategies or internal reviews. Most of these have delivered clear benefits for users but have not always focused on the most disadvantaged or those in most need. For example, the Council has invested in Multi Use Games Areas (MUGAs) following work to map sports provision across the district against Sport England's facilities planning model. This identified gaps which have been filled but it is not clear what outcomes they are delivering against the Council's aims around, for example, community safety. In fact it is quite difficult for young people most likely to be at risk of anti-social behaviour to access these facilities due to booking arrangements and cost of using the floodlights.
- 86 The Council has reviewed progress against its Sport and Physical Activity Strategy. It has shown that access to sports has improved with new facilities, increased use of equipment loans and take-up of taxi tokens, and targeted sessions such as those in sheltered accommodation. The Council is meeting and in some cases exceeding targets set for participation in sports activity, but the coach development programme has been less successful in terms of meeting its targets. It is not clear whether the targets were too ambitious or whether other factors have influenced performance.
- 87 The Council can also provide evidence of having introduced a range of new activities and programmes of work over the past three years. The Council has made improvements which will contribute towards delivering High Level Targets described earlier. For example it has delivered four new community facilities which was a target of the Community Plan. These are the fitness rooms at Sandy and Biggleswade, the MUGA at Cranfield and the new athletics track at Sandy.

- 88 The Council cannot demonstrate that changes it has delivered have resulted in improved performance against national and local indicators. This is partly due to the inevitable time lag between investment in facilities and improvements in satisfaction rates, and also partly due to the lack of local indicators to make up for the relatively small number of national indicators for cultural services. It is monitoring usage and user satisfaction as well as financial performance but has not developed systems to evaluate progress over time. The Council is taking steps to address this and is beginning work to establish baseline information to allow for meaningful targets to be set and measured. Like many councils, Mid Beds is only beginning to evaluate outcomes and impacts of its work.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 89 The absence of a county-wide cultural strategy means that cultural planning at both local and county level is weak. The Council's vision for cultural services is based on its ability to deliver on other agendas, particularly with regard to community safety and health. The community plan provides some direction for cultural services but overall future plans focus on the short and medium term with a lack of clarity about the sustainable outcomes for the longer term. The Council's ability to take a wider view of major tourism developments or the impact on cultural services of the growth agenda is subsequently constrained.
- 90 There are some strategic plans in place which help to provide a focus for future cultural planning. The Council's sport and physical activity strategy is based on sound research and the Council has signed up to a range of partnership strategies such as the Children and Young People Plan for the county and the strategy which underpins Arts Happen, the new county-wide arts development partnership. However, these strategies are not linked and there is a risk that they will run in parallel with each other. This could mean that resources may not be used to best effect and the relative priority between different areas such as sports and arts is unclear.
- 91 Performance management in cultural services is not sufficiently developed to enable the Council to monitor impact. This is due to the lack of baseline analysis in some areas; lack of clarity around what the Council is trying to measure and limited scope of current PIs in allowing the Council to evaluate the impact of cultural activity on key areas such as crime rates and health. Cultural services is generally monitoring information rather than actively using performance data to manage performance. Service plans are variable in quality and the Council recognises that the approach needs further refinement. However, the development of service plans includes and engages staff and councillors.
- 92 Councillors have very limited data upon which to judge how the service is performing and whilst the new software and PMS system provides accessible and easy to understand information the lack of usable data on cultural services limits its effectiveness. For example, the leisure and culture portfolio PIs are limited to satisfaction data for tourism and the arts service, the former of which is due to be discontinued as a service provided by the Council in April 2006.

The PI measuring the take up of available places by young people does not provide a useful indication of whether to the Council's objective of increasing participation is being achieved. The Council also plans to measure leisure performance using benchmarking data but currently has no baseline data to populate the system and no clear timescale for obtaining that data. This means that there is very little useful information on which to base an assessment of performance.

- 93 The service is taking steps to improve performance management. It is undertaking research to develop baseline information on obesity in school children and GIS mapping to support targeted community safety work. It has introduced sophisticated IT systems in its gyms which have the potential to measure health improvements in individuals such as cardiac fitness, strength and regularity of exercise. It is planning to introduce new performance indicators based on Sport England's Active People and Active Places surveys which will provide baseline data in the autumn.
- 94 Financial management is sound. The service has a track record of good financial management and does not overspend its budget.
- 95 The Council recognises the need to develop itself as a learning council and has recently agreed a range of initiatives to improve learning across Council departments. At present there are few formal networks in place such as the 'One Council, One team' group and schemes such as a mentoring scheme to support staff learning. Within cultural services, staff are keen to learn from Beacon Councils and other high performers but without further development of formal systems some of this learning may not be shared across the Council and its impact may be subsequently reduced.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 96 The Council has in the past benefited from good capacity and has had few pressures on spending. However, the previous policy of keeping council tax low by using reserves to balance spending has resulted in the current financial difficulties. This has been compounded by the government's decision to cap the Council reducing its ability to increase council tax. As a result, financial capacity within the Council is stretched at the moment.
- 97 The Council does not currently have a robust medium term financial plan linked to long term objectives. The Council has a formal financial strategy that was approved by Council in October 2004. However, the capping decision has meant that the Council has had to effectively change tack and opt for an alternative approach. This led to the Council developing its spending priorities based on the matrix referred to earlier and a revised financial strategy was agreed in September 2005 with proposed savings based on achieving a balanced budget in 2006/07. Work is now in hand using this starting point to revise the medium term financial forecast.

- 98 More recent information has indicated that the Council needs to make a further saving of around £750,000 to balance the budget for 2006/07. This is in addition to the savings already made as a result of the capping decision. The Council has undertaken a range of measures including a moratorium on filling staff vacancies and a review of senior staffing structures. This is having an adverse impact on morale and some people feel threatened by the process and uncertain of their future.
- 99 It is not clear whether the Council has the financial capacity to deliver planned improvements to cultural services. Some councillors are reluctant to draw further on capital reserves given the Council's current financial situation. The Council is planning to redevelop Flitwick Leisure Centre but it is not clear whether the Council has the financial resources to deliver its ambitions. There is little information available at present about the projected total cost of the scheme and the contribution the Council is willing to make. The Council has a framework in place for assessing capital spending proposals. The Flitwick LC proposal has yet to be brought before the Executive and is therefore not currently in the capital programme.
- 100 The Council has sound HR practices and most cultural services staff do feel valued for their expertise. They also feel that there is a flexible and open style of management which allows managers to lead and encourages them to use their initiative. Conditions are seen as very good with a flexible approach to working patterns, good personnel policies and good work life balance policies.
- 101 Planned service reductions will have an impact on users although attempts are being made to mitigate this impact by negotiating with partners. For example, the Primary Care Trust has taken over the funding of the exercise programme in sheltered housing accommodation and Sandy Town Council has agreed to take over the running of the Tourist Information Centre.
- 102 The Council has been successful in building capacity through partnership working. It is seen by partners as fulfilling a much needed leadership role and 'punching above its weight' in terms of both the contribution it makes to partnership working and the benefits it secures for local people as a result. For example it is an active partner in the CDRP and the LAA. It works with county wide sports and arts partnerships to strengthen capacity and secures significant additional investment through this route.
- 103 The Council works well in partnership to enable cultural activities to take place and has successfully increased its financial capacity by securing additional resources such as Lottery funding. This enables the Council to achieve more than it could with just its own resources.
- 104 The Council also understands the need to build capacity at a local and community level. It supports clubs and organisations through grant aid and has helped them to successfully bid for external funding such as Lottery grants, by pump priming and providing advice and support.
- 105 Partners feel that generally the Council has the capacity to improve but they are not clear what impact continued budget reductions will have on cultural services and the scope for continued improvement.

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- 106 At a corporate level procurement is weak but improving and whilst the Council has not fully implemented the procurement strategy it is procuring all major contracts and areas of spend using modern procurement principles, for example refuse contract and leisure centres procurement. The Council is also considering scope for working with other councils to share expertise. For example, it is working with Luton to procure internal audit functions through its contract with an external provider. However, the Council currently has no procurement specialist and this is seen as a gap.

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 2 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 3 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. |