

Service Inspection Report

June 2006



Cultural Services

North Norfolk District Council

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

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

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

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

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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 (KLOEs) 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.

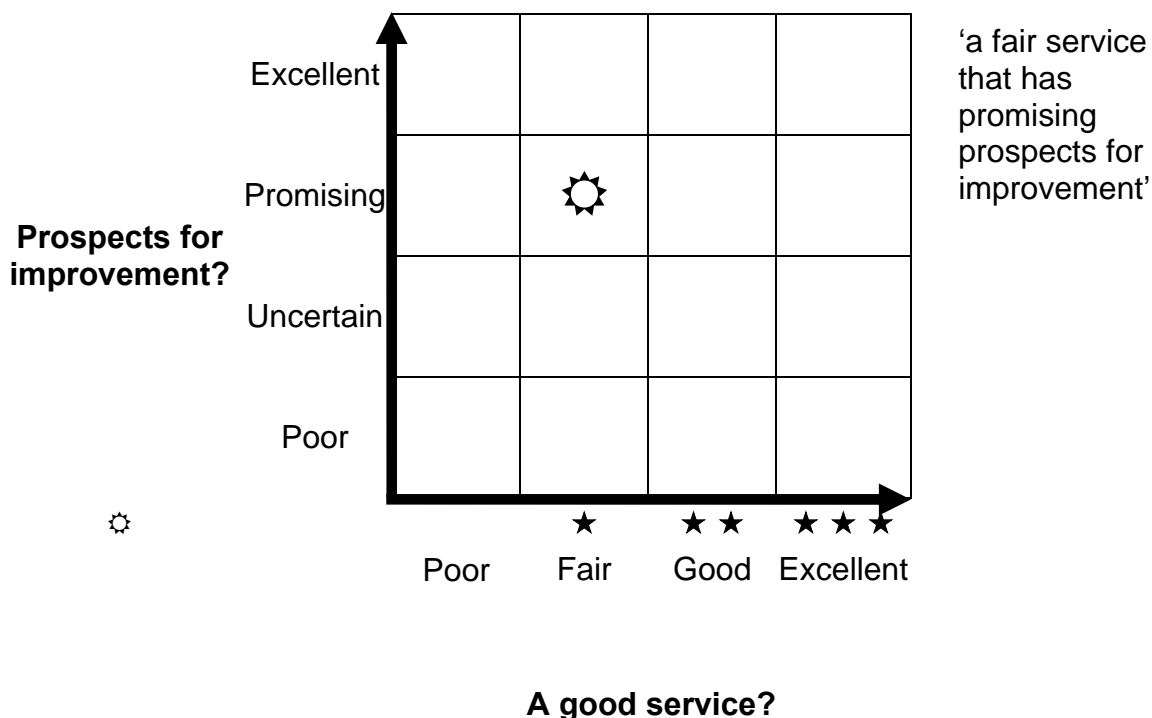
Summary

- 1 North Norfolk District Council provides 'fair' cultural services which have 'promising' prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council supports and directly provides a range of cultural services which enhance the quality of life for local people. Service delivery is based on a broad understanding of local needs and is responsive to requests for support for community initiatives. However, equality and diversity are insufficiently taken into account in the design and delivery of services.
- 3 There has been effective community engagement in major projects and feedback is used appropriately to improve services within some facilities but this approach is not consistent and co-ordinated across all cultural services and there has been insufficient use of available information to tailor services to the needs of all groups within the whole community
- 4 Performance management is at an early stage, but being progressively introduced although this is hampered by the absence of clear strategic priorities for cultural services. Service planning is generally weak with the exception of the arts and the new 'active communities' plans which include measurable targets and some expected outcomes.
- 5 There is some information on costs but this is not used with evaluation of service quality or outcomes to monitor the value for money being achieved. The Council is not consistently achieving value for money across all services, but it has delivered on major capital projects that enhance cultural service provision and appropriate action is taken to ensure value for money from these investments and from contracted out services.
- 6 There is cross-party support for cultural services and acknowledgement of the importance of these services in the delivery of corporate objectives. Cultural services feature strongly in budget prioritisation and appropriate resources are in place to enable the delivery of service plans.
- 7 By moving toward more of an enabling role, working effectively in partnerships and encouraging community involvement, the Council is increasing its capacity to promote and support cultural services and is embedding provision more firmly within the community.

Scoring the service

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

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 9 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- there is a range of art and leisure opportunities that improve the quality of life for local residents;
 - initiatives meet the needs of the wider community, for example the mobile gym takes services out to rural areas;
 - the Council is responsive and supportive of cultural initiatives; and
 - there has been effective engagement of the community on major projects.

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.

10 However:

- insufficient use is made of available data to ensure that the Council is meeting the needs of specific groups, for example older people;
- service planning is generally weak;
- equality and diversity are insufficiently taken into account in the design and delivery of services;
- performance management is at an early stage of development;
- the Council is not consistently achieving value for money across all services.

11 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- the Council has successfully drawn in external investment and delivered four major capital projects that have improved cultural services;
- there is commitment to cultural services and recognition across the Council of the role they play in delivering Council priorities, for example supporting tourism;
- action is taken to ensure value for money from investments and contracted out services; and
- the Council has increased its capacity through partnership working, community engagement, training for officers and shared and hosted posts.

12 However:

- the lack of clear vision and strategic aims for cultural services is hindering the co-ordination of service delivery and effective performance management;
- capacity to deliver service plans becomes stretched when delivering major projects and facing staff vacancies; and
- progress has been slow against service improvement plans.

Recommendations

- 13 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the Council. In addition we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

Recommendation

R1 Develop a clear vision and strategic aims for cultural services which are agreed and used to provide a base for effective service planning and performance management with SMART³ targets.

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

- a shared understanding of what cultural services are seeking to achieve; and
- ability to measure the outcomes achieved.

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

Recommendation

R2 Ensure that equality and diversity issues are taken into account in all aspects of cultural services provision.

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

- more access for people with a diverse range of needs;
- improved satisfaction levels of residents; and
- improved quality of life for vulnerable groups

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

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.

³ Specific, measurable, with attributed responsibility, realistic and with timing indicated.

Recommendation

R3 The Council needs to ensure that cultural services are providing value for money by assessing the balance between costs and service outcomes and setting targets to improve value for money.

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

- better quality, more accessible services for the same or reduced costs to the Council.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 14 North Norfolk is a large rural district covering 373 square miles, with a 43 mile strip of coastline, part of which is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There are 80 conservation areas and a large proportion of the Norfolk Broads are within the district. There are no major urban centres and almost half of the population of just under 98,800 lives in the seven small market and resort towns of Cromer, Fakenham, Holt, Sheringham, Stalham, Wells-next-the-Sea and the largest, North Walsham, (which has a population of 12,000). North Norfolk is fifth highest of all councils in England for the percentage of people living in villages, hamlets or isolated settlements. The District Council is based in the holiday resort of Cromer.
- 15 The county has an ageing population, with a higher than national average percentage of people aged 65 years and over (26.2 per cent) and the highest percentage of people aged over 70 in the county. The average age was 45, compared to the national average of 39. People from black and ethnic minority groups represent only 0.8 per cent of the population, compared to the national average of 9 per cent.
- 16 North Norfolk ranked 180 out of 354 local authorities based on the average deprivation scores in 2004 (where 1 is the most deprived). No areas fall within the 10 per cent most deprived in the country. Just one area (within Cromer town) falls within the 11 to 25 per cent most deprived, but there are pockets of deprivation, especially in the North Walsham area and rural areas. Parts of the district have received European funding because of their rural nature and the decline of traditional industries such as fishing.
- 17 Average earnings are relatively low, as are levels of educational qualifications, with the 2001 census showing that 51.4 per cent of the population had low or no qualifications. At 2 per cent, unemployment is below the national average of 2.5 per cent. North Norfolk is a low crime area, and most indicators show a fall in crime between 2003/04 to 2004/05. Health indicators show that there are overall good standards of health in the area, although 21.4 per cent of residents have a limiting long-term illness.
- 18 In 1999, the Council commissioned a study of the value and volume of tourism which examined for example, expenditure by holiday makers and day visitors and the impact on local employment. Since 1999, the Council's monitoring has indicated increasing numbers of visitors to North Norfolk. The Council estimates that tourism is currently worth in the region of £357 million per annum. The percentage of second homes and holiday homes is high at about 10 per cent of all properties.

The Council

- 19 The Liberal Democrats gained overall control in May 2003. The current political composition is 29 Liberal Democrats, 16 Conservatives and 3 Independents. The Council operates on a leader, cabinet and scrutiny system.
- 20 The Chief Executive is supported by two directors, one responsible for service delivery the other for organisational development. There are currently seven heads of service, including head of community and head of regeneration and strategic housing.
- 21 The Council's overall revenue budget for 2005/06 is £15.7 million and the net revenue budget is £14.7 million.
- 22 In November 2003 the Council was rated as 'fair' in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). The 2005 Direction of Travel Statement indicated improvement in the Council's strategic planning and progress in its approach to performance management. Both these issues were identified as weaknesses in the CPA and in a 2002 inspection of parks, open spaces woodlands, beaches and the foreshore that rated the services as good, but unlikely to improve.
- 23 Partnership working is a priority for the Council, and the effectiveness of this was reviewed by the Audit Commission in November 2005. This concluded that while the Council has been proactive in engaging with other organisations to develop partnerships, there is no strategic direction to partnership working and it is unclear what outcomes partnerships are delivering. The effectiveness of partnerships varies, as does their level of performance management.

The Council's cultural services

- 24 Three leisure centres in Fakenham, North Walsham (Victory Pool) and Sheringham (Splash) are managed on behalf of the Council through the North Norfolk Community Leisure Association (NNCLA). This is a 'not for profit' organisation wholly owned by the contractors, DC Leisure. A further three dual-use sports centres are managed by the Council on school sites in Cromer, North Walsham and Stalham. A mobile gym provides outreach leisure facilities.
- 25 There is one directly managed museum at Cromer, and the area museums manager, who is jointly employed by the County and the District Council, provides professional advice to over 20 privately run museums across the district.
- 26 The Council owns the Sheringham Little Theatre building which is leased to the Sheringham Little Theatre Society, and owns the Cromer Pavilion Theatre, which is run by a commercial company.
- 27 Support is provided to the large arts and creative industries sector. The Council has investment agreements with key partnerships that specify the outcomes expected by the Council in return for funding. Council buildings provide art gallery facilities.
- 28 The parks and open spaces maintained by the Council include Holt Country Park, smaller areas of woodland and seafronts, foreshores and beaches.

- 29 The tourism service co-ordinates marketing, producing two main holiday guides, website information and staging a major event 'A day out in North Norfolk' aimed at tour operators. Council facilities act as tourist attractions in their own right, for example the Splash swimming pool at Sheringham is designed around the tourist market. The number of tourist information centres reduced from seven to four in 2004 with those at Fakenham, North Walsham and Mundesley being closed.
- 30 The service employs 39 full-time equivalent staff and approximately 50 casual staff. The net revenue budget for 2005/06 is approximately £3.8million.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 31 Service planning is based on the corporate plan 2004 to 2009, which has aims that are similar to, but not fully aligned with, the community strategy. The shared vision of the Council and of the local strategic partnership is 'to promote the community, economic and environmental sustainability of the district'. This includes developing the local economy and maintaining the high-quality of life and natural environment.
- 32 The high level of second/holiday home ownership together with comparatively low wage levels has made affordable housing the first priority for the Council. Cultural issues do not feature in the 'headline priorities' in the corporate plan, but support for tourism and promotion and development of more informal leisure and recreational options are two of the seven 'focused priorities'.
- 33 The corporate plan and community strategy are currently being updated to achieve better alignment and to reflect the delivery of the local area agreement (LAA) which will come into effect in April 2006. The Council has been instrumental in ensuring that the role for culture in achieving the outcomes is clearly recognised in this agreement. Headline priorities drafted for the revised corporate plan include active and sustainable communities and protection of the natural environment and built heritage.
- 34 In 2003 a new Council was elected with majority control where there had previously been a hung council. A new Chief Executive took up post later the same year. The Council undertook a preliminary restructuring in 2004 in order to reflect the increased focus on community engagement. Cultural services (with the exception of tourism and heritage which are in the regeneration and strategic housing service) currently fall within community services, which includes an 'active communities team', tasked with increasing community engagement. Further restructure is currently taking place as part of business process re-engineering.
- 35 The over-arching community services business plan for 2005/06 links to the corporate plan and refers to the contribution of service areas and activities to community safety, transport, health and environmental regeneration. Young people and older people are identified as target groups. Each cultural service area has a specific plan in a set format that identifies the priority developments for the next five years as well as the actions for the forthcoming year. These are linked to corporate priorities and there is some linkage to associated regional and national agendas.

- 36 The activities with high priority in 2005/06 were:
- developing a cultural/arts strategy;
 - Cromer seafront enhancement scheme;
 - Sheringham Little Theatre – review the investment agreement;
 - implement the Active England mobile gym project;
 - leisure management of the three contracted-out leisure centres – developing an action plan with NNCLA;
 - complete the Cromer Museum access project;
 - participate in Sure Start;
 - establish a pilot area forum;
 - review the youth action group;
 - develop a communications plan for community safety; and
 - implement a cross-agency protocol/policy to address anti-social behaviour.
- 37 Local area partnerships (LAPs) are in various stages of development across the district and receive funding from North Norfolk's local strategic partnership, the North Norfolk Community Partnership (NNCP). The Council has an agreement with Norfolk County Council whereby some of the income from a council tax levy on second homes is given to NNCP, which then uses it to support the work of the LAPs. The active communities team supports and promotes LAP working. Area forums have also been introduced to improve the communication between the three tiers of local government, from parishes up to county council level.
- 38 The Council is aware of local cultural provision, such as the extent of the local artistic community, tourist attractions and private sector leisure provision. It works in partnership with other public bodies, voluntary agencies and commercial providers to promote and enable cultural activities and events.

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

- 39 This inspection looks at all aspects of the cultural services provided by the Council and especially focuses on the contribution to the agreed shared priorities⁴ of economic vitality and quality of life for young people and for older citizens.

Access, customer care and community focus.

- 40 Decisions relating to planning, managing and delivering cultural services are based on a broad understanding and knowledge of local needs. The problem of accessing services in a largely rural area has been tackled through outreach and the provision of transport. The Council promotes cultural tourism, maintains the natural environment and provides services such as lifeguards. This supports the tourism industry that is vital to the local economy.

⁴ Between central government and the Local Government Association.

- 41 Detailed data is available but it has not been used systematically to tailor service delivery to the needs of the whole community. Mechanisms such as the citizens' panel, customer forums and local area partnerships are in place, but results are not always used effectively. For example, research commissioned by the local strategic partnership was used to help determine the priorities for the community strategy but this data has not been effectively used to inform cultural service provision. Similarly, information from the contracted-out leisure centres is not systematically analysed and used to ensure that services are being accessed by all groups within the community. The Council is missing opportunities to tailor services more closely to residents' requirements.
- 42 Feedback from customers is used to improve services within specific facilities, although the approach is not consistent and co-ordinated across all cultural services. Focus groups run by DC Leisure at the three leisure centres that they manage have resulted in minor improvements and added provision, including the setting up of a new parent and toddler session at Fakenham leisure centre. Other facilities such as Holt Country Park collect feedback from school groups and through their visitor books and income from car parking charges is re-invested into the site to meet identified customer needs for example improvements to signing. The Council is responding to specific user demands at facilities, but is missing opportunities to gain a wider view of the needs of its customers which could lead to increased participation by more people.
- 43 The Council responds effectively to requests for support for community initiatives. The Ranger from Holt Country Park provides expertise and advice to a community group that wants to improve the condition of Sadlers Wood, near North Walsham. As a result, this woodland, which had been subject to vandalism, is now cared for by an action group of local residents, including children. Similarly, the Council supplied bags and arranged for the disposal of rubbish collected as part of a Beach Watch at Mundesley organised by a local councillor with a group of young people. This supportiveness both promotes a positive image for the Council and encourages a self-help approach by local communities towards improving public spaces in their area.
- 44 There has been effective community engagement in specific projects although the Council does not consistently involve all stakeholders when making changes to service delivery. The Cromer regeneration project had a representative focus group which was involved in appointments such as those of the artist and landscaper for the seafront and influenced the resulting designs. The development of the new leisure centres at North Walsham and Fakenham were designed around local community needs. However stakeholders were not fully involved in the decision to close three tourist information centres which meant that these communities felt excluded from the decision. Better examples of community involvement have meant a greater sense of community ownership in decision-making.

- 45 The public have not had a full say about the standards they would like the service to meet and are not clear about the levels of service that they should receive. Service standards are in place within most of the Council's cultural services but they have not been formed in consultation with users or extensively communicated to the public. Some services have achieved nationally-accredited standards such as Quest and Green or Blue Flags. Other services such as museums, dual-use leisure centres and parks have adopted the corporate customer charter and standards. Apart from being submitted to a county readers group to check readability these have not involved service users. This means that residents have not been able to influence the standards they want the services to meet.
- 46 In the absence of a consistent approach to contracting and investment agreements, the Council cannot be sure that it is obtaining maximum benefit from all externally provided services. Contracts and investment agreements have resulted in improved services for local people and visitors to the district, for example investment agreements in the arts have led to a range of outcomes, such as targeted marketing by Sheringham Little Theatre drawing in people from outside the district (thus contributing to the local economy). The contract with Openwide International ensures proportional reduction of the Council subsidy in line with the profits from the company's management of the Pavilion Theatre. However the Council's requirements are not always clearly specified, for example the contract with DC Leisure is less precise regarding the expected outcomes, and those that have been achieved have been more based on initiatives by the contractor than as a result of a robust contract.
- 47 Effective partnership working has increased and enhanced cultural opportunities and provision. The Council acts as an enabler, providing information and advice for the local arts community. This has, for example, resulted in the Council producing and distributing the *Arts in North Norfolk* guide which enables the smaller arts groups, lone artists and community groups to promote their activities and events in a co-ordinated and more cost effective manner. Also high school pupils in Fakenham worked with Norfolk Music Works on rock and pop performances and song writing. By promoting links and partnership arrangements, and using the capacity within the community, the Council is increasing cultural provision with minimal extra input of resources.
- 48 Cultural services are well promoted through a range of attractive leaflets that are displayed in local venues, libraries and in the tourist information centres. The community newsletter, Outlook, is used effectively by the Council and partners as a communications channel to all residents. The website is helpful and informative, with extensive listing of heritage attractions, sports opportunities, arts and culture information. The easy access to information helps promote usage by residents and visitors although potential electronic access such as online bookings has not been fully exploited.

- 49 Not all services are fully accessible to residents, in particular younger people. For example, research showed that young people felt there was a lack of sports facilities and for other activities such as social venues and skate parks The Council has sought to address this by bussing young people in to sports and arts events and providing some skate boarding facilities. However, most services are based in the three main towns with various other venues being used, for example Salthouse church provides an ideal venue for the successful North Norfolk Exhibition Project, and museum collections are taken out to schools and day centres.
- 50 The Council has extensive opening hours for leisure centres which are maximising access to most cultural services facilities. Service opening hours cater for a range of users and lifestyles, for example swimming is available at the Splash and Victory leisure centres from 7.00am in the morning until 9.30pm and junior sessions are available in their gyms after school and at weekends. The exception is Cromer museum where the normal high season opening hours are limited to daytimes, with only afternoons on Sundays, and it is not clear whether these hours are based on community and visitor need and, therefore, the Council can not be sure that they are offering the optimum access. However, local people generally have access to a range of facilities at convenient times.
- 51 The Council uses differential pricing to promote good access, although there is not a consistent approach across all services. North Norfolk has some of the lowest leisure charges when compared with data available for its nearest neighbour group. There are concessionary charges for children, families, and people aged 60 or over at the leisure centres and at Sheringham Little Theatre carers can accompany people with disabilities free of charge and unemployed people pay a reduced admission fee. While access is encouraged for specific groups the lack of consistency is inequitable.

Diversity

- 52 The Council does not take equality and diversity sufficiently into account in the design and delivery of its services. Council contracts require equality and diversity issues such as access for people with disabilities, to be taken into account. However there is no monitoring of how this is put into effect. The Council has yet to reach Level I of the Local Authorities' Equality Standard. This lays it open to the risk of legal challenge. There are some positive examples, particularly relating to the needs of people with disabilities, for example where capital investment has been made in facilities such as Fakenham Leisure Centre and Cromer sea front and museum, where the leisure contractor operates an inclusive policy that is sensitive to religious and social considerations. However, overall cultural services cannot demonstrate that they are ensuring equality of access and meeting the needs of diverse sections of the local community.

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 53** The service has made good progress on many of its objectives. For example the delivery of the mobile gym project has meant that people in rural locations have participated in activity sessions which are helping to improve their health and wellbeing. It is also making a contribution to corporate priorities such as all year round tourism through the promotion of the North Norfolk Exhibition Project and Openwide International Ltd. projects where visitors have been attracted to the area for arts experiences.
- 54** However, the Council cannot be sure that it is achieving what it has set out to do and demonstrate to council tax payers that they are receiving services that are good value for money. There is an absence of a consistent approach to evaluating service outcomes. The service plans lack measurable outcomes which means there is a lack of robust evidence of what impact the services are having on peoples lives, although positive outcomes are evident in some areas. For example, for arts activities evaluation takes place and outcomes are clearly demonstrated. However, there is only basic participation information recorded for sports initiatives.
- 55** The Council has not clearly set out what it aims to achieve through sports development. The service has a target to increase participation in physical activity in line with government targets but this does not specify target participants and there is a lack of strategic direction for the development of key sports and excellence. Sports development outreach is limited with activity based mainly in the leisure centres. Without appropriate plans the Council cannot be sure that they are effectively meeting the needs of the targeted groups.
- 56** The Council is achieving good outcomes from its arts activities. Investment agreements for the arts require annual reporting of outcomes to the public. For example, approximately 5,000 visitors were attracted to Salthouse Church for the 2005 North Norfolk Exhibition Project. A total of 60 artists exhibited, 13 were involved in workshops and 15 in events which contributed, through sales of their work, to the aim of supporting the professional artists in the area. Other projects that aim to impact on quality of life include the 'Space for Sports and the Arts' programme, which targets specific groups such as girls and women in sport and boys and men in the arts, at two rural schools. However, it is unclear how the effectiveness of this project is being evaluated.
- 57** External accreditation endorses the quality of services provided. All three of the contracted out leisure centres hold Quest accreditation, The Green Flag held by Holt Country Park and the four Blue Flag beaches and the four Resort Seaside Awards testify to the quality of maintenance of open spaces. Such awards assure residents of the attention being given to maintaining the local environment and providing good quality services and add to the visitor attraction of the area.

- 58 The latest available information regarding residents' satisfaction shows a mixed picture for cultural services. Residents, whether or not they used the services, were asked their views in the 2003/04 national satisfaction survey. The Council has not conducted any research to update this information. The 2003/04 survey showed above average satisfaction with parks and open spaces, arts and galleries and museum when compared with satisfaction levels achieved by other English district councils. Conversely satisfaction was very low regarding sports and leisure facilities, but since then there have been new facilities at Fakenham and North Walsham and the introduction of the mobile gym. Positive feedback has subsequently been received from focus groups and through visitor comments. The Council is meeting some customer needs, but until the next triennial satisfaction survey is conducted it will not know how effectively it has addressed dissatisfaction with sports and leisure provision.

Economic vitality

- 59 Cultural services support the Council's high priority of developing year-round tourism. Business plans reflect this priority particularly in the Arts where a cultural tourism initiative aims to increase attendance at arts events by visitors from outside the district. This was successful in 2005 with around 4,000 visitors to the exhibition at Salthouse coming from outside the district. All supplies, services and printing for the exhibition were obtained locally in Norfolk, the majority in North Norfolk, and its significance was acknowledged by its featuring in the CAN 05 major visual arts festival based in Norwich. The attractive formal gardens on Cromer seafront and the regeneration of the town, well maintained beaches and provision of tourist information services, all support the tourism industry. Holt Country Park and the refurbished Cromer Museum serve both the local population and add to the tourist attractions available. The Council's effective partnership with the Royal National Lifeboat Institution has resulted in an attractive new Lifeboat Museum. Economic vitality is thus being supported by the Council both through its enabling and supporting role for tourism and by direct provision of tourist attractions.
- 60 Open spaces, including beaches, and the built cultural heritage are well maintained. Attractive sculptures and town centre landscaping reflect Fakenham's printing heritage. The Cromer regeneration work has included grants to enable residents to improve and restore the physical appearance of buildings within the town centre. The Council is thus effectively maintaining the natural and built heritage that is vital to the tourism industry.

Quality of life for local people (especially young people and older people)

- 61** Cultural services provide some improvements to the quality of life for local people but lack the evidence to quantify this impact consistently across the services. Available information is not always used effectively to tailor services to the needs of target groups. There is potential for the interests and aspirations of these groups to be identified through customer forums, but it is not clear that these are taken into account. For example the older people's forum has not been asked for views on cultural services provision. Information from research such as that conducted by Opera and the MORI pilot performance measurement for the development of sport is not used in a strategic way to set performance targets and outcomes within the service plans. By not fully utilising customer information that is already available, or can be easily obtained, the Council is missing the opportunity to better tailor services to the needs of the community.
- 62** There are some good examples of specialist officers targeting provision. For example the arts officer works closely with the arts community and uses surveys and feedback to shape provision. The active citizenship co-ordinator (a jointly funded post with the County Council) has used his links with teenagers to identify their needs and has organised teenage visits to a Norwich nightclub for non-alcohol evenings. Such targeting of effort represents cost-effective use of officers' time and a matching of provision with needs.
- 63** Councillors provide clear leadership and actively promote the interests of specific groups. There are designated councillors who act as 'champions' for younger people, for older people and for those with disabilities. They act as lobbyists, challenging where appropriate to ensure that issues affecting their interest groups have been taken into account in service developments. The 'speed dating' exercise was perceived as a success by councillors in terms of enabling them to gain better insight into the needs of young people, while the young people realised that the perception of all councillors being elderly and out-of-touch was inaccurate. By strengthening the links between councillors and these identified groups within the community, the Council is promoting a better understanding of needs.
- 64** Cultural services provide services which impact on the quality of life for some vulnerable groups. For example, outreach work of the museums service with visits to older persons groups provides reminiscence experiences for people unable to visit museums independently. The GP referral scheme at North Walsham leisure centre has achieved target numbers of people participating. The activity is aiming to improve participants' health and wellbeing. A range of initiatives has increased participation in cultural activities and improved the quality of life for a range of different people.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 65 The value for money achieved from revenue expenditure on cultural services has been mixed. Overall expenditure on culture and heritage is high, but comparative expenditure varies between the services. For example, parks and open spaces have achieved comparatively good value for money as spending is below average, the quality is good as evidenced by external accreditation, and satisfaction rates are above average. However, the value for money secured by sports and leisure services is less clear. Spending is comparatively high, resident satisfaction was low in 2003/04 but usage has increased with the new leisure centres and the quality of some facilities has been endorsed by accreditation.
- 66 Local people have benefited from the Council's ability to secure significant external investment for capital projects which have improved services. Of the £15.2 million investment only £2.04 million has been provided by the Council. The largest investment has been in the £8 million regeneration scheme for Cromer. Cultural services improvements, such as the refurbishment of Cromer museum and improvements to the seafront have been achieved to a greater degree than would have been possible within the Council's own resources.
- 67 Value for money is appropriately taken into account in decisions regarding capital investments in cultural services. The decision-making process which led to the provision of two new leisure centres included consideration of value for money. Creation of these centres made the management proposition more attractive to an external leisure contractor and the increase usage levels have reduced the overall cost per head of sports and leisure provision. By ensuring that its investments secure an appropriate return, the Council is achieving value for money for North Norfolk residents.
- 68 The Council's focus and high expenditure on tourism appropriately reflect the importance of tourism to the area. To extend the tourist season the Council has changed its marketing emphasis from 'bucket and spade' to presenting North Norfolk as a destination for all seasons. This justifies the focus on securing and retaining quality marks such as the Blue and Green Flags.
- 69 The Council effectively capitalises on the tourist attraction value of the Splash through seasonal charging, while also encouraging year round use by local residents through a membership scheme. Local residents benefit from lower costs, and cost effective use is made of the facilities which can be kept open outside the tourist season.
- 70 There is limited exploration of value for money and comparative costs. The new performance monitoring system (TEN) does not highlight value for money issues and there is not currently a programme of scrutiny around cultural services that would drive value for money. Management arrangements do not focus on value for money and service business plans are not underpinned by robust mechanisms to drive and review progress and review impact.

- 71 There is no routine review by councillors of areas of high spending to ensure value for money is being secured, although review of the tourism services was prompted by budget pressures. Decisions made as a result led to more equitable sharing of cost for tourism promotion with the private sector. But this is an isolated example and without a more routine focus on value for money other opportunities for delivering services in more cost effective ways could be missed.
- 72 There is a lack of clarity regarding the value for money given by all the partnerships within cultural services. This means that the Council cannot be sure that it is receiving appropriate returns for its investment in individual partnerships.
- 73 Procurement practice is underdeveloped and the service has not considered all options when making decisions about how parts of the service should be managed. A full options appraisal was not carried out prior to the decision to tender for the management of the leisure centres. The closure of three tourist information centres was based on a business analysis but did not fully consider other ways of delivering these services. Two of the affected communities were concerned about the effect on their local tourist trade and made alternative provision. The Council cannot be sure that it is making the best arrangements for service delivery and obtaining value for money.

Summary

- 74 The Council provides a range of cultural services that enhance the quality of life for local people. Service delivery is based on a broad understanding of local needs and is responsive to requests for support for community initiatives. There has been effective community engagement in major projects and feedback is used appropriately to improve services within some facilities. However, this approach is not consistent and co-ordinated across all cultural services and there has been insufficient use of available information to tailor services to the needs of all groups within the whole community. Equality and diversity are insufficiently taken into account in the design and delivery of services. Service planning is generally weak with the exception of the arts and the new active communities plans which include measurable targets and some expected outcomes. Performance management is at an early stage of development and the Council does not routinely set local performance indicators. There is some information on costs but this is not used with an evaluation of service quality or service outcomes to monitor the value for money being achieved. The Council is not consistently achieving value for money across all services.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 75 Progress has been made in delivering the community services business plans. The main priorities for 2005/06 were the delivery of the capital projects (Cromer Regeneration, the North Walsham Victory Swimming Pool, Fakenham Sports Centre and the mobile gym) which have been successfully completed and have impacted upon the quality of life of service users resulting in higher levels of attendance than expected.
- 76 There is a mixed record of delivery of service improvements as a result of external inspection. Weaknesses in asset management identified in the 2002 inspection of parks and open spaces had not been remedied. The Council has introduced a new performance management system corporately which has led to the cultural services improving performance management in line with the corporate approach. The 2002 inspection recommended development of a clear strategy for the service, for example, through production of a play strategy. The response to this recommendation has been slow, with a play strategy only just emerging. However, the recommendation that information for the public should be improved has been carried out across all cultural services with the development of an informative and helpful website.
- 77 The Council has maintained, or made small improvements, in its overall performance in recent years but mixed performance is indicated in cultural services. The 2003/04 survey indicated that residents' satisfaction with parks and open spaces had improved, and in August 2005 Holt County Park secured Green Flag status. The beaches at Cromer, Sheringham, Mundesley and Sea Palling have all achieved the highest possible grade in the Blue Flag and Seaside awards. There was no improvement regarding satisfaction with other aspects of cultural services, such as sport and leisure facilities, where satisfaction remained amongst the lowest for English district councils. However, targets for the number of visitors have been exceeded at the two new sports and leisure centres which, together with Sheringham Splash, have achieved Quest accreditation. Positive feedback has been received through visitor comments and focus groups. Museum attendance figures were low and not showing signs of improvement, but for some of the period covered by the data collection the only Council-run museum was closed for refurbishment. A range of surveys indicates positive response to the redevelopment of Cromer seafront. (*Requested evidence behind this claim in the SA.*) While recent service improvements and anecdotal evidence indicate increased user satisfaction with provision, there has not been a statistically valid survey regarding all aspects of cultural services to ascertain how satisfied residents are with current provision. It will not be possible to evidence this until the next national round of resident satisfaction surveys is conducted in 2006/07.

- 78 Investment agreements in the Arts ensure that the Council is receiving an appropriate return for annual subsidies, both in terms of provision that supports corporate aims and, in the case of the contract regarding the Pavilion Theatre, by reducing the subsidy from £150,575 in 2002/03 to £124,119 in 2005/06. The arrangements for a not for profit organisation to manage three of the leisure centres have resulted in investment, for example at Fakenham Leisure Centre where there was insufficient council funding to fit out one room, the contractor made the necessary investment and this room now hosts a range of activities. The potential of adding further responsibilities to the existing contract is being reviewed. Value for money and improvement in facilities is thus being secured from contracted out services, with readiness to explore the potential for further provision if this represents good value for money.
- 79 The Council is appropriately matching corporate revenue expenditure to delivery against its priorities. A budget prioritisation approach has been adopted in which value for money and efficiency savings were considered. The individual services were examined in a two-day prioritisation exercise and the importance of their contribution to corporate priorities debated between councillors and senior officers. For example, the support given to tourism and parks and open spaces scored comparatively highly because of its contribution to the economic vitality of the district. The importance attached to cultural services was highlighted by most of them falling within the top 50 per cent of services ranked by contribution to corporate priorities. This approach has enabled the Council to match its limited resources to the most important aspects of service delivery and enabled the identification of high and lower priority services both corporately and within cultural services.
- 80 Weaknesses in performance measurement inhibit the Council's ability to demonstrate value for money in what cultural services are achieving. There is no link between performance management and the budget and councillors are unable to judge whether the expected returns are being achieved for the resources invested.
- 81 An open approach is taken to the procurement of services, but not all opportunities for providing services in the most cost effective ways are explored. For example, three tourist information centres were closed without exploring the potential of providing these services in partnerships such as with the library service. However, readiness to contract out service provision and to enter into partnerships has increased the range and quality of services available, such as in the theatres, leisure centres and museums. The lack of a strategic approach means that some opportunities regarding service delivery are missed, although the general openness to alternative methods of service delivery have resulted in better provision than could be achieved within the Council's resources alone.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 82 Performance management within cultural services is generally at an early stage of development. It is hampered by the lack of a clear vision and objectives that set out the purpose of cultural services and their priority within the Council's overall plans.

- 83 Strategic leadership is improving with a clearer sense of direction at political and corporate level. Individual service plans identify the priority developments for the next five years as well as the actions for the forthcoming year. These are linked to corporate priorities however they are generally weak and lack measurable outcomes for customers, exceptions being service planning in the Arts, and in active communities. The overarching community services business plan lacks a strategic approach. In the absence of a clear vision and measurable targets cultural services cannot demonstrate that they are achieving what the Council and the local community want.
- 84 Performance monitoring information is limited. Local performance indicators have not yet been created and available data is not used effectively to monitor service provision to the whole community. Contract monitoring and performance management for leisure centres is not robust, with the data available from the contractors not being used effectively to ensure that services are meeting the needs of the whole community. However, there are effective investment agreements in the Arts for example with Sheringham Little Theatre and the North Norfolk Exhibition Project which include targets such as to increase attendances by people living in specific post code areas and programme one community event per annum.
- 85 Where it exists, target setting is generally not SMART. The investment agreements in the Arts generally do have well constructed targets, but in other areas targets are less precise. For example, it is not clear how the target of increasing participation in physical activity by 1 per cent is to be achieved. An increase could be achieved by more frequent attendance by existing customers at leisure centres, rather than a more targeted approach identifying specific groups such as by age, gender or geographical area, in order to extend the benefits of exercise to the wider community. Without clarity regarding the desired outcomes, it is difficult for the Council to demonstrate that outcomes have been achieved for the intended recipients.
- 86 Review and reporting of performance is variable. The major projects for which external funding have been gained have review and reporting back to the funding bodies built into the grant conditions though the Council do not review such reports to judge whether they have met Council priorities. Progress against service business plans are reported annually to Cabinet. However this reporting is limited to comments regarding progress on service initiatives. This reflects the lack of measurable targets and outcomes within plans. The Council is able to review progress against plans but does not have a full understanding of how this is meeting their corporate priorities.
- 87 The new TEN performance management system is improving the reporting of best value performance indicators. Any deviations from expected performance are reported on a monthly basis to a performance management board consisting of senior managers and councillors. Quarterly reports are sent to Scrutiny, which is increasingly effective in challenging performance, although issues relating to cultural service have not yet arisen.

- 88 The quality of performance management of contracted out services is mixed. In the Arts, investment agreements effectively set the direction and expected outcomes and have been used to performance manage, review and improve the service. The investment agreement with Sheringham Little Theatre makes links with the county wide cultural strategy and Council priorities, and has measurable targets, such as provision of 20 workshops and outreach events during the year. Investment agreements with Norfolk Music Works and with the North Norfolk Exhibition Project set out clearly how the projects will contribute to the Council's priorities with clear measurable targets. However information from the contracted out leisure centres focuses on basic usage figures and is not systematically analysed and used to ensure that services are being accessed by all groups within the community. The lack of a consistent approach means that the Council can not fully demonstrate that contracts are effectively managed.
- 89 Awareness of performance management is increasing across the Council and is evident at all levels within cultural services. This has been promoted for example through the 'golden thread' corporate staff awareness events and by linkage between the appraisal system and corporate objectives. By increasing awareness, the Council is building foundations for the development of a performance management culture.
- 90 The Council has appropriate plans to address the identified weaknesses in its partnership working by reviewing how effectively partnerships are helping meet corporate priorities, the value for money that is being achieved, and how to manage the performance of partnership arrangements. This will help the Council ensure that partnerships, including those within cultural services, are adding value.
- 91 Monitoring of improvement plans is inadequate. A five-year risk based audit plan led to service reviews. Recommendations were being monitored by scrutiny on a quarterly basis, but this has fallen into abeyance and there is a consequent lack of challenge to ensure that identified improvements are put into full effect.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 92 The Council understands that it does not have the capacity to meet community aspirations from its own resources and has shifted its focus. It realises that there is a limit to the extent to which community aspirations can be met from within its own resources and has shifted its focus from direct provision to a greater role as an enabler. Externalisation of the management of the Pavilion theatre and of three leisure centres has reduced direct provision responsibilities, while also resulting in improved performance. Rather than making direct tourist provision, the Council reverted the caravan site at Wells back to the Holkham Estate at the end of the lease and is acting in a more strategic role by enabling developments such as the conversion of church hall to a 30-bed youth hostel. This approach frees up resources which can then be more effectively deployed in promoting and supporting development of cultural services.

- 93 The restructure in 2004 in which the active communities team was created has effectively supported this change of emphasis and the increased focus on activating communities. By drawing together specialist officers, the active communities team has both given these individuals a stronger team identity and provided an appropriate support base for the local area partnerships and for the further development of community engagement.
- 94 The Council is currently taking steps to increase cultural services' capacity to improve. It has actively investigated ways of improving its management of services. A recent review by consultants identified opportunities for improving customer service, increasing efficiency and achieving Gershon savings. The Chief Executive has presented proposals for a change programme, including an early reconfiguring of the corporate team to more closely align services to corporate priorities and develop a stronger customer focus.
- 95 Councillors and officers are aware of their respective roles and work effectively together. Relationships are good, with ready dialogue when issues arise and councillors generally feel well informed about initiatives in cultural services. There is a widespread ownership of cultural services by councillors and its importance to the high priority tourism agenda is recognised. Four councillors have portfolio responsibility for aspects of cultural services and two further councillors act as champions for young people and for older people. While this is a strength in building support for cultural services, fragmentation of responsibility adds to the lack of clarity of the overall role of cultural services. There is a consensus across the political groups regarding the importance of culture in delivering corporate priorities. This widespread political support and close working between councillors and officers on cultural issues strengthens the position of cultural services as an important aspect of the Council's work although the overall aims remain unclear.
- 96 Officers' training needs are appropriately identified through the appraisal scheme. These are evaluated as to their effectiveness in meeting service needs and training is provided as required. Capacity has been increased through joint posts such as an active citizen co-ordinator and the area museums officer, and hosted posts such as a post working to increase capacity within the voluntary sector. However, staff vacancies and the impact of delivering four major capital projects have impacted on delivery against service plans, for example development of an arts/cultural strategy has been delayed.
- 97 ICT is helping to improve performance management and increase the accessibility of cultural services. The TEN performance management system is providing more accessible performance management for officers and councillors, although it is at an early stage of development and use in cultural services. The services are publicised through a helpful and informative website, although not all the information is current. Facilities such as electronic booking have not yet been fully utilised. The Council is thus benefiting from some, but not all, the potential benefits that ICT can bring to cultural services.

- 98 Appropriate financial resourcing is in place to deliver service plans and growth bids are assessed against corporate priorities, with financial implications identified. A prioritisation exercise has been undertaken to ensure that resources are allocated in line with corporate priorities. The importance attached to cultural services is highlighted by most of these falling within the top 50 per cent of services as ranked by contribution to corporate priorities. This gives security regarding the continued provision of cultural services.
- 99 Linkages are increasing across the Council and this is evident within cultural services, for example in the use planning gain monies for young people's facilities and initiatives such as Creative Change feeding into the crime and disorder agenda. The active communities team brings together information to inform partnerships and council officers and works with service heads to enable them to tailor their services to meet expressed need. This increased co-ordination improves overall capacity to deliver services.
- 100 Partnership working has been effective in helping secure the significant external capital investment in cultural services, and there are productive formal partnerships, such as with contractors and other statutory bodies. The Exercise on Prescription scheme is an example of effective collaboration with the local primary care trust and DC Leisure. Effective community engagement is evident, such as at Sadlers Wood and in the provision of the Arts. Over 100 volunteers help with the bar, café and front of house at Sheringham Little Theatre and an estimated 445 volunteer days supported the 2005 Salthouse exhibition. This approach is resulting in sustainable enhancement of the cultural services that can be provided to the people of North Norfolk.

Summary

- 101 There is cross-party support for cultural services and acknowledgement of the importance of these services in the delivery of corporate objectives. The Council has delivered on major capital projects that enhance cultural service provision. Appropriate action is taken to ensure value for money from investments and contracted out services. Cultural services feature strongly in budget prioritisation and appropriate resources are in place to enable the delivery of service plans. By moving toward more of an enabling role, working effectively in partnerships and encouraging community involvement, the Council is increasing its capacity to promote and support these services and embedding provision more firmly within the community. Officers receive appropriate training and capacity has been increased through shared and hosted posts, although vacancies and the pressures of delivering major capital projects has resulted in some planned developments not taking place. However progress has been slow against service improvement planning. Performance management is at an early stage, but being progressively introduced although this is hampered by the absence of clear strategic priorities for cultural services.

Appendix 1 – Judgements

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

Table 1 Judgement 1 – How good is the service?

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

Table 2 Judgement 2 – Prospects for improvement

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