

Service Inspection Report

June 2006

Cultural Services

Merton 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 (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.

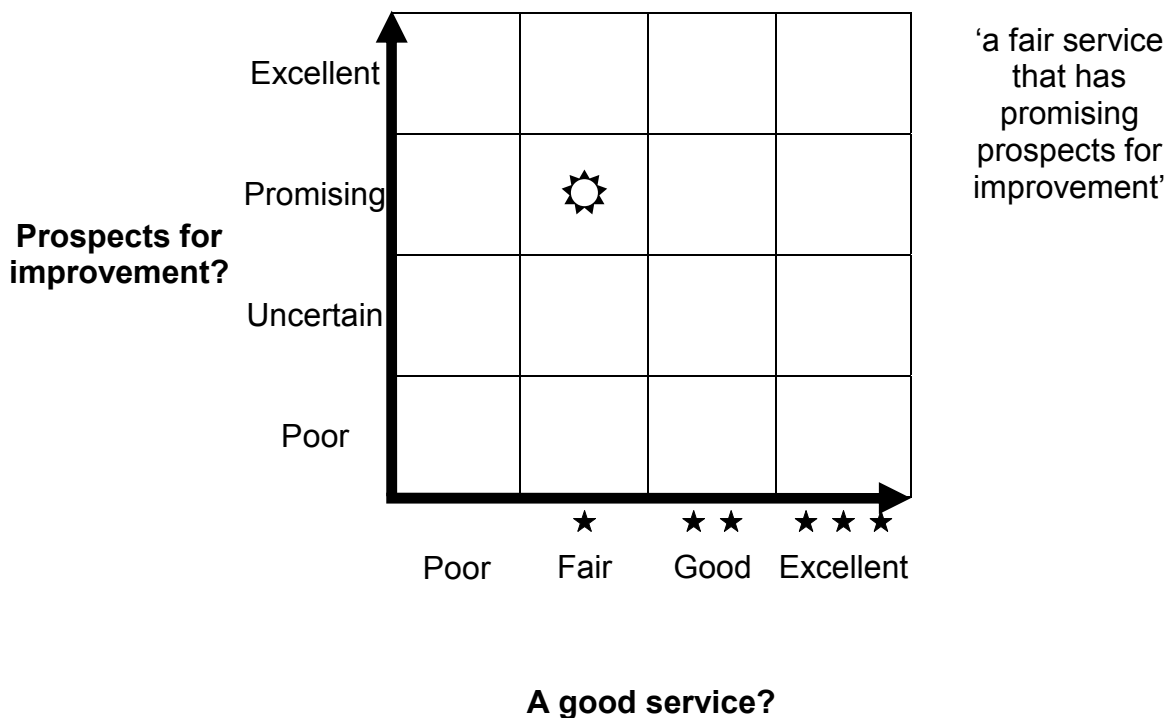
Summary

- 1 The London Borough of Merton provides fair cultural services, which have promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council's cultural services are fair because they offer a wide range of services which contribute to some wider outcomes for the community. The Council's community focus is good and is addressing the inequalities in the geographic access and quality of cultural services available to local people. There has been a greater take up and participation from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, looked after children, people with disabilities and other disadvantages groups across a good range of arts activities, particularly in dance and drama. Traditional events like fun fairs or circuses remain but musical and other events are more inclusive in content and attendance. Similarly, heritage services have integrated the cultural history of newer communities from Asia and the Caribbean. These changes contribute to social cohesion and help to ensure a wider section of the local community contribute and benefit from these services.
- 3 However, cultural services do not fully address the needs of some sections of the local community and are only providing adequate value for money across all cultural services. Some gaps in provision include facilities for teenagers and older people, services to faith groups, public library standards, addressing the declining use of certain sections of the community and the need to address health inequalities in the borough. These gaps in the current service means that many local people are not having their needs met and the Council is therefore not fully addressing national shared priorities set by the Government.
- 4 Prospects for improvement are promising because the Council has a track record of improving cultural services and has improved capacity to make further improvements. In the last 18 months, the satisfaction levels (with libraries, leisure centres and parks) have improved, although from a low base. Recent improvements include libraries, which now have a better range of stock and increased free internet access. Two of the three leisure centres have had refurbishment works leading to a steady growth in general usage. A range of parks have had environmental improvements, refurbished toilet blocks, more cafés and local people were consulted on the priorities.
- 5 The senior management team has been strengthened with the appointment of key managers, who have addressed the weaknesses in financial control and improved the performance management. The combination of investment, restructuring and new managers has improved the Council's capacity to deliver and sustain further improvements.
- 6 Councillors and senior managers are clear about the future direction for the service. The Council has set out their aims for cultural services in the new Business Plan 2006/09 and individual service strategies, reflecting the increased priority given to cultural services. However, the Council's broader vision for cultural services is not clearly communicated to staff and other stakeholders. Some external stakeholders are unclear about the future strategic direction of cultural services in the borough.

Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed Merton 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

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 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- cultural services are making an adequate contribution to the quality life of local people through a diverse range of services;
 - the Council with its partners in the private and voluntary sectors are delivering a wider range of leisure and cultural opportunities and increased participation amongst a more diverse range of people. For example, a range of arts projects for children with disabilities, BME communities, schools projects, looked after children, youth offenders and other target groups; and
 - some improvements in value for money have been achieved, increasing the revenue available to invest in services.
- 9 However, weaknesses include:
- the Council has below average resident satisfaction from below average spending, when compared to national averages;
 - there are still significant gaps in the cultural service provision. For example, facilities for teenagers, a targeted approach to older people and faith groups and services to address health inequalities; and
 - this service only meets four out of ten Public Library Service Standards.
- 10 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:
- recent investment in cultural services has lead to improved facilities and a rise in usage;
 - the Council has improved financial control and performance management;
 - councillors have committed significant capital resources to address many of the weaknesses in the current service; and
 - there is a significant increase in priority and commitment to improving cultural services, including improving their contribution to narrowing health inequalities.
- 11 However:
- the overall vision for cultural services is not well articulated to staff and other stakeholders, which is acting as a barrier to some planning and longer-term investment; and
 - cultural services will find it difficult to maintain the current revenue expenditure to secure their current and future services due to the difficult financial situation facing the Council.

Recommendations

- 12 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the Council. In addition, we identify the approximate 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.

<i>Recommendation</i>
<p><i>R1 Communicate a clear vision for cultural services:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><i>• bringing together inputs from key stakeholders and the core objectives and priorities from the wide range of individual strategies; and</i><i>• disseminating the vision to staff and other stakeholders.</i>

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- stakeholders will be clear what the Council is trying to achieve across all cultural services in the borough, over the next three to five years. (stakeholders include staff, managers, the public, the voluntary, private and other public sector providers); and
- those involved in the planning and organisation of cultural services can better plan and work with the Council in achieving these objectives.

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

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

Recommendation

R2 Prioritise improvement in satisfaction levels against costs, across all cultural services and to increase usage:

- *gathering satisfaction and dissatisfaction data broken down by target groups;*
- *improving outreach generally and focusing on target groups in particular, such as BME communities, young and older people and certain social classes; and*
- *providing tailored services for older people.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved satisfaction levels against costs will mean better value for money and increased usage should contribute to an improved quality of life for local people; and
- the targeting of disadvantaged groups ensure that all local people have the opportunity and access to cultural services and helps to address other social outcomes like improved health and better social cohesion.

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

Recommendation

R3 Develop a targeted programme of activities to address the significant health inequalities in the borough:

- *working in partnership with other agencies, particularly the local primary care trust; and*
- *targeting the communities with the largest gaps in healthy outcomes.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased participation in leisure and fitness activities contributes to national targets for physical activity and health improvement; and
- cultural services can make a significant contribution to encouraging an understanding of healthy living across communities.

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

Recommendation

R4 Improve benchmarking, use of good practice and data on the diversity of users. Use this information and data to improve services and to target under usage:

- *focusing resources where the impact on under represented target groups is greatest;*
- *using benchmarking to improve value for money; and*
- *using good practice to improve services for all.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- The Council will be able to use best practice and share learning across all cultural services to improve quality for current and potential users;
- The Council will be able to be more focused in targeting resources where they can have the most effect and reach those groups that may not be fully accessing existing services.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 The London Borough of Merton has a population of about 190,000. Twenty-eight per cent of the population are from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, which rises to 35 per cent for school age children.
- 14 Unemployment stands about 2.5 per cent which is below the London and national average.
- 15 The London Borough of Merton has three main towns Mitcham, Morden and Wimbledon. The borough is best known for the All England Lawn Tennis Club's annual championship known simply as 'Wimbledon' (tennis host for Olympics 2012). Less well known is the borough's connection with Lord Nelson and the fact that it is one of the greenest boroughs in London with 69 parks and open spaces.
- 16 Average household income is £29,000 per annum for the borough as a whole, but in Mitcham ward, it is approximately £9,000. Home ownership is 70 per cent, with the Council owning and managing about 6,500 properties. Female life expectancy at birth in Cricket Green Ward is 77 years but up to 85.3 years in Hillside ward. These figures demonstrate the significant income differences and health inequalities.

The Council

- 17 The Council has been run by a Labour-controlled administration since 1990, with the last election won in 2002, and elections due in May 2006. Out of the current 60 seats, Labour have 33, Conservative 24 and Merton Park Ward Independent Residents 3. The Cabinet comprises of nine portfolio holders plus the Leader. The Council has a revenue budget of £211 million including £1.9 million in reserves.
- 18 The Council employs about 5,500 staff of which 73 per cent are women, 40 per cent are part-time and 15 per cent are from BME communities.
- 19 Merton Partnership, the local strategic partnership (LSP), agreed a new draft community plan for the period 2005-2015. The mission statement for the LSP is *'Pride in Merton - Working better together to protect what we value and invest in our communities to deliver a sustainable future.'*
- 20 The Community Plan outlines the following priority themes: creating safer and stronger communities; meeting transport needs; establishing healthier communities; maintaining economic vitality; transforming the local environment; better accessibility for housing; and education and skills.

- 21 The Council's Business Plan 2003/06 defines a vision for Merton with six strategic objectives for the Council and is underpinned by priorities, outcomes and targets and details how performance against them will be measured. The vision is 'Merton - A great place to live, work and learn.'
- 22 The Council was rated as 'weak' in Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) 2002, then 'fair' in 2004 and is now rated as 'two-star' in CPA 2005, with their direction of travel rating 'improving well'. The Council has had in place an improvement programme called, 'Journey to Excellence' from 2003/06, primarily to address the weaknesses identified in the 2002 corporate assessment report.
- 23 The Council continues to have significant financial pressures including the need to find savings of £12.5 million in 2005/06.

The Council's cultural services

- 24 The Council's cultural services include:
 - 69 parks including a wide range of sport pitches, play areas, pavilions, toilet blocks and cafés;
 - seven libraries including a local studies centre in Morden;
 - three leisure centres including three swimming pools, one athletics track and the water sports centre (Wimbledon Park);
 - 17 allotment sites;
 - the arts development service;
 - the heritage service; and
 - other services include: sports development, sports bookings, tourism, shows and events and the Easter and summer play schemes.
- 25 The budget for the cultural services is £3 million in the Community and Housing Department and £3 million in the Environment and Regeneration Department - about 3 per cent of the Council's overall budget. The total capital budget for cultural services is £3.4 million for 2005/06.
- 26 This inspection of the Council's cultural services considered the effectiveness of the service activity and approaches to meeting local needs, achieving value for money, delivering improvement, managing performance and ensuring there is sufficient capacity to improve services. In addition, and in line with the Government's national agenda, the inspection sought to assess how well services are delivering outcomes against the themes of learning and quality of life.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 27 The Community Plan has a number of principles upon which it is based. The principle relevant to cultural services is 'Cultural Life' - this states that 'Merton has a strong tradition of creativity. We believe that the future of both our cultural and commercial life will depend on nurturing the artistic and creative endeavours of those who live and work here. We aspire to support creative and cultural life so far as possible.'
- 28 Merton Business Plan 2003/06 has six strategic objectives of which one is 'Safe, clean and green Merton'. It states one objective for cultural services, 'The condition of our parks and open spaces will be improved.' Another objective, under education, includes, 'under Education there will be better provision of media and ITC, and longer library opening hours'.
- 29 The new Business Plan 2006/09, which was agreed by cabinet in February 2006, sets out new priorities for cultural services:
- ensure that Merton's residents have access to high quality learning opportunities and information provision within the community;
 - promoting healthy lifestyles and choices; and
 - developing better places to go and things to do that children and young people enjoy.
- 30 These priorities are underpinned by a range of targets that address a number of local and national priorities for cultural services.
- 31 Five key strategies have been developed to drive the delivery of cultural services and improve outcomes for residents:
- the Merton Open Space Strategy addresses the full range of issues relating to parks and open spaces, and has set a five-year action plan to improve facilities, increase community development and respond better to community needs;
 - the Sport and Physical Activity Strategy provides a framework for developing the range and condition of facilities within the centres, as well as improving employment, development and educational opportunities;
 - the Arts Development Strategy sets out clear targets for arts-related activities over a three-year period, having been developed through extensive consultation with an emphasis on black and minority ethnic (BME) groups;
 - the Library Improvement Plan has been developed with clear targets for improvement along side major investment in both the physical condition of the libraries and improvements to the library stock; and
 - the Tourism and Visitor Strategy aims to develop and promote the attractions and visitor accommodation through local marketing initiatives and support for collaborative activities and sub-regional links with 'Visit London'.

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

Community focus and access

- 32** The Council has a good understanding of the demographics of the borough, its disadvantaged communities and where there are deficits in cultural provision. Councillors, managers and staff are clear about the need to balance cultural service provision between the more affluent areas in the south and west of the borough, particularly Wimbledon, and the significant pockets of deprivation in the east and north of the borough. The Council is aware of the needs of the black and minority ethnic populations and seeks to ensure that other groups at risk of disadvantage are not excluded from the expansion of cultural services. The Council makes good use of its neighbourhood consultation, neighbourhood forums, user groups, citizens' panel, census data and indicators of deprivation by wards. This has given the Council a sound basis to plan its services.
- 33** The Council uses consultation adequately to inform priorities for improvement. Annual satisfaction surveys for leisure, parks and libraries have been completed from 2003/05, which have helped the Council to target investment in the respective services. Examples include the need for a new library in Raynes Park, the need for improved layouts in other libraries, targeted improvements to parks and open spaces and leisure centres. Targeted consultation has also been used to improve library, heritage and arts services to discrete groups of people, like young people, older people, asylum seekers and refugees. Other consultation has been concerned with park improvements and larger public events. This means that the Council is responsive to local needs.
- 34** The Council is not sufficiently focused on the contribution that cultural services can make to addressing health inequalities. Cultural services in Merton are not making a fully effective contribution to tackling health inequalities in the borough. Within cultural services there are limited plans to address health inequalities. The relationship with the local primary care trust (PCT) is limited and the Council does not have a strategy for targeting communities with traditionally poorer health. This is a weakness in the Council's community focus, given the significant health inequalities that exist in the borough between the more affluent areas and more deprived areas. This is an omission which restricts the Council's ability to make a contribution to reducing health inequalities.
- 35** Physical access to cultural services buildings is adequate. Not all of the Council's libraries and leisure centres are Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant. The Council has begun a comprehensive programme of capital work to improve access to people with a disability across all cultural services. The programme started in 2003/4 and has £335,500 for 2005/06. This programme has improved access to and the quality of entrances to Council buildings but also refurbishments to pavilions, toilet blocks and changing rooms in parks. This provides the public with better access but also opens up facilities to a wider range of users.

- 36** Access to other cultural facilities is mixed. The Council's websites for cultural services provide clear information about the range of services but pricing information is not always clear. The public are not able to book or pay for cultural services via the internet. Targets for answering telephone bookings are being met within the publicised times - between 9.00am and 5.00pm - Monday to Friday. However, many calls are received before 9.00am. While staff will generally take calls at this time, the service does not formally start before 9.00am. There are a wide range of leaflets and other promotional material available on cultural services but the distribution across Council facilities and other locations is not systematically organised so access for potential users is mixed. Library annual opening hours are well below the national target. The target is 128 hours per 1,000 in the population but Merton are only achieving 86.5 hours per 1,000. However, the Council meets the national target for access to electronic work stations and the internet. Overall, some cultural services are not as accessible as they could be so many potential users may not be able to easily access the various services.
- 37** Service standards across cultural services are not clear or easily accessible to the public. Service standards exist for most areas of cultural services within service plans but they are not systematically publicised across cultural services facilities in posters, leaflets or on the Council's website. Similarly, written public information about cultural services does not generally publicise how information can be translated or received in other formats. Potential and actual customers of cultural services cannot easily identify the quality of the service they can expect and this may be a barrier to participation.
- 38** Children and young people have opportunities to access a wide range of cultural services, although the Council does not systematically track outcomes. Some examples include:
- a wide range of parks and open spaces that are well used - 85 per cent of children and young people use the parks regularly;
 - the subsidised water sports centre in Wimbledon Park offers a wide range of activities for children, including disabled children;
 - schools in Merton have good links with three theatres including the Polka Theatre for children with children participating in plays and productions; and
 - a range of free services for children - 'Tennis for Free' coaching on Saturdays, access to all junior football pitches, Sure Start sponsored swims for families.
- 39** Cultural services for older people lack co-ordination. There are some leisure activities targeted at people over 50 years - for example bowls, leisure classes and swimming sessions and allotments are well used by older people. However, it is not clear how older people can find out what cultural services are available for them. This remains a gap in the current service provision and may be excluding a significant number of older people from services.

Diversity

- 40 Cultural services have mixed success in encouraging all local communities to participate in cultural activity. Several local communities are under represented in service take up. For example, in the leisure service usage levels among BME communities, children between 16 and 19 years, men and people on lower incomes are all below their respective numbers in the local population. In the arts services, targeted action was taken to address similar disparities among the BME community. Usage levels of BME communities in arts is now well above the proportion in the local population. Similarly, heritage services now reflect the history of newer communities like the Asian or Caribbean communities. However, the library service still needs to accurately record usage across diverse groups. Similar gaps in data exist on usage and participation levels across cultural services for the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender (LGBT) community. Without systematic monitoring, feedback and targeting of groups in the local community, significant gaps in usage, satisfaction and participation levels will continue and undermines the Council's aim to ensure the equality of access for all local people.
- 41 The Council has a good range of services for disabled people. Examples include:
- leisure centres and fitness gyms are fully accessible for wheelchair users;
 - Rebound scheme for autistic children - a sports programme;
 - Merton Crossroads is a weekly arts club for autistic children;
 - watersports centre - the centre has equipment for children with a disabilities to participate in the full range of water sports on offer;
 - Funzone - a summer holiday play scheme for children with severe and complex disabilities;
 - the Council changed swimming arrangements to improve access, following consultation with the parents of children with disabilities; and
 - London Youth Games - 303 children, 56 with special educational needs and 42 per cent BME.
- 42 However, as mentioned above, the lack of systematic monitoring of satisfaction against various groups prevents the Council from fully understanding the impact of its services.
- 43 The Council works well with some local communities but there are gaps in the groups targeted. Within cultural services, staff consult a range of target groups like young people, BME communities, people with disabilities but there is little evidence of consultation with LGBT communities. Similarly, the Council's dialogue with faith groups is not well co-ordinated. Whilst there is some evidence of consultation with faith groups and some of their venues are included in public hall bookings, the approach could be better developed. A more co-ordinated approach to faith groups could add a significant number of community facilities to a wider group of people but also better establish what the groups themselves want from cultural services. A lack of focus and co-ordination to consultation

limits the Council's ability to understand the needs of all groups and provide services to meet their needs.

- 44 The Council has successfully facilitated positive engagement between young and older people within cultural services. Residents, when consulted for the Community Plan (2003), mentioned the need for more contact between young and older people to improve community cohesion. The Council has some positive examples of this engagement:
- 'Ma Kelly's Door Step' - a short comic play performed by children and professional actors to older people - highlighting the danger of distraction crime (in partnership with police) - this increased awareness of this crime against older people;
 - 'Ma Kelly Plays It Safe' - another play about safety in the home performed by children and professional actors to older people with support of the Fire Brigade lead to 150 fire alarms being fitted and greater awareness; and
 - some allotment allocations have placed younger and older people together to help increase contact between them.
- 45 These are positive examples of how cultural services can be used to build community cohesion in response to residents' concerns.
- 46 The Council has targeted and reached other disadvantaged groups but outcomes are not systematically measured. Examples include:
- 'We served' - untold story booklet on West Indian contribution to World War Two but an assessment of the impact on social cohesion of local people or feedback from the BME community has not been undertaken by the Council;
 - outreach to schools - three art based residencies - Dance Around the World, East Asian and African Slave Experience (for key stage 2 and 3). These projects helped to increase participation in the arts and expose other sections of the community to other art forms and experiences;
 - 'Welcome to your library' - a project to improve resources for refugees and asylum seekers but the impact has not been measured. Some of the stock is tailored to the diverse needs of local communities ranging from foreign language collections to stock for the dyslexic user; and
 - two community cohesion programmes (600 participated in 2004 and 1,000 in 2005) - targeting people with physical and mental health problems, single mothers and fathers, vulnerable families, special needs school. However, the impact on these groups of people has not been measured.
- 47 This inclusive approach to cultural services is part of a strategic approach to diversity to ensure that people who have not traditionally accessed or been included in some cultural activities, may have the opportunity to participate. However, the lack of effective monitoring of the impact on users means that the Council is unaware of the success of their targeted work.

- 48 The Council has some gaps in provision for teenagers and the local community remain concerned about the perceived lack of facilities to fully occupy young people in the borough. An example raised from some young people consulted during the inspection, included the lack of night buses, particularly from the centre of London and their perceived lack of affordable leisure facilities, particularly for 16 to 19 year olds. Failure to address teenagers' needs could lead to a rise in anti-social behaviour or just disenfranchisement from many cultural services.
- 49 The Council is not adequately addressing equality of employment and access to contracts. The staff mix in cultural services does not reflect the community of Merton. 28 per cent of the local population are from the BME community but only 15 per cent of staff in cultural services reflects these communities. Similarly, the Council has begun to consider the impact of procurement on various communities and tried to improve the balance of the allocation of grant aid but without systematic monitoring, across all cultural services, the full impact of this approach is not known. Without greater attention to systematic monitoring and targeted action the Council may not be fully addressing inequalities within cultural services.

User experience and satisfaction with the quality of the services

- 50 The Council is performing adequately in its contribution to some national, regional and local objectives. The Council's strategy to provide quality cultural facilities with limited resources, particularly in more deprived parts of the borough has delivered some successes. Cultural services have facilitated community capacity building through its support for a range of cultural partners. Examples include the development of a range of friends groups by the Council to take an active role in the improvement of local parks, encouraging and facilitating some self-managed sports facilities like some local bowls clubs and effective partnerships with the private sector to provide new quality facilities for the community like 'The Hub'. Cultural services have contributed to economic regeneration particularly in more deprived areas in the east of the borough and in reducing crime in some areas of the borough with their youth engagement. Unfortunately, community outcomes, like reducing crime, are not always clear and measured by the Council. Similarly, without regular feedback from local people, it is difficult for the Council to assess the full impact of some of these activities.
- 51 The experience of users across cultural services is mixed. Most buildings used for cultural facilities are in need of modernisation and or refurbishment. Examples include:
- most of the libraries are located in traditional buildings, which are also set out and decorated traditionally. They do not have bright layouts and are not particularly inviting. Only one library has significant learning space for adult education or other educational classes or training;
 - the parks and open spaces are generally well maintained but many of the facilities in the parks need modernisation; and
 - Canons and Wimbledon leisure centres have not yet been fully refurbished so the user experience is only adequate. Changing rooms need refurbishment as well as most of the activity areas.

- 52** Until the refurbishment to all these facilities are completed, the user experience will not significantly improve.
- 53** Service quality across cultural services is adequate. Examples include:
- the libraries service is currently only meeting four out of the ten Public Library Service Standards. These include the proportion of households living within one mile of a library; percentage of libraries providing access to computers; total number of computers with access to the internet and the library catalogue available in libraries per 10,000 in the population; and percentage of library users under 16 who regard the library as good or very good;
 - the arts service provides a good range of services and has attracted participation from diverse sectors of the community. There have been an increasing number of children and young people in drama and other visual arts. The Council has facilitated more space for professional artists that have also contributed to community training and learning. The service has increased the activity of the BME community and people with disabilities in arts. Positive feedback from users demonstrates their appreciation at being exposed to new activities and expressions of their creativity. The arts service is also able to demonstrate some positive outcomes in the wider community like reductions in crime and opportunities for self-employed artists;
 - good quality multi-use games areas which have been installed for teenagers and new play areas for younger children. All sports pitches have adjacent changing rooms with showers. Some parks such as John Innes Park or Ravensbury Park have good and newly refurbished facilities, like pavilions, toilet blocks and changing rooms. However, some existing facilities have declined over the years, for example, access to paddling pools. The Council has not yet completed work in many other parks, leading to some complaints about quality; and
 - the leisure centres have promoted their monthly membership scheme, which is popular and growing but membership levels are lower among certain groups as mentioned above. The Council is investing in the leisure centres but until this investment is completed, these facilities will remain of mixed quality and resident satisfaction levels are likely to remain low.
- 54** Satisfaction rates for cultural services in 2003/4 (last national survey) were poor. These statistics are gathered from national surveys every three years and illustrated that resident satisfaction rates in Merton were well below national average. Resident satisfaction rates for sports and leisure; libraries; museums and galleries; theatres and concert halls scored 42 per cent; 57 per cent; 25 per cent; and 35 per cent respectively. These figures are all low when the Council is compared with other councils nationally. The other resident satisfaction measured is for parks and open spaces which scored 68 per cent - below average satisfaction nationally. This means that a significant range of cultural services in Merton are not meeting all the expectations of local residents.

- 55 More recent satisfaction figures produced by the Council show some improvement but overall satisfaction levels are still low. For example, the results of the 2004 leisure centres annual user survey, carried out by an independent company on behalf of the Council's leisure management contractor, showed that 69 per cent of users rated the services as 'good' or 'excellent'. These figures look positive but overall residents in Merton are less satisfied, on average, than similar users nationally. The Council still has significant gaps between what local residents expect and the service they currently receive.

Learning

- 56 The Council, through cultural services, has contributed to a range of opportunities for learning in the borough but the Council is not always able to identify the impact of these activities. The Council has formal and informal learning opportunities through libraries, heritage, the arts service and within the sports development service. The library service works closely with local schools and runs the national Summer Reading Challenge, which aims to maintain children's reading habits through the summer holidays. Library staff, working with Merton 'Sense' magazine, have provided young people with the opportunity to develop creative writing and artistic skills through producing a community youth magazine that is distributed to about 15,000 young people in the borough. Over 200 young people have been involved, with over 45 per cent of participants from BME backgrounds. Merton Heritage Centre has a programme of visits by local schools as well as mounting exhibitions and events focused on the history of the locality. It also runs a successful series of coach tours to places of interest within Merton. Two sites have been developed in parks to provide a range of learning opportunities for young children and families - Lavender Sure Start and Tamworth Farm. Arts learning opportunities include Arts Mark in two secondary schools and Sportsmark in five primary schools. The Polka Theatre (children's theatre) in partnership with the Council facilitated story telling in community centres in deprived areas of the borough, with the aim of encouraging family reading with children from 18 months. These activities demonstrate the Council's strategy to expand learning opportunities and contribute to improved educational attainment.
- 57 Cultural services have successfully extended the opportunities for physical activity and learning through sport. Examples include involvement in short leisure courses, competitions, development initiatives, holiday programmes, Wimbledon junior tennis initiative and the London Youth Games. The School Sports Partnership led to 58 per cent (although below Merton's target of 63 per cent) of pupils actively engaging in two hours a week or more of sport and physical activity. This partnership has secured Big Lottery funding to work with under-represented groups to engage them in sport and physical activity. These activities contribute to national and local priorities to increase physical exercise and learning opportunities to young people.

- 58 Take-up of learning opportunities through the People's Network (access to computers and internet) in libraries is low partly due to the limited spaces in libraries. Children, young people and older people and targeted communities, like the BME community, use learning opportunities but details of take-up are not systematically recorded. Accurate recording of the satisfaction and benefits to users would help the library service to target further potential users.

Quality of life

- 59 The Council, through cultural services has contributed to improvements in the quality of life of local people. The majority of local people in Merton are users of Merton's parks and open spaces. 76 per cent of residents use parks regularly, rising to 84 per cent for younger people. However, usage significantly falls (to 51 per cent) for older people over 75 years old. Merton is well served with parks and open spaces, with 69 parks and open spaces across the borough and they are generally well maintained. The range and quality of parks and open spaces are valued by local people and contribute to their quality of life.
- 60 Reductions in funding to parks and open spaces have led to a reduction in standards. There is a consistent view from older users and staff that standards in the parks have been falling for many years. This is reflected in the consultation with adults and older people and the real reductions in funding over many years. Within the last 18 months, the Council has begun to address the decline. Whilst many have noticed the recent improvements, many others comment on the reduced revenue spent in parks. Park Rangers and gardeners provide good quality pitches and the parks are generally seen as well maintained but not to the same standards the Council set over four years ago. An example of the impact of reduced revenue to parks is the reductions in the opening times of the paddling pools, from 13 weeks to only 6 weeks. Funding issues are having a direct impact in the quality of users' experience of parks and open spaces.
- 61 There has been progress in reducing crime in Merton. Local residents believe that there is a link between the levels of some crime and the level of engagement of young people. Cultural services' staff in partnership with the Police and other agencies have reduced the offending rate of young people by 10 per cent and incidents of disorder by 17 per cent since 2002. For example, a 2001 race crime audit showed that the majority of racial crimes were committed by young people in their mid-teens. To address this, the Council's arts development unit set up the 'Urban Blood Lines' project in Merton schools. This programme, acknowledged as best practice by the Arts Council of England, explored issues of race and identity and the effect of racial attacks using intensive story telling programmes. The effect has been a 24 per cent reduction in race crime, a significant improvement to the quality of life of local people.

- 62 The Council has demonstrated a commitment to the borough's cultural heritage. Celebrations of Admiral Nelson were held in 2005, as part of the Trafalgar 200 celebrations. The celebrations directly involved many school children, and were well publicised and attended. Displays in the Heritage centre, the civic centre and the big musical production at the Wimbledon theatre are all examples of the celebration. Similar efforts have been made to capture local history and BME community contributions to Britain and more locally. The bust figure of Haile Selassie (who spent some time in exile in Merton) in Cannizaro Park is another example. The Council has also facilitated a number of friend groups to maintain or restore the quality of historic parks, like John Innes (a local philanthropist) Park or some allotment sites. This gives local people a sense of belonging and helps to maintain the quality of the local environment.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 63 Overall, the Council's performance is mixed with respect to providing value for money.
- 64 The Council is not providing value for money within its cultural services when satisfaction is compared against spending overall. Although spending on cultural services is slightly above the national average per head of population satisfaction is well below national averages (latest national data 2004). This level of spending is largely due to the relatively high spending on parks and open spaces, which is well above national average largely due to the large proportion of open space in the borough. However, spending on libraries, sports, recreation and heritage are all well below national averages. This spending delivers below average resident satisfaction levels (last national survey 2003/4) for sports and leisure, libraries, museums, galleries, parks and open spaces. The same survey demonstrated that resident usage levels of cultural services in the previous six months (before the survey) was mixed. In sports facilities, museums and theatres usage was below average. However, in parks, open spaces and libraries usage was well above average. Overall, the Council's low spending on cultural services (except parks and open spaces) has resulted in low satisfaction for residents.
- 65 Modern procurement methods have been used to deliver some good examples of value for money. These examples have been achieved through procurement and efficiency measures. The use of tighter stock supplier selection in libraries has led to some savings. The leisure services team have concluded a new contract arrangement with its leisure management contractor to reduce the current operating subsidy from the present cost of £250,000 to zero by 2007. This subsidy has already been reduced from the £400,000 paid in 2003, when the contract commenced. The contractor has been able to agree these reductions due to increased Council investment in improved facilities and rising income from more membership sign-ups. The Council's budget for the financial year 2006/07 has required the services to find savings of £238,000. Some services have been protected from budget cuts due to a reduction in the leisure contractor subsidy, savings in repairs and maintenance as a result of capital improvements, increased income from the increase in memberships and energy efficiency mean that these savings have been achieved with no reduction in service quality.

Managers in cultural services have been able to improve and protect frontline services under significant financial pressure.

- 66 Partnerships with the private and voluntary sectors have been well utilised by the Council to achieve value for money. Partnerships have helped the Council to expand cultural services, whilst revenue from the Council has been reducing. The Council has ensured that all six of their new private finance initiative (PFI) funded secondary schools have included brand new sports halls and five have all-weather pitches. The Council's relationship with the All England Lawn Tennis Club has ensured that hundreds of young people, from across the borough, continue to benefit from free tennis coaching and access to the club's development programme for the talented. Other partnerships include:
- the Lavender Children's Centre was an unused park pavilion in the most deprived ward in the borough. With capital of £1.9m from a range of partners, the Council has developed with Sure Start, a purpose built family centre. It has a nursery, space for an Early Support Service with key workers for children with support needs, a new café, public toilets and other meeting space. The children in the nursery have an allotment site, which is behind the centre. The paddling pool will also re-open in summer 2005. The new centre encourages families back into the park;
 - 'The Hub' - a new centre for health, fitness and leisure - community facility in the previously unused corners of Tooting and Mitcham United FC's stadium, in the most deprived area of the borough. The Council facilitated the club's access to £1.45 million in external funding (Lottery and Sport England) to develop the stadium and provide 'not for profit' community facilities - including a multi-purpose room with full catering facilities, café bar, all weather pitch, large sports hall, fitness gym, play zone and other useful space. Merton Hockey Club has now returned to the borough as a result of this new facility and other users include National Children's Home and Sure Start. This facility is used by people of all age groups and families;
 - the Wandle Trail Arts Programme to develop a series of public arts projects along the 14 mile trail, a pedestrian and cycle way. This was in partnership with Wandsworth and Sutton. It was selected as an example of excellence by the Arts Council in 2006; and
 - the Council worked in partnership with an arts charity to refurbish three formerly derelict sites, to provide three artistic studios with space for 30 artists. This has given local artists important space to develop their visual arts and develop commercial possibilities. The charity also facilitates free outreach and artistic training to local people as a condition of the artists' commercial lettings.
- 67 These examples demonstrate that the Council is proactive in planning and procuring new cultural service provision, particularly to address the need for good quality cultural facilities in the more deprived parts of the borough. This has been done with little financial investment from cultural services. These facilities do not just extend cultural services but also provide quality facilities to help the Council address educational, community and social needs.

- 68 The Council is achieving adequate value for money from their arts fund. The Council has grant aided The Polka Theatre and the Attic Theatre in 2004/5 with approx £30,000 collectively. The funding facilitates the involvement and attendance of young and older people from Merton who would not have otherwise been able to participate. The Polka Theatre had 5623 young people (50 per cent BME and 16 per cent with special educational needs) and The Attic 1670 older people (28 per cent BME and 12.5 per cent disabled). The arts development fund has remained the same in 2003/4 and 2004/5 but the arts team have increased participation of local people by 22 per cent to 2917, although income from match funding and ticket sales reduced by about 30 per cent. A significant number of local people are able to participate in the arts with the help of partners for less that the Council could provide directly. However, better data on satisfaction or other quality measures would provide better analysis of outcomes and value for money.
- 69 The Council has not fully integrated systematic practices to ensure value for money. This weakness is demonstrated by the leisure services' commissioned value for money health check, completed by a private consultancy and reported in January 2006. Some of the key findings were that staff do not have a consistent and consolidated approach to value for money; using comparative data, market data and marginal cost data - for example, to set fees and changes at appropriate levels that the market can bear; and no policy for concessions for hiring public halls and some poor financial controls in pitch lettings and pavilion hire. Similar issues can be found across cultural services, which are missed opportunities for the Council. A more systematic approach could lead to further value for money gains.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 70 The Council has a good track record of improving priority services. Following a 'weak' CPA rating in 2002, the Council drafted a three-year business plan entitled 'Journey to Excellence.' This set out the corporate priorities for the period 2003/06 and provided a framework for service planning. Merton's priorities were to improve social services and education, which were both failing services. Improvements have been made to social services and education. Having stabilised and improved these services, the Council has turned its attention to other services areas. In response to extensive resident consultation, the Council focused and improved the street scene in Merton and have been particularly successful in addressing the problem of graffiti. This demonstrates a corporate ability to prioritise, deliver priorities and improve services to residents.
- 71 Cultural services have a good track record of infrastructure improvement in the last 18 months. Internal investment and external funding has been used to build new facilities, refurbish old facilities and deliver new programmes. This has included capital investment of £1.5 million in parks and open spaces; £2.3 million in leisure centres and £1 million in the library service. Some examples from this investment include:
- a new library at Raynes Park which opened in 2005 - increased membership to 220 per month (formally 50) with 30 per cent from the BME community, average issues to 11,000 per month (formally 5,500), average visitors to 550 (from 211);
 - improvements to some park facilities including better disability access, increased toilet provision and enhanced standards of horticulture. These have led to increased user satisfaction and the achievement of an improvement award for John Innes Park in the 2005 London in Bloom competition;
 - refurbishment of Wimbledon athletics track including disability access and resurfacing; and
 - additional signage, new play equipment, improved pathways and refurbished toilets in parks.
- 72 This has led to increasing opportunities for residents and increased levels of satisfaction in these locations.

- 73 However, infrastructure improvements are not always focused on outcomes. In reversing the decline in investment in cultural services, the Council has been making improvements in infrastructure, whilst addressing their obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act. This focus on facilities, several of which, including leisure centres, are still underway. However, the Council has not always focused on measuring the impact of its investments beyond the aesthetic improvements. This means that the benefits to the community are not always apparent, eg satisfaction levels of participation or health improvement.
- 74 The management of cultural services has improved following the reorganisation and the appointment of new senior managers. The street environment and parks staff now share equipment, which has allowed the park rangers to respond more quickly to fly-tipping or graffiti and gives them access to industrial cleaning equipment for the paths. As a result, graffiti, fly-tipping, cleanliness and maintenance of pitches have all improved.
- 75 The Council's independent annual satisfaction surveys for leisure, libraries and parks have all risen over the last three years. The Council carries out an annual residents survey and the following results show the percentage of service users participating over the last three years that consider Merton's cultural services to be 'good' or 'excellent'.

Table 1 Merton's annual resident satisfaction surveys

	2003	2004	2005
Libraries	63 per cent	61 per cent	67 per cent
Parks	55 per cent	54 per cent	59 per cent
Leisure facilities	41 per cent	49 per cent	48 per cent

- 76 This shows the positive impact of the increased investment on resident satisfaction.
- 77 Cultural services have made good use of external funding to improve services. The Council has used investment from its operator to fund improvements in leisure centres and lottery funding to build artificial turf pitches. Merton's schools have been improved through the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). This has resulted in both improved physical education (PE) curriculum opportunities and community access to sport through the provision of new indoor and outdoor sports facilities, including five artificial turf pitches. Section 106 agreement contributions have funded library construction and improvements in parks. The Council completed a creative development agreement with an arts development charity, which led to the building of artists' studios in derelict Council buildings with associated outreach programmes into local schools. This means that the Council has been able to source external funding to supplement their own resources, thereby improving local services.

- 78 The Council uses annual satisfaction surveys to improve services. Low levels of satisfaction with services were identified in the 2003 best value performance indicators (BVPI) survey. The Council used these as a spur to improvement and put in place a range of service enhancements, such as improved changing rooms for outdoor playing fields and improvements to changing rooms at three leisure centres. It has measured the impact of these through similar surveys which show improved impressions of the service. As a result, the Council can demonstrate that identification of poor performance leads to action and improvement.
- 79 The Council uses the results of external scrutiny to improve its cultural services. In 2004, the Council worked in partnership with the Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) to commission a peer review of its library service. This review made a range of recommendations ranging from the strategic, 'establish a clear vision and priorities for the service' to operational issues such as the creation of a marketing plan and a radical disposal of old stock. The Council is now implementing the recommendations of this review using improvement funding from the IDeA. This has contributed to increased visitor numbers and customer satisfaction.
- 80 Improvements to parks have been made in direct response to the community and parks' friends groups. For example, at the service planning level, concerns were expressed about the quality of bedding in Merton's parks and the loss of many paddling pools. The Council responded to these by making additional finance available to continue with bedding and to open paddling pools during the long school holiday. At operational level, volunteers have given their time to tackle graffiti and to improve the appearance of parks. These initiatives have led to increased use and greater satisfaction with these parks.
- 81 The service has worked hard to improve its work with BME communities. For example:
- programmes of dance from Goa, South America and the Caribbean have been developed with schools;
 - the proportion of young people from minority communities in Merton's London Youth Games team exceeds that for the population as a whole; and
 - holiday schemes in some areas, eg a basketball course at Tamworth Manor School, have been fine tuned to better meet the needs of the local community by adjustments in pricing and timing.
- 82 This work has led to improvements in the proportion of people from BME communities accessing leisure and cultural services.
- 83 The Council has also increased the diversity of its programmes. There has been a general increase in the services for and participation of a more diverse range of users than they offered three years ago, including the rebound programme for children with disabilities and the Funzone, a summer holiday playscheme for young people with severe and complex disabilities. This means that a wider cross-section of the population has access to cultural services.

- 84 The Council has successfully protected some services when originally funding has been withdrawn. For example, the Pollards Hill Open Learning Centre, in one of the poorer parts of the borough, offers a range of learning opportunities including computer access and training and works with young people excluded from school on health grounds. It was originally funded by the Single Regeneration Budget programme from the late 1990s and then New Opportunities fund until 2004/05 and in the following years by the Council. Similarly, the paddling pools in parks were reinstated after residents' complaints. The Council has recognised the value of these services and with savings from elsewhere has continued to provide these services, ensuring the continued delivery of these services.
- 85 It is not clear whether the Council has all the resources necessary to sustain the improvements or that cultural services are sufficiently focused on outcomes for local residents. Recent improvements have begun to counter the effect of the Council placing greater priority on other areas of its service. There was an acknowledged decline in service quality before improvement began two years ago. Whilst the service has developed a track record of improvement it is from a comparatively low level of investment and financial pressures remain. The Council's commitment to keep the Council tax increases to 2.5 per cent over the next two years, does mean year on year cuts in some Council services for 2006/07 and 2007/08. For example, financial pressures caused a reduction in library opening times which have not yet been reinstated. As a result, it will require considerable further improvement for libraries to achieve all ten of the Public Library Service Standards. This investment has not yet been committed.
- 86 The sports service has missed its target of encouraging young people to take part in PE and school sport. Some 58 per cent of young people engage in high quality physical activity at school which is six per cent up on last year. However, this is below the Council's target of 63 per cent. This means that some of Merton's young people may not be forming the habit of life long physical activity with detrimental effects on their health.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 87 Senior managers and executive Councillors have a clear vision for cultural services. This was particularly well articulated by the Leader of the Council. The Leader is clear about the need for a good sports offer, improvements to library services particularly facilities and media offered, providing more facilities and opportunities for young people, the contribution the arts can make to Merton as an inclusive community and the need to address inequalities, particularly in the east of the borough. The Council also wants to create community hubs where libraries and schools go beyond traditional roles to extend adult learning, sports and other leisure activities into communities. This means that the Council is clear about what services they want to improve.

- 88 Cultural services have adequate strategies and plans for the service. Within cultural services there are a number of strategies in place, such as the Merton open spaces strategy but other strategies that expired in 2005 are in the process of being updated. The Council do not have a cultural strategy but the draft Community Plan and the new corporate Business Plan 2006/09 now reflect the importance of cultural services to the borough. Clear strategies should enable the Council to effectively plan further improvements to cultural services.
- 89 There are examples of service strategies and plans being successfully implemented. The Merton open space strategy has facilitated an approach that has led to real improvements in a number of parks. The strategy guided the development of parks management plans, which in turn guided work on the ground and in particular the use of section 106 funds. These plans are now being used to prepare applications for Green Flag awards in two parks. Similarly the arts strategy has guided the successful work of the section in recent years. This shows that the Council's plans can be successfully managed to deliver improvements to local people.
- 90 The service does not make explicit the standards customers can expect. Opening times and charges are displayed at libraries and leisure centres and parks notice boards do contain some information. However, there is little use of explicit service standards and/or customer charters and only limited information on how to make comments, suggestions and complaints. As a result, customers are unclear about the level and standard of service available.
- 91 The Council effectively uses customer comments and feedback to develop and improve services. For example, the leisure development team gathers data on the young people taking part in the 'Easter Plus' and 'Summer Plus' programmes to assess satisfaction and penetration of the project into the community. This resulted in the delivery of a new basketball course. The service also carries out regular satisfaction surveys of playing pitch users and this has led to improvements in changing rooms. Similar feedback from parents of disabled children led to changes to swimming pools to improve access. This shows that the service has some systems in place to enable it to be responsive to customers.
- 92 The Council's performance management systems are effective. These provide a consistent link between the Council's main priorities, service plans and individual work programmes. The Executive Councillors, with responsibility for the services, receive monthly reports. Reports are exception based using a traffic light system. Actions to tackle areas of underperformance are agreed, minuted and reported back to the following meeting. Councillors give good leadership and are committed to the service. The senior management and Executive Councillors of cultural services are effective. Staff interviewed described good management practices and tight performance management systems. There are good examples of financial management and achieving efficiency savings whilst protecting frontline services. The impact of these systems is a sustained focus on delivering against their plans.

- 93 Sound human resource systems are in place. Management and service plans are linked to the work of individual members of staff through a system of annual appraisals and half yearly reviews. Staff value this system and believe that it enables them to contribute to the work of the service and to receive relevant training and personal development. This helps the Council effectively manage staff resources and the staff feel valued and able to influence development.
- 94 The service appreciates the value of internal and external scrutiny. The Council commissioned the IDeA review of the library service and a detailed improvement plan has been put in place to address some of the concerns raised. This is leading to a range of improvements. Several of the cultural services have volunteered to act as a pilot for an internal value for money review. The Council has also carried out a review of fees and charges which has compared the Council's prices with those in neighbouring and comparable boroughs. This has led directly to increased income. This shows that the service is willing to learn, increasing self-awareness and change based on their learning.
- 95 The service manages individual projects well. For example works to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) were well planned, are being implemented and will meet the target of April 2006 for all facilities to be DDA compliant. Library refurbishments have been carried out on time and to budget. This means that capital funds are effectively and efficiently spent.
- 96 There are some weaknesses in performance management. Plans for the service are contained in a number of strategies and plans and it is not easy for stakeholders to identify the Council's longer-term direction for cultural services. Data on diversity is gathered but not always used to develop the service. For example, in 2004, the proportion of some BME customers using the Council's leisure centres was 30 per cent but by 2005 this figure had fallen to 25 per cent. However, neither the Council nor the private operator of leisure centres have plans in place to identify underlying causes and then to rectify the situation. As a result, the Council may have a problem attracting further users from the BME or other diverse groups. Improved communication about the future for cultural services and better use of available data would help staff and other stakeholders to focus on the Council's priorities for this service.
- 97 Performance management is hampered in some areas by a lack of clear outcome-focused targets. The targets set out in several strategies and plans are not SMART³ and there is little use of local performance indicators. As a result, it is often difficult to assess the intended outcomes of a particular action in a strategy or service plan or to monitor progress.

³ Specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and timetabled.

- 98 The Council does not consistently use market research and satisfaction returns to develop services. Whilst there are examples of good use of data to develop services this is not evidenced across all parts of the service. For example, the library service has detailed data on service users and their patterns of participation but does not use this for marketing and service development purposes nor does it compare the profile of service customers with the community as a whole. Overall, the quality of data on users and non-users is weak and the Council is not systematically recording diversity data across all cultural services. As a result, the service may not be reaching all parts of the community.
- 99 The service is weak at learning from best practice elsewhere. The Council is a member of several benchmarking groups, for example in grounds maintenance and libraries and also draws upon the experience of beacon councils. However, the services have yet to demonstrate how learning from benchmarking or best practice is systematically driving improvement.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 100 Cultural services have the capacity to deliver its planned improvements. Councillors are committed to the service and there is strong leadership in place from senior managers. Additional capital and revenue finance has been made available for service improvement although the Council and the service remain under financial pressure.
- 101 The Council is committed to cultural development in Merton. Despite some gaps and weakness in the Council's strategies, they do generally indicate the importance of cultural services. This commitment is demonstrated by Councillors in both the Labour administration and within the Conservative opposition and by the most senior Councillors. The Council has backed this commitment with additional funds for improvements. Proposed resources should continue to be available to fund planned improvements.
- 102 Investment in cultural facilities provides positive prospects for improvement. There are a number of projects under construction at the time of the inspection. These include leisure centre improvements, improvements to parks and open spaces, library refurbishments and access improvements for people with disabilities. The Council has also agreed partnership arrangements with a private contractor to build a new auditorium in Wimbledon, providing well needed performance space. The plans for the site include a flexible design to allow the facility to be used for concerts, weddings or other events. These facilities should enhance cultural services' capacity to deliver additional leisure and cultural opportunities in the borough.

- 103 The political commitment to cultural services has been strengthened with the increased priority given by the current administration. There is a strong management team in place to drive improvements. Councillors, external partners and senior Council staff in other departments recognise and commend the experience and expertise of senior staff in the Council departments responsible for cultural services. This is being augmented by the imminent arrival of new, highly experienced senior staff. This means that the necessary leadership is in place to drive improvement.
- 104 The Council has a wide range of effective partnerships in place. These include a wide range of sporting, artistic, community and educational organisations such as the All England Lawn Tennis Club, the Polka Theatre, the ACAA arts charity, Tooting and Mitcham Football Club (responsible for 'The Hub') and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Association. Programmes delivered together include, arts outreach into local schools, a range of children's theatre programmes, sporting activities linked to community regeneration and increased contact between faith communities. This has resulted in an increase in local cultural opportunities arising from these partnerships.
- 105 The service also makes good use of volunteers and works well with partners. Examples include the Friends of Parks groups and the 'Lending Time' programme in libraries, which has delivered such benefits as volunteer computer coaching. Links with local schools are good and the service has achieved considerable improvements to community use of school facilities by helping prepare funding bids and negotiating community use arrangements. Examples of enhanced service delivery through partnerships include, partner funding from the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) for community sports coaches and a 'Books on Prescription' scheme delivered in partnership with the local PCT. These arrangements ensure that the service enhances its internal resources with its partners.
- 106 There is a positive atmosphere towards change and improvement. Staff spoke of an agenda of improvement and development and were positive about their ability to influence this change. Staff morale is good and their confidence in delivering further improvements is important if management are going to make the necessary changes to services.
- 107 However, there are obstacles to improvement. The Council has not effectively articulated its vision for cultural services to ensure all staff and stakeholders are clear where they want to go in the short and longer-term. Strategies and plans are in place but staff and other stakeholders would have to read all the strategies and plans about the service plus the new Business Plan 2006/09 to get a full understanding of what the Council intends to deliver. Whilst individual service areas are improving, opportunities for co-operation and collaboration towards common goals may be being missed. This is most noticeable in looking at national priorities such as health and physical activity. A failure to fully co-ordinate the strategies and articulate the vision for cultural services may hinder partnerships and further improvements.

- 108** Financial pressures limit the capacity to improve. Constraints are seen in a number of areas. Lunch time closures and reductions in opening hours continue to limit access to the library and heritage services and the Council was forced to withdraw from the Quality Leaders Project. Some staff are currently fully stretched and there is sometimes difficulty in responding to unexpected illness, absence or emergencies. Similarly, there is a shortage of equipment, for example parks vehicles and the service sometimes depends on staff using their own cars to lock-up in the evenings. This will restrict the extent of further improvements to the services.

Summary

- 109** The Council in general and this service in particular has a strong track record of service improvement and has proved adept at accessing external funding for both facilities development and to support revenue projects.
- 110** The new Business Plan has an explicit commitment and aims for cultural services. Councillors of both the main political parties are committed to these improvements. The commitment has already led to improvements in facilities and further improvements are in late stages of planning. Against these strengths, continuing financial pressures will continue into 2006/07 and 2007/08. Similarly, the overall direction for all cultural services is not explicit.
- 111** The Council has the staff and systems to improve and uses external partnerships to enhance its own capacity. Management and leadership are strong.
- 112** Overall, we judge the prospects for improvement to be 'promising'.