

Service Inspection Report

July 2006



Cultural Services

Swale Borough Council

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Service Inspection

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

Audit Commission service inspections should:

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

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's web site 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.

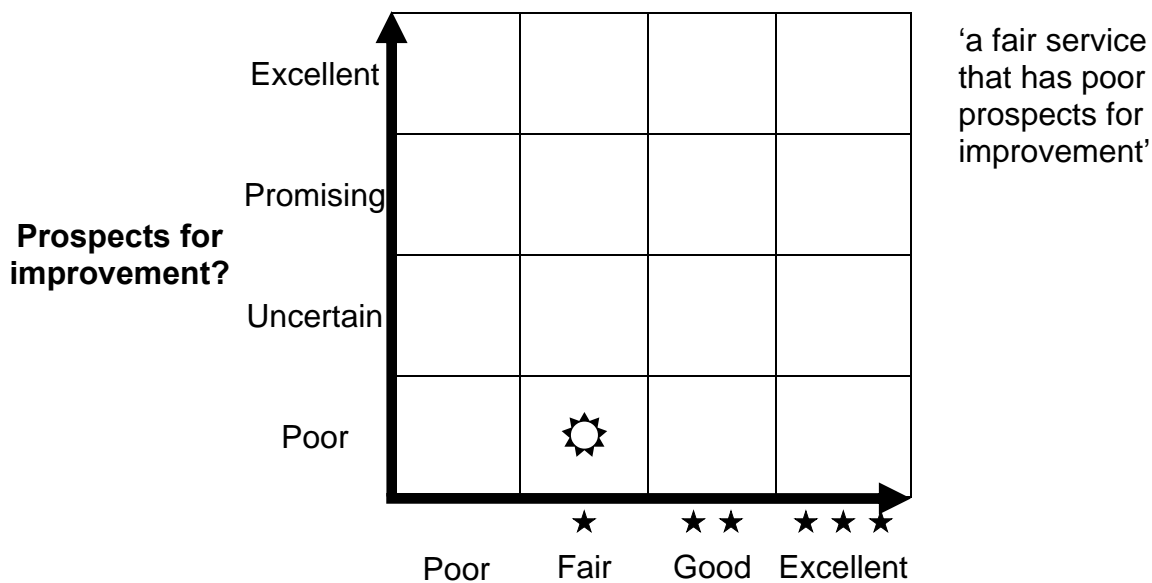
Summary

- 1 Swale Borough Council provides **fair** cultural services which have **poor** prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council lacks a clear, long-term vision and objectives for cultural services. Cultural services do not have defined priorities. As a result, there is confusion about the Council's role in culture and what it is trying to achieve. It therefore lacks focus and its cultural leadership is limited. Many activities are opportunity led rather than strategy led. This puts pressure on limited capacity and reduces the overall impact of the services on the community.
- 3 It is difficult to measure how successful the Council has been as there are few outcome focused, longer term targets for cultural services. The Council cannot effectively demonstrate the extent of its contribution to improving the quality of life for local people. Due to the lack of a systematic approach to using consultation and customer profiles the Council has gaps in its understanding and is not effectively co-ordinating information and using it to design and plan cultural services. This undermines its user focus. In particular, the Council does not understand whether its services are reaching all sections of the community. The Service is not systematically tackling barriers to access and participation to encourage take up by some communities. Resident satisfaction is below average with many aspects of cultural services compared to other councils.
- 4 There are significant shortcomings in the way the Council manages its performance; it lacks information and systems to drive improvement. Capacity, partnership work and funding are not aligned to priorities. The Council is unable to demonstrate skills and resources to deliver future improvement and lacks robust resource planning. Cultural services do not work cohesively and do not have a strong track record in consistently delivering improvement. The Council is not clear if it is achieving value for money.
- 5 However, the Council provides and enables an expanding range of cultural services across the borough that are generally accessible and of a good quality. It can demonstrate some improved outcomes for residents from the range of cultural activity and initiatives it supports. Outcomes contributing to quality of local life and promoting safer and stronger communities can be identified as a result of the Council's efforts. For example, cultural initiatives have led to reductions in anti-social behaviour and improved health and well-being of primary school children. The Service has a successful track record of attracting external investment and the Council works well with its partners to maximise its limited resources and achieve more than it could by working alone.

Scoring the service

- 6 We have assessed Swale Borough Council as providing a 'fair' one-star service that has poor prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹



A good service?

Source: Audit Commission

- 7 The Service is a fair, one-star service because:
- it is contributing to improving the quality of life of local people; a range of cultural initiatives and services are impacting on community safety, community sustainability, health and well-being and regeneration;
 - it has a broad understanding of local needs and expectations and has responded to local priorities including expanding the level of cultural provision for young people;
 - there is a varied programme of activities and opportunities, physical access is good and access for people in rural areas has been improved;

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.

- the Council works well with partners to maximise its limited resources to achieve more than it could by working alone; and
- targeted sports and arts projects have broadened the appeal of cultural services, widened access and promoted new audiences.

8 However, weaknesses include the following.

- The Council is not effectively co-ordinating information and using it to design and plan cultural services, there are gaps in understanding and a lack of customer information.
- The Service is not systematically tackling barriers to access and participation to encourage take up by some communities, such as on affordability.
- An underdeveloped approach to diversity and equalities, the Council does not understand whether its services are reaching as many people as they could.
- A lack of clarity about what the Service is achieving, and how it is contributing to improving the quality of life for local people.
- Below average satisfaction with all aspects of cultural services compared to other councils and the quality of the user experience is mixed.
- The Council is not clear if it is achieving value for money in its cultural services and has not targeted resources to priorities.
- A lack of defined quality standards to assist local people understand the level of cultural service they can expect.

9 The Service has poor prospects for improvement because:

- the Service lacks a clear strategic vision, priorities, tangible objectives and outcomes;
- future plans are not well co-ordinated or robust;
- it lacks strong leadership, cultural services are not working cohesively, a lot of work is opportunity led and the role of culture in delivering the Council's vision is unclear;
- the Council cannot demonstrate a sustained contribution of cultural services to improvements in quality of life for local communities over time;
- the capacity and track record of the Service do not demonstrate improving value for money over time;
- there has been no significant increase in levels of satisfaction or public perception of improvement with cultural services in recent years compared with other councils;
- performance management is not fully effective, owned or being used to drive improvement;
- the Council is not clear if it has access to the appropriate skills and people to deliver future improvements;

8 Cultural Services | Scoring the service

- partnerships, inward investment and community grants are not evaluated for effectiveness or aligned to priorities; and
- the Council lacks robust resource planning and has not demonstrated the financial capacity to deliver cultural services priorities.

10 However, there are some strengths.

- Improvements have been made to the quality and range of the cultural offer and visitor experience which are resulting in increased use.
- Contract management has improved and productive relationships are now being forged.
- Capacity is significantly enhanced by the Service's success in attracting inward investment and partnership working.

Recommendations

- 11 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.
- 12 The Council needs to produce and agree a specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and targeted (SMART) action plan to implement the following recommendations. This should be in place by mid September 2006.

Recommendation

R1 Develop a clear vision and objectives for its cultural activities and facilities with local and regional partners by:

- *clarifying its longer term strategic role in delivering cultural activity;*
- *establishing clear ambitions and targets for cultural services;*
- *integrating the range of strategies and plans that are in place; and*
- *ensuring its role is affordable and consistent with corporate objectives and community need.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved clarity and ownership by partners and staff about the Council's future role and objectives for cultural services over the next ten years;
- improved cultural leadership;
- clearer focus for cultural activities against which progress can be measured;
- improved use of cultural services to achieve cross-cutting objectives; and
- reduced risk of duplication between services and partners.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs.

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 Develop priorities for its cultural activities and focus efforts and resources to deliver against these:

- *establishing priorities and non priorities;*
- *aligning its new and ongoing activities to focus on its priorities;*
- *defining outcome measures of success;*
- *using performance management to make the focus a reality; and*
- *communicating what it wants to achieve.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- cultural services work more cohesively;
- service activity will have a greater impact on local community;
- improved focus on user needs; and
- improved alignment of limited capacity to priorities.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs.

Recommendation

R3 Integrate value for money into the provision of cultural services by:

- *identifying local performance indicators to drive improvement;*
- *setting clear targets for service improvement focused on outcomes and linking this to expenditure;*
- *defining service quality standards;*
- *aligning inward investment and grant funding to priorities;*
- *evaluating the effectiveness of partnerships;*
- *undertaking an open and consistent assessment of the relationships between costs and quality in cultural services; and*
- *measuring the impact of new initiatives on both the revenue costs and the experience of users.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved strategic decision-making;
- improved value for money;
- focusing service activity on outcomes for users;

- improved investment decisions; and
- improved customer satisfaction.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs.

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 Located on the north Kent coast, the borough of Swale is 142 square miles (37,000 hectares) in area. The borough has a mixed landscape; the coastal part comprising mainly of the Isle of Sheppey including seafronts and recreational harbours and to the south, countryside within the North Downs areas of outstanding natural beauty. The main towns are Sittingbourne, Sheerness and Faversham. It is close to Canterbury to the east and the Medway towns to the west.
- 14 In 2004 the population was estimated to be 126,200 living in 49,000 households. The proportion of people from ethnic communities other than 'white British' is low at 3.9 per cent; this compares to 8.7 per cent for the south east and 13 per cent nationally. At just over 21 per cent the proportion of the population who are young (aged under 16) is just above both the regional and national average.
- 15 There are significant socio-economic issues facing the area. The unemployment rate is 2.2 per cent, which is above the figure for England of 2.0 per cent and the regional average, 1.4 per cent. The Isle of Sheppey has problems of underachievement of education standards coupled with relatively high levels of deprivation. Some 34 per cent of the working age population have no qualifications. Average life expectancy in Swale is 78 years, one of the lowest expectancy rates in the South East. Swale has lower vehicle, violent and burglary crime than the national average, but the borough's crime rates are high for the region. Sheerness West is the most deprived ward in the borough and overall 16 per cent of the population live in wards which are in the most deprived areas in England (ODPM Indices of Deprivation 2004). This is partly reflected in the overall ranking of the Council showing it to be the 130 most deprived out of 354 council areas nationally.
- 16 The Council has been successful in obtaining significant resources through the Thames Gateway Partnership. Some £27 million has been allocated to housing, jobs, community infrastructure and environmental enhancement and is being co-ordinated by Swale Forward. A new bridge link to the Isle of Sheppey has been funded and will be completed in 2006. There will be a significant increase in the local population; nearly 2,200 homes were constructed between 2001 and 2005 and an additional 7,000 new homes will be built in the borough in the next ten years. There are plans to invest in the learning and skills base, create opportunities through the Kent Science Park and substantially reduce levels of deprivation through preventative strategies of health and social care.

The council

- 17 Swale Borough Council is a district authority with 47 councillors representing 25 wards. At the time of this inspection the political composition was 25 Conservative, 11 Labour, 10 Liberal Democrat and 1 Independent. The Council had in place a Leader and Cabinet model of executive arrangements and there was a single party executive of nine Conservative councillors with portfolio responsibilities. Five overview and scrutiny committees take responsibility for scrutiny, review and consultation: co-ordinating, community safety, community plan, environment and sustainability and economy and administration.
- 18 The Council employs 353 full-time equivalent staff who are headed by a management team made up of the Chief Executive and two directors. The Chief Executive took up post in January 2006. Delivery of cultural services is split between two heads of service - community regeneration and technical services. Technical services is part of the development, environment and technical services directorate and community regeneration is part of the Chief Executive's directorate. The new Chief Executive is tasked with reviewing the current structure of the Council by July 2006.
- 19 The Council's overall net revenue budget for 2005/06 is £17 million with a cap on capital expenditure to avoid external borrowing. In 2004/05 revenue expenditure was supported by over £1.2 million from reserves and the Council was planning to use nearly £1.9 million of reserves to support revenue expenditure in 2005/06. The Council now recognises that it cannot continue to rely on reserves to support revenue expenditure. The Council's plan indicates that 2005/06 will be the last year that the Council will rely on reserves to fund revenue expenditure. The net revenue budget for cultural services for 2005/06 is £3.5 million which is approximately 20 per cent of the total budget.
- 20 In July 2004 the council was rated as 'fair' in its comprehensive performance assessment (CPA). The assessment found that the Council was making significant investments to address poor performing service areas and the gaps in its internal processes. It was working to improve its housing benefit service and was investing in new systems to enhance performance management. However, the Council had no strategic approach to providing services for young people and community leadership was limited. The direction of travel report 2005/06, which followed up on progress made since the CPA found that the Council's limited resources and capacity are significant risks and may limit its ability to maximise the opportunities and benefits for local people of the Thames Gateway regeneration. The Council is acutely aware of this and is working hard to minimise the risks and maximise its impact. The first key stage will be the success of its new Medium Term Financial Strategy to deliver increased resources and capacity.

The council's cultural service

- 21 Swale Borough Council is engaged in delivering and enabling cultural services in a variety of ways in the borough. There are a range of cultural activities which the Council directly provides through its community development service. These include community halls, arts, events and festivals and tourism. While the Council's technical services provide seafront services, parks and open spaces, playgrounds and sports development. For the purposes of this report the Council's cultural activity is referred to as the Service.
- 22 The Council also plays an enabling and influencing role through partnerships with other organisations, working with different service providers, including contractors and by using grant aid. Significant partnerships include the following:
- working with Serco, a leisure contractor who manages on behalf of the Council Sittingbourne Leisure Centre and Sheppey Leisure Centre and Pool;
 - providing a deficit guarantee for Faversham Leisure Trust who manage and operate Faversham Pool;
 - delivering the Art at the Centre initiative in partnership with the Arts Council in Queenborough;
 - working with Groundwork Medway Swale who are project managing the creation of a new country park at Church Marshes in Sittingbourne, redevelopment of Beachfields park in Sheerness and Oare Gunpowder Works;
 - grant aiding and supporting a range of community organisations to provide heritage centres;
 - Sheppey Matters and Faversham Community Café and Resource Centre, the two charitable trusts responsible for the ongoing development of the two healthy living centres, one in Sheppey and one in Faversham, developed by the Council with funding from New Opportunities Fund; and
 - as accountable body and partner in the Sure Start Seashells centre.
- 23 This inspection of the Council's cultural services considered the effectiveness of these services in meeting local needs and their contribution to local priorities. It also assessed the Council's success in achieving value for money, delivering improvement, managing performance and ensuring there is sufficient capacity to deliver priorities and improve cultural services.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 24** Culture and its contribution to the development of Swale are highlighted in the community strategy 'Priority Swale 2016'. The strategy has an overarching vision to 'transform the economic, social and environmental profile of the borough so that communities and individuals can aspire to live happy and fulfilled lives'. This is underpinned by seven strategic priorities. The Swale Local Strategic Partnership developed these in consultation with local people, agencies and partners. Culture features under the 'vibrant and safe' priority. This aims to reduce crime and anti social behaviour to provide accessible, healthy, safe but interesting public spaces and recreation facilities where there are fulfilling opportunities for everyone.
- 25** Specific objectives of the strategy relate to cultural developments to be achieved by 2010 and 2016, these include:
- cultural life and opportunities for leisure and sport developed and made more accessible;
 - the Art at the Centre initiative for Queenborough has brought innovation and investment to the town, the Queenborough and Rushenden regeneration project is complete, the new community is evolving and the area has helped Sheppey become one of the top tourist visitor destinations in the south east;
 - a regular programme of events and activities publicised and managed in consultation with young people to help provide constructive activities out of school hours; and
 - quality services for sports, arts, leisure and events provided in all of the major towns and supported by activities and developments in the rural communities and neighbourhoods.
- 26** To date the Council has not linked the local priorities of the community strategy with its own priorities and resource allocation. It is not clear how the Council will contribute to achieving the cultural objectives of the LSP. The Council does not have a corporate plan. It has three corporate aims - a thriving community, healthy environment and strong economy. The Council has also identified 15 critical success factors that it uses to direct its work, one of which is 'to enhance the health and cultural well-being of the community'. The Service has the potential to make a significant contribution to many of these objectives, but the Council has not set out how it wants to use its cultural services to help achieve them.
- 27** The Council has made efforts to understand the local cultural market through consultation with local communities, its partnerships with the voluntary and commercial sectors, and regional and national agencies. It has used this information to develop a cultural strategy. The themes of this strategy reflect local community priorities. It also makes reference to the ways that Swale's cultural services support the delivery of regional and national agendas, including a focus on health improvement, sustainable communities and community safety.

However, it does not drive service aims nor is it reflected in the Council's own service plans or related strategies.

- 28 The Council has developed a draft youth strategy and has in place a community safety strategy. Both make explicit links to cultural services activity and identify areas of joint work and contribution by cultural services. The Council is also developing specific service strategies, such as for sports development, open spaces, playing pitches and tourism.
- 29 The Council does not have any specific service aims and local priorities for cultural activity. Service plans for the directorates set out short and medium-term activities and projects. They are not linked to the Council's financial plans or the cultural strategy.
- 30 Swale is a partner in the pilot Kent Local Area Agreement (LAA). Cultural related themes are reflected in the children and young people block of the agreement. These focus on improving participation and engagement by all children and young people in youth, cultural and community activities.

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

Community focus

- 31 The Council has a broad understanding of local needs and expectations. Overall, it has focused on the identified priority needs of the community. It consulted with residents to gain a high level knowledge of cultural needs and used this to plan and deliver services. The Quality of Life Survey 2004 and the State of the Borough survey 2003 both highlighted the need to address issues of provision for young people and anti-social behaviour - these form key aspects of cultural services activity. The Cultural Strategy 2002-2007 used a range of consultation techniques to build an understanding and knowledge of local needs in the four areas of the borough. Needs such as improved transport, extended provision for young people and sports facilities have been a focus and have been delivered.
- 32 The Council can also demonstrate areas of good practice where the needs of the community are at the heart of the design and delivery of services.
 - The Council, working with Swale Forward, has a strong understanding of community need and is using the information in a co-ordinated way to plan and manage services and developments in its regeneration work in Queenborough and Rushenden. The Council and its partners have undertaken extensive local consultations involving planning for real exercises, visits to schools and community groups as a proactive way of ensuring the community are involved and influencing future provision and performance.
 - The Council has also been proactive and effective in its approach to young people. It has undertaken a range of consultation and engaged with young people through the youth forum. The Council has introduced initiatives to tackle issues raised by young people based on its understanding of their needs. Consequently, it has widened their participation in cultural activities.

- 33** However, within cultural services there are gaps in knowledge and understanding. The Council's self assessment acknowledges that there are service areas where customer information is not being collected and fully utilised. Councillor, manager and staff awareness of local needs is mixed and patchy. Information on user and potential user profiles is limited and trends information is lacking. Services collect and use a narrow range of information on ethnicity, vulnerability and disability. Understanding of the needs of target communities is irregular and lacks co-ordination, for example, families with young children and older people. There are examples of different services undertaking unco-ordinated consultation with the same community groups. And there are no formal mechanisms to ensure a regular and consistent gap analysis. As such service planning and delivery to meet local needs is not fully effective.
- 34** The Service is not effectively co-ordinating information and using it to drive development. Information is not systematically collated, analysed and shared across services. Cultural services do not bring together a range of the information available and use it to provide a co-ordinated and coherent approach central to their design and delivery. There are examples of joined up planning and delivery by individual services but the Council lacks a holistic approach to planning across cultural services. As a result the Council risks decisions relating to planning, managing and delivering cultural services not being user focused.
- 35** Customer feedback is not methodically used to plan service provision. The Service lacks a co-ordinated approach to complaints and user feedback mechanisms and user forums are not well developed. Cultural services are not effectively engaging local people in service planning and design. For example, the local people were not engaged in the planning of the redevelopment of Sheppey Pool, although the overall approach was made in response to lobbying from a local user group. At present there are limited examples of where the services have engaged effectively with target communities, exceptions to this are the Sure Start project and redeveloped parks and play areas. However, the effective use of customer feedback to enhance services is improving. Individual services are beginning to collect information and use it to develop and change. Over the past two years the leisure centres, parks, tourism and events services have used a mix of mechanisms to consult and communicate. There are examples of improvements introduced as a result of the services listening to the views of stakeholders. These include changes to the content of festival programme and the cleaning schedules of the leisure centres.
- 36** Further, the Council's cultural services lack quality service standards. The comprehensive performance assessment in 2004 found that the availability of the council's service standards to the public is limited. This has not improved, the Council has still not worked with users and local people to set and publicise standards for its cultural services. As a consequence, the Council cannot measure what standards it is achieving and local people are unaware of the level of service they can expect.

Accessibility

- 37 The Council has taken positive steps to improve access to facilities and services. There is a varied, formal and informal programme of activities and opportunities for different target groups. There are swimming and sports facilities in each of the main towns, including the recently developed sports facility and specialist gymnastics hall in Faversham. There is a growing network of schools opening their facilities for community use providing accessible, responsive services locally. The Council provides a range of informal play and recreation facilities for young people including skate parks and has expanded targeted opportunities for children and young people through the Seashells family and children's centre and the healthy living centres. Improvements have been made to Queenborough Harbour, and public access secured to Elmley nature reserve and The Oare Gunpowder works. An exception to this is the provision of arts services, the borough lacks opportunities to access arts activities and the Art at the Centre project is in its early stages.
- 38 Access to cultural facilities is generally good. The Council is actively seeking to meet its duty to take reasonable steps to ensure good physical access. Overall 83 per cent of council owned cultural buildings are accessible for people with physical disabilities. In 2005/06 the Council installed additional lifts and toilets in its community halls to reach this level of access in its cultural buildings. The only remaining facility without access for people with disabilities is King George's Hall, Sittingbourne. Some facilities have improved sensory access with the installation of induction loops and tactile labelling. This has improved the quality of experience for users.
- 39 In addition, the Council has improved access for rural communities to sport and leisure. The Bus Club project increases access for primary age children from rural areas to council run leisure facilities. The scheme is recognised by Sport England as notable practice and shows sustainable improvements with 65 per cent of children using the centres for the first time and 75 per cent of those first time users continuing to use the facilities. Sports development work is also taking affordable activities to target communities and running them in facilities and environments that are easily accessible to them. For example, the rural projects scheme provides sports and arts activities for children at the eastern end of the Isle of Sheppey. The scheme has met its targets with over 30 regular attendees and a register of 70 users and has been expanded to including other healthy lifestyle initiatives including cooking.
- 40 There is no co-ordinated cultural pricing policy. Some discount and concession schemes operate to enable low cost access to targeted groups but these are not across all facilities or integrated and co-ordinated. The leisure card scheme which entitles a range of target groups to reduced charges at Sittingbourne and Sheppey Leisure Centres was extended in 2005 to be free to all 16-19 year olds and entitles holders to a free swim per week. Although take up of the card has improved it is not representative of the proportion of the population entitled to it and the Council is unclear how to achieve this. There is no overall targeted pricing policy aimed at specific communities to stimulate new and additional use.

Pricing increases have continued to be on a percent basis rather than linked to specific objectives. And the Council does not have robust data to indicate how successful its actions have been at improving access where cost is a potential barrier to participation.

- 41 The Service's use of technology to assist access is limited. The Council's website contains information about the various cultural services but the pages are not integrated or orientated to users needs. Navigation is difficult and links are missing. There are very few areas where users can directly request services and it is not possible to undertake any interactive transactions, for example, booking holiday courses or event tickets. The range of information on the website is basic but generally up to date and relevant. The Council website is currently being reviewed. Bored in Swale is a dedicated website developed to co-ordinate youth activities. Under-developed remote access restricts how well potential wider audiences can participate more fully.

Diversity

- 42 There are key weaknesses in the Council's overall approach to equalities and diversity issues and these are reflected at service level. Equalities work is underdeveloped. Swale has only achieved level 1 for the Local Government Equality Standard demonstrating a commitment to a comprehensive equality policy but no firm action to achieve it. Cultural services have not undertaken Equalities Impact Assessments and leadership on equalities issues is lacking. Training on equalities has been undertaken for staff and councillors, but has not been well received by some nor has it had sufficient impact; raising awareness of the issues and ensuring all members of staff are competent in understanding equality and diversity issues.
- 43 Overall, the Service lacks an understanding of whether it is encouraging all local communities to participate in cultural activity. Generally, it does not know which communities and groups are under represented in service take up. User and non user profiles are not available or used to systematically design and develop services. With the exception of young people there are limited initiatives to comprehensively capture the views of some hard to reach groups, for example lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people or older people living in rural areas. The Council lacks good data on the affordability and accessibility of its cultural services to some communities. It recognises that there are service areas that could do more to promote diversity proactively through targeted support and activity, for example its events programme. Currently, the Council cannot be confident that its cultural activity is reaching as many people as it could.
- 44 The Council's procurement policies are inclusive but commitment to diversity in service provision is not fully effective. For example, the Council and its partner Serco are achieving targets for use of the leisure centres by young people but within this are not actively targeting those young people who find it harder to access opportunities. The Council recognises it needs to work with its contractor to address this and has recently secured external funding to support reduced price sessions for target groups of young people.

- 45 However, there are some positive examples of cultural services promoting diversity proactively through its targeted support and activity. Where the Council has taken action to encourage specific communities, it has been successful. Targeted sports projects have engaged people from minority communities, including young people with disabilities and those living in deprived areas. In addition, the Service has begun working with the Chinese community to understand needs and enable greater participation in cultural activities in partnership with the healthy living centre. Examples of successful initiatives include:
- a needs assessment of sports activities for disabled people resulting in the provision of targeted disability sports sessions in two locations. The programme is now so successful it is being expanded to Sheppey Leisure Centre. The programme is recognised as notable practice by the English Federation of Disability Sports;
 - Swallows Leisure Centre is part of the English Federation of Disabled Sports (EFDS) Inclusive Fitness Initiative (IFI);
 - school holiday activities run in partnership with Amicus Housing and Social Services targeting schools in deprived areas with a range of affordable opportunities and referrals of young people to other holiday schemes made through social services, youth offending team and Swale young carers;
 - work with local sports clubs to secure awards for all grants that have enabled them to expand junior sections and girls sessions and increase participation; and
 - Art at the Centre initiatives with the community of Queenborough and Rushenden targeting children and families from the local school and nursery to participate in practical art projects.
- 46 The Council has also taken a positive approach to diversity within its assessment of young people's needs. To inform the youth strategy, three specific focus groups were held: with looked after children, with young people with disabilities; and with children with special needs. The findings of this work have informed the strategy but have not yet been acted on.

User experience

- 47 The Service is making a contribution to national and regional agendas and to the local objectives as set out in the community strategy. In particular, where projects are externally funded or a partner organisation has clear priorities the Council is able to demonstrate outcomes and impacts that result from its work. For example, it promotes health and well-being through its sports development work, and community sustainability through its arts development work. It is achieving outcomes that are having an impact in the local area to benefit the quality of life of children and young people and target communities. In these areas the Service is making progress towards achieving many of its project objectives.

- 48 Cultural partnerships are achieving improved outcomes for local people. There are many examples of joint projects and working across cultural services internally and with others. For example, the sports development team supported Sheppey Splash, a community organisation by providing specialist sports coaches for summer activities. Groundwork Medway Swale oversees the project management of the development and marketing of Oare Gunpowder Works. Such effective approaches enable the Service to achieve more than it could by working alone.
- 49 However, the overall extent of its contribution to national, regional and local objectives is unclear. The Service as a whole is not planned specifically to contribute to local objectives and priorities or to meet local needs and aspirations. Target setting is poor and outcome focused measures of success are not consistently set. Ongoing services and areas where the Council is not seeking external funding rarely set targets or measure the outcomes and impacts of work. They are not clear about what is being achieved and the pace of improvement. Without this approach across cultural services the Council cannot be clear that it is delivering what it promised, making the best use of resources or having an impact on the local community.
- 50 Cultural services contribution to the specific national, regional and local priorities of safer and stronger communities and quality of life are described below.

Safer and stronger communities

- 51 The Council has an understanding of the role cultural services play in developing safer and stronger communities. The Council undertook a crime and disorder audit and youth community safety survey to establish what issues were affecting young people. Cultural services are effective members of the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership (CDRP). They contribute directly to two of the strategic objectives of the CDRP plan; tackling anti social behaviour and providing diversion support and inclusion for young people. The CDRP young people action group is led by the youth diversion co-ordinator and includes other cultural service providers. Successful initiatives already delivered by the Council and its partners include:
- the appointment of a youth diversion co-ordinator who has brought together the range of disparate organisations providing activities for young people in a structured network which is helping to avoid duplication and improve communication and resource sharing, 33 organisations are now represented;
 - improved and continuously updated Bored in Swale website which acts as a central point for information for young people, ensuring a multi-agency approach to provision of youth diversion activities. There is an upward trend in number of hits;

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- the youth Diversion Network summer programme 2005 co-ordinated 43 youth service providers to run holiday schemes. Nearly 5,000 young people aged 5-19 accessed and attend these activities with over 12,000 visits over the six-week period. During the period of the scheme youth crime and criminal damage figures were lower in actual and real terms in 2005 compared to 2004; and
- eight pub clubs have been established which run diversion activities. One has now evolved into boxing club, which has contributed to the co-ordinated multi-agency approach on an estate that has helped to revitalise the area and it is no longer a hot spot for nuisance.

- 52** The Council has also been successful at working with partners to improve safety in public open spaces. Initiatives have included the provision of multi use games areas in target neighbourhoods and skate parks, including an indoor one operated by a charity. Faversham Recreation Ground was improved to include a new bike zone and improved skateboard park and a youth shelter resulting in less antisocial behaviour and improved use. The improvements to the play area in partnership with North Preston Residents Association had a positive impact on the local community. With its contractor the Council is contributing to community safety through good maintenance such as planting, better lighting and visibility, security fencing and entrance barriers. Overall, the number of reported crimes in parks and open spaces has declined. Between 2002 and 2004 there was a significant improvement in the proportion of people who feel safe in parks and open spaces in Swale. In 2002 only 33 per cent of people felt safe, in 2004 figures had risen to 46 per cent. The Council is now putting in place risk assessments and will implement action plans across all of its parks and open spaces.
- 53** There is evidence that cultural services contribute to strengthening communities through work with groups and organisations. For example, Sheppey Green Gym provides physical exercise while doing practical conservation work and volunteers undertake a range of roles supporting the Swale Festival. Art at the Centre is beginning to build community capacity in Queenborough: the Sea Sheppey event is being planned again for 2006 with more community involvement in the planning and managing of the festival building on the success of 2005. And pupils at Minster College have achieved the Community Sports Leader Award through work with sports development. Work by Swale Forward to look at levels of community provision found that Swale has more active community organisations than other Thames Gateway areas.
- 54** However, the Council has still not undertaken an assessment under section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to ensure that safety issues are mainstreamed into services. This was highlighted by the CPA in 2004. A draft audit was completed by May 2006.

Quality of life

- 55** The Council's cultural activity is helping to support improvements to the quality of life of local people. It has developed a number of initiatives in partnership with others.
- Improvements to health and well being of young people. With Swale PCT the sports development unit initiated and ran a skip to be fit programme in local primary schools. The scheme was rolled out across the district and schools reported links between take up and improved mental ability in children. School and parental feedback has been positive.
 - Local sense of pride of place and community identity created through the annual Swale Festival, including a range of events and concerts. Attendance at the events has increased and the diversity of activity widened.
 - Targeted local health improvement opportunities through close working between the PCT and Amicus housing. Addressing specific tenants needs in terms of health improvement, youth diversion and estate regeneration.
 - Improvements to employment, sustainability and diversification in rural areas through Leader + scheme and related tourism projects including Eco Tourism Sheppey and the Blean and Mid Kent Downs projects.
- 56** Working with partners the Council established the Seashells children's and families centre in Sheerness. The services are delivered through the centre and in partnership with other venues including libraries and the leisure centre. The centre opened in 2005, but many of the programmes have been developed since 2003 focusing on a range of educational and health related services for families. In an evaluation of the work of Sure Start parents and carers reported that it has made a positive difference to the community, it has helped their child's ability to play, get on with others and their ability to learn. Sixty per cent of parents felt they were less isolated because of the programmes. Some 86 per cent of children under four are registered with the centre. Schools in Sheerness are beginning to report significant positive changes in children who are coming into reception classes, the number of pre-school children admitted to hospital has fallen dramatically and other health statistics are showing encouraging changes such as a reduction in smoking and increase in breastfeeding among new mothers.
- 57** The sports development team have been successful at maximising opportunities to increase and develop social inclusion. The Positive Activities for Young People scheme targeted ten young people who were excluded from school and at risk of committing crime, through a range of sports initiatives many have re-entered mainstream education or secured housing and employment and only one has re-offended. The futures programme is being run in partnership with Charlton Football Club. Young people are referred on it by schools in a reward for positive behaviour. The programme includes a fitness session, responsible citizenship workshop and games session. The Council is working to improve the local environment. In the past the Council has also delivered the public artwork Foreshores project on Sheppey in partnership with the Medway Estuary Partnership, enhanced the national cycle route and promoted local footpaths and cycle routes all of which are seeing improved levels of use.

- 58 The healthy living centres bring together a range of services for the local community - health, arts and sports activities, learning and skills, counselling, young people's activities and volunteering. In the first year of operation 4,000 people attended activities and 30 new activities were introduced. The Sheppey HLC has achieved a growing number of volunteers and an evaluation of their activities show that they achieve considerable health benefits from their activities and involvement. As a result of identifying cost and childcare as two of the biggest barriers to participation the centre introduced low cost and free activities so that local people have been able to participate in cultural activities and enhance their quality of life.

Satisfaction and quality of the service

- 59 Overall resident satisfaction with cultural services is below average. The latest 2004 survey to inform national performance indicators shows below average levels of satisfaction for all aspects of the Service:
- 49 per cent with sports and leisure compared with 54 per cent nationally;
 - 66 per cent with parks and open spaces compared with 72 per cent nationally;
 - 27 per cent with arts activities and venues compared with 48 per cent nationally; and
 - 24 per cent with museums and galleries compared with 42 per cent nationally.
- 60 This below average satisfaction is supported by other surveys of residents. For example, the Council measures satisfaction with nine aspects of parks and open spaces annually. Despite improvements over the last three years residents of Swale still rate their parks below average compared with the satisfaction rating for local parks given by resident of other district councils which are members of the benchmarking group. A 2005 survey of Swale leisure centres showed that among the 36 per cent of residents who were not satisfied, the main concerns were cleanliness, cost, temperature, safety and general upkeep.
- 61 Where information from users of services is available satisfaction tends to be higher. For example, satisfaction is generally high among people who have participated in sports development programmes, used community halls and attended festivals and events. Similarly 64 per cent of users of Swallows and Sittingbourne Leisure Centres were satisfied. However, a service that delivers above minimum requirements would expect to achieve in excess of 70 per cent user satisfaction across all cultural services. Further, because the Council does not collect robust satisfaction information across its cultural services it does not have a complete picture of satisfaction with the quality it is achieving.

- 62 Service quality from the user's perspective is recognised by several external accreditations. The two leisure centres operated by Serco are Quest accredited. Swallows Leisure Centre received the highest Quest rating of all centres in Kent. The three towns have Britain in Bloom silver awards, and King George Playing Fields was awarded silver in the best park category. The Council has three Seaside Award beaches and has previously achieved Blue Flag Awards for its beaches. Such recognitions help residents and the Council assess the quality of its cultural activity.
- 63 The quality of the visitor experience across cultural services is generally good. Refurbished and new facilities offer a high quality environment. The new Faversham Gym, refurbished Swallows Leisure Centre and Seashells Centre have modern reception areas, comfortable seating, well interpreted displays, refreshment facilities and up-to-date equipment. The Oare Gunpowder Works, King George Plying Fields and redeveloped Faversham Recreation Ground have clear signs, modern equipment and well maintained natural environments. Members of staff are deemed welcoming and helpful in customer surveys. However, some facilities, such as community halls and sports pavilions appear shabby and lack modern facilities. High quality customer facilities are important to local people and can affect their experience and willingness to extend their visit or return.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 64 Information linking performance and cost is not used to manage resources. There is clear and accurate information on unit costs, but not how this compares to others or the quality of the services. The cost of providing Swale's cultural services is below average compared to other district councils. Comparative data is limited but using available information its spend on sport and recreation and parks and open spaces is below average in comparison with other similar districts. Spending on tourism and culture and heritage are within the lowest 25 per cent of councils nationally. The impact of this may be reflected in the below average levels of local satisfaction and low levels of use. However, the Service does not know as it has not explored the links.
- 65 The Council is not clear if it routinely achieves value for money (VFM) in cultural services. The Council acknowledges that it does not have a strong corporate framework which services can use to help focus and assess VFM. While expenditure on different cultural activities varies the Service is not able to clearly link its level of expenditure to anticipated outcomes in different service areas or overall. It does not make any link between the costs of cultural services, quality standards and satisfaction. Without this it cannot be clear that its costs are appropriate or identify where savings may be sought, for example is the relatively high expenditure on parks and open spaces in comparison to other cultural services value for money? It cannot clearly demonstrate an open and consistent relationship and scrutiny between costs and desired quality, and so demonstrate that it is investing appropriately in improvements or reducing costs while maintaining quality. Two examples of this are set out overleaf.

- The borough currently has a range of heritage centres that are run by different organisations under varying arrangements and levels of financial support. However, the Council does not know if they are providing value for money or how effective its partnerships are with the voluntary sector organisations. The Council is unclear about the outcomes from the service.
- Similarly, the Council does not know if it is achieving VFM in its partnership with Faversham Leisure Trust. It monitors cost information and guarantees to meet the annual deficit for the facility, but is unaware of how well the facility is performing in terms of use, quality or satisfaction. No local PIs are set.

- 66 There is limited evidence of the Council targeting its spend on culture to achieve local priorities. There has not been any significant increase or reallocation of budgets between different areas in the last three years in response to any identified priorities. Spend per head on cultural services has increased from £19 in 2002/03 to £22 in 2004/05 but the Council does not clearly link level of expenditure to outcomes for the public. It is not clear if this additional investment has resulted in targeted improvement in some service areas. Nor have reductions in service budgets considered the impact on cultural services as whole.
- 67 The Service does not know if it makes good use of resources through grant aiding. Approximately £500,000 is awarded annually. In 2004/05 this was used to support 51 organisations and projects. The average revenue grant was £760.00. In 2005 the Council undertook a best value review of its grants service. The review concluded that the Council does not clarify to itself or customers what it wants to achieve from its grant funding; there is a need to ensure grant conditions have an overt link to corporate objectives. Processes for assessing grant applications vary across the different arrangements and there is considerable duplication. The Council has limited arrangements for measuring and collating what it is achieving for local people by payment of grants. As a result of this councillors have struggled to manage effectively the grant scheme and stakeholder perception of the scheme is poor.
- 68 The Council works well with partners to supplement its resources through external funding and capacity. Such funds enable projects and initiatives to progress and in turn this benefits the local residents through the provision of a greater range of cultural activities, the reestablishment of new projects and the upgrading of existing facilities. For example, external funding has been secured to support arts and sports development officers who are acting as catalysts to establish local projects including the youth diversion co-ordinator and neighbourhood arts development officer. By using partnerships well the Service is able to make better use of resources and provide more than it could by working alone.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 69** The Council is unable to evidence a record of sustained improvements in outcomes over a period of time. Cultural service's trend data on achievement of outcomes and levels of use is underdeveloped. The Service has more robust data for externally funded projects but elsewhere there is limited trend data on outcomes achieved and service use across cultural services. The Council is achieving some improvement in outcomes such as the improvement in youth crime and criminal damage achieved through effective engagement in the summer holiday scheme. But many of the areas where the Council is achieving outcomes have been secured in the recent past and impacts are not evident over time. Therefore, although the Service has achieved some improvements to the quality of life for some users it is difficult to assess what progress the Service has made overall.
- 70** Improvement plans have not been effectively implemented. The Council has lacked a consistent approach to reviewing and updating its plans to drive improvement. For example, it is not clear from the open spaces and generic best value improvement plans, what level of progress has been made as the updates lack any easily identifiable measures of progress. The playing pitch strategy identified opportunities for revenue savings, but the plan has not been implemented and the savings achieved. Actions within the CPA improvement plan have not been consistently delivered, for example, a partnership officer post has not been created due to lack of capacity, although the Council has improved its strategic approach to providing services to young people in response to CPA. The Council is not demonstrating that it consistently identifies weaknesses, plans and implements change over time.
- 71** The Council is unable to demonstrate improving VFM in cultural services over time. It does not assess VFM across cultural services and while detailed cost data is collected this is not considered alongside quality data for individual services or across cultural services. Also, the Council has relied heavily on reserves – a position which is no longer sustainable. It has adopted a revised Medium Term Financial Strategy and is beginning to prioritise spend on services. This means that 2005/06 was the last year that it relied on reserves to fund revenue expenditure. The Council has not been in a position to know if it has used its resources in the most effective and efficient way.
- 72** The Council does not have a track record of delivering VFM through effective procurement decisions. The Council recognises that the previous leisure centre contract was not well managed. It is also not in a position to know if it is delivering VFM at the Faversham Pool as only cost is measured. Due to insufficient procurement resources the Council decided to re-tender the grounds maintenance contract for 21 months an unusually short period of time.

The annual audit letter 2004/05 concluded that an absence of robust risk assessment and project planning for the grounds maintenance and waste contracts meant that the Council's procurement capacity was not recognised as an issue in sufficient time. The Council did not have adequate regard to securing VFM when planning the procurement of these services.

- 73 There has been some improvement in levels of resident satisfaction with cultural services over time but performance remains below average. Satisfaction with sports and leisure improved from 36 per cent in 2000/01 to 49 per cent in 2003/04. A survey at Swallows Leisure Centre in 2004 and 2005 showed a significant improvement in user perception of cleanliness and an upward trend in overall experience and VFM. Satisfaction with parks and open spaces increased from 46 per cent in 2000/01 to 66 per cent in 2003/04. The Council's 2005 parks survey shows an overall increase in satisfaction of 5 per cent since 2003. A recent survey undertaken by the Council identified the festival and events as the most improved Council service. However, satisfaction with arts activities and venues fell slightly in 2003/04 compared to 2000/01. Service developments are resulting in some improvement in user and community satisfaction but overall satisfaction is still below average when compared with other councils.
- 74 Resident perception of improvements in cultural services is poor. Satisfaction is low with improvements to cultural services, over the three years from 2000/01 to 2003/04. In 2003/04, the Council was in the worst 25 per cent of authorities for resident satisfaction with improvements to: activities for teenagers; cultural facilities (eg cinemas, museums); sport leisure facilities; access to nature and parks and open spaces. The Council was below average for resident satisfaction with improvements to facilities for young children. Lack of strong public perceptions of improvement to cultural services may be due to a number of reasons, including ineffective communication or the Service not improving the things that matter to local people.
- 75 However, the Council has made positive progress in delivering against many areas within the Cultural Strategy 2002-07 action plan. Examples include improvements to rural transport, targeted schemes for young people in the Isle of Sheppey, enhancements to the Oare Gunpowder Works in Faversham, development and improvement of Church Marshes Country Park in Sittingbourne. There is further work required before the Council achieves its ambitions for improving access and marketing set out in the strategy. Delivery of cultural projects in the strategy across Swale is enabling the Council to expand its range of cultural opportunities for local people.
- 76 The Council has improved its cultural offer by investing in services. Over the last 18 months, in partnership with its leisure centre contractor, it has invested £1.8 million (of £2.2 million capital spend) into leisure facilities. In line with its Cultural Strategy, improvements have been made to environmental control, pool, changing rooms and reception at Sheppey Pool, as well as the dry sports facilities at Sheppey and Swallows Leisure Centres. As a result the centres are beginning to show improved levels of use. The new grounds maintenance contractor has set up a dedicated team which responds to need rather than a set specification.

The new system has contributed towards the Service achieving a silver award for parks and an increase in customer satisfaction. The partnership at Blean Woods, the largest ancient woodland in the South East, has enabled public access to be secured. Other examples include the Art at the Centre programme delivered in partnership with the Arts Council, which has linked the community with the designs for the living space being planned in the Thames Gateway area. It has involved them in events that explore the identity of the area and helped establish the new vision for their environment.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 77** The Council is not well placed to deliver future improvement in cultural services. It does not clearly set out what is the overall strategic vision for the Service or what are its priority areas. As a consequence it has not been able to translate its priorities into tangible objectives and outcomes. Because the Council does not have in place appropriate corporate mechanisms to drive improvement, for example a corporate plan, the Cultural Strategy operates in isolation without a 'golden thread' through other strategic documents. The Service is delivering improvements to culture through other mechanisms such as Priority Swale (LSP), Swale Forward and the Local Area Agreement – however it is not clear how these actions support the Council's overall objectives or indeed service priorities as these are not articulated. Lack of a clear vision and priorities means that the Service is unable to focus on improving the things that matter most to communities in a targeted way.
- 78** The Council does not provide strong cultural leadership. Partners and staff perceive a lack of strategic direction for cultural services because it has no vision or priorities. Cultural services are not considered to be operating cohesively as a single entity with a focus on the same user groups. There is also little evidence of the Service having to make tough decisions as non priorities have not been established. There is a perception that nobody champions culture as a whole, politically or at senior officer level. While a lot of productive and positive work is being done, it is opportunity-led, rather than strategy-led, and fundamental choices are being avoided.
- 79** Future plans for culture are not well co-ordinated, realistic and robust. The Cultural Strategy action plan does not include clear outcome measures, milestones and responsibilities. It does, however, identify partners and outline resourcing implications. While the Youth Strategy has clear aims and objectives, as a draft document it is not costed or resourced – with the Council having less than £1,000 to pump prime actions. Because an overall vision and priorities for culture are not specified it is not clear how the various cultural service strategies relate to each other. The quality of action plans affects the Council's ability to monitor progress it is making towards fulfilling its overall ambitions.

- 80 Performance management arrangements are not fully effective. The Council does not have an integrated approach to setting priorities and allocating resources. Service plans are monitored quarterly using a traffic light system but are not SMART, monitoring the achievement of outcomes is underdeveloped and there is limited use made of local performance indicators. There is strong financial monitoring. While the Council has achieved Investors in People (IIP), a recent staff survey found that only 45 per cent of staff felt that their performance appraisal process helped them to understand their contribution to the Council; 38 per cent did not know what the Council's vision and values were and 57 per cent of staff did not feel well informed about the Council's work. The Council does not have in place a performance management system which gives the organisation a full picture of how well the service is delivering against corporate and service objectives, improvement plans, the national agenda and local needs, limited information is available to understand reasons for variation in performance, or how well performance compares to others, and access to performance information is not easy. In addition, contract management is underdeveloped; it is not clear how the Service's procured contracts will deliver the Council's overall objectives. Performance management is not driving improvement as there is a lack of ownership at a senior level.
- 81 The Service does not have clear and robust proposals for meeting efficiency targets and improving VFM. Some efficiency savings, for example from the tourism budget, have been made this year but these have not been based on a clear set of priorities. For example, some initial budget reductions were based on significantly reducing complete service areas but these have since been partially rescinded. Clear and robust proposals for improving VFM will allow the Council to make better use of its limited resources.
- 82 There is a lack of a systematic approach to learning internally or externally. There are limited examples of cultural services learning from each other or externally. There is limited use of benchmarking. Complaints information is not co-ordinated across cultural services and feedback is not used to drive improvement across the piece. The Council is missing opportunities for self development because limited resources have not been explicitly aligned to priority areas therefore limiting capacity to be proactive.
- 83 The Council's Cultural Strategy reflects national and local agendas and is based on community consultation. The Cultural Strategy 2002-07 incorporates national and regional priorities, for example to increase sporting activity, linked to the health improvement agenda, and diversionary activities to support sustainable communities and community safety. This is informed by an extensive public and community consultation process, involving nearly 3,000 people across the borough. Other strategies such as the draft Tourism Development Strategy, Green Grid Strategy and the Community Safety Strategies are also based on a broad analysis of users and local markets.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 84 The Service cannot be certain that it has access to appropriate skills and people to deliver future services and improvements. Workforce planning is not yet in place corporately or within cultural services. The Council has undertaken a training needs analysis but has yet to assess the gaps to inform future workforce needs. In some areas additional posts have been created to support new work, for example, a development post to support the £1.6 million play and youth activity facilities secured through housing development and an arts development worker for Queenborough; however these tend to be part of new externally funded projects. Some key gaps remain with ongoing service provision particularly in contract monitoring. Staff rate levels of training and development positively but provision of on-line development is not well received because it lacks a tailored approach. As a result training on customer care and diversity has had a limited impact. While services work well together on projects, there are no mechanisms for joint planning or cross-team meetings. The Council is not able to plan its future workforce requirements.
- 85 Managers and councillors are not clear about the strategic role of culture and their associated roles and responsibilities. Some officers and councillors are clear that the Service has a role to play in delivering the Council's vision, for example, in community regeneration, but this is not consistently understood or explicitly articulated in any of the Council's strategic documents. Therefore the contribution that cultural services can make is weakened and associated roles and responsibilities remain unclear. The impact of this is that the Council is not able to provide effective community leadership on culture and support partners in delivering shared agendas.
- 86 The Council does not have robust resource planning which demonstrates financial capacity to deliver its service priorities. The Council has not explicitly linked the objectives of the MTFS to the key strategic objectives of the Council and planned the level of investment allocated to achieve objectives in each of its service areas. Cultural services continue to face a downward pressure on their resources. For example, in areas such as youth and tourism, it is not clear how proposed action plans will be delivered due to financial constraints. The Council acknowledges in its self assessment that one of its biggest challenges in this area is the difficulty in matching the cultural aspirations of the community against limited resources.
- 87 There is no strategic co-ordination, or alignment with priorities, of the partnerships that exist. Cultural partnerships are not currently evaluated in a systematic way. This may inhibit the Service from focusing its capacity and resources in the most appropriate way. While it is a strength that the Council is delivering in partnership – resources are so stretched that they may not be able to focus on the areas that matter most to the community.

- 88 Opportunities to increase capacity through investing and attracting inward investment are not being maximised. The Service is not securing external funding or investing according to well defined strategic priorities. Because there is not an explicit set of priorities, community grants are based on meeting broad community strategy objectives. Little data on monitoring of impact and outcomes is collected, except through Service Level Agreements, and there is no central co-ordination or reporting of applications. External funding is also not secured on the basis of strategic service priorities and therefore its impact is more opportunistic than planned.
- 89 However, financial capacity is enhanced by the Service's significant success in attracting external funding, in most instances linked to achieving local area priorities. It has secured funding to support delivery of national priorities and local projects. The Council secured European funding which has led to tourism related projects such as the Island Think Tank and Eco tourism. A Rural Projects Scheme has been developed, providing sporting and arts activities for children in the Isle of Sheppey funded by BBC Children in Need. The establishment of two healthy living centres was facilitated by New Opportunities Funding. Swale Forward has secured £27 million from the Sustainable Communities Fund for regeneration of the Thames Gateway. Regeneration schemes include Sittingbourne Town Centre and Queenborough Regeneration Initiative. There is £5 million funding for parks projects, including the creation of the Church Marshes Country Park in partnership with a private company. The Council is among the top five districts in Kent for Lottery Fund investment. The Service is able to deliver on a broad range of projects in partnership through maximising external funding despite the pressures on financial resources.
- 90 Cultural services have engaged effectively in partnering with evidence of improvements in services. Solid cultural partnership working remains a major source of future capacity. Swale Forward was established in January 2004 and is the regeneration delivery vehicle for the Borough; it is a partnership between Swale Borough Council, Kent County Council, South East Economic Development Agency, Government Office South East, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, Swale Primary Care Trust and the local private and voluntary and community sectors. Initiatives include: The Arts at the Centre initiative, currently being delivered in partnership with the Arts Council, on the Isle of Sheppey, bringing arts to young people in deprived wards. Other examples of partnership working include a skip to be fit programme in conjunction with the PCT and local schools with schools reporting links between take up and improved mental ability in children. More recently contract management has improved with productive relationships now being forged with contractors. The Council has re-let the contract for the management of its leisure and grounds maintenance contracts and has improved its approach to monitoring. The Council is building its own capacity through its work with partners to deliver its cultural aspirations.