

Service Inspection Report

July 2006



Cultural Services

Berwick Upon Tweed 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 (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

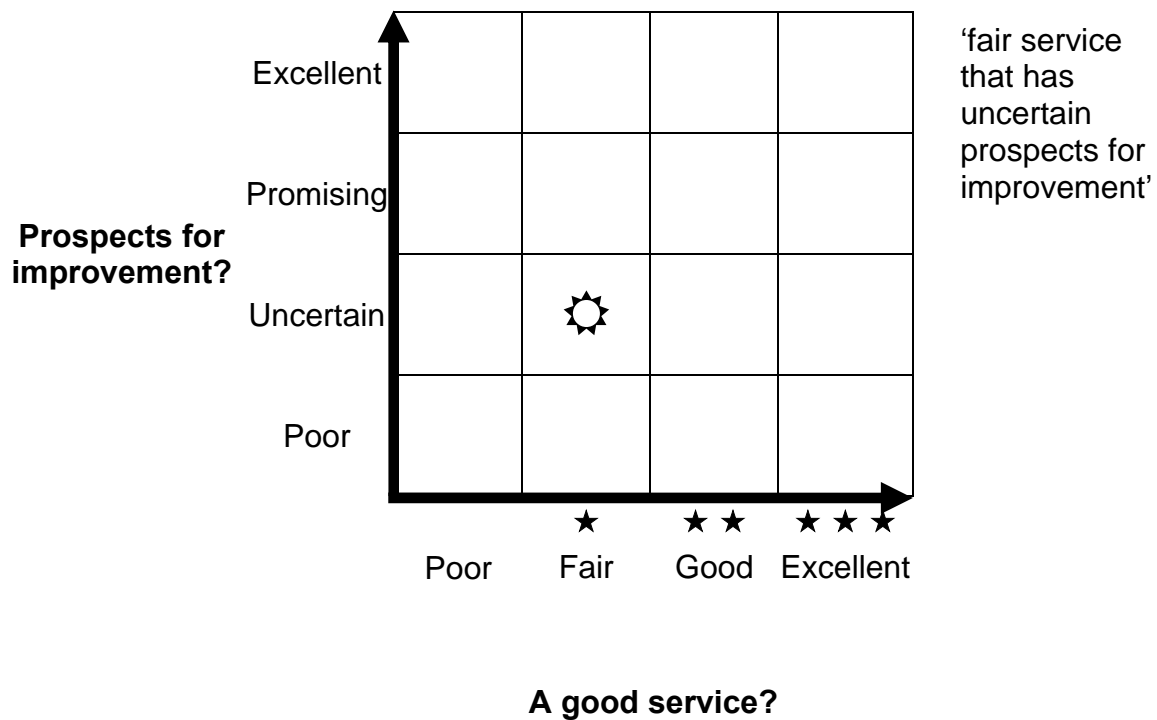
- 1 Berwick is the second smallest district council in England with a resident population of 26,132 but it covers a large geographic area. During the summer months, an influx of visitors increases the Borough's daytime population to an estimated 100,000. The Council has limited resources to provide cultural services and this has a major influence on how they can be delivered and the depth to which they can be provided. The Council's close working with other organisations at a regional level has helped the alignment of culture services to national, regional and local priorities. A large majority of cultural services are appropriately located in Berwick town where the majority of residents live.
- 2 The facilities and activities within the culture service include: tourism, museums, archives and public records, culture and the arts; sports development and management, and play and parks services. Service standards exist for most service areas but they are limited and do not form part of contract or performance arrangements with funded groups. There is little evidence to show that users and local people have been involved in setting service standards although the Council involves local people in new proposals including cultural issues.
- 3 The Council is making progress to achieve many of its objectives across cultural service areas through a mixed economy of service provision including working with partners to deliver services at the Swan leisure centre and Maltings theatre. The Council also supports and facilitates the needs of local groups to develop their own projects such as the funding of local sport clubs through the club development project.
- 4 The Council is making positive contributions to the quality of life of some local people but it does not always clearly reflect the positive impact it is making. Satisfaction and usage of cultural services are mostly high and improving when compared to other district councils. Evidence of how improvements have been achieved within cultural services is limited.
- 5 The Council is making good progress towards achieving the milestones set by the CPA improvement plan including those for culture services. Council visions provide a clear direction for the future provision of cultural service although they do not set any timescale for implementation of its plans. The calibre of leadership for cultural services is mixed and the effectiveness of senior officers is limited by restricted resources.
- 6 The Council has made positive changes to its approach to value for money (VFM) and there is evidence that it is improving. However, progress with performance management has been slow and there are still a number of areas that need to be addressed before further required improvement can be achieved. The effectiveness of cultural services business plans is limited and their actions are not SMART¹. They are not related to corporate priorities and they are not resourced.

¹ SMART - specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-related.

Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed Berwick Upon Tweed Borough Council as providing a ‘fair’, one-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart²



Source: Audit Commission

² The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

8 Cultural services is a fair, one-star service because:

- The Council does not know if it is satisfying demand for services as:
 - it does not know the overall views of its citizens; (Para 21)
 - it does not know how successful its investments in services have been; (Para 42)
 - it does not make special arrangements for consulting with minority groups including young people; and (Paras 31, 32 and 34)
 - service outcomes and achievements are not always recognised or celebrated.
- The Council does not know if cultural services is providing value for money because:
 - service plans are not consistent in providing costing and performance data and value for money is not considered; (Para 46)
 - current procurement arrangements do not follow modern procurement practices; and (Para 51)
 - there is no guarantee that investments will contribute to the Council's priorities for local people. (Paras 22 to 24).
- Use of leisure facilities by local people is low but overall usage is increasing. (Para 48)

However:

- use of and satisfaction with arts, museums and theatre facilities is high; (Para 41)
- satisfaction with leisure facilities is high; (Para 41)
- the Council supports and facilitates the needs of local groups to develop their own projects; and (Paras 30, 35 and 50)
- cultural services are working in a variety of partnerships to deliver improved performance. (Para 26)

9 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- the community plan generally does not give a clear picture of what it will be like for local communities in 2015; (Para 56)
- the extent of councillor involvement in cultural services is mixed and the effectiveness of senior officers is limited by capacity including unfilled and unconfirmed posts; (Para 63)
- the Council's priorities are limited to its core functions and do not recognise its contribution to wider issues including education and health improvement of local people; (Para 62)
- the effectiveness of cultural services business plans is limited - service aims and future plans are not robust; (Para 66)
- costs and performance are not considered together and benchmarking with others is not carried out; and
- the Council has yet to decide on the future of some cultural services.

However:

- use of cultural services and user satisfaction are improving in most areas; (para 54)
- the Community Plan has identified short-term priorities for working groups and partners to follow including for cultural services; (Para 57)
- the Council is making good progress towards achieving most of its milestones that were established as part of its CPA improvement plan including those for cultural services. The Council is starting to embed performance management across all services; (Para 69)
- consultation with young people is leading to the establishment of a youth forum; and (Para 60)
- as part of its new focus on VFM the Council has started to challenge existing arrangements including procurement. (Para 72)

Recommendations

- 10 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 costs³ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

Recommendation

R1 Determine the priority the Council attaches to cultural services by:

- *establishing a clear vision and alignment of priorities and actions;*
- *resolving current uncertainty of resourcing of cultural services including unfilled and unconfirmed posts; and*
- *an early determination of its review of museum services.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are to:

- clearly establish the future role of cultural services; and
- provide appropriate resources to support the future role of cultural services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with undetermined costs. This should be implemented within six months.

Recommendation

R2 Performance management needs to be embedded in cultural services:

- *councillors should be more engaged and aware of performance information and the way it reflects the quality of service provision;*
- *service plans should be developed so they provide informative performance data which is relevant to key service objectives; and*
- *the Council should look to systematically benchmark with the way others provide cultural services as a means of monitoring value for money.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are to:

- provide a greater understanding and focus on what the services should be doing;
- ensure that service provision is in line with priorities; and
- identify and implement best practice from other service providers.

³ Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented within six months.

Recommendation

R3 The Council should improve its engagement with local community, partners and other stakeholders to improve its understanding of their needs and satisfaction with Cultural services by:

- *finding out what service outcomes local people expect including ethnic minority groups;*
- *involving users and non-users in decision-making; and*
- *explaining what is to be achieved rather than what is going to be done (such as public art proposals).*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- targeting services at areas of need and improving facilities to address priorities;
- getting the support of communities for projects that will result in change; and
- ensuring that people know when the Council has been successful.

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

Recommendation

R4 The Council should ensure that partnership working adds value to the achievement of local priorities including:

- *developing contracts with challenging outcomes;*
- *obtaining detailed information about contractor/partner performance;*
- *ensuring joint benefits are achieved;*
- *requiring outcomes for funding of projects;*
- *providing incentives by rewarding success; and*
- *engaging users in contract performance details.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are to:

- improve VFM;
- increase quality of service and user satisfaction; and
- improve inter-service working.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented within six months.

Recommendation

R5 As part of the culture change programme, the Council should acknowledge achievements as well as processes by:

- *emphasising outputs and achievements instead of inputs when looking at performance and service planning;*
- *identifying achievements and proposed improvements to local communities and not what is to be done; and*
- *encouraging staff to celebrate success.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- people will have a better understanding of what the Council intends to achieve;
- staff will gain a better understanding of how they are contributing to Council priorities; and
- a culture that values success will develop.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 11 The Borough of Berwick upon Tweed is located in Northumberland and is the northern-most Borough in England. The Borough is bordered to the north and west by Scotland and to the east by the North Sea and covers a mainly rural area of 370 square miles. The resident population is 26,132, making Berwick-upon-Tweed the second smallest local authority area (by population) in England. The Borough is mainly rural with a population density of 27 per square kilometres compared to the national average of 380 people per square kilometre. Half the population live in the town of Berwick and there is no other settlement exceeding 2,000 people. The black and minority ethnic population is very low at 1.4 per cent. The pensionable age population is increasing and was 26.2 per cent in 2004/05 compared with a UK average of 18 per cent and the 2001 census showed a small, overall fall in population since 1991.
- 12 During the summer months, an influx of visitors increases the Borough's daytime population to an estimated 100,000. Many visitors stay at holiday centres and camps located mostly in the coastal areas. There has been a marked increase in second/holiday homes in the Borough and this usage accounts for over 8 per cent of the total housing stock compared with Northumberland at 1.73 per cent and the UK at 0.64 per cent.
- 13 Unemployment in the Borough is 2.6 per cent, higher than the national average of 2.0 per cent but lower than the regional average of 2.8 per cent. The Borough is ranked 124 out of 354 in the Indices of Multiple Deprivation for England. The top four employment industries within the Borough are agriculture, manufacturing, distribution and public administration. Twelve per cent of the working age population are in receipt of key benefits which is the national average and lower than the regional average. Life expectancy is high compared with other areas nationally and regionally but so is infant mortality. Few people consider anti-social behaviour to be a problem compared to other areas.

The Council

- 14 There is no overall political control of the Council with the 29 councillors split 14 Conservative, 7 Liberal Democrat, 6 Independents and 2 New Labour Independent councillors. The Council has adopted the fourth alternative arrangements for its political structure. This consists of a leader, two policy committees (Corporate Services and Regeneration and Environment) which are chaired by Conservative councillors and an Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which is chaired by the Liberal Democrat group. There are also a number of working groups established by policy committees to consider particular issues or services. In 2004 the Corporate Performance Assessment of the Council described it as weak.

- 15 The Council employs 146 full-time and 28 part-time staff in three directorates: Environment; Regeneration and Development; and Corporate Services. The Council's net revenue budget for the year 2006/07 is £6.05 million and the capital programme is £1.1 million. Its revenue expenditure per head of £169 is higher than the regional and national averages.

The Council's cultural services

- 16 The Council provides a broad range of cultural services to Berwick communities and visitors to the area; both directly and through supporting partnerships. This is an important role for the Council and other public and voluntary sector organisations as there is very little private sector provision of culture facilities or activities other than those provided specifically for visitors such as at large caravan sites. The facilities and activities within the culture service include: tourism; museums, archives and public records; culture and the arts including The Maltings theatre and arts centre; sports development and management; and play and parks services. Cultural services have recently been restructured within the Regeneration and Development Directorate but some posts remain unfilled.
- 17 The Council's net revenue budget for the service in 2006/07 is £1.8 million and a capital commitment to culture projects is £44,000. The projected capital budget for 2007/08 has not been determined although it will include the improvement programme for children's play areas. The service employs 22 staff.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 18 Berwick is the second smallest district council in England based on its resident population but it covers a large geographic area. The Council has limited resources to provide cultural services and this has a major influence on how they can be delivered and the depth to which they can be provided. The Council aims to provide culture facilities and activities for all communities within the Borough in line with the clear direction provided by the wider corporate aims. For example, the service has impacts on the corporate vision for 'economic, community development and regeneration' and its proposed action to 'enhancing tourism' is to provide comprehensive tourist information services together with a wide range of support for local tourism-related businesses. Also the 'Quality of Life' vision has a proposed action 'for people to enjoy diverse and exciting cultural and leisure opportunities'.
- 19 The Council's close working with other organisations at a regional level has helped the alignment of culture services to national, regional and local priorities. For example, the Council's visions for 'economic, community development and regeneration' and 'quality of life' have identified priorities that reflect national government and regional agencies' focus on social and economic regeneration and improving the environment.
- 20 Cultural services supplement in-house capacity through partnership working at both strategic and at operational levels. Strategic partnerships include regional and sub-regional working including the local and Northumberland strategic partnerships, Northumberland County Council and its only English neighbouring Council, Alnwick District Council. In addition, it works in partnership with various regional public bodies and representative groups for each service activity area including Sport England, North Northumberland Tourism Association and English Heritage. Where appropriate, the services have aligned their strategies and action plans with those at a regional and sub-regional level such as the Council's children's play strategy with the North Northumberland playing fields strategy. At an operational level the Council has a number of agreements for joint working such as with Northumberland County Council for the provision of archive services and through private sector contracts such as for the operation of the Swan Leisure Centre.

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

- 21** Decisions relating to planning, managing and delivering services are based on some understanding and knowledge of local needs from surveys and other consultations. There is a general awareness of local needs among councillors, managers and staff and this inform services such as parks and leisure. The Council relies on national surveys by Mori to provide information about the overall views and satisfaction of the Borough's citizens. The Council does not supplement these surveys in a systematic way to get more detailed views such as user surveys at facilities. The lack of a detailed or greater depth of awareness means that not all aspects of services are user-focused.
- 22** The Council has a good picture of how important culture is to local people, compared to other council priorities. However, they have not yet acted upon the results of these findings? It recently completed a Simalto survey of 300 local people to identify their views of current services. It identified that the reduction of some culture services would cause least displeasure such as the shutting of the museum and the withdrawal of the Beadnell Bay boat launching facility. They considered that other cultural services should not be reduced including tourist information centres, leisure centres, local events support and maintenance of open spaces. The Council is considering the implications of these findings but it is not clear what action is to be taken in relation to the survey.
- 23** Effective consultation is carried out regarding individual schemes such as the heritage play trail and feedback has influenced the layout of play equipment in new play areas. Some service areas consult partners about particular service issues such as the friends of Museums and Archives. But there are no surveys to identify how satisfied people are with the outcomes achieved from projects or investments made by the Council. Without this information the Council cannot be certain that it is providing suitable services for local communities.
- 24** The Council has a clear pricing policy for targeted groups. It offers discounts to groups including young people, older people and the disabled but it does not identify the particular views of these groups as part of its wider consultation process. Without this information the Council cannot be clear about the overall views of its citizens or how successful its investments have been. It does not know if it is matching demand with provision.
- 25** There is limited, joined up service planning and delivery within cultural services. This has been recognised by the Council and a restructure is being implemented in an attempt to make the best use of available resources and provide a more co-ordinated service.

- 26 Partnership working is improving the capacity of cultural services. It works at a regional and sub-regional level to secure funding and support for service provision such as that from Northumberland Strategic Partnership for the development of public art planned for The Ramparts Business Park in Berwick. It has procured contracts for its leisure services and has agreements such as with the Maltings trust for the provision of arts and cultural services. It works with communities to improve local access facilities that are managed by the community including the provision of IT equipment at village halls. These joint arrangements are helping to bring together key players and partners to provide services.
- 27 The Council's approach to diversity and providing equal access and opportunities is mixed. Many facilities comply with requirements for access needs of local people. Some key buildings such as The Maltings and The Borough Museum are not DDA compliant and documents are not provided in large print but Council offices do have portable induction loops. There is limited information about ethnicity, vulnerability and disability of service users and this means that, whilst there may be a basic understanding and general provision to address diversity issues, the Council does not know if it provides services in a non-discriminatory way. The Council is missing opportunities to provide bespoke services to particular groups in the community.
- 28 The large majority of services are located in appropriate locations and settings, and opening times are generally convenient for users. The majority of facilities and services are based in Berwick which has the majority of residents, but facilities elsewhere include:
- an agreement with a private operator for local people to use a swimming pool at a caravan park in Seahouses; and
 - children and young people have access and opportunities to a number of play facilities. Informal play areas are provided by local communities and the Council inspects and maintains them to a safe standard.
- 29 The location of the Borough Museum is not ideal. It is part of the English Heritage Barracks Museum Complex, but there is no signage to advertise its presence, and visitors pay the standard English Heritage entrance rate which includes access to the Council's museum. However, visitor numbers have increased from 13,000 in 2002/03 to just over 15,000 in 2005/06.
- 30 The Council has effective ways of promoting and encouraging participation in local events. Details of events are readily available at Council facilities and Tourist Information Centres (TIC's). The Council announces community and charity events every week to a local radio audience of over 90,000. These arrangements have resulted in high usage of art and museum facilities although leisure facilities usage is low compared with other councils.

- 31 The Council does not have information about the transport needs of local communities. It does not consider it necessary to provide help with transport for people from isolated locations to access the Council offices at Berwick or to attend events at cultural facilities. It tested the need for people from Wooler to attend an event in Berwick but there was no identified demand. The Council considers that local communities adequately satisfy their own transport needs. Without greater consultation with local communities the Council cannot be sure that there is not a transport need for local communities.
- 32 Feedback about cultural services and facilities is generally not encouraged. The Council is not proactive in obtaining user and non-user views about cultural services. The leisure centre and The Maltings have user feedback cards but the Council does not use the data to monitor contractor performance or change working arrangements. The Council does have a systematic customer complaints procedure and there have been no formal complaints about culture services in the last twelve months. Without the effective collection and analysis of user and non-user feedback on services, there is little opportunity for customer feedback to influence service provision.
- 33 Service standards exist for most service areas but they are limited and do not form part of contract or performance management arrangements. There is little evidence to show that users and local people have been involved in setting standards. The Maltings management determines the programme of events without consultation. The leisure centre displays standards of service but these were not developed through user consultation. The museum determines its programme of events largely in relation to available funding. The lack of user and non-user involvement in setting standards means that the Council cannot be sure it is providing what the local community and visitors want.
- 34 The service makes little use of information about local communities. It is aware of the make-up of its communities through census and other information but makes little use of the information and does not work with its partners to develop a wider understanding of community needs. Although the service does not discriminate directly or intentionally against any person or organisation it is generally not proactive in identifying and working with or for them. The service does not have a register of minority groups and it does not make special arrangements for consulting with such groups.
- 35 The Council is making progress to achieve many of its objectives across cultural service areas. It does this through a mixed economy of service provision which includes supporting and facilitating the needs of local groups to develop their own projects such as the funding of local sport clubs through the club development project.

- 36 The impact of the Council's cultural services on the *quality of life* for local people is not clear as it does not always reflect the positive impact it is making. It has a quality of life priority to 'enjoy diverse and exciting cultural and leisure opportunities'. However, service outcomes and achievements are not always recognised or celebrated as corporate priorities do not explicitly include reference to health and education and the council does not recognise their contribution to these areas. For example:
- the Museum and Archives services work with local schools to teach students, through presentations and visits, about their local heritage in line with the national curriculum;
 - the Council works in partnership with Northumberland PCT on the 'walking for health' initiative. Although it knows how many people participate it has not been related to any impact on the health of local people; however
 - the motivation project encourages disabled people to participate in a variety of exercise and sport events. Target groups are identified, the number of participants is recorded and the benefits of each initiative are closely monitored. This is a good example for other projects to follow.
- 37 Museum service targets are not aligned to Council priorities. They are mostly driven by the availability of external funding and grants. Recent examples include the maritime and WW2 events which attracted £26,000 and £28,000 respectively from Arts Council England – North East. The success of such events can be linked retrospectively to the Council priorities of 'Enhancing tourism' and 'Enjoying diverse and exciting cultural opportunities' but any success is not quantified or related to priorities when funding applications are made. There is no guarantee that these investments will contribute to the Council's priorities for local people.
- 38 The impact of cultural services initiatives on quality of life is not measured. For example, the Cheviot Centre includes community space, tourist information centres (TIC) and promotes health and education to families. It provides facilities for local people as well as visitors. However, it is not clear how effective or how well the facilities are used. The Council also works with various groups including young people and disabled but the impact of their work is not clear.
- 39 Cultural services' contribution to the *local economy* is recognised and valued by partners and key stakeholders. Although the Council has some understanding of the value of its contribution it cannot be quantified.

- 40 The area's cultural heritage features highly in the area's tourism product but not significantly or strongly in regeneration schemes or as part of the promotion of the area as a 'good place' to live and work. The service is marketing and promoting the Borough in terms of tourism through its three TICs at Wooler, Seahouses and Berwick. Following encouragement by the regional development agency, ONE North East, they have combined their tourist holiday guide with Alnwick Borough Council and have also updated Lowry Trail and Golfers Passport leaflets. The Council has worked with Alnwick Borough Council to produce an events booklet covering both areas. Annual events such as the Border Marches, Riding the Bounds, the Curfew Run, Stride for Life and Xmas Lights attract large numbers of tourists to the area, some staying in local B&B, thereby increasing the potential economic benefit to local traders and businesses.
- 41 Residents and service users were mostly satisfied with cultural services in 2003/04. Satisfaction with sports and leisure facilities, museums and galleries, and arts activities and events were all above average compared with other English districts but satisfaction with parks and open spaces was in the worst quartile. The Council has not carried out supplementary surveys to identify more recent user satisfaction. Usage by residents of museums and galleries and theatres and concert halls were best quartile in 2004/05 compared to all English authorities. Sport and leisure usage by residents was worst quartile although overall use is improving. These figures indicate that Berwick on Tweed residents are generally satisfied with their cultural services and making good use of them.
- 42 The Council can not demonstrate that the investment it has placed in cultural services has led to an increase in satisfaction or use. For example, in 1996, the Borough Museum and Art Gallery was the first north east museum to receive Phase II accreditation for the museums, libraries and archives national standard. The Council has recently agreed to fund the Museum service an additional £20,000 to enable it to obtain re accreditation as this is a primary requirement for receiving regional funding for projects such as the SeaBritain exhibition. However, it can not distinguish how many people visit the Borough museum as separate to the Barracks Museum complex.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 43 The Council does not know if it is providing value for money for cultural services. Over the last few months the Council has made significant and positive changes to its approach to value for money (VFM) and there is evidence that the challenge is beginning to improve VFM. However, these changes are not fully implemented or embedded across services and the Council is unable to demonstrate a track record of challenge to value for money
- 44 The Council currently spends 30 per cent of its total revenue budget on cultural services compared with a typical district council spend of around 20 per cent. It is delivering good customer satisfaction from this investment. The combination of high spend, high usage and mostly above average satisfaction in cultural services suggests that, overall, value for money is average.

- 45 The Council does not undertake systematic cost comparisons with other councils or partners. This restricts their learning or understanding of the differences between the costs of providing various cultural services or to review cost effectiveness.
- 46 Service plans are not consistent in providing costing and performance data and value for money is not routinely considered. Following the introduction of the Council's performance management framework (June 2005) and its subsequent implementation, the services are now starting to monitor their costs against performance and challenging irregularities.
- 47 As part of its new focus on VFM the Council is challenging existing arrangements as reflected in the recent decision to reject the proposed business plan from The Maltings Theatre and Arts Centre. The Council own these premises, which are run by the Maltings Theatre and Arts Trust, and they provide £130,000 core funding each year but traditionally have had no information to identify if it was delivering VFM. During 2005/06 the centre continued to run at a considerable loss. The proposed business plan was seen to be inadequate in a number of ways including performance management, projections of future income and fund raising and was subsequently rejected. To ensure that the next business plan submission includes value for money, the Council and Arts Council have appointed a private consultant to oversee the production of a new plan. This reflects the Council's commitment to obtain VFM from its investments.
- 48 As part of its efforts to improve VFM the Council has agreed to review the current management arrangements for the operation of the Swan Centre for Leisure. The facility is owned by the Council, and managed on its behalf by Leisure Connections Ltd. until the end of March 2008. A review of arrangements and available options for the future management is being considered with a strong emphasis on achieving continuous service improvements, and VFM. A review is being carried out to identify the best way of providing the service in the future. However, it does not consider the best use of the facilities even though figures show that usage is low compared to other district councils. There is little evidence of user opinions and no details of what limits non-users from using the various facilities (anecdotal evidence suggests 50 per cent of users are from Scotland). Limiting the brief to management arrangements will not address the low performance and limited performance information available about the facility. In addition the Council has not taken a proactive approach to increasing usage and monitoring existing performance data during the two years leading up to the expiry of the current contract.
- 49 The Council is not monitoring the impact of its advertising campaigns. The Berwick /Alnwick tourist brochure is paid for through local advertising and is available at all council properties and are distributed to other TIC's in the region. However the Council does not know how effective the brochure is at attracting people to the area and does not know if it is obtaining value for money.

- 50 The Council is supporting local sport and arts organisations through grant funding but it does not know if it gets value for money for its investments. It gives awards and grants to help local groups but it does not set conditions such as requirement for widening user base including young people. The lack of control means the Council cannot be sure that investment is being effectively targeted at priority areas. Typical examples include support funding for improvements to Tweedmouth Bowling Club and Kirknewton Village Trust. It is not clear how these improvements to premises will be measured in terms of usage and satisfaction of local people.
- 51 Current procurement arrangements do not follow modern procurement practices. The Council is aware of this and is working with other Northumberland districts to produce a joint strategy. They have learned from best practice by using, as a model, an appropriate strategy already produced by a metropolitan council. This will help the Council to fast track the adoption of a proven strategy. This new strategy will reflect corporate priorities and will allow for joint purchase to achieve economies of scale.
- 52 The Council's more rigorous approach to procurement is improving value for money. For example, Overview and Scrutiny Committee is investigating why an opportunity was missed to obtain funds for the employment of a culture and arts officer. This is an example of the Council monitoring the performance of the service and focusing on VFM.
- 53 Cultural services are working in a variety of successful partnerships to deliver improved performance through achieving economies of scale and capacity building. Examples include:
- tourism work with Alnwick and Tynedale Councils to produce guidance for local groups who want to run events;
 - Museums and Archives work with Northumberland County Council and North East Museums Libraries Arts Commission to enable electronic access of records. Without the joint arrangements the resulting benefits would probably not have been achieved; and
 - The North Northumberland Playing Pitch Strategy was commissioned and funded jointly by Berwick and Alnwick District Council. Other funders included Northumberland County Council, NOF and Sport England. The strategy was completed in September 2004. The strategy has been used as a basis for the funding of themed play equipment across the Borough.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 54 Cultural services are improving in most areas and this is reflected in the general increased satisfaction with cultural services between 2000/01 and 2003/04. Residents satisfied with parks and open spaces, sports and leisure facilities, arts activities and venues and museums and galleries all improved.
- 55 Evidence of how improvements have been achieved within cultural services is limited. Services are unable to demonstrate how changes have led to improvements in value for money and satisfaction. There is little evidence of how outcomes are contributing to improvements for different community groups. There are no explicit links between the actions of the individual services and directorate aims. Service improvements in relation to its action plan for the Northumberland cultural strategy are not clearly articulated; many of the actions are ongoing, and details of potential outcomes or the impact of completed actions are not given. The lack of information about how its services are impacting on users and non-users is limiting the Council's ability to make decisions that focus on key service objectives.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 56 The clarity of direction provided by the Community Plan for cultural services is patchy. The Berwick Borough Local Strategic Partnership (BBLSP) produced a community plan, after consultation with local people that has established a vision and aims for 2015. Some aims provide a clear focus such as 'to promote good health and wellbeing' which has a related target for 2015 to 'Reduce by 40 per cent the death rate from heart disease, strokes and related conditions'. This is a good example of the community plan giving a clear direction for partners, including the Council, to focus their efforts towards improving the lives of local people. However, the plan generally does not give a clear picture of what it will be like for local communities in 2015.
- 57 The community plan has clearly identified priorities for working groups and partners to follow. Those relating to the Council's cultural services include: to fund a Town Centre Manager; new cultural events and the promotion of the Borough to tourists and businesses; to identify, protect and improve existing facilities and to increase the number of visitors from within the UK and beyond; to work towards World Heritage Status for Berwick; and to extend the tourist season, bringing economic benefits throughout the Borough. These give a clear direction for the Council to develop its cultural service. Linkages between Council, regional and sub-regional strategies are clear such as the links between the Council's Children Play Strategy and the North Northumberland Playing Fields Strategy. These links are helping the Council to focus on priorities that help to justify funding bids such as the Heritage Play Trail scheme.

- 58 The Council's visions for the future reflect most community plan priorities and clearly determine what the priorities are for cultural service. The vision 'that the Borough of Berwick-upon-Tweed becomes a premier location to live, work and play' and associated priority to 'Enhance Tourism' can be clearly linked to the service action to 'Develop a strategy to improve 'access for all' to our main tourist attractions'. A second vision 'to develop sustainable, enjoyable communities' is clearly linked to the service actions including 'Contributing to the development of a beacon arts, music and cultural experience with existing and other venues throughout the Borough'. The Council visions provide a clear direction for the future provision of cultural service although it does not set any timescale for implementation of its plans. It does not give a clear picture of how people will benefit from cultural services during the lifetime of the visions.
- 59 The Council does not have a complete understanding of the cultural expectations of local residents. However, it is taking steps to improve its consultation process. A consultation strategy is close to approval and a centrally co-ordinated programme and timetable for community consultation is in place. The culture service has access to information collected by other agencies such as the County Council's Youth Service and this provides a greater understanding of, for example, what families and children expect of a culture service.
- 60 The Council has appropriate arrangements in place for involving local people formally and informally about new proposals including cultural issues. It is currently consulting about the proposed provision of public art in Berwick town centre. It had open meetings involving the appointed artist and has included a questionnaire in its quarterly newsletter 'Bear Facts' which is delivered to every household in the Borough. Feedback will help determine if a piece of art will be commissioned for Berwick market place. The Council has also used its citizens' panel to identify local views of the relative priorities of its range of services. Feedback has resulted in the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee looking at current priorities with the intention of deciding if funding for any non-priority services should be stopped. Consultation with local people is impacting on the Council's decision making process. Consultation with young people is leading to the establishment of a youth forum. It is too early to say what impact this will have on future Council decision-making.
- 61 The Council has an effective procedure for considering diversity, equality and human rights implications of proposed service decisions or actions before action is taken. The implications of any action is referred to in all Committee reports although the thoroughness of some statements is questionable such as the suggestion that the regeneration and development directorate's service plan for 2006/07 has no equality or crime and disorder issues. The workforce development plan includes the Council's position statement on diversity and the race equality scheme is to be incrementally introduced by 2007. Some staff training has been provided but not in a systematic way.

- 62 The Council's priorities are limited to its core functions including cultural services. They are not outward focusing and do not reflect the impact that the Council is making on nationally shared priorities such as social wellbeing. Cultural services contribute towards the education and health of local people but this is not recognised or celebrated by the Council. Recognition of this work would help employees to understand the contribution they are making towards the wellbeing of local communities.
- 63 The extent of councillor involvement in cultural services is mixed. Councillors' involvement in service performance is limited to leading councillors who meet monthly with senior officers to discuss progress and any necessary remedial action. Other councillors appear unclear about their role, particularly in relation to performance management. They have recently been given access to a new performance management database and information about performance reports is included in the weekly listings. Performance information is provided in the in-house magazine 'What's Bruin' and on the Council's website. Councillors give consideration to service plans through the annual review process but there has been a limited response to recently provided performance management information. The lack of councillor awareness and use of performance information limits their ability to challenge the way services are designed and delivered.
- 64 The effectiveness of senior officers is limited in cultural services because of restricted resources. A new structure for cultural services has been agreed as part of a review of the Regeneration and Development Directorate but some key posts are still unfilled and others have not been confirmed. This has a significant impact on such a small team and until a full establishment has been achieved it will not be possible for senior officers to be fully effective.
- 65 The Council is starting to embed performance management across all services but it has some way to go. It has consolidated and improved informal and inconsistent arrangements with the introduction of a performance management framework including the use of software to record data and monitor performance. Officers are being trained in its use although to date this has not included culture staff. It is too early to see any impact of the new arrangement on performance improvement or value for money.

- 66 The effectiveness of cultural services business plans is limited. Service aims and future plans are not robust and actions are not SMART. Actions are not related to corporate priorities and they are not resourced. Responsibility is identified but no clear timetable or project plan is provided to say how and when they will be done and no costs are provided. Service plans for each service area are provided as part of the Directorate Plan. There is limited performance data to measure the performance of services and some service areas such as sport development and tourism have no performance measures. Plans follow a general format but the amount of information provided in each varies. For example, only the archive section gives details of local PIs and only the museums plan identifies its budget for 2006/07. Proposals relate to one-year and there is no reference to longer-term planning. The service planning process is limited and provides little detail of what is being done and it is not possible to monitor how well services perform in most areas.
- 67 Informal monitoring of cultural services is not fully effective. The Council has established an informal culture and arts working group to oversee and monitor development and progress of cultural events and activities within the Borough including the Maltings Theatre and Arts Centre. The group has a number of aims but it has no formal responsibilities. It brings together councillors and officers with invitations extended to community and event organiser representatives as and when necessary. It meets on a monthly basis to monitor progress of the Maltings and community events; give advice and guidance to event organisers; and to progress public art initiatives. The informal nature of the group means that it is difficult to give it credit for improving services but there is a general view that it is having an impact on service improvement.
- 68 There is little evidence of costs and performance being considered together and benchmarking with others is not carried out on a routine basis. This limits the ability of officers and councillors to make informed VFM decisions.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 69 The Council is making good progress towards achieving most of its 116 milestones that were established as part of its CPA improvement plan including those relating to cultural services. These include the restructuring of the service and the appointment of new staff. Those relating to Leadership, Vision and Priorities, and High Profile Operational Issues have been met but a significant number relating to Culture Change and Partnerships are not being met. Progress in these areas is important as the Council has limited capacity to provide services without joint working.
- 70 The Council's current financial position is relatively healthy with general fund reserves of £1.9 million. However, it is using reserves to support its revenue expenditure and this is not sustainable. The Council has yet to fully address this issue. It has built into the medium-term financial plan annual cost savings of £200,000 and is currently undertaking an exercise to identify further savings. It has not yet identified how it will meet its entire Gershon savings by 2008.

- 71 The Council has begun to prioritise its funding. The 2006/07 budget book has matched existing funding arrangements to priorities but the Council has not yet decided how it will invest in line with its priorities. It has not identified what current investments relating to non priorities should be stopped. For example, what impact will the simalto survey have on service priorities?
- 72 The implementation of the improvement plan is having a positive impact on cultural services. The services have been restructuring within the Regeneration and Development Directorate. However, the approval of new posts, the agreement to fill existing unfilled posts and the integration of services areas has not yet been fully implemented. Although the town centre and inward investment manager has recently taken up post and a regeneration officer will be starting shortly; until all posts on the establishment have been filled there will be no noticeable increase in the capacity and ability of cultural services to deliver improvement. Overview and Scrutiny Committee carried out a partnership audit that included the Swan leisure centre and The Maltings which has led to the review of working arrangements for these two centres with the intention of identifying improved performance management and customer services.
- 73 Culture services have a good record of obtaining funding for capital projects such as through Northumberland strategic partnership for cultural and arts activities and revenue projects including New Opportunity funding for its Walking to Health initiative. This funding is helping the Council to improve the quality of life for local people.
- 74 The Council is working in partnership to regenerate parts of Berwick town in accordance with its strategies and priorities for cultural services.
- It has established a partnership with the Berwick Preservation Trust on a scheme to regenerate the former Dewar's Lane Granary building which currently stands derelict in the town centre. The project is receiving support from English Heritage, ONE NE and Northumberland Strategic Partnership. The scheme aims to transform the granary into an attractive building, housing a café, auditorium, meeting space, exhibition spaces, and Youth Hostel accommodation - contributing to both regenerating part of the town and tourist accommodation.
 - The Council, in partnership with the Berwick Rangers football club, supporters and other stakeholders, is pursuing a number of options for regenerating the site adjacent to Shielfield Park. This includes an improved sports stadium, office space for relocation of Council headquarters (away from town centre) conference and meeting facilities. External consultants undertaken a feasibility study for such a multi purpose development site. Their report is currently with the council for decisions on which options to pursue.
 - The Council has recently commissioned an artist to develop and deliver high quality public art on-site as part of the nearly completed Ramparts Business Park.

- 75** Both the Shielfield Stadium and Dewars Lane Granary projects are long-term and whilst providing opportunities for increased employment and use, their impact will not be known for some considerable time.
- 76** The Council is providing good advice and training to people in local communities that are helping them to organise and manage their own events. The Council has worked with Tynedale and Alnwick Councils to produce a guidance document for people wanting to organise events. It gives details including a checklist of what to do from inception to completion of a project. The Council is also encouraging local people to become sport coaches so that local communities can organise and run local coaching events. These initiatives have been successful in enabling activities to take place safely in local communities whilst increasing community capacity.