

Culture Inspection

Solihull Metropolitan 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 Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council provides 'fair' cultural services which have 'promising' prospects for improvement.
- 2 There are a broad range of cultural services in the borough including libraries, sports activities and facilities, parks, arts, a theatre and tourist information. The Council spends approximately £11.3 million annually on these services.
- 3 The Council is clear about what it wants to achieve with cultural services and the corporate priorities of learning, health and quality of life are embedded into the services. It has good intelligence about the needs of the community which, coupled with ongoing consultation, is being used to shape cultural services.
- 4 There is a broad range of initiatives across cultural services to promote and enable access and the services are making an impact on people's lives particularly through learning. Partnerships are also delivering some tangible outcomes within sport, the arts and learning.
- 5 Diversity is not fully embedded into cultural services. Cultural services have a number of initiatives to address the needs of different groups within the community but has not fully formalised its approach. It has not completed equality impact assessments for many parts of cultural services and corporately the Council has achieved Level One of the Equality Standard. The approach to using pricing to promote access is inconsistent and its effectiveness is unclear. Access to cultural services through ICT is not fully developed, for example it is not possible to book theatre tickets or sports facilities on line.
- 6 Overall value for money is inconsistent with differences between the service divisions - for example it is significantly better for parks than leisure facilities. However, accredited quality assurance is in place in most parts of cultural services.
- 7 The quality of cultural facilities is inconsistent. For example the Council has ageing leisure centres but good quality library buildings. This is reflected by varying satisfaction levels for cultural services. Priority areas of cultural services are improving and overall usage of key services is increasing.
- 8 There are clear improvement plans to address the main service weaknesses in particular the condition of sport and leisure facilities. The Council has completed a robust procurement process for its leisure facilities and has recently secured a public private partnership which will result in the replacement of one of its leisure centres and refurbishment of another. It includes £8 million of private investment.
- 9 The performance management framework for cultural services is solid but outcome measurement and targeting are not fully developed. Leadership is strong and human resource planning is good and the Council has secured finances to make key cultural services improvements. It is good at attracting external funding for cultural services.

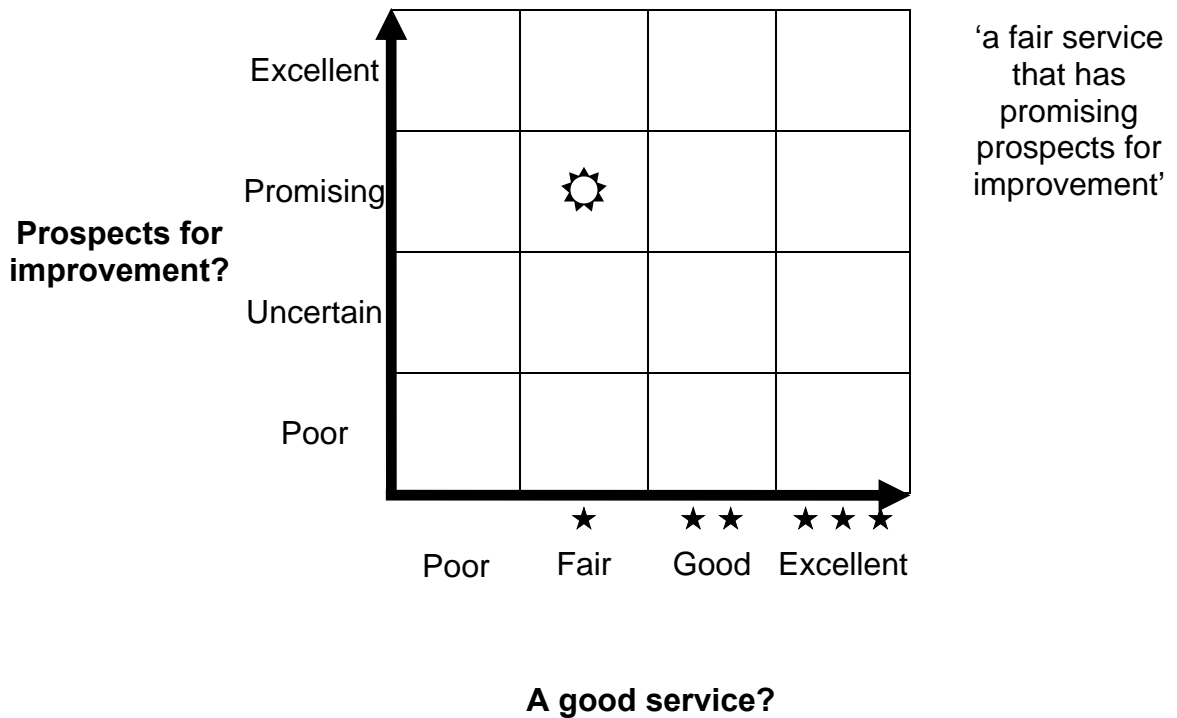
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- 10 The Council does not have a track record of improving value for money or overall satisfaction levels for cultural services. The improvement agenda for leisure facilities is reliant on a public private partnership which has some inherent risks.
- 11 There are uncertainties around the Council's approach to improving physical activity levels. It has not fully developed its implementation plans to work with partners and agree shared targets and initiatives to improve physical activity in the borough.

Scoring the service

- 12 We have assessed Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council's cultural services as 'fair' one-star services that have 'promising' prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 13 Cultural services are fair, one-star services because:
- the Council is clear about what it wants to achieve with cultural services and has good intelligence about the needs of the community which, coupled with ongoing consultation, is being used to shape services;
 - there is a broad range of initiatives across cultural services to promote and enable access and the services which are making an impact on people's lives particularly through learning;

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.

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- partnerships are delivering some tangible outcomes within sport, the arts and learning; and
- quality assurance is in place within most areas of cultural services.

However:

- the approach to using pricing to promote access is inconsistent within cultural services and its effectiveness is unclear. Access to cultural services through ICT is not fully developed;
- diversity is not fully embedded into the delivery of cultural services. The Council has a number of initiatives to address the needs of different groups within the community but has not fully formalised its approach. It has not completed equality impact assessments for many parts of cultural services and corporately the Council has achieved Level One of the Equality Standard;
- the quality of cultural facilities is inconsistent. For example the Council has ageing leisure centres but good quality library buildings. This is reflected by overall average satisfaction levels; and
- value for money is inconsistent between divisions within cultural services. For example, value for money for parks is significantly better than leisure facilities.

14 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- the Council's priority areas are improving and overall usage of cultural services is increasing. The Council also has a track record of delivering key projects within cultural services and corporately;
- there are clear and robust improvement plans to address the main service weaknesses in particular the condition of sport and leisure facilities;
- performance monitoring is solid within cultural services, leadership is strong and human resource planning is good;
- the Council has secured finances to make key cultural services improvements and is good at attracting external funding;
- the Procurement Strategy is successfully applied within cultural services and has recently secured a public private partnership (PPP) for its leisure facilities which includes £8 million of private investment; and
- cultural services are linked into the Council's substantial regeneration agenda and section 106 planning gain funding streams.

However there are some risks.

- The Council does not have a track record of improving value for money or overall satisfaction levels for cultural services. The improvement agenda for leisure facilities is reliant on a PPP which has some inherent risks.
- The measurement and performance management of outcomes is not fully developed.

- There are uncertainties around the Council's approach to improving physical activity levels. It has not fully developed its plans to work with partners and agree shared targets and initiatives to improve physical activity in the borough.

Recommendations

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

Recommendation

R1 The Council needs to develop a more consistent and effective approach to the pricing of its cultural services which:

- *maximises opportunities for disadvantaged groups to access services;*
- *balances targeting subsidies with income maximisation; and*
- *contains clear objectives and targets which link into appropriate performance management systems.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- clearer and more consistent pricing policies which target subsidies; and
- a more effective pricing policy which is successful in attracting disadvantaged groups to access cultural services.

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

Recommendation

R2 The Council should develop its approach to increasing physical activity to enable it to reach its aspirations of contributing to national physical activity targets by:

- *agreeing an action plan which shows how clear targets will be delivered with partners including the voluntary and particularly the private sector;*
- *developing mechanisms to enable the Council and its partners to measure progress; and*
- *seeking good practice from other authorities.*

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

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a joined up approach to physical activity in the borough; and
- improved physical activity levels and associated health benefits.

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

Recommendation

R3 The Council should refine its approach to the performance management of cultural services by:

- *developing more outcome measures and associated targets;*
- *introducing local indicators for parks; and*
- *including indicators which specifically measure value for money.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- clearer information on the contribution of cultural services, and
- improved targeting of resources and value for money.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented for inclusion in the 2007/08 cultural services performance plans.

Recommendation

R4 The Council should ensure that its emerging regeneration plans inform the future planning of cultural services. Conversely, strategic plans for cultural services should inform the regeneration agenda. To enable this the Council needs to:

- *ensure all appropriate assessments of cultural needs have an input into regeneration planning;*
- *include cultural services in all relevant regeneration work streams; and*
- *integrate the regeneration agenda into cultural services delivery plans with clear outcome targets.*

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The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- ensuring cultural services provision is appropriately planned in tandem with regeneration; and
- opportunities for cultural services to contribute towards sustainable communities are maximised.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be initially implemented for inclusion in the 2007/08 cultural services and regeneration performance plans.

Context

The locality

- 16 Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council is in the west midlands of England. It covers an area of 178 square kilometres and is eight miles away from Birmingham city centre. The population of Solihull is 200,400, the lowest of the west midlands seven metropolitan boroughs. Census data indicates that 91.2 per cent of the population in Solihull is 'white British,' higher than the England average of 86.9 per cent, with 2.5 per cent of residents being Asian or Asian British. The majority of residents are between the ages of 30 and 59.
- 17 Seventy-one per cent of people described their health as 'good' in the 2001 Census and the number of people recorded as having a limiting long term illness in the area is lower than the national average at 16.3 per cent.
- 18 Solihull is home to the National Exhibition Centre, Birmingham International Airport and a number of international companies. Apart from the Council itself, major employers in the area include Land Rover, Transco, John Lewis and British Gas. House prices are relatively high.
- 19 Educational attainment compares favourably and is the highest amongst its seven metropolitan neighbours and above the national average. The overall employment rate is higher than regional and national averages at 77.4 per cent in 2004/05 but has experienced a decrease in recent years.
- 20 Solihull was ranked 183 out of 354 local authorities based on the average deprivation scores. Although the majority of areas fall within the 75-100 per cent least deprived set in England, ten areas in the north of Solihull fall within the 10 per cent most deprived areas in the country reflecting a marked difference between the north and the south of the borough.
- 21 A £1.8 billion regeneration scheme focusing on the northern area of Solihull is aiming to bridge the health and economic gaps dividing the borough. It was reported in August 2005 that the developer Bellway would work with Solihull MBC and Whitefriars Housing Group on the initiative, which is expected to be completed in 20 years. The project includes the creation of community hubs in specific areas, offering education, leisure, health and shopping facilities.

The Council

- 22 The Council is made up of 51 councillors with 26 Conservative, 15 Liberal Democrat, 11 Labour and 3 independent/other. The management structure for the Council comprises six directorates including community services.
- 23 The Council's net expenditure for 2005/06 was £228.9 million which is £1,148 per head of population and the average band D council tax was £1,094.85 which is amongst the lowest 25 per cent of councils nationally.

- 24 In December 2005 the Council was rated as 'three-star improving well' in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). The assessment found that the Council has a strong track record of improving its priority services, particularly children's social care and that there is a value for money culture within the Council. Services are generally good and delivered at comparably low cost.

The Council's cultural services

- 25 Cultural services in Solihull broadly comprise of:
- three multi-use leisure centres of which two have swimming pools;
 - thirteen libraries and associated services such as the mobile library;
 - an arts complex with a theatre;
 - parks, playgrounds, sports pitches and open spaces;
 - a sport and inclusion team which is focused on delivering a range of sport and recreation activities and services in the more deprived areas of the borough;
 - outreach services including sports and arts development; and
 - cultural services partnership working including heritage.
- 26 There is a mixed economy in terms of how cultural services are delivered. The parks maintenance function and more recently the leisure centres are managed by private contractors; libraries, sports and arts development, and tourism are run in-house. The Council also works with the voluntary sector to support the delivery of other cultural services such as sports clubs and museums.
- 27 The portfolio for cultural services falls largely within the Community Services Directorate through the Libraries, Arts and Lifelong Learning Division and the Sport and Leisure Division. Parks and open spaces are the responsibility of the Transport, Highways and Environment Division of the same Directorate.
- 28 The Service employs 161 full time equivalent staff although staff employed by the parks and leisure external contractors also deliver a significant part of cultural services. Net expenditure by the Council projected for 2006/07 on the range of cultural services is £11.3 million with £3.2 million generated in income before other external funding and projects are included.
- 29 In February 2005 the Audit Commission's report on Solihull's Regular Performance Assessment for its cultural services concluded that:

'The overall picture in Solihull is one of a council that has begun to put in place a sound strategic framework to support culture and its role in improving quality of life for local people ... there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the current judgement of 'fair' should be reviewed, and it is therefore recommended that a full inspection be carried out to investigate further.'

In May 2005 the Audit Commission developed a new methodology for inspecting cultural services which is considered to be a harder test when compared to approaches used previously.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 30** The community strategy, 'A Place for People - 2006-2013' sets out a vision to make Solihull a place:
- that is good to live in for everyone;
 - that offers opportunities for learning and creativity;
 - where we value children, young people and family life;
 - that is safe from crime and disorder;
 - that creates jobs and encourages enterprise;
 - where people enjoy good health;
 - where people respect difference and diversity;
 - that is inclusive and community focused; and
 - where people promote caring towards others.
- 31** Within aims for the first three years the following have direct links to cultural services:
- reduce crime and anti-social behaviour;
 - reduce drug misuse;
 - provide leisure facilities that are easy to access and available to people at the right time and the right price; and
 - improve access to information, learning, leisure and cultural opportunities in local communities through new technologies.
- 32** In 2005 the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) was renamed as The Solihull Partnership, and the Community Strategy has been refreshed, establishing a new range of priorities. The cultural strategy has yet to be revised and updated but has recently been re-established within the remit of the Place to Live Thematic Group of the LSP.
- 33** The Council's Corporate Plan has a vision of Solihull as 'a place where well-being, pride and quality of life is enjoyed by all.' This has been underpinned by five corporate objectives, eight step change improvement priorities and seven major projects. This is underpinned by values of respect; learning; equality; integrity and caring delivered through leadership, people, communication and competencies. The objectives themselves have been reviewed during 2005 and new priorities established. These include the following.
- A Brighter Future for our Children –with the contributions made by libraries, leisure, and play as essential contributions to meeting the Government's 'Every Child Matters' agenda aimed at raising standards and opportunities for children.

- Improve your Quality of Life – with the environment and culture significantly represented in both the definition and rationale, and recognising the part played by learning and creativity.
- 34 The Council has explicitly made the leisure facilities Public Private Partnership a corporate priority project. This has resulted in close scrutiny and input at the highest level within the Council.
- 35 The Council is clear about what it wants its cultural services to achieve. The main areas of focus are learning (particularly young people) and quality of life health (through physical activity) supported by better facilities and a safer environment. There is now a golden thread from the Community Strategy through to service plans. Cultural Services also has two Local Public Service Agreements (LPSA) each with associated projects and targets:
- LPSA 4 – Creating opportunities for children and young people at risk; and
 - LPSA 5 - Increase the health of patients referred to the exercise referral scheme.

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

Access, customer care and community focus

- 36 The Council's cultural services have good intelligence about the needs of the community in the borough which is being used to shape services. There has been substantial work undertaken including an assessment of physical activity levels, a playing needs assessment, green space strategy and numerous studies into library users and non-users. These are being used to shape services; for example the playing pitch strategy is being used to inform section 106 planning gain agreements. Assessing the need is now embedded into the planning of cultural services and is starting to have an impact on shaping service delivery.
- 37 Ongoing consultation and community engagement is strong within cultural services. The Council has a robust customer complaints monitoring system which captures all formal and informal feedback. Within cultural services the majority of comments and complaints are resolved to the customer's satisfaction. There are also numerous ways of engaging with customers which include a pro-active Citizens Panel and user groups for key cultural services including the libraries, the theatre, leisure centres and parks. Consultation is also integrated into all cultural service strategies. This is enabling the service to be responsive in areas such as opening hours, and proposed capital investment for service enhancements.
- 38 There is a broad range of initiatives across cultural services to promote and enable access and the Council is beginning to measure their impact. For young people the 'Positive Futures' scheme provides sporting opportunities for young people at risk of offending or exclusion. It has developed to a point where participants have gained qualifications to become sports coaches and are now helping deliver the programme.

The sports development function can evidence reductions in anti-social behaviour in areas where it has implemented diversionary activities. The library service is amongst the top 25 per cent of councils nationally at providing ICT for all sections of the community. This is resulting in increased usage particularly amongst younger and older people in the borough. Cultural services buildings have benefited from significant investment to adhere to the Disability Discrimination Act. Where it has not been feasible to make some of the older leisure facilities fully compliant, reasonable adjustments have been made. The Council is developing opportunities for disadvantaged groups to access cultural services.

- 39 The use of pricing to promote access is inconsistent within cultural services and its effectiveness is unclear. There are differences in criteria used for concessions within service divisions and policies do not always promote access. For example an unemployed person can access lower leisure charges but this does not carry through to the family of the individual. This means that the concessions do not always get through to all people affected by an individual's circumstances. The effectiveness of pricing policies is not consistently evaluated - for example concessionary users are not measured against the number eligible to give a sense of penetration. Sport England 2005 benchmarking data indicates a mixed uptake of concessions compared to other authorities with the Tudor Grange centre being below the median and North Solihull above although this reflects the socio economic profile of their respective catchment areas. The Council is not fully clear on how it wishes to use pricing to promote access or how effective current arrangements are across cultural services.
- 40 Cultural services have good operational service standards but do not always communicate these to users. The library service is driven by public library standards, parks have a modern partnership arrangement with a contractor specifying standards and the theatre has comprehensive operational procedures. The Council have based many of these standards on user expectations derived from consultation. However, only the leisure centres, which adhere to the Quest national quality assurance scheme, actually communicate service standards to the public through posters and leaflets. In many areas of cultural services customers are not clear what standards of service they can expect.
- 41 Access to cultural services through ICT is not fully developed. Websites contain up to date information about the services and an active sports database has been produced with partners. However, due to corporate prioritisation for developing ICT, based on a cost benefit analysis, the level of interactivity within cultural services is currently limited. It is possible to reserve a book through the library service but it is not possible to make sports bookings or reserve seats at the theatre. Residents can not electronically access all areas of cultural services where it could be made possible to do so.
- 42 The marketing of cultural services is not strategic and fully aligned to service plans. Marketing budgets are held by individual divisions within cultural services and there are few opportunities for economies of scale although there are some examples of where services are working jointly on promotional initiatives such as arts events in parks. However, marketing plans are not strategic in approach and do not always link into key target groups.

Evaluation of marketing initiatives is not consistently in place across cultural services. This means that there is a risk that the Council is not making the most of its marketing resources and is not clear about the effectiveness of the various initiatives that are in place.

Diversity

- 43 Cultural services understand the needs of its local community. It has carried out substantial work in assessing need and there is a clear recognition of the disparities between the north and south of the borough. This is reflected in a number of positive initiatives including sports development targeted at deprived areas, the development of sight loss resource centres at the Chelmsley Wood and Central libraries, adaptive software installed on People's Network computers, including at least one larger screen at each library, and hearing loops on all reception counters. The Council has also led the growing Black History Month programme. Some groups are benefiting from cultural services initiatives.
- 44 Diversity is not fully integrated into the delivery of cultural services. The Council has achieved Level One of the Equality Standard but has not completed equality impact assessments for significant parts of the library, sports and outdoor leisure services. The Council has improved its internal processes reflected in its score on promoting equality checklist (BVPI 2b) from 21 per cent in 2003/04 to 57 per cent 2004/05. There are inconsistent levels of knowledge and training on diversity amongst staff within cultural services. Internal processes for diversity planning within cultural services are not fully developed.
- 45 Leisure facilities have mixed success in attracting target groups to participate. Sport England 2005 benchmarking includes three key indicators; young people (aged 11-19 years), visits by users from socio-economic classes D and E and visits from black, Asian and other ethnic groups. The results show that at the North Solihull centre usage of two out of three groups are under-represented when compared to the Borough profile, and for Tudor Grange, two out of the three groups are over-represented. The leisure centres are not consistently attracting users from target groups.

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 46 The Council is able to demonstrate significant outputs in all areas of cultural services and the measurement of outcomes is developing. All services have national and local indicators which track areas such as usage and satisfaction. The Council is also able to demonstrate it is improving outcomes particularly with regard to learning and health. Cultural services are very much focused on their priorities of learning, health and young people.
- 47 Accredited quality assurance is in place within most cultural services divisions. The two major leisure centres have achieved the nationally recognised Quest accreditation and three of the Council's main parks have achieved green flag awards. The 'Doc Spot' exercise referral scheme is one of the first nationally accredited schemes in the country. The library service is driven by public library standards and is meeting seven out of ten of the standards.

The Council takes a positive approach to measuring quality which is an integral part of service planning.

- 48** Satisfaction with cultural services indicate overall average performance. The Council conducts regular user surveys for parks, leisure facilities, the theatre and libraries which show overall high satisfaction. However national indicators for 2003/04, which include a cross section of users and non-users, are less positive. Satisfaction with sport/leisure facilities and museums is in the bottom quartile, arts venues and parks are in the second quartile and libraries top quartile. The Council has looked behind these indicators for explanations and its improvement plans are focused on improving satisfaction particularly for sport and leisure. Overall satisfaction rates are inconsistent with sport and leisure being the major weakness when taken in the context of these services accounting for significant levels of discretionary revenue funding.
- 49** The quality of cultural facilities is inconsistent. The libraries have benefited from significant refurbishment in recent years, the theatre is in good condition and the parks are kept to a high standard. However the Tudor Grange and Norman Green leisure facilities, originally built in the 1960s are in need of replacement and North Solihull Leisure Centre is in need of refurbishment. The Council is amongst the worst 25 per cent of councils for making public rights of way accessible (BVPI 178). The recently produced playing pitch strategy highlights disparities in the quality of playing pitched in the borough. Overall the quality of cultural services facilities is mixed.
- 50** The Council agreed two areas of focus with inspectors; learning and healthier communities.

Learning

- 51** Learning is embedded in most parts of cultural services as a corporate priority. The library, arts and sport and leisure services are particularly focused on learning and have a wide mix of initiatives aimed at promoting learning for adults and children. Resources are clearly made available for this corporate priority reflected by the significant investment made in library buildings and associated services in recent years.
- 52** The Council is making an impact on people's lives through learning. The adult learning initiatives operated through the libraries have resulted in individuals progressing to formal qualifications and employment. Initiatives aimed at young people such as the after school clubs and successful 'Bookstart' scheme which has resulted in comparatively high retention are beginning to have an impact on education levels. Similarly, the Council's support by hosting Age Concern's 'Silver Surfer' programme is opening up ICT to growing numbers of older people. Level 2 qualifications in literacy and numeracy through the award of National Test Certificates are also a key strand of the work within the library service. There is emerging evidence that the disparities in educational attainment between the north and south of the borough are beginning to narrow and that cultural services learning programmes are playing a key role in this.

- 53 Partnerships are delivering tangible learning outcomes. Key partners are positive about the Council's contribution to raising educational standards. An example of this is Solihull College which is experiencing new students enrolling in adult courses as a result of being referred from library service learning programmes. Similarly cultural services have been successful in working with schools to promote the library service and delivering a wide range of sporting opportunities through the sports development function. The Council works well in partnership to promote learning.

Healthier communities

- 54 The Council's approach to healthier communities through cultural services is developing. It has set up an innovative Public Health Directorate run jointly with the Primary Care Trust which ensures close working between the two agencies.
- 55 There are some initiatives which are making an impact on the health of local people. The 'Doc Spot' exercise referral scheme is part of a public service level agreement and is in the Council's top 40 performance indicators. The scheme now has in excess 450 participants and is growing each year. The Council tracks the participants through the scheme which is resulting in improving health levels and changes in behaviour as people continue to use leisure facilities after completing the programme. This scheme is now being supported by a cardiac rehabilitation programme in key leisure facilities. The Council has also developed a 'Walking for Health' scheme which is now run by local volunteers in the larger parks in the borough. As a consequence the scheme is not reliant on the Council for sustainability. The Council is beginning to make an impact on the health of groups at risk.
- 56 Cultural services have developed a strategic approach to physical activity but it lacks a delivery plan. The Council has undertaken research to get a baseline position on physical activity in the borough and has worked with private, public and voluntary partners to develop a strategy. However, a clearly assigned and resourced plan to achieve agreed physical activity targets has yet to be developed. Whilst the Council and the Primary Care Trust are clear that they want to raise physical activity levels and contribute towards the national agenda it is still developing its approach to achieving this aim.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 57 Value for money is not mainstreamed into all aspects of cultural services. The Council has produced a value for money position statement for the library service, undertaken benchmarking for the sport and leisure function through Sport England and there has been comparative work done on the theatre. However, there has been very little comparative work undertaken within the parks service. Plans for cultural services do not explicitly contain targets to improve value for money although they do contain measures to reduce costs. The Council's approach to value for money has not developed to the point where it is fully clear where it wishes to position its cultural services in relation to cost and quality of outcomes.

- 58 The sport and leisure service is offering below average value for money. The 2004/05 Audit Commission value for money profile shows satisfaction for the service is amongst the worst 25 per cent of councils in the country with reported usage below average. The Council has undertaken benchmarking through Sport England but the 2005 results have not yet been compared to quartile positions making it difficult draw any firm conclusions about efficiency. For example, the upper quartile positions in 2002 cannot be used because of the significant changes in the cost structures of leisure facilities in recent years particularly regarding energy and staff costs. On the basis of the available information the current leisure facilities are offering residents lower value for money than most other councils in the country.
- 59 The library service outcomes reflect its costs. The 2004/05 Audit Commission value for money profile shows that although satisfaction is amongst the top 25 per cent of councils the cost per head of population is also amongst the highest. Reported usage is average and CIPFA data indicates below average access in terms of service points when compared to similar authorities. Mobile library access is however above the CIPFA average. Overall this reflects a service delivering minimum standards in terms of value for money.
- 60 There are some aspects of cultural services which reflect value for money. The 2004/05 Audit Commission value for money profile for parks shows that the service's expenditure per head is comparatively low with satisfaction above average and reported usage amongst the top 25 per cent of councils. Similarly, the theatre has a very small subsidy with utilisation for major performances above 95 per cent which adds value by financing arts development. The sports development and inclusion functions recover comparatively high levels of the service cost through income and grants. The Council is delivering positive outcomes for a low spend per head in selected areas of cultural services.
- 61 Funding for cultural service reflects policy decisions. In recent years there has been a drive to improve the library service which resulted in significant capital investment for refurbishment. Similarly, the Council is now committed to upgrading its sport and leisure facilities which has been supported by capital and revenue funding. There has also been a corporate decision for most areas of cultural services to retain present levels of funding and retain the sports and inclusion unit functions even though external funding comes to an end in 2007. The Council has matched its policies with financial resources within cultural services.
- 62 Procurement and market testing is effective within cultural services. The Council has market tested its parks and open space maintenance function and library book and audio visual stock. More recently it has undertaken a thorough market testing exercise for its sport and leisure facilities resulting in private investment. The parks and leisure facilities are now managed by private partners. The Council is also developing ways of enhancing volunteer capacity reflected in its sports development, parks and heritage functions. The Council is open to different ways of running services.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 63 Priority areas of cultural services are improving. The two LPSA targets which are also in the Council's 'top 40' indicators for exercise referrals and young people at risk have both been exceeded in 2005/06, showing significant growth on the previous year. The Council can demonstrate that it is improving in areas that matter to local people.
- 64 The overall usage of cultural services is increasing. In 2005/06 against the previous year visits through the library service increased 6.5 per cent against a national trend of declining visits, arts performances 9.2 per cent, leisure centres 2.9 per cent and sports development activities 100 per cent. There have also been an increasing number of events in the parks. However visits to the Tourist Information Centre have declined. More people are engaging with the services through ICT. Overall cultural services can demonstrate increasing engagement with the community.
- 65 The library service is showing significant overall improvement. The 2005 public library position statement shows that the authority has made significant progress with 86 per cent more of the 22 standards available in 2001 being met in 2004 than in 2001. Similarly the service is able to demonstrate a good track record against the Council's own performance targets - over the last two years the 23 out of 26 indicators have improved with 16 significantly exceeding target. During this period there has been significant improvements to library buildings, the availability of ICT stations, increased opening hours and improvements to the mobile and housebound service. However, 3 out of 7 of the public library service standards did not improve between 2003/04 and 2004/05. The direction of travel within the library service is positive.
- 66 The Council has made service improvements in other areas of cultural services. The parks service have benefited from improvements to Shirley Park, more parks adhering to Green Flag award status, the introduction of a ranger service and Solihull in Bloom achieving national awards. The theatre and gallery have received investment to modernise facilities. Sports development activity has increased and there have been other outreach programmes introduced such as Positive Futures and those delivered by the inclusion team. These improvements are visible to residents.
- 67 Satisfaction levels for cultural services are not improving in comparison to other authorities. National satisfaction indicators for 2003/04 compared to 2000/01 show that sport and leisure remains amongst the lowest 25 per cent of councils. Similarly parks and arts venues remain in the second quartile. Satisfaction with libraries has remained in the top quartile. The ranking position of the services did not significantly improve between 2000/01 and 2003/04.

- 68 There have been no significant improvements to leisure facilities. The Tudor Grange swimming facility is over 40 years old and other leisure facilities are in need of refurbishment. Over the last decade the Council has not been able to allocate sufficient capital funding to address the problems and the buildings have continued to deteriorate. The Council has also been unable to reshape the leisure facilities to bring them in line with modern expectations.
- 69 The Council cannot demonstrate consistent improvements to value for money across cultural services over the last three years. There are some examples of improvements through procurement such as the library book stock and parks contract. Improved income and usage in the theatre has assisted in expanding arts development and the sports inclusion team has been funded within existing resources. However, there is no track record of improving outcomes such as satisfaction in tandem with efficiency savings. Comparative data to track progress over three years is either not available or incomplete - for example Sport England data exists for two leisure centres in 2005 but only one in 2002. Value for money is still developing within cultural services.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 70 There are clear links between the Council's corporate drivers and the service plans for cultural services. The corporate priorities of learning, quality of life and health are embedded into the Community Services Directorate plan and the divisional plans for cultural services. The Council has also developed a 'top 40' basket of performance indicators which includes two key indicators for cultural services and it has been explicit about the leisure PPP being one of seven priority projects. Most cultural services divisional performance plans contain a mix of national and local indicators and targets. The Council is clear about what it wants to achieve through cultural services.
- 71 There are clear improvement plans to address the main service weakness related to the condition of sport and leisure facilities. The Council has finalised a 30-year PPP with a leisure management operator to develop and manage its sport and leisure facilities. Over the next five years there will be £14 million spent on a new facility to replace the old Tudor Grange and Norman Green centres and on refurbishing North Solihull Sports Centre. £8 million of the estimated £14 million required investment will be financed by the new private partner. The Council had a clear project plan which started in 2002 and has carried out a rigorous procurement process which included customer consultation to find an appropriate partner. There are fully approved and resourced plans to address ageing sport and leisure facilities which will be highly visible to residents and users.
- 72 Cultural services have robust plans to address other areas of weakness. The Council is committed to improving ICT access and has resourced plans to introduce on-line bookings for theatre tickets and sports bookings. There are also plans to improve the accessibility of public rights of way and further improvements to the library service including a new library at Chelmsley Wood. There are also plans to improve the parks including substantial investment in Tudor Grange Park to compliment the new leisure centre.

All of these plans are on track, include community consultation and focused on customer facing improvements.

- 73 Performance monitoring is solid within cultural services. There is quarterly reporting through the directorate management team which is clearly linked to budgets and scrutiny. There is also a performance management panel which identifies key exceptions. Recently it triggered the action plan to address the Council's comparatively poor performance on the accessibility of public rights of way. Councillors and officers are fully informed about the performance of cultural services and take corrective action where necessary.
- 74 Leadership is strong within cultural services. Senior officers, councillors and partners are clear about service priorities and current performance. Staff delivering services are committed and clear about their part within key plans. Similarly learning is used to inform service improvements. An example of this is visits to other authorities that have PPP arrangements for managing leisure facilities. This is enabling the Council to drive forward improvements.
- 75 The Council's assessment of the financial aspects of its Private Public Partnership (PPP) indicates that the project is likely to deliver comparable value to other PPP's from a financial stand point. The Council carried out a mostly solid independent assessment of the PPP for its leisure facilities covering the key financial components in relation to construction costs, operating costs, finance terms and the payment mechanism. The assessment concludes:

'...we believe it is reasonable to conclude that the value for money offered by the proposed project is broadly similar to that of similar projects procured by other authorities'

However, there are some risks, for example the report intimates that a more in depth assessment of lifecycle costs may have been more revealing. The Council's assessment indicates that the PPP will deliver similar value for money when compared to similar schemes. However, it does not indicate that the Solihull MBC partnership will deliver enhanced financial value.

- 76 There are some inconsistencies with performance management and use of outcome measures is not fully developed. The performance plans for libraries and the arts contain a good range of national and local indicators. However within parks the Council have not developed local performance indicators and leisure facilities have not utilised information gained from Sport England benchmarking to target improvements within service plans. The Council is beginning to measure outcomes particularly for learning and its exercise referral scheme. It also utilises data from partners particularly those involved with learning. However, it has not developed a range of outcome measures and targets throughout cultural services. Consequently current performance management arrangements do not fully measure the impact of cultural services.

- 77 The Council has not finalised its plans to improve physical activity. It has carried out work to engage partners and generate baseline information on current activity levels in the Borough. However, it does not have a clearly resourced plan with shared targets which all key stakeholders from the voluntary and private sector are signed up to. It is not clear how the Council is going to turn its aspirations to raise physical activity levels in line with national targets into reality.
- 78 Cultural services have not fully developed performance management of value for money. Whilst clear efficiency targets are in place, as discussed in section one value for money position statements have not been developed in all areas of cultural services. The Council is not in a position to fully measure value for money or set targets for improvement.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 79 The Council has secured finances to make key cultural services improvements. The medium term financial plan is sound and does not require cultural services to make any abnormal revenue savings. The finances to deliver the capital required to invest in the leisure facilities have been secured through sale of land and the required additional revenue for maintenance is in place. The Council have also agreed to revenue fund the inclusion team which was previously funded externally. Finances are in place for the new library at Chelmsley Wood and to develop Tudor Grange Park. The cultural services improvement agenda is backed up with robust financial planning.
- 80 Human resource planning is good within cultural services. All staff employed by the authority are signed up to clear targets either individually or as part of a team which link into service performance plans. Staff also have training and development plans. The Council has gained the Investors in People accreditation and demonstrated that there was clear understanding by staff regarding their role in delivering the corporate agenda. Staff delivering cultural services are experienced and committed. The Council also ensures that human resource planning is integrated into its agreements with partners who are delivering parks maintenance and more recently leisure facilities. The Council is currently developing a new and joined up approach to customer access which will involve re-processing many of its business practices and has plans to re-shape services and have staff with different skills. The Council is aware of the importance of human resource planning.
- 81 Cultural services have developed other good building blocks to promote improvement. Section one of this report highlights considerable work that has been undertaken to assess the needs of the community which is starting to inform service delivery. Cultural services are now linked into the Council's substantial regeneration agenda and section 106 planning gain funding streams. There is also a public art position statement which is encouraging art to be included in development proposals. This means that funding will be made available for cultural services where there is identified need in areas that are being regenerated.

- 82 The Council has a solid procurement strategy which is successfully applied within cultural services. The Council have carried out a rigorous procurement process to secure a PPP for its leisure facilities. This will result in significant investment and transfer of risk including full responsibility for maintenance and lifecycle costs. The Council has a clear indication of the cost for the next thirty years. Other examples of good procurement include the parks maintenance contract and book stock contract. Cultural services are maximising on capacity by being open to different ways of delivering services.
- 83 The Council is successful at attracting external funding and enabling community capacity within cultural services. Since 2001 there has been £5.2 million of external funds invested in cultural services including arts, libraries and sports facilities. There is growing community capacity as a result of partnership working including a leisure database, sports club development, use of libraries by Age Concern, support to conservation groups and working with dance organisations. This is resulting in sustainable cultural services which are not reliant on the Council.
- 84 Cultural services are strong partners within the sub region. Officers have a clear leadership role within sub regional projects and ensure that developments are linked to corporate objectives. This means that local people benefit from regional as well as local cultural opportunities.
- 85 There are some risks to delivering cultural services improvements. The leisure PPP has inherent risks in relation to delivering value for money including the building project, financial risks and improving outcomes such as satisfaction and levels of participation. There are also risks in relation to the impact of the Council's business transformation agenda and uncertainties around future external funding. However, the appointed auditor's 2004/05 annual audit letter is positive about the Council's approach to risk management and the Council has a good track record of delivering major projects corporately including a new contact centre and the establishment of an Arms Length Management Organisation for housing.