

Service Inspection Report

December 2006



Cultural Services

Basildon District 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 Basildon District Council provides 'fair' cultural services and has 'promising' prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council provides leisure centres, swimming pools, sports development, arts development, a motorboat museum, the Towngate theatre, a golf course, events, and play areas. There is also a range of outside leisure facilities and open spaces, including country parks, nature reserves and parks. Cultural services employ 132 full-time equivalent staff plus casual staff and the revenue budget for 2006/07 is £6.3 million.
- 3 The Council recognises the importance of cultural services in delivering outcomes for local people, including improving health and promoting safer and stronger communities. A wide range of activities and services are provided to deliver these agendas, with the focus being on sport and parks and open spaces. Much is being delivered through effective partnership working and through the use of external funding.
- 4 There is a strong focus on sport and on children and young people participating in a range of physical activities, both within schools and outside. A range of services are also provided for all sectors of the community with levels of user satisfaction consistently high across services. However, resident satisfaction with cultural services is below average. Leisure facilities are also aging and meet minimum access requirements.
- 5 The Council undertakes effective public consultation and engagement with its residents. It listens to its users and reviews and changes cultural services to meet their needs. And also seeks the views of local residents to help it develop and improve its services.
- 6 But the Council does not have a comprehensive picture of who is using its services or the impact of its pricing structure on usage. Information on usage is available but it is not used to monitor and target its services to ensure it is reaching the whole community. Similarly, it does not know if its pricing structure is effective in increasing access by target groups.
- 7 The impact of the service's work or the outcomes secured for local people, particularly to improve health, is not monitored. The Council is still developing performance management and it is not fully embedded within the Council.
- 8 The Council is delivering services through working with partners which is enabling the Council to achieve more than it could on its own. Services are being delivered by staff who are passionate about their work and are self-motivated and through effective leadership within the Council.

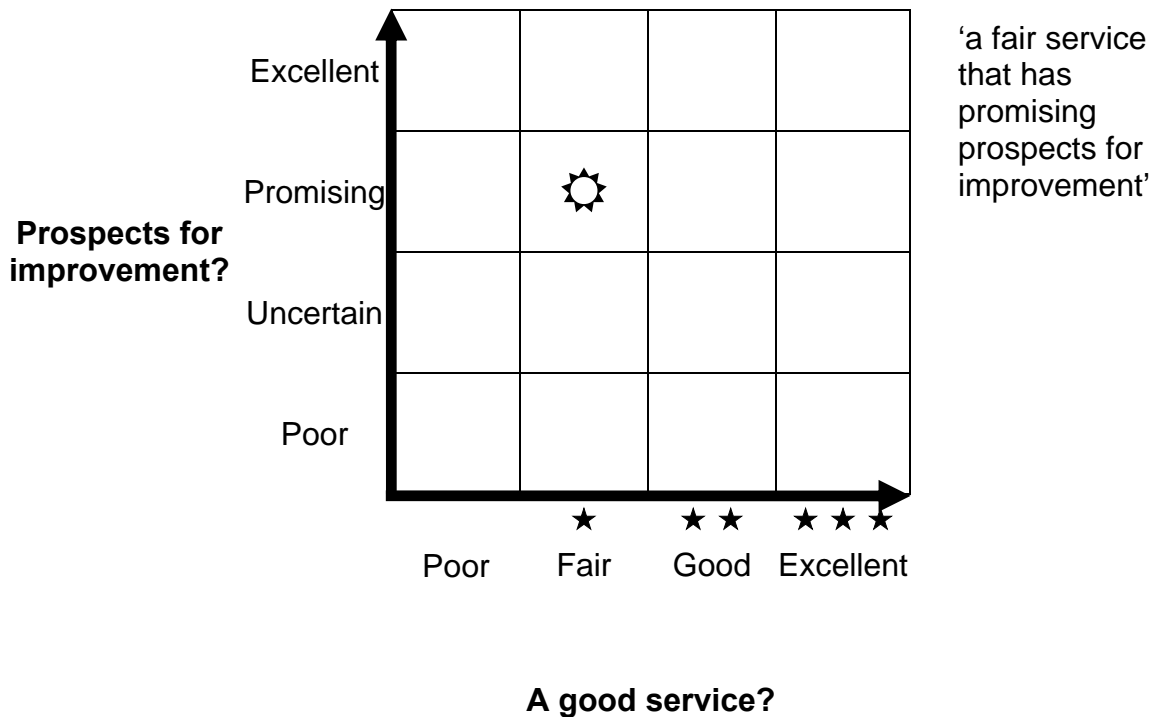
6 Cultural Services | Summary

- 9 Improvements to cultural services have been made and more are planned. These are providing local residents with a range of opportunities to participate in cultural and sporting activities and improving the visitor experience. Major developments such as the Sporting Village are still reliant on securing external funding but with partners fully engaged and significant funding in place there is confidence within the Council and from partners that this will be delivered.

Scoring the service

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

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

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.

11 The service is a fair, one-star service because:

- services are user-focused and changed in direct response to customer feedback. Improvements to service delivery are also made based on the results of consultation and engagement activities, as is service planning;
- initiatives are effective at increasing access. The Council has a strong focus on sport and children and young people which is increasing participation;
- levels of user satisfaction are consistently high across cultural services;
- cultural services actively supports the Council's and Local Strategic Partnership's key priorities; and
- the Council is proactive in targeting its work to contribute to the safer and stronger and health agendas, for example through the Basildon Community Football project which attracts over 2,000 participants every month.

12 However:

- resident satisfaction with services is below average;
- the Council does not have a comprehensive picture of who is using its services and is not using the data it has to monitor and target services;
- the Council cannot demonstrate whether its pricing structure is effective in increasing access by target groups;
- leisure facilities are aging and meet minimum access requirements; and
- the impact or outcomes of the range of work delivered by the service to improve health is not monitored.

13 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- the Council has invested in its services and facilities, re-opening the Towngate theatre, providing new facilities within leisure centres and recreation areas and developing its open spaces;
- external funding has been secured to deliver service improvements in priority areas;
- participation levels have increased in a number of activities and facilities over the last two years;
- the Council has a clear vision for its cultural services and clear, robust plans for improvement are in place; and
- the service has effective leadership and there is strong managerial and political support.

14 However:

- the performance management framework does not enable the Council to monitor the impact of its cultural activities or the outcomes secured for local people;
- performance management is developing and is not fully embedded within the Council; and
- section 106 planning gain funding is not used to its full potential.

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 comprehensive picture of usage and non-usage to enable service planning and target setting for new and existing facilities in accordance with priorities. This includes:

- co-ordinating existing information about usage, identifying gaps in knowledge, and putting in place measures to complete the picture;*
- using pricing structure to maximise usage;*
- compare current usage with the local population profile and intended usage by priority groups; and*
- use this information to inform marketing plans, service planning and target setting for existing and planned facilities, and for outreach activities.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the Council will have an up-to-date, comprehensive picture of usage and non-usage in cultural services;
- the use of future services and facilities can be better planned and targeted to ensure that usage is maximised, especially by priority groups; and
- in the longer-term, usage will increase and satisfaction levels will be more likely to rise.

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

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.

Recommendation

R2 The Council should refine its approach to the performance management of cultural services to ensure delivery of key services and its role in corporate priorities by:

- *developing more outcome measures and associated targets; 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 by June 2007.

Report

Context

The locality

- 16 Basildon District Council lies in the southern part of Essex, in the east of England, 30 miles east of London. The town of Basildon is one of a number of 'new towns', developed in the 1950s and early 1960s to accommodate overspill population from the post-war redevelopment of inner London. The area has excellent road and rail links to London and the south east. The district covers 110 square kilometres and has three main towns, Basildon, Billericay and Wickford, with 70 per cent of the district rural. According to 2004 population figures there are 166,500 people living in the district including 4.1 per cent of the people from minority ethnic communities. There is also a significant gypsy/traveller community in the area, according to Government figures in July 2005 Basildon has the highest number of unauthorised and authorised caravan sites in Essex.
- 17 The district is the commercial and business hub of south Essex, accounting for almost a quarter of manufacturing output for Essex. Major commercial employers include Ford, Visteon, International Finance Data Services, SELEX Sensors and Airborne Systems and First Data Europe. 28 per cent of the district's workforce commutes to London. Unemployment stands at 2.2 per cent; less than the national average of 2.6 per cent but above the regional average of 2.0 per cent. Average earnings for the area were reported as £380 per week in 2005, above the regional and national figure, but lower than the county figure. The Council is involved in the Thames Gateway South Essex, a national priority area for sustainable development and is the designated 'business hub' for the south of the county. The district is ranked as the 132nd most deprived out of 354 English councils, where 1st signifies the most deprived council. Four areas fall within the 10 per cent most deprived areas in the country.
- 18 The Council facilitates and hosts the Basildon Renaissance Partnership. This partnership has a board with representation from the Council, the East of England Development Agency (EEDA), English Partnerships (EP), Essex County Council (ECC) and Thames Gateway South Essex (TGSE). The partnership plans, manages and co-ordinates a programme of regeneration projects across the district. To date £30 million of projects are underway.
- 19 As part of this inspection the Audit Commission has reviewed how the Council's cultural services support the shared public service delivery priorities of promoting healthier communities and creating safer and stronger communities.

- 20 Health indicators in Basildon district vary. In the 2001 Census 91.7 per cent of residents described their general health as 'good'. Whilst mortality rates from cancer and suicide have shown an increase between 2001 and 2003, mortality rates from circulatory disease have fallen. The teenage pregnancy rate has increased since 1991/2001 and at 53.1 per 1000 for the period 2001/03 is considerably higher than the regional and national average.
- 21 Crime is a significant issue for Basildon district residents: consultation on quality of life undertaken in Autumn 2005 identified crime and anti-social behaviour as the highest priority for the Council and identified low levels of crime as one of the most important factors in making somewhere a good place to live. Crime levels when compared to the Home Office nearest neighbour group are mixed with performance in all four quartiles (2003/04). Key problems for the district are theft from motor vehicles. But the most recent crime figures show that overall crime is below the national average (2004/05).

The Council

- 22 The Council has 42 councillors. The Conservatives form the administration with 27 seats, the remaining seats are held by 12 Labour and 3 Liberal Democrats. The Conservatives have led the Council since 2002. Currently a leader and cabinet with eight portfolio holders govern the business of the Council.
- 23 The Chief Executive is supported by three Executive Directors, an Assistant to the Chief Executive and the Head of Democratic, Legal and Executive Services. The directorates cover sustainable communities and development; resources and organisation; and housing, customer contact and operations. The Assistant to the Chief Executive covers policy and planning, equalities and diversity, change management, performance and media, marketing and communications. The organisation employs 1269 full-time equivalent staff.
- 24 The Council's budget for services for the year 2006/07 is £30.1 million. Expenditure on capital projects is budgeted at £17.5 million, with £10.2 million of these for housing.
- 25 Following a major reorganisation of management, begun in late 2004, cultural services is now part of the housing, customer contact and operational services directorate.

The Council's cultural service

26 Cultural services delivered across the Council comprise of:

- sports centres:
 - Markhams Chase leisure centre;
 - Eversley leisure centre;
 - Pitsea leisure centre; and
 - Basildon sports centre (joint use);
- swimming pools:
 - Gloucester park;
 - Pitsea;
 - Wickford; and
 - Billericay (managed by DFW Leisure Ltd);
- Towngate Theatre;
- sports development;
- arts development;
- summer in the park play schemes;
- arts development awards;
- events: including Basildon Festival, Teddy Bears Picnic;
- Motorboat Museum;
- golf course;
- countryside service comprising of country parks, two nature reserves;
- parks and open space;
- 266 play areas; and
- a range of outside leisure facilities including football pitches, netball and tennis courts, cricket pitches, bowling greens, fishing lakes, athletics track, novelty golf and synthetic turf pitch.

27 The Service employs 132 full-time equivalent staff plus casual staff to deliver cultural services. The revenue budget for 2006/07 is £6.3 million.

28 The Council delivers most of its cultural services directly, although Billericay swimming pool is managed by DFW Leisure. The management of two joint-use facilities: Billericay and Bromfords sports centres have been transferred to the school partners. The marina at Wat Tyler country park is in the process of being transferred to a specialist operator and the golf course is being outsourced. Catering outlets in parks and leisure centres are contracted to a number of private operators.

29 In addition to the range of Council services detailed above, there are several private fitness and health clubs located in the district.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 30** The Council has a vision for culture in the district that is set out in the Council's Cultural Strategy produced in 2006. This strategy has been informed by the strategic context highlighted in broader ambitions and plans. Specifically, those outlined in the community strategy; the crime and disorder reduction strategy; the local development framework; and the Council's own strategic improvement plan.
- 31** The cultural strategy supports all the community strategy's themes of:
- feeling safe;
 - lifelong learning and jobs;
 - health and social well-being;
 - fair and equal life chances; and
 - living in a pleasant environment.
- 32** The Council's vision for culture includes a commitment to allowing open access to high quality cultural facilities and the chance to take part in leisure activities to improve the quality of life for all Basildon's population. Improvements in services are being developed under six themes. These themes are that culture should:
- contribute to healthier living;
 - engender a sense of community identity and well-being;
 - enable the development of proactive partnerships;
 - be sustainable and sensitive to the environment;
 - be accessible to all; and
 - benefit current and future residents.
- 33** In delivering the vision for culture the Council is currently focusing on three major initiatives. These are:
- a Sporting Village proposed for Gloucester Park;
 - completion of an open space strategy; and
 - the development of a football centre at Barleylands Farm.
- 34** The Council has committed to making a major investment in the Sporting Village. The vision for this new facility, set in 100 hectares of landscaped parkland in the centre of the district, is that it will cater for all sports as well as community recreation. The Sporting Village will be a hub for a network of existing and new clubs and facilities with academies being established in a range of sports. It will also release some existing sites that are aging and costly to maintain. The development of the Sporting Village is central to delivering regeneration through sport, one of the priorities of the Basildon Renaissance Partnership.

35 The Sporting Village and the cultural strategy as a whole also link clearly to the three new priorities identified in the recently refreshed strategic improvement plan. These are to:

- work effectively with others to deliver for the district;
- promote health and well-being through quality leisure facilities; and
- promote stronger communities where everyone is included.

These sit beneath the corporate aims of:

- continually improving quality services;
- a clean, pleasant and safe environment;
- improving homes whilst protecting green spaces; and
- a vibrant community.

36 In addition to the local imperative to improve cultural services the cultural strategy has been influenced by national and regional cultural policies including: the Arts Council's 'Ambition for the Arts' 2003/06 strategy; 'Game Plan' the Government's vision for sport and physical activity; the Countryside Agency's 'The State of the Countryside 2020' and Living East's vision to put 'culture at the heart of the region's life'.

37 The local area agreement (LAA) for the county: 'Health and Opportunity for the people of Essex' corresponds with three of Basildon's community strategy themes. The other LAA priority of children and young people is a key element of all the local strategic partnership's (LSP) community strategy themes. The LSP thematic groups are currently re-aligning their work to deliver the LAA targets. Cultural services has a role in contributing to the delivery of a number of priorities including 'reducing obesity', 'reducing crime' and 'improving the quality of life'.

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

Access, customer care and community focus

38 A range of effective mechanisms are in place to involve local people in the development of the service. This includes the corporate 'Have your say' complaints and compliments system, post-event analysis, specific surveys, consultation with friends groups, the Citizens Panel and work with forums such as the minority communities forum, youth councils and community forums. The service also undertakes on-street interviews, non-user surveys and user satisfaction surveys; examples include the non-user survey for Wat Tyler country park. Individual members of the Citizens Panel have also been used to visit Wat Tyler country park with a checklist to get their views on service provision. The panel members were then brought together in a focus group to discuss the findings which fed into the development of the Heritage Interpretation Project. Findings have led to the development of specific activities such as women only swimming sessions and the Nifty Fifty scheme as well as improvements to the Council's countryside services.

- 39 Services are user-focused and changed in direct response to customer feedback. For example, the Council's indoor sports facilities continually look to provide services that respond to local need and demand. Customer comments are recorded and compiled on a monthly basis. Notice boards are used to feed back to users in leisure facilities under the banner *'You said, we did'*. If changes are applicable to more than one site the manager will share the comment and action it. A small budget has also been allocated to each leisure facility for implementing customer driven suggestions. This approach is reflected in the high satisfaction with staff received in a recent user survey in leisure facilities.
- 40 The Council uses core data effectively to inform its planning of service delivery. It has previously used data from Basildon Trends and now the Basildon District Profiles to inform external funding bids, particularly those targeted at deprived areas. This is a ward by ward statistical breakdown of data allowing comparisons on indicators including demography, employment, health and crime for example. Figures are drawn from the 2001 census, the official labour market data base (Nomis) the Land Registry and the Index of Multiple Deprivation (2004). The profiles were used to inform development of the Interlock neighbourhood management project at Northlands Park.
- 41 The Council has a proactive approach to marketing the recently reopened Towngate theatre. The theatre was closed to the public as a fully operational theatre in 2000, only being available for private hire within the local community. However, the theatre was still incurring costs and offering poor value for money to the Council. In April 2006, the Council's cultural services took over the theatre's management with the challenge of creating a five-year business plan allowing the theatre to open to the public and offer a varied programme of events, including business conferences. An interim plan has been developed to see the theatre through the first year and to enable the management team to research and consult on the way forward for the theatre. This includes the development of a new mailing list and friends group to support the theatre re-launch. Existing and potential users and visitors are invited to input ideas and support. There is a visitor information centre at the box office and customer enquiries and feedback are welcomed through the centre. The combined short and long-term approach to marketing the theatre offers the best chance of meeting local demand and achieving value for money.
- 42 The Council makes improvements to cultural services based on results of consultation with non-users as well as users. For example in the leisure survey 75 per cent of residents think existing facilities need refurbishing and the Council is addressing this through a new synthetic sports pitch at Hannakins Farm and new multi-use games areas at Pound Lane and Fryerns open space and drainage works at Markhams Chase. A need to increase the range of services aimed at 12 to 18 year olds resulted in the StreetWeb event at the skateboard park in August 2006, targeted at teenagers. Responding to comments from residents helps the Council to increase participation in sport and leisure and helps to identify reasons why people do not currently take part.

- 43 Effective public consultation and involvement can be seen through the creation of Wick country park. The country park, including lake and woodland along with an education centre has been developed since 1999, close to new housing development at Wickford. Development of the park has involved public consultation, engagement through the education centre and the establishment of a 'friends' group in 2002. Facilities and activities, including family fishing, countryside events and working with the ranger to improve management, have evolved in response to having a community focus, listening to the views of local people and identifying their needs.
- 44 The Council is committed to providing accessible services and is making progress to ensure access for all. Staff refer to existing services as catering for people 'from the cradle to the grave'. All sectors of the community are catered for and services are targeted to support their needs and include activities for over 50s: Nifty Fifty scheme, falls prevention; those with specific health conditions: GP referrals, diabetic referrals, cardiac rehabilitation; and children and young people (see following paragraph). The geographical coverage of indoor and outdoor facilities for leisure is a strength. The provision of sport and play facilities across the district is comprehensive. The Sport England 15 minute criterion is met and there is a variety of outreach work to complement this. For example, in school holidays the Basildon football development scheme holds soccer schools at various locations in Basildon, Billericay and Wickford, for boys and girls aged between six and 14. Football coaching for children of gypsy and traveller families is provided at Crays Hill primary school. Providing accessible services helps the Council to fulfil its commitment to improving the quality of life for all Basildon's population.
- 45 The service has a positive focus on children and young people and works effectively to improve their access to services. During school holidays Playweb childcare sessions for 5 to 8 year olds and BaseCamp sessions for 8 to 15 year olds are held. All year round programmes include the Active Tots session for 0 to 5s and Mother and Toddler sessions and a range of sports courses. The sports development team works with primary and secondary schools and community groups. A new initiative: 'StatS' aimed at encouraging athletics amongst school children provides local school children with access to the athletics track at Gloucester Park with coaching from Basildon Athletics Club. Over 100 children attended each of seven weekly sessions. This broad approach promotes an active lifestyle for young people both in and outside the school environment.
- 46 The Council's countryside environmental education team, based at Wat Tyler country park, provides a wide range of activities in response to the needs of local schools. These include pond dipping, crafts, tours and orienteering. This adds to and complements the sporting-based opportunities.

- 47 Facilities meet minimum access requirements. Physical access has been made possible for service users through adaptations and alterations and the majority of services meet DDA regulations. Within cultural services 84 per cent of buildings are currently accessible to disabled people. Reasonable adjustments have been made where possible to leisure sites but further work has not been undertaken at sites which are faced with possible closure. The Council's leisure facilities, whilst aging, are maintained in a clean and functional order. However, it is uncertain when the Council will upgrade or replace all its aging facilities.
- 48 The Council's open spaces provide reasonable access for people with disabilities. Seven out of the 12 sites have easy access trails, three sites have hearing loops and the education service caters for people with learning difficulties. In Gloucester Park there are fishing facilities adapted for the needs of disabled people. In addition, staff are specifically trained to provide customer care for people with disabilities.
- 49 Service standards are developing. The corporate service charter has been developed with local people. Some service standards are in place but are being improved and updated following public consultation. Operational service standards are in place for 'streetscene', which covers play areas and a service standards leaflet has recently been produced for the countryside service. Service standards are in place for cultural services and are clearly displayed in leisure centres and on the website. Service standards developed with local people are more likely to be understood by provider and user alike.
- 50 There is limited use of user data to monitor and target services. Data exists on users and usage patterns across the service but it is not being used effectively. The Council's draft cultural services marketing plan analyses data from Bascard and the replacement Fastcard and compares with district wide figures on age, ethnicity and disability. Information on GP referrals is maintained and regular assessments undertaken but the information is retained at individual sports centres and outcomes from the work are not drawn together.
- 51 Remote booking of services is limited. All services can be booked via the telephone but bookings cannot be made via the Council website. Once online booking is available access to services will be improved.
- 52 The Council cannot demonstrate whether its pricing structure is effective in increasing access by target groups. The leisure card, Bascard providing a two tier charging structure was replaced by the Fastcard in April 2006, offering the lower rate charges. Many services are free, including the country parks, skateboard parks, playgrounds and multi-use games areas. But the Council does not know if its current pricing structure, based on three time bands and concessionary groups, is maximising access. For example concessionary users are not measured against the number eligible to give a sense of take-up. The Council is currently undertaking a review of its charges. The impact of the current pricing structure does not inform service planning.

Diversity

- 53 The Council is self-aware on its current position on equalities and diversity. The Council, through the use of an external organisation, has assessed that it has achieved Level Two of the Equality Standard. The Council had previously self-assessed itself at Level Three. Building blocks are being put in place to enable the Council to achieve Level Three and to develop its strategic approach. A revised Race Equality Scheme, 2005/08 is in place, training to undertake equality impact assessments has been completed in cultural services and a draft Disability Equalities Scheme is in place. A statement on action for equality is now included in service plans.
- 54 At a service level there is a focus on ensuring equal access to services but the Council does not know if this is being achieved. This is reflected in a number of initiatives targeted within the community, aimed at addressing health inequalities, reducing anti-social behaviour and increasing access to services. The service has identified, through consultation that ethnic minority communities do not use Wat Tyler country park in great numbers and an open day was held in 2005 to encourage them to visit. Services are also delivered aimed at specific groups, including children and young people, over 50s, girls and women and people with disabilities. However, the equality impact assessment of the cultural strategy highlighted some weaknesses in the service delivering an accessible, equitable service. It is acknowledged by the Council that monitoring of take up by target minority groups could be improved. An imbalance of use by gender has been identified and activities to reduce this are in place but the impact of these is not clear.

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 55 Users are satisfied with cultural services. Levels of user satisfaction are consistently high across cultural services when last measured across all services in 2003/4: 88 per cent satisfied with parks and open spaces, 81 per cent satisfied with sports and leisure facilities, 70 per cent satisfied with the motorboat museum and 66 per cent satisfied with theatres. The leisure facilities user survey of 2005 was positive with 85 per cent of respondents noting that the overall experience was good or very good. 80 per cent of teachers are satisfied with facilities and activities meeting their pupils' needs at Wat Tyler country park.
- 56 Overall resident satisfaction with cultural services is below average. The indicators from the 2003/04 resident survey show that performance in the service's two key areas is mixed with sports and leisure facilities in worst quartile and parks and open spaces in second quartile. The other indicators are in the worst quartile: museums and galleries, and arts activities and venues. The Council has undertaken its own consultation on satisfaction and its 2005/06 figures are similar to those from 2003/04. However, a direct comparison cannot be made between these figures, as the methodology used is different. The Council is clear in its understanding of why there is poor resident satisfaction following its own research and has acted to improve it through investment in sports facilities, re-opening the theatre and developing services at the museum site.

- 57 There is limited service achievement against nationally recognised standards. One leisure centre, Markhams Chase, has been assessed for and achieved Quest. It is proposed to extend this to Eversley leisure centre in 2006/07. Both Wat Tyler country park and Lake Meadows in Billericay have been assessed for the Green Flag but did not achieve the award. An action plan for achieving this at the country park and at Northlands Park, in 2006/07, is in preparation. Some specialist accreditation has been achieved, for example, through 'Aiming High', a quality assurance scheme for all aspects of out of school club activity, for under 8s at Eversley Leisure Centre and through 'Hospitality Assured', the standard for service and business excellence in hospitality recognised by the British Quality Foundation, at Pitsea Leisure Centre. The Motorboat Museum achieved museum registration status under the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries in May 2002. Achieving specialist accreditation demonstrates a desire to exceed customer expectations.
- 58 The Council agreed two areas of focus with inspectors; healthier communities and safer and stronger communities.

Healthier communities

- 59 The work of cultural services is effectively targeted to address health issues. This is evidenced by activity set within the context of the work programme of the Basildon district health partnership. The partnership is itself targeted to address locally identified health issues and outcomes from the community plan and through the local Health Profile, as well as through national targets identified within the Local Area Agreement. There is joint delivery by the Council and Primary Care Trust(s), attached to strategies tackling obesity and smoking for example. Links with the cultural strategy are made within the action plans of these streams. Working in this way supports the cultural strategy's theme of contributing to healthier living and wider community plan aspirations around health and social well-being.
- 60 The Council's work around healthier communities is proactive in its use of external funding. The work of the youth and community teams on drugs outreach; health outreach; and millennium volunteers are supported by a range of external funding. Initiatives such as positive futures, arts development and football in the community are viewed as being essential for the delivery of youth and community development activity promoting healthy living. The Council's work in securing external funding to promote healthier communities supports effective partnerships at the local level. The Council recognises that long-term planning to secure funding and the achievement of sustainable outcomes is challenging.

- 61 A wide range of activities are delivered by the service to support the health agenda. These activities include:
- GP referrals (150 referrals 2005/06);
 - falls prevention work funded by the PCT;
 - seated exercise classes at 50 sheltered housing schemes;
 - work in 24 schools on healthy eating;
 - 'rattle and roll' exercise with new mums and babies in the parks;
 - working with the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV) on the green gym (a community conservation project that works with local volunteers who benefit from exercise and outdoor work); and
 - promoting activity with young people through holiday activities such as Basecamp (90 participants over Easter 2006).

There is some evidence, for example from individual GP referral assessment forms, that work may be having an impact on the health of those participating in activities.

- 62 Physical activity is increasing within the district through the provision and promotion of Council services. The Council is, however, still developing ways of measuring impact. The work links to community, Council and service objectives. The Council has a joint work plan and set of priorities with the PCT. National studies have shown a positive link between increased physical activity and improved health and well-being. The Council's recent track record indicates a growth in activity likely to impact on an individual's physical and mental health. For example:

- increasing gym usage and pulse fitness card users;
- increase in usage of facilities at Hannakins Farm;
- increases in the numbers swimming in the Council's pools; and
- increasing numbers of visitors to Wat Tyler country park.

The Council also organised the 'Race for Life' in Gloucester Park in June 2006, when 5,000 women took part and the 'Swimathon' in 2005, with 370 participants. The Basildon district health partnership monitors current performance against the joint work plan.

- 63 The impact or outcomes of this range of work being delivered by the service to improve health is not currently monitored through the Council's performance management system.

Safer and stronger communities

- 64** Cultural services is proactive in targeting its work to contribute to the safer and stronger agenda. The joint Basildon and Southend Positive Futures scheme won a High Sheriff of Essex award for its contribution to crime reduction. The service also received a highly commended at Essex Business Awards in 2006 for providing activities including DJ workshops, football, basketball, and street dancing for youngsters at risk of offending. The service is delivering a range of community safety initiatives in line with the work of the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership. At an operational level there are excellent working relationships with staff working on the stronger and safer agenda. Working in this way supports the cultural strategy's theme of engendering a sense of community identity and well-being as well as community plan aspirations around feeling safe.
- 65** There is an understanding of the role of cultural services in developing safer communities. A range of sports projects aimed at reaching 'hard-to-reach' young people have been established including an outreach football project in partnership with the Football Foundation and NACRO, as well as the positive futures project which includes a girls activity programme and a 'shoot for health' basketball project. There are individual examples of a reduction in crime linked to cultural activity. For example, police crime reduction figures show a drop of 23.5 per cent in reported crime on the Craylands estate following activity under the football in the community programme.
- 66** The service is working effectively to strengthen specific local communities. Through the Interlock Project, a neighbourhood management pathfinder at Northlands Park, the Council is working with local communities to provide safe environments for young people and residents. Government funding of £2.1 million is being used to deliver local projects which meet local needs. A committee of local residents and co-opted members works with local residents and agencies to address local issues. Work has included the local youth council delivering a graffiti wall, a fishing competition and the planting of flowers at an older persons housing complex. A skateboard park designed with young people has been installed. A multi-use games area has also been built. The positive futures programme has been delivered locally. Benefits for the community include a reduction in anti-social behaviour, crime and loitering on estates. Evaluation of the project identified a reduction in the proportion of people who think vandalism and graffiti is a problem from 76 per cent to 37 per cent.

- 67 Staff are clear on child protection issues and recognised procedures are in place but work is on-going to ensure that all hirers provide the same high level of child protection. All existing and new Council staff are Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checked. Mandatory training on child protection is provided for staff likely to work with children. Staff are clear where they can get support and back-up when required. Individuals hiring facilities have to have the necessary public liability insurance and are also CRB checked. Copies of this evidence are sent to the Council's HR department and each year documents are checked to ensure they are up-to-date. However, a recent Council survey of over 50 existing groups using community halls found that some groups had not completed CRB checks for their coaches/instructors. These groups have been informed that this needs to be completed within three months or their hire will be terminated. The Council's staff will advise any club or organisation where they can obtain CRB checks and grant aid may be available to support the costs of the CRB process. The guidance notes to organisations that work directly with children or young people under the age of 18, seeking grant aid from the Council, stress that they are required to produce details of their child protection procedures and policy. Staff inform adults organising swimming parties that they cannot take photographs but there is limited publicity in facilities and the policy on the use of mobile 'phones as cameras is not clear. Procedures are in place for staff taking photographs. Safer access for children and young people is being provided through the service's child protection procedures but there is further work to do to minimise the risks associated with organisations hiring Council facilities.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 68 The Council's approach to demonstrating value for money (VFM) from its cultural services is adequate. The Council recognises that it needs to continue to improve its approach to VFM and cultural service managers and finance colleagues work closely together, particularly during the budget setting process. Budget monitoring is thorough, with monthly meetings with the head of service, executive director and cabinet member in place to review costs and service. The Council, through its strategic improvement plan and medium-term financial strategy, is committed to providing a value for money service whilst maintaining low levels of council tax. Costs for cultural services are below average when compared with nearest neighbours. Highest spending is with parks and open spaces and sport and recreation is second quartile. The Council spending on open space is high overall due to the large areas requiring management but costs per hectare are low and costs per head of population are similar to Essex districts with comparable high populations; Chelmsford and Southend. The high spending on sport and recreation reflects the high maintenance costs involved in maintaining a number of aging facilities across the district. Levels of user satisfaction across cultural services have been consistently high.

- 69 There is some information on service costs and how these compare to other providers. But there is some difficulty in comparing like with like and understanding how others' costs are made up. Again, the Council recognises that it needs to do more to understand and compare service costs. Cost effectiveness for the Council and local council tax payers is more difficult to achieve if costs are not fully understood.
- 70 Areas of high spend and investment are generally in line with priorities. Through its budget setting process the Council seeks to allocate resources for cultural services that reflect priorities. It revisits the staffing complement in cultural service each year and undertakes a line by line financial review of the service. There is a bidding process for any new service development that has to meet the Council aims and service priorities. Business cases are collated across services and presented to the management team.
- 71 The Council has achieved VFM from some of its indoor centres through consideration of the appropriate management arrangements. For example, the third party management arrangements for the swimming pool at Billericay (DFW Leisure). The Council has also looked to rationalise opening hours at some of its centres and transfer usage to others. This proactive approach offers VFM through making savings without impacting on overall levels of service.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 72 The Council has delivered improvements in the range and quality of cultural services whilst undergoing a major staff restructuring in the past two years. The recommendations set out in the Audit Commission leisure services inspection 2001 have been addressed. The Council has reviewed the Bascard and replaced it with Fastcard. A further review of the charging policy for services is now planned to assist in maximising access. The Council has improved staff awareness and training in child protection to ensure safer access to its services for children and simplified its sports and arts grants scheme, making more explicit links to the strategic improvement plan and cultural strategy. Basildon golf course is also about to be outsourced with a consequent increase in investment and benefits to users. By making change in response to external review the Council demonstrates a commitment to improvement.
- 73 The Council's track record for improving sports services and facilities is strong. A number of recent improvements have been made. Examples include: the new ball court at Noak Bridge, with £50,000 invested; new multi-use games area at Pound Lane recreation ground and work underway to create new football and changing facilities for young people at Fryerns open space, along with an enclosed ball court at a cost of £670,000. New jump pits have been put in at Gloucester Park athletics stadium. The Council is continuing to provide and update a wide mix of services for the local community.
- 74 The Council has improved its services to the arts. After five years of the Towngate theatre only being available for conferences, private hire and the local community in April 2006 its management was passed to cultural services. Although, the long-term solution for theatre provision is linked to the Basildon Renaissance Partnership's strategic priority for culture and environment, touring shows are now being attracted and the space is being used for local art exhibitions. The service is also working closely with the local community on a number of arts projects: local school children are helping to develop sculpture which will form the sculpture trail at Wat Tyler country park. Two of the sculptures are currently in place. Re-opening the theatre, enabling the art collection display and commissioning the sculpture trail increases the mix of cultural opportunities available in the district and satisfies a broad range of interests.
- 75 The Council has improved its open spaces through partnership and external funding. There have been a range of improvements to facilities at Wat Tyler country park, including the introduction of a model boat lake. Improvements at other sites include introduction of easy access trails, the development of a community garden and creating new nature reserves. These improvements are improving facilities and the visitor experience.

- 76 The Council has successfully targeted improvement to those in priority need through its service planning. The delivery of Play Web and BaseCamp at Eversley sports centre are good examples. The strengths and weaknesses of these initiatives have been evaluated and as a result changes are planned for the future; particularly around pricing. The impact is a better targeted and costed scheme for future school holiday provision.
- 77 The Council has achieved some improvements in the quality of life of some service users. Targeted work on community safety, for example through work to target anti-social behaviour in Pitsea saw the establishment of a youth club at the community centre. Also, work took place under the transforming your space project at Scott Drive nature reserve. Here, green space was cleared and improved with ranch fencing and walkways constructed. This has resulted in less criminal damage and youth nuisance reports from local residents. To ensure sustained improvement the local school has been engaged in the work and local residents have taken ownership of the site. Impact has been local and it is too early to ascertain how sustainable improvements are.
- 78 The Council has officers and councillors who show some awareness of VFM in day-to-day activities and decision-making. The re-opening of the Towngate theatre was in recognition of expenditure being incurred on a redundant building. The Council has a joined up approach to using this as a community resource and demonstrates VFM with wider community and environmental benefits linked to having a livelier town centre.
- 79 The service has achieved increased participation levels in a number of its activities and facilities over the last two years. This includes an increase in the number of teams using football pitches and netball courts, gym users, swimming numbers and visitors to Wat Tyler country park. The total participants of the Nifty Fifty scheme has risen by 179 per cent to 1,121 with sessions increasing to 41. However, there has been a reduction in the overall use of leisure centres.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 80 The Council has clear aims for its cultural service in support of its wider vision and all the Basildon community strategy's themes. The cultural strategy provides the foundation for action to improve the quality of life of local people in the longer-term and the service has clear plans for the future direction of the service over the short and medium-term to meet identified needs and address specific service weaknesses.
- 81 The service has a number of key robust plans in place to improve its services and facilities. The delivery of these will make a measurable difference for service users. The service has also developed plans to deal with specific weaknesses such as marketing. Improvements in ICT are being made, such as the imminent introduction of electronic bookings and payments for the leisure facilities and for the theatre.

- 82 The Council has a clear vision and robust plans for the development of its Sporting Village. This is identified as one of its three big initiatives, along with the open space strategy and football centre at Barleylands Farm. The PMP report of January 2006 sets out the need for the Sporting Village, how it contributes to key national and local agendas, the preferred mix of services and facilities and possible ways to fund it. The project is a key element of the Basildon Renaissance Partnership's cultural and environment priority. Progress since January 2006 has not been as clearly communicated as it could have been. The decision on the outline planning application due in early 2007 is a key risk to the delivery of the wider strategy for cultural services.
- 83 The Council has an existing playing pitch strategy that is being revised. The revised draft playing pitch strategy, centred on expansion of the Barleylands farm site to accommodate a football centre, is well researched and supported by its key partners. The strategy has a clear vision to develop the site as a community football development centre. The vision fits with the wider strategic plan for football development in south Essex and has a particular focus on the benefits to boys and girls and the wider community, whilst encouraging participation, skill development and physical activity. The draft strategy identifies the key risks to delivering the vision for Barleylands Farm.
- 84 The Council has clear plans to develop Wat Tyler country park. The RSPB is working positively and constructively with the Council on projects including the Heritage Interpretation Project at the country park. The RSPB has already established a presence at the park and if the project bid is successful their operation will be extended to sales and office facilities for up to 10 staff and 50 volunteers. The project will deliver enhanced, curriculum-based education, exhibitions on the industrial and natural heritage of the marshes, a café, craft centre and multi-purpose space for community use, conferencing and sports activities. This will improve facilities and the visitor experience and particularly attract new visitors to the district.
- 85 The Council understands its current position regarding declining usage at some facilities. It has plans to address this and increase participation rates through improved marketing and recognises that it needs to develop its marketing approach to arrest the decline in usage at the Council's managed sports facilities in the short-term, in 2006. In the longer-term it is committed to consolidating and better co-ordinating the activities delivered within the service through better use of data available on existing users to complement ongoing consultation. The draft marketing plan matches the benefits of providing for active recreation in response to local needs and demands, with improvement in revenue streams.
- 86 Effective leadership is in place within the service. The cabinet member, director and managers responsible for cultural services demonstrate leadership that is active, visible and recognised by staff as setting a positive tone for the organisation. The Council's officers are seen by a wide range of partners as being committed, available and willing to work on shared priorities. Strong leadership and commitment has a positive impact on staff morale.

- 87 The Council is putting the building blocks in place to ensure diversity and equalities are delivered throughout the organisation in a consistent manner. Councillors are to receive refresher training on equalities and diversity to include legislation changes and human rights. Work is also being undertaken with overview and scrutiny committee to assist councillors in ensuring equalities issues have been considered in reports received. The Council is producing its disability equalities scheme. This approach will ensure a more comprehensive approach ensuring users have fair and equal access to cultural services across the Council.
- 88 The Council learns from other authorities and from its own experience. The Council is committed to improving its learning from other providers. It uses benchmarking to assess the costs of similar facilities at other local authority facilities. Visits to new facilities have been made to help develop plans for the Sporting Village and planned developments at Eversley sports centre. It is part of the Essex-wide leisure group working towards sharing best practice and benchmarking as well as quality of service accreditation. Learning is also shared between leisure facilities. The Council is looking to use 'Towards an Excellent Service' for accreditation rather than 'Quest' as it provides a more continuous approach to improvement and quality. It is also committed to being part of the National Benchmarking Service and the Association for Public Service Excellence network.
- 89 Progress against corporate priorities is effectively monitored but outcomes for local people delivered by the service are not monitored. A corporate performance management framework is in place that enables the Council to monitor progress against strategic improvement plan priorities. Reporting takes place quarterly and a traffic light system is used to enable councillors, staff and the public to understand whether targets are being met or not. Monitoring arrangements are also in place for key strategies; the cultural strategy will be monitored annually by overview and scrutiny committee. However, the framework does not enable the Council to monitor the impact of its cultural activities or the outcomes secured for local people as many targets are input or output-based.
- 90 Performance management within the Council is developing and is not fully embedded. The Council acknowledges that managers and staff have not previously recognised the importance of performance management as opposed to performance monitoring. Performance management is variable across services and responsibility for performance is not owned by all managers. The Council recognises the need to cascade the gathering and recording of performance information down through the service to enable greater understanding of the importance of performance management and improve the effectiveness of data gathering and recording. Additional local PIs are being developed with members of overview and scrutiny committee, including some relating to cost and income. Until revised local PIs are in place the Council will not have a complete picture of what is happening within the service.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 91** The service's staff are a key strength. Staff are passionate about their work, self-motivated and well managed in teams. The Council makes tremendous efforts to involve and enable staff and staff recognise that their needs, suggestions, comments and contributions will be considered. The skills and enthusiasm of staff are key to improvement being made in the future.
- 92** Management within the service is committed to supporting staff and effective training is in place and is valued by staff. Training and continuous professional development is seen as a vital ingredient to the success of the Council. A range of in-house and external training is available. The Council also sponsors staff to gain qualifications such as NVQ level 4. Staff are provided with training to enable them to deliver new services. In 2004 the Council was awarded the Investors in People National Standard and it was noted that the energy and persistence with which Investors in People standard was maintained 'is a further demonstration that there is a tangible attitude of continuous improvement'. This is resulting in a skilled and motivated workforce.
- 93** Corporate and political support for culture is strong. Councillors and officers are clear about their strategic and operational roles, responsibilities and accountabilities. Councillors have a good understanding of the service and how it can deliver cross-cutting agendas. Consequently relationships are productive.
- 94** The Council is committed to developing its councillors. The Council has a councillor development programme that is well planned and valued by councillors. This includes a councillor role definitions and skills framework and joint training with Rochford and Castle Point District Councils. Also, there is a new councillor agency group meeting with partners on community safety to share, information, knowledge and ideas.
- 95** Managers and staff in cultural services are well supported in their financial management. There is a good working relationship across the services and the financial strategy and services section provides training, recently launching a programme of modular training around financial issues for staff at all levels. This is now part of the corporate training programme. There is a lead group accountant, who works with officers in the service to support the financial management aspects of future partnerships and external funding opportunities, looking at staffing, auditing arrangements, VAT aspects, financial support for staff and the exit strategy. Financial strategy and services also run a stakeholder forum each quarter for managers from all services to share developments in finance and seek views on support anything that might be required in the future.
- 96** The Council's approach to external funding is aligned to priorities identified within the service. This involves the completion of a pro-forma identifying links to priorities and outcomes as well as an exit strategy for any proposal.

- 97 The Council's approach to partnership working is a key strength. The Council engages well with partners so that its aims closely link to their priorities and concerns. Communication with partners is good, there is an open dialogue and an open minded approach from the Council. The Council is happy to ask for advice and take on ideas for policy development. The Council has recently completed a review of its partnerships and is now looking to focus on those best positioned to meet the aspirations of the local community. Effective partnership working provides access to further resources in support of the Council's cultural priorities and enables the Council to deliver additional services within its capacity.
- 98 The Council works positively with partners at all levels. For example, it has recently secured support from the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE Space) to help with completion of its open space strategy. This work, a key aspect of the cultural strategy will include a full audit of facilities. It will support and inform both the strategic planning approach to the future provision of open space under the local development framework and the winning of external funding from private developers and the lottery funded Parks for People programme.
- 99 The Council is attracting external funding to deliver its improvement agenda and has bids in place to deliver more. The Council and Essex County Council together have committed almost £20 million to the Sporting Village project with bids for the remainder in place. A bid is also in place for the Heritage Interpretation Project. The Council needs to secure the funding to deliver significant improvements for local people.
- 100 The Council has successfully secured external funding to develop services. Recent examples include: the sculpture park in Wat Tyler country park where funding was achieved from the Big Lottery Fund and Cleanaway Pitsea Marshes Trust; Playweb using County Council Early Years Partnership funding; and a range of funding and sponsorship for the annual Basildon Festival. By working well with other agencies the Council is able to add value to its own resources and provide more cultural opportunities for local people.
- 101 The Council has continued to invest in improving its own services. Recent capital expenditure has included; Gloucester Park athletics track (£42,000 in 2004/05); Hannakins Farm artificial pitch (£250,000 in 2005/06); Wick country park (£71,000 in 2004/05 and 2005/06) and this year an artificial pitch at Gloucester Park (£400,000). Using its own resources to improve cultural services demonstrates to external partners and potential funders the Council's commitment to improvement.
- 102 The Council does not use section 106 planning gain funding to its full potential. Although there are many examples of section 106 benefits the Council is only just beginning to look at a strategic approach to securing funding for bigger projects.

- 103** The Council is taking an effective approach to procurement of the Sporting Village. It is using external capacity to identify a range of different procurement approaches for the design, construction and operation of the new facilities. Within cultural services the approach to procurement has resulted in a range of service provision as evidenced elsewhere in this report. However, whilst the Council has clear corporate processes around procurement its procurement strategy, adopted in 2003, is out-of-date.