

Service Inspection Report

January 2007



Access to Services

Kerrier District Council

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local services for the public. Our remit covers around 11,000 bodies in England, which between them spend more than £180 billion of public money each year. Our work covers local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services.

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Service Inspection

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

Audit Commission service inspections should:

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

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

This report is issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under section 13 of the 1999 Act.

Summary

- 1 The Council provides 'fair' access to services for its customers. It has strengths in access to services but some key areas remain to be addressed.

Key strengths

- 2 The Council's broad aims for access to services are clear. Its ambitions, strategies and priorities include delivering and improving access to services. The Council has three clear priorities, Housing, Regeneration and Environment and access to services is a key theme in each of these.
- 3 The Council is aware of the broad needs of its customers and organises the delivery of its services to meet them. Its 2004 Customer Access to Services Strategy (CASS) identified that the telephone remains the preferred contact option for the majority of its customers and that a higher than average number of people in Kerrier still prefer to pay their bills in person. As a result, the Council adopted its Customer Service Point (CSP) approach to access.
- 4 The Council's CSP approach is increasingly effective and receives positive feedback from most users. The CSP includes an effective customer services and telephone enquiry service. People contacting the Council for information receive a friendly efficient service in most areas. The Council provides an increasing range of online services to the public and for business customers.
- 5 An easy to read and well-focused Council magazine is sent to all homes and businesses twice a year and this makes it easier for customers to access services.
- 6 The Council uses partnership working to secure improvements to services (and access) that demonstrate good value for money. The provision of a new one-stop-shop in Helston is a good example of this.

Areas for improvement

- 7 The Council does not know the specific access needs of all parts of its community and decisions about access are based only on a broad understanding of needs. Systems for capturing, sharing and learning from customer feedback are underdeveloped. The CASS does not focus sufficiently on the access needs of all sections of the community, including the most vulnerable and those who do not usually engage with the Council. This includes people with limited access to computers and those in the most rural areas of the district. This is important if access to all services is to be based on the specific needs of all groups.
- 8 The Council's performance in assuring and progressing equalities and diversity is poor. Awareness of equality and diversity issues is low in the Council. It has a basic Equality Policy, an out-of-date race equality scheme and is only at Level 1 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government. Equality and diversity is not routinely addressed in Council, department and team meetings or in the Council's procurement processes, publications and reports. As a consequence, it cannot be sure that equality and diversity are embedded in the delivery of all its services.

- 9 Physical access to some Council buildings is poor. The Council has improved access to some buildings, but has made slow progress in implementing fully the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act. The Housing Advice Centre in Redruth, for example, is not accessible for disabled people. The Council's reception area is cramped, lacks privacy and does not currently include access to the planning service.
- 10 Electronic access to services is weak in some areas. The Council's website is below average when compared to other councils. Overall, accessibility is below average, it does not meet the requirements of the DDA and has poor links to other sites and services - and it is not kept up-to-date. Not all councillors are contactable by email and the Council does not promote sufficiently use of online services.
- 11 The Council's information on the costs associated with customer services is incomplete and it does not know what it spends and saves on access to services.
- 12 The Council has 'promising' prospects of improvement in access to services.

Key strengths

- 13 The Council's ambitions, strategies and priorities include delivering and improving access to services.
- 14 There is a strong track record of implementing changes that have improved access to services. Overall, local people, partners and staff within the Council can see tangible improvements, for example improved customer access and service through the Council's CSP. This also includes improved access for some of the most vulnerable people in the district, for example migrant workers and an improved welfare visiting service has helped people secure additional benefits.
- 15 The Council has good capacity to improve. Its financial capacity is sound and it is particularly successful at attracting external funding. This is enabling a major regeneration programme, which includes access improvements, to take place. It has strong and focused leadership and staff are well trained and clearly motivated to put the customer at the heart of all that they do.
- 16 The Council's overview and scrutiny function and corporate performance management framework is improving. Overview and scrutiny is well organised and increasingly effective in delivering improvement. The Council's performance management framework clearly links individual performance with team, service and Corporate Plan objectives and this is helping assure improvements.
- 17 The Council uses partnership working effectively to improve its capacity to deliver improvement. A county-wide equality and diversity group is accelerating progress in the delivery of equalities and diversity as part of the Local Area Agreement work for Cornwall.

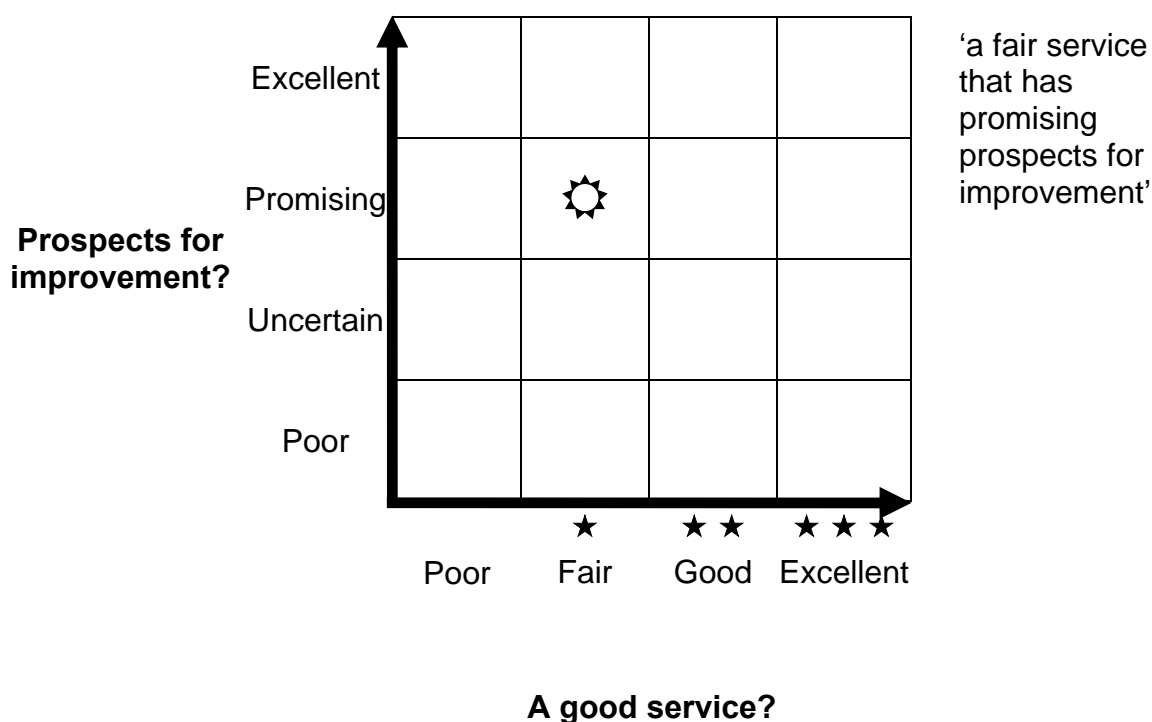
Areas for improvement

- 18 The Council has not clearly articulated what its future priorities are for improving access to services based on the identified needs of all its communities and it has not yet developed SMART measurable targets through which it can demonstrate continued progress in improving access to services.

Scoring the service

- 19 We have assessed Kerrier 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

- 20 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- the Council's broad aims for access to services area clear, its ambitions, strategies and priorities include delivering and improving access to services;
 - the Council has a good overall understanding of the make up of its community;
 - it has an effective customer services team and telephone enquiry service which receives positive feedback from most users;

¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

8 Access to Services | Scoring the service

- people using services or contacting the Council for information receive friendly efficient service in most areas; and
- it provides an increasing range of online services to the public and for business customers.

21 However:

- the Council does not know the specific access needs of all sections of the community;
- the Council's performance in assuring and progressing equalities and diversity is poor;
- physical access to some council buildings and some services is poor;
- access to services and information through the Council's website is poor;
- systems for capturing, sharing and learning from customer feedback and information are underdeveloped; and
- information on the costs associated with customer services is incomplete and it does not know what it spends and saves on access to services.

22 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- the Council as a strong track record of implementing changes and local people, partners and staff within the Council can see tangible improvements;
- access to services has improved including improving access for some of the most vulnerable people in the district;
- the Council has a well trained and motivated workforce who put the customer at the heart of what they do and customer service is good;
- it has strong leadership backed by sound financial capacity and resources;
- the Council has an improving performance management framework to help assure delivery of improvement; and
- it is particularly successful at attracting external funding which is enabling a major regeneration programme to take place in some of the most deprived areas of the district.

23 However:

- the Council does not yet clearly articulate what its future priorities are for improving access to services and back these with clear, measurable SMART targets through which it can demonstrate continued progress.

Recommendations

- 24 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 Strengthen arrangements to assure improvement in access to services by:

- *refreshing, updating and communicating the Customer Access to Services Strategy based on the identified access needs of all elements of the community;*
- *setting local performance targets and SMART action plans that allow the Council to measure success in improving access to services;*
- *making better use of consultation, compliments and complaints information in order to review and improve access to services; and*
- *clearly identifying access to services costs and efficiencies.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved clarity, focus, public involvement and awareness of access to services; and
- better capacity to deliver improved access to services.

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

Recommendation

R2 Improve physical access to services for customers by:

- *fully implementing the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) to assure access for disabled people to all its buildings; and*
- *upgrading its reception area to improve access and privacy.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved physical access to services for the public.

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

R3 Improve electronic access to council services by:

- *ensuring its website is kept up-to-date and meets accessibility requirements;*
- *publicising, encouraging and supporting potential users in all aspects of information and computer technology to increase its use where appropriate; and*
- *improving access for the public to councillors by email and the website.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved remote access to services for the public.

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

Recommendation

R4 Improve equalities and diversity by:

- *accelerating commitment and focus to progress the Equalities Standard for Local Government, including race and disability;*
- *raising the awareness and delivery of equality and diversity across the Council; and*
- *routinely addressing equality and diversity in all Council, department and team meetings and in procurement processes, publications and reports.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved awareness of equalities and diversity and fair access.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 25 Kerrier has a population of approximately 95,600. It is sparsely populated with 201 people per square kilometre, compared with an average of 380 for England. The main population is concentrated in the towns of Camborne, Pool, Redruth and Helston. The remainder of the district is rural with limited transport links. Much of Kerrier is classed as either an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty or as Heritage Coast and is characterised by the remains from its mining and industrial past.
- 26 The district attracts tourists but not on the same scale as some other Cornish districts. Of the six Cornish districts, Kerrier has about 10 per cent of the total tourist trade. Kerrier has approximately 0.5 million staying visitors per year which compares with more than 5 million for Cornwall as a whole. In Kerrier approximately 14 per cent of total employment is supported by tourism - compared with 25 per cent for the whole county. The largest employer in the district is the Royal Naval Air Station near Helston which employs more than 700 people.
- 27 Kerrier has relatively high areas of deprivation. When compared to the national average it is ranked 87 out of 354 (where 354 is the least deprived). Kerrier has four areas classed as 'super output areas' which attract external funding through Neighbourhood Renewal Funding (NRF) these are concentrated in the Camborne, Pool and Redruth areas which are ranked in the top 15 per cent most deprived areas nationally.
- 28 The proportion of households with one or more person with a long-term illness is 38 per cent in Kerrier, higher than the national average of 32 per cent. The Council report that Camborne and Redruth are in the ten per cent of most health deprived areas nationally.
- 29 Average earnings in Kerrier are low and house prices relatively high. Average earnings in Kerrier are £332 per week, the national average is £433 per week and the regional average for the south west is £407. House prices average £185,000 in Kerrier compared with £169,000 for England and Wales.
- 30 The age distribution of Kerrier's population broadly matches that of the south west region. It has a slightly higher number of older people when compared to the national average. In Kerrier 22.3 per cent of people are above 65 years old, the national average is 18.5 per cent. Within the population of Kerrier only 2.4 per cent are classed as non-white or non-British.
- 31 Unemployment is low in Kerrier at 1.7 per cent, compared with the national average of 2.6 per cent. The district attracts between three to four thousand migrant workers.

The Council

- 32 The Council comprises 44 councillors, of which 21 are Independent, 9 Liberal Democrat, 5 Labour, 4 Conservative, 4 Mebyon Kernow and 1 Liberal. The Council has no overall political control. It is governed by a leader and a politically proportionate executive of seven portfolio holders (Housing, Social inclusion, Environment, Regeneration, Finance and staffing, Democratic renewal and Leisure, arts and culture). The Council has four politically balanced Overview and Scrutiny Committees.
- 33 The Council is currently restructuring. Until recently, a Chief Executive and two Directors (External and Internal) managed the Council with nine Heads of Service. The Council is streamlining this to a Chief Executive and one Director supported by five Heads of Service (Environment, Regeneration, Housing, Performance and Resources). The Council currently employs 329 full-time and 100 part-time staff.
- 34 The Council's overarching vision for Kerrier is described in its 2003/08 Corporate Plan as:
- 'To be a place where people choose to live and work, and a place in which people feel valued, a place which provides sustainable employment, and a place the provides opportunities for all.'*
- 35 The Council is currently reviewing its strategic framework. The Local Strategic Partnership is refreshing its Community Strategy and the Council is updating its Corporate Plan to reflect the emerging new Community Strategy. This work will be completed early in 2007. The Council has already adopted three priority aims (Housing, Regeneration and Environment) and it agreed in May 2006 a revised vision *'to enable everyone in Kerrier to have a quality, sustainable, healthy home'*.
- 36 The Council has a net revenue budget of £13.4 million. The 2005/06 council tax bill for a Band D household in Kerrier is £1,144, which is lower than both the national or regional averages.

Background

- 37 Access to services is a cross-cutting theme applicable to all councils and council services. It covers four broad areas:
- ease of access to services;
 - using e-government to support access to services;
 - reaching all parts of the community; and
 - partnership working.
- 38 For customers, it means that they should be able to contact councils in a range of accessible and Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant buildings and places. They should also be able to contact councils through a range of other methods. This includes through a fully accessible, easy to navigate website. There should be appropriate arrangements for electronic transactions, electronic communication and consultation.

- 39 Councils should have an e-government programme informed by citizen/user needs and aspirations. Council services, and access to those services, should be focused on the needs of the whole community. They should ensure equality of access and take proper account of equality and the diversity of all service users. There should be appropriate arrangements for consulting, engaging and communicating with users and non-users of services. Councils should use partnership working with neighbouring councils, organisations and businesses to provide seamless and high quality access to services wherever possible.

How good is the service?

What has the Council aimed to achieve in access to services?

- 40 The Council's ambitions, strategies and priorities include delivering and improving access to services. Improving access to services is a visible and important theme in Kerrier's high level plans. This is evident from the 2002 Community Strategy and it remains so in the emerging 2006-2012 Community Strategy. This details aims to make Kerrier a place that is *'well run, thriving, environmentally sensitive, inclusive, well served, well designed and built and well connected'*. These aims are central to access to services and are supported by aspirations such as, to make Kerrier a place where:
- people who provide public services really understand and respond to the views of the community, and everyone can play their part and have their say;
 - everyone values the contribution that diverse, groups of people make to the local community and culture and everyone is treated fairly, regardless of differences; and
 - local business is diverse and growing, and there is a strong network of community, voluntary and social groups.
- 41 The Council has three clear priorities, Housing, Regeneration and Environment and access to services is a key theme in each of these priorities. Access to services is also a part of the Local Area Agreement for Cornwall; this is being developed by a county-wide equality and diversity Group and is aimed to *'build a cohesive society based upon equality of opportunity'*. The Council does not yet have a regeneration strategy to deliver this key priority. It has, however, defined its regeneration priorities which include improving access to services.
- 42 The Council's planning framework is clear and includes access to services' aims at all levels. Both the Council's previous and emerging Corporate Plans describe an hierarchy of linked plans down from the Community Strategy to the Corporate Plan which are supported by portfolio, work and individual performance plans. Access to services aims are included in plans at all these levels. In addition, the Council has six key values appropriate to delivering and improving access to services including making sure that everyone has equal access to its services and that it does not discriminate against anyone.
- 43 The 2004 Customer Access to Services Strategy (CASS) painted a clear picture of the context for access to services in Kerrier. This document represents a substantial amount of research and summarises the findings of a project team which was set up to review existing customer service provision and consider the impact of the e-government agenda. The vision stated in the CASS is *'Corporately working together to provide our customers with a quality, focused and convenient joined-up means of access for all Council services, in a way that reflects our core values'*.

- 44 The Council's overall approach to customer access is based on research. The CASS identified that the telephone remains the preferred contact option for the majority of its customers and that a higher than average number of people in Kerrier still prefer to pay their bills in person at the Council's office. As a result, the Council adopted a Customer Service Point (CSP) approach.
- 45 The Council's CSP approach is improving access to services. The Council has a customer services team which runs the telephone enquiry service, provides initial response to emails sent to the customer services in-box and manages the cash office and reception areas in Camborne. The telephone enquiry service began in April 2005 and is increasing in capacity by taking on more services in a planned incremental way. The CSP approach aims for 'one-stop' resolution at the first point of contact for customer enquiries. A range of customer services are now part of the CSP including council tax and some direct services such as bulky waste collection, abandoned vehicle and graffiti removal, and pest control.

Is access to services meeting the needs of the local community and users?

Customer and community focus

- 46 The Council is aware of the broad needs of its customers and it uses this in the planning and delivery of access to most services. The Council understands the broad make up of its community gained through its regeneration work and close working with partners and town and parish councils. The increasing number and quality of town and parish council plans and the work of the South Kerrier Alliance provides the Council with some good intelligence of its communities. A comprehensive survey of its community, carried out on behalf of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) in March 2006, has also given the Council some valuable knowledge of the make up of its community.
- 47 The Council does not know the specific access needs of **all** sections of the community. Decisions about access to services are based only on a broad understanding of local needs drawn from a range of sources including the Council's 2004 CASS. However, the CASS does not focus sufficiently on the access needs of all sections of the community, including the most vulnerable, people who do not usually engage with the Council. This includes people with limited access to computers, harder to reach groups, people with learning disabilities and older and younger age groups. Some people in the most rural areas of the district, especially in the south believe that the Council is too focused on the regeneration of Camborne, Pool and Redruth, and as a result, they do not have equal access to the Council. The Council is aware of this perception and is working to improve engagement with town and parish councils to address it. This is important if access to all services is to be based on the specific needs of all groups within the community.

- 48 Local people have not been sufficiently involved or engaged in the design of access to services or in setting the vision and future targets for access. The Council does not routinely use consultation, compliments and complaints information or seek feedback on specific access issues in order to review and improve access to its services. It is important to gather this information and to then share it across all council services so that all service access is based on identified need and shared learning.

Ease of access for all

- 49 Although not always based on a robust understanding of local need the Council has some responsive services which are easy to access. For example:
- users report that telephone access is easy and efficient through the Council's telephone enquiry service;
 - Council reception, cash payments and benefits services are generally easy to access in Camborne, they are open 8am to 5.15pm with good parking, a hearing loop, access to interpretation services and public transport from the main centres of population;
 - an out-of-hours emergency contact service is provided;
 - recycling and waste collection services are easy to access and responsive to customer needs;
 - an A-Z of council services and a very good, easy to read and well-focused council magazine (Coast to Coast) is sent to all homes and businesses and this makes it easier for customers to access services;
 - some good services are delivered within communities including an effective and accessible sports development service and delivery of community events such as the 'Over 50s Leisure week';
 - a very successful welfare visiting service helps the most vulnerable people access benefits from their own home;
 - good public access to the district's industrial heritage sites which are well maintained by the Council and linked by an easily accessible network of paths; and
 - a new purpose built one-stop-shop in Helston opened in November 2006 to replace an existing unsatisfactory building at the Willows in Helston and this will provide improved access to a range of services including payments and benefits.
- 50 The Council provides good access for its business customers. It established in 2005 a West Cornwall business network in partnership with Penwith District Council and funded in part by Neighbourhood Renewal Funding (NRF). This has more than 700 members who have access to directories, data, publications and communications, a members' website and access to various networking events.
- 51 The Council meets its duties to provide information under the Freedom of Information Act. However, it does not monitor and report its performance in this.

Access to buildings and services

- 52** Physical access to some council buildings and some services is poor. The Council has made slow progress in implementing the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) to assure access for disabled people to all its buildings. In 2005/06 only 42 per cent of the Council's buildings complied with the DDA. The Housing Advice Centre in Redruth does not meet the requirements of the Act and remains impossible to access for wheelchair users. Adjustments have been made to the Camborne office to improve access, for example the provision of evacuation chairs now allows some limited access for disabled people to the upper floors. Some of the Council's public toilets still do not comply with the Act.
- 53** The Council's main reception area is cramped and has insufficient private areas. At busy times queues from the cash and revenues and benefits office crowd the main reception space. This makes access difficult especially for older people and for mothers with young children and pushchairs. At the time of our inspection only one private interview room was available. Privacy barriers are in place between desks, but people seated in the waiting area can hear what is being said.
- 54** Access to the Council's planning service has improved through the use of online technology, but physical access to planning advice for customers remains poor. Personal planning advice is not available in the Helston office and in Camborne it can be difficult to access. Planning is in a separate reception area on an upper floor and customers have been frustrated by short notice closures due to staff shortages. Planning is not yet included within the Council's CSP approach. In addition, public speaking is not permitted at council planning committee meetings.
- 55** The Council has improved access to its leisure centre, which now meets DDA requirements and is open for early morning and evening use. However, access is still restricted by poor public transport and inadequate parking facilities. The Council does not operate a concessionary pricing scheme to help and encourage people on restricted incomes or on benefits to use the centre.

Electronic access

56 Remote access to Council services by customers using information and computer technology is of a mixed quality. Stronger points in this include:

- the Council met its requirement to provide 100 per cent compliance with the nationally set e-government targets³ by 2006;
- e-government has been well managed by the Council and it now provides an increasing range of online services, including the submission of planning applications and payments of bills and services which can now be done online;
- a customer relationship management (CRM) system is used effectively within the Council's CSP and this improves access to information for staff to better serve the public;
- access to broadband is good for the public, business users and town and parish councils; and
- the Council has an easy to use Housing website which enables users to quickly and easily do a self-assessment of their own needs and potential benefits.

57 Remote access to Council services by customers using information and computer technology is weaker in some areas. For example:

- access for the public to services and information through the Council's website is below average when compared to other councils:
 - the website was rated below average for accessibility and quality in 2006 by SOCITM⁴ who concluded that it is a basic site with poor internal links and poor links to other sites;
 - the website has not been developed in partnership to provide a seamless service to a wider range of public services such as police and health services;
 - the site does not meet the requirements of the DDA for accessibility and search, language translation and facilities for people with visual impairment are limited;
 - the Council does not keep its website up-to-date, updating is left to individual service areas, because there is no dedicated person to update and manage the website; and
- the availability of online services is not always effectively communicated and the Council needs to do more to encourage take-up and support potential users in all aspects of ICT.

³ The Government set all councils targets to improve by December 2006 access to services through the use of technology (e-government) for services such as making online payments.

⁴ SOCITM - the Society for Computer and Information Technology Management carries out an annual survey of all council websites in its publication '*Better Connected*' - www.socitm.gov.uk.

- 58 The Council's website has improved in the past year but it is still not good enough to meet all customer needs. It was redesigned and improvements made following feedback from a usability study with customer service advisors and the Kerrier Citizen's Panel. A facility to access frequently asked questions is now in place and some services and documents are now available electronically and 24 hours a day. Customers can also access some web-based services and information provided by Cornwall County Council via links on Kerrier's website.
- 59 The Council does not have an efficient internal intranet system. This means that it is sometimes difficult for council staff to give efficient answers to questions and requests from the public since staff do not have quick and easy access to searchable information at the touch of a button.
- 60 Access for the public to councillors by email is not consistent. A dedicated web-page for each councillor is not available and some councillors have not taken up computer technology or remain unsure or lack confidence in its use.

Standards of service

- 61 The Council has appropriate, accessible and visible customer service standards set out in a simple customer service standards leaflet, available and visible in the Council's reception areas and on the website. This includes targets on responses to telephone, letter and electronic requests and for face-to-face contact with the public. The standards also include contact details and opening times, a feedback form, aims for staff behaviour, equal opportunities, customer's responsibility, appointments, visits, complaints and confidentiality.
- 62 The standards of service are monitored by the Council and this shows good performance against its own targets especially in responding to telephone contacts.

Engagement

- 63** The Council uses consultation and engages with its customers effectively in most areas. The Council has improving dialogue with most, but not all, its town and parish councils and staff and most councillors attend meetings to discuss and focus on local needs. It has a well organised and managed citizen's panel. This includes a youth panel which has recently been strengthened through a positive recruitment campaign in local schools. Consultation has been used to change services. For example:
- consultation on schemes to improve the amenity site and access to the local park in the Helston area through the Liveability scheme;
 - consultation with the Citizens Panel has led to a programme of sessions in schools where housing staff help educate young people in housing access;
 - a web-based health database has been set up through a West Cornwall Healthy Living Centre as a direct result of consultation;
 - consultation on regeneration for the Kerrier Core Strategy and Camborne Pool Redruth Area Action Plans to conserve and enhance the environment and heritage of the area and the development of local communities; and
 - effective direct engagement with its migrant workers, gypsies and travellers to improve their accommodation and access to council services.
- 64** The Council does not engage and consult fully with all sections of the community. Its communication and consultation does not always address access to services issues for harder to reach groups, such as the small black and ethnic minority population, current non-users of services and people in some of its most rural areas. As a result, the Council does not know the specific access needs of all parts of its community.
- 65** The Council's communication with local people and with its own people within the Council is effective. It produced a new Communication Strategy in June 2006 with a purpose to provide it with a clear effective two-way communication between the Council and all its stakeholders. Its external communication through its Coast to Coast magazine is excellent. Internal communication is effective. The Council has an open culture in which staff feel confident and able to contribute. An internal publication effectively communicates corporate and service improvement to staff and councillors.
- 66** The Council's system for capturing, sharing and learning from customer feedback and information is underdeveloped. The Council has a basic complaints system similar to that in many councils, but it does not make full use of the information from this, or from more informal feedback, to improve services. Staff and councillors regularly engage with local people, but this learning is not always shared within and across services.
- 67** Feedback from the Council to people participating in its consultations is sparse and it does not always describe the actions resulting from the consultation. Consultees are not usually involved in setting the consultation questions. This is important in assuring continued engagement of local people.

Equality and diversity

- 68** Awareness of equality and diversity issues is low across the Council. As a consequence, it cannot demonstrate that equality and diversity are embedded in the delivery of all its services.
- 69** The Council has adopted a very basic Equality Policy which includes commitments to develop equality objectives and targets and to consult and carry out equality impact assessment and monitoring. This places the Council at only Level 1 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government.⁵ The Council plans to meet Level 2 in 2006/07 and Level 3 by 2008/09. Level 1 is about beginning to put a system in place and it is not until higher levels are achieved that people will notice a difference in how the Council address equality and diversity.
- 70** The Council does not have an up-to-date race equality scheme. It produced its first race equality scheme in May 2002 but this has not been updated since and knowledge of its existence and impact is weak across the Council. A project plan to achieve Level 1 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government was produced in October 2005 but this has not as yet resulted in an agreed in-date race equality scheme. This is important not only for assuring racial equality but it is also a national requirement for all councils.
- 71** The Council plans to have a Disability Scheme in place by December 2006 to meet its requirement under the amended DDA.⁶ This follows consultation with the local disabled community. The Council's scheme is in draft format at the moment and does not yet include an action plan to achieve disability equality. The number of disabled people employed by the Council is low when compared to the number in its community.
- 72** Awareness of equality and diversity issues is low across the Council. Equalities and diversity training was mandatory for all staff and was delivered in 2004. Councillors were invited, but take-up was poor. The Council has not provided refresher or update training and training for new staff since 2004. Equality and diversity is not routinely addressed in Council, department and team meetings or in the Council's procurement processes, publications and reports.
- 73** Council reports and communications do not routinely include information or strap lines to say how these publications can be made available in other media and languages. Although the Council's website has a translation facility, it is not available in Polish which is the most common language used by migrant workers in the district.

⁵ This standard has five levels and provides a common approach for dealing with equality for race, gender and disability. All councils should be working towards Level 5 as soon as practicable.

⁶ The DDA was amended in 2005 to place a duty on all public sector authorities to promote disability equality and to produce a 'disability equality scheme' and action plan by December 2006.

- 74 Partnership working in equalities and diversity is improving across the County. The Council is working with neighbouring councils on equality and diversity. This includes a county-wide Equalities and Diversity Group and a County Migrant Worker Group. This has resulted in positive engagement with gypsy and travellers, and the production of a county-wide accommodation assessment for traveller's sites. The Council and its partners have a good understanding of the accommodation needs of gypsies and travellers in the district, who form one of the largest minority groups in Cornwall. The Council has submitted bids for the funding of new sites in the area and secured funding for repairs and replacement of vans. This partnership working has also resulted in a good informative county-wide welcome pack for migrant workers and an anti-bullying in Cornwall (ABC) initiative.

Outcomes for users and user experience

- 75 Customer's satisfaction with Kerrier District Council's services is average when compared to other councils. In the last major survey (2003/04) 61 per cent of people were satisfied with the Council's services overall (61 per cent is average for all councils). Public satisfaction with other key services in Kerrier, for example with leisure and parks and open spaces, the housing benefits service, waste collection and planning is also about average when compared to other councils.
- 76 People using the Council's services or contacting the Council for information receive friendly and efficient service in most cases. Customer service staff are flexible, helpful and are well trained in customer service. Customer satisfaction is monitored through a customer response form. The Council's own performance data shows improving levels of satisfaction and that very few calls are abandoned. Currently about half of calls are answered and half transferred to specialist service areas for answer. The Council's customer service approach is successful, although not yet fully achieving its aim of a one-stop seamless service. It aims eventually to resolve 80 per cent of all calls to the Council at the first point of contact.
- 77 The Council's telephone enquiry service is providing an improved standard of service which is appreciated by customers with very few complaints and improving customer satisfaction. The service has been introduced in stages since April 2005. This approach is being well managed by the Council and is a credit to the flexibility of the staff involved. Staff have changed the way they work to deliver a better service for the public without disruption to services.
- 78 We carried out some mystery shopping checks and received a mixed quality of customer service from the Council. Our enquiries by telephone were dealt with efficiently but the Council's response to our emails was unsatisfactory. Some emails were lost and not replied to at all, and in some the response was slow and of limited use. These findings were supported by evidence of similar experiences by our focus groups with local people.
- 79 Access for customers to wider public services is not always one-stop or seamless for the people of Kerrier. The Council has few sites where the public can access a full range of information, such as on local health services, those provided by the County Council and by voluntary organisations.

- 80 Some information leaflets are available in the Council's leisure centre but it does not offer wider access to council or other services. Public access to computers is not provided in council buildings. The Council had a shared facility with the Citizen's Advice Bureau in Helston but this is not included in its new one-stop-shop. It is important for the public to be able to access a wide range of linked services no matter whom the provider is. The Council's should facilitate joint use of sites where possible in order to make this easier for the public. The new one-stop-shop in Helston does include access to some County Council services.

Is access to services delivering value for money?

- 81 The Council delivers satisfactory overall value for money (VFM). It provides a satisfactory level of value for money in its services and where there are weaknesses, these are recognised and plans implemented to deliver improvement, for example by assuring VFM in its improvements to benefits administration and benefits access and in the access improvements to the leisure centre at Helston.
- 82 The Council has delivered efficiency savings. It has achieved more than half a million pounds worth of efficiencies in 2005/06 and this is in excess of its own target. Further savings above the 2.5 per cent target are planned for 2006/07.
- 83 The Council attracts and makes good use of external funding to provide value for money for its tax payers. This includes funding obtained from central government through the Liveability Grant, Neighbourhood Renewal Funding and from Big Lottery funding. Value for money is also addressed in the way the Council is delivering the regeneration of Camborne, Pool and Redruth through its partnership working with its Urban Regeneration Company managing £150 million of funding over the next ten years. All this has helped the Council invest almost £2 million in e-government, and £0.5 million in direct customer services over the past three years.
- 84 The provision of a new one-stop-shop in Helston is a good example of how the Council addresses value for money. It has provided a substantially improved accessible centre with no initial costs for its council tax payers. This has been achieved by selling the existing inadequate Willows centre and using this money to secure a discounted lease and fit out a brand new building.
- 85 The Council uses effective partnership working to secure improvements to services (and access) that demonstrate good value for money. Recent examples of partnership arrangements to reduce costs and improve quality include the e-government partnership (Cornish Key) through which document management system and customer service points were procured. There are also joint arrangements with other Cornwall district councils such as with Penwith District Council for removing abandoned cars.

- 86 The Council manages and monitors aspects of value for money. The Council's procurement methods demonstrate value for money. Over £200,000 of efficiencies have been gained by joint procurement savings arising from the Cornish Key Partnership. It uses single issue panels effectively to focus on value for money issues in identified major projects. However, it does not routinely report and compare its value for money performance using clear value for money indicators. For example, the Council has not benchmarked its access to service costs against other councils or the private sector. This would help it demonstrate value for money to its customers.
- 87 The Council's information on some direct access to services costs is incomplete. It does not know what it spends on access to services across all service areas. The Council believes that savings in time, staff costs and general efficiencies, as well as increased quality at lower cost, have been made by bringing services together and moving staff and services from back office to frontline customer roles. However, any savings from the implementation of its customer service approach and CRM system have not been analysed. In addition, the Council has not yet done the detailed work to identify further efficiencies in access to services through its implementation of technology. It is important that the detailed breakdown of costs and efficiencies from this change, and for future changes, are clearly demonstrated.

What are the prospects for improvement to access to services?

What is the track record in delivering improvement?

- 88 The Council has a good track record of implementing changes that have improved access to services. Its initiatives have included improving access for some of the most vulnerable people in the district. Overall, local people, partners and staff within the Council can see tangible improvements.

Service delivery

- 89 The Council has improved access to local services and outcomes for service users. A number of these are shown below to illustrate the Council's track record in delivering improvement.
- It has employed an additional part-time welfare visiting officer which has helped almost 200 very vulnerable people this year to secure additional benefits worth over £300,000.
 - It proactively engages with migrant workers by arranging visits to houses and employers where groups of workers are located. Interpreters accompany officers and the visits provide an opportunity for workers to ask questions, voice their views and gain access to information and advice. This initiative is aimed at breaking down barriers and ensuring that migrant workers have equal access to services.
 - A new purpose built 'one-stop-shop' customer service centre in Helston was opened by the Council in November 2006. This replaces an old building which was run down and was not easily accessible to people with mobility problems. The new building is virtually complete, has easy access and public car parking in close proximity.
 - The Council has made improvements as part of the regeneration programme such as the Helston Townscape Heritage Initiative, and using Liveability Scheme funding, to transform facilities and access at Coronation Lake and Park in Helston.
 - The Council has completed a £250,000 refurbishment programme of the Helston Sports Centre to improve access and facilities for local people and visitors.
- 90 The Council is managing change to customer services effectively. It introduced its CSP and telephone enquiry centre in April 2005. This was developed and introduced following a series of business improvement reviews (BIRs) which were used to bring services online in a structured, incremental way. This has brought about a fundamental shift in the way that everyone in the Council deals with customers. Staff have had to make changes to historic working patterns and learn new skills. The change process has been underpinned by an effective training programme, equipping staff to undertake their new role.

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- 91 The Council has delivered against the e-government agenda in a planned, incremental way, to give it a good foundation for future developments. For example, customer service points, the customer relationship management system, electronic document management, online payment of council tax and planning applications online have been successfully implemented. Better links between front and back office systems and action to bring complaints handling into the system are also in progress. Longer-term aspirations to improve e-government-related areas are in place and are being managed through a co-ordinated modernisation programme and a series of well planned projects.
- 92 The Council's asset management planning has improved and an Asset Management Plan is now in place. This was first produced in 2004 with a three to five-year action plan. It has been rated as good by Government Office and used by ODPM as a good example of an improved plan. A County Asset Group has been formed with close links to the Rural Development Agency and an Asset Management Group is also in place within the Council. The Council now has a sound framework to manage its assets.
- 93 Progress in meeting the requirements of the 1995 DDA has been slow and some council buildings still do not meet appropriate access standards. As a result of the work by the Asset Management Group, the Council now has a repair and maintenance strategy (published in 2005) and funding allocated to improve the condition of its buildings and to deliver DDA compliance. It estimates that 70 per cent of its buildings will comply by early 2007. This is particularly important as some buildings are not accessible to disabled people.

Performance improvement

- 94 Best Value Performance indicators show a mixed picture of improvement for the Council. In overall terms they demonstrate that performance is continuing to improve. Unaudited figures for 2005/06 show that the Council achieved or exceeded 82 per cent of its targets, which is an improvement on the previous year. Over three quarters of indicators had either improved or maintained their level.
- 95 The Council has improved its performance in some access to services-related indicators. For example:
- Kerrier is in the best 25 per cent of all councils for improving recycling and although access to its kerbside collection of recyclables was below average at the end of 2004/05, it is improving;
 - un-audited results in 2005/06 show that housing benefit performance has improved after previously poor performance; and
 - the Council's investment in homelessness prevention work, a private sector letting scheme and building single person accommodation in partnership with the private sector is proving effective.

- 96 The Council has not improved its performance in some key access indicators. For example:
- in meeting the requirements of the equalities scheme including race gender and disability; and
 - the proportion of the Council's own workforce that have a disability is below average, when compared to the number of disabled people in the community, and has worsened during the past two years.

Value for money

- 97 Consideration is given by the Council to the likely impact of decisions in terms of cost and quality, particularly through the work of Single Issue Panels. For example, the closure of the old offices in Helston and use of Liveability Fund grant to bring about major improvements to some of the most deprived parts of the district.
- 98 Actions and plans for managing and improving value for money also include effective use of technology to improve services (and access to them) and increase efficiency. The electronic records and document management system which was introduced in November 2005 and new customer service points are a good example of this.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 99 The Council is clear on what it wants to achieve in broad terms and is working to improve its focus on service delivery by refreshing the Community Strategy and then the Corporate Plan. Stable and committed leadership is helping to deliver on a range of initiatives, some of which are focused on the most deprived and excluded sections of the community. Performance management arrangements are now in place throughout the Council and Overview and Scrutiny is effective.

Aims and plans

- 100 The Council has a broad vision of what it wants to achieve through its 2004 customer access to services strategy. However, the strategy is becoming out-of-date and is not backed by clear articulated plans to meet identified access needs for all sectors of the community. Specific priorities for improving access to services, identified in consultation with services users, for the short and medium-term have not yet been defined. Although, this is not holding back improvements, it does risk the Council undertaking them in an unco-ordinated way and with poor public support or awareness.
- 101 Detailed plans with measurable outcomes have not been produced by the Council in some key areas. In 2004 the Council's Corporate Performance Assessment recommended that the Council produce a regeneration strategy and this is still not in place. The Council's anti-poverty strategy is still a draft document with no action plan or details on how and when it will be delivered.

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- 102 The new draft Community Strategy uses plain, jargon-free language and a style that engages the reader. This shows that the Council has learned and taken steps to address some past weaknesses by making the Strategy more accessible to a wide range of readers. However, the draft still fails to clearly say what the Council itself will actually do in order to secure some of its key objectives - this is still work in progress.

Leadership

- 103 The Council demonstrates leadership and a willingness to change when needed. It has recently restructured its senior management team to better align its management structure with its three key priorities. Although the re-structuring is not complete, staff are supportive of the changes. Staff morale is generally good and staff say that the Council is a good place to work, as shown in the recent Investors in People (IIP) report. Above all, officers have a clear understanding of what the Council wants to achieve and how they can contribute to this.
- 104 Councillors and officers have overcome some past tensions and difficulties and are now working together productively, to ensure that the Council achieves its key corporate aims and objectives. The Council's Portfolio Plans are produced collaboratively between cabinet members and service managers and are translated into service and personal plans to ensure that all in the Council know what they must achieve.
- 105 The Council demonstrates strong leadership in its work to make services accessible to migrant workers and travellers and to reduce fear of crime and give residents pride in their environment in some of the most deprived areas of the district. This has not always been popular with some sections of the community, but the Council has remained focused on its aims.
- 106 The Council has limited staff capacity in tourism and the future of the Council's tourist service is not clear to the public. Tourism remains a key part of the local economy and although some tourism services are delivered through partnership working it remains important for the Council to provide leadership in this area in order to assure continued access to services for tourist and in related areas.

Performance management

- 107 The Council's corporate performance management framework has improved. It clearly links individual performance with team, service and ultimately Corporate Plan objectives. High level actions in Portfolio Plans are underpinned by more detailed and specific plans for individual officers as part of the Personal Review and Development Record (PRAD).
- 108 The Council monitors information from its telephone enquiry service and this is used to assess and determine future service provision. Trend data and statistics are produced for the number of calls taken and numbers that were abandoned. The number of visits to reception and number of cash transactions is also monitored. This effectively drives improvement to the service.

- 109** The Council's overview and scrutiny function is improving. It is well organised and increasingly effective in its role and has undertaken work such as reviewing the implementation of the new one-stop-shop in Helston which resulted in improvements. The Corporate Performance Overview and Scrutiny committee monitors progress against each portfolio and all service plans. This is increasingly challenging service performance and helps direct action where risks are identified or targets are slipping. Following the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) in 2004, the Council developed an improvement plan which is monitored effectively by a dedicated performance board and some improvements have been delivered as a result.
- 110** The Council's existing performance management data base is effective, but it lacks flexibility and does not fully meet the requirements of the Council's improved performance management arrangements. New software to allow more comprehensive and flexible performance management, better integration with neighbouring councils' systems and reporting is planned. This will mean that the public will be able to have direct online access to information that will allow them to see progress against plans and performance indicators. The system will be in place in early 2007.
- 111** Some weaknesses in the Council's corporate performance management arrangements remain. For example:
- there are few local performance targets or SMART action plans that allow the Council to measure success in improving access to services;
 - some actions in Portfolio Plans do not have a target, so achievement cannot be quantified and performance does not form part of the quarterly monitoring reports that go to cabinet or to Overview and Scrutiny committee; and
 - some specific actions linked to improving customer access lack a baseline figure and no target percentage against which improvement can be measured.
- 112** The reporting of performance to the public and to councillors and staff is not adequate or timely. The Council's performance against its BVPIs beginning in April 2006 was not reported to the cabinet until November 2006. This leaves the Council just four months to direct action at any areas where performance is not on track before the start of the new year in April 2007.

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Learning

- 113 The Council learns and takes action to improve access to services in some instances. For example:
- it has addressed weaknesses identified during an Audit Commission review of partnership arrangements to produce a comprehensive guidance document for officers and councillors to improve partnership working;
 - it learns from high performing councils through participating in the Rural Excellence Mentoring Programme designed to help the Council work more effectively with partners to prioritise and improve access to services and regeneration in rural areas; and
 - a delegation from the West Cornwall Together Diversity Group visited Lincolnshire to learn from its experience in providing services for migrant workers.
- 114 The Council's systems to ensure that information is used consistently to drive change and improvement are underdeveloped. Its systems for capturing, sharing and learning from customer feedback, consultation, complaints and information are not adequate. Complaints are monitored and reports on the numbers and the time taken to resolve them are produced. However, the Council does not have an effective mechanism for sharing this learning across the organisation.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 115 The Council has sound financial resources and a well trained and motivated workforce which gives it the capacity to improve access to services. It is particularly successful at attracting external funding and this has enabled a major regeneration programme to take place in its most deprived areas. Partnership working with neighbouring councils and across the county is playing a key part in this.

Skills and resources

- 116 The Council has a healthy level of financial reserves and manages its overall spending well. It is improving its financial management and its medium-term financial planning to better align corporate and service planning with financial planning. This provides a sound financial platform for introducing further improvements to accessing services.
- 117 The Council achieved Investors In People (IIP) reaccreditation in July 2006 and received a very favourable report which confirmed that the Council meets and in many cases exceeds the requirements of the IIP Standard. The report points to specific strengths in team working, good support for councillors and committees and good customer care. These achievements provide a measure of assurance in the Councils' ability to improve.

- 118** Information management and technology is being used increasingly effectively by the Council. Improvements in information technology have been managed effectively through good project management procedures and skills. However, there are still some weaknesses. The absence of a Council intranet site remains a barrier to accessing up-to-date, accurate information and in providing fast quality service to customers. In addition, the Council has inadequate focus and capacity to update and maintain its website to assure that it meets customer requirements.
- 119** The Council's work force and related human resource planning is basic and not helping it improve its capacity to deliver improvement. The Council has a Human Resources (HR) strategy (Pride in our People) which was produced in 2005, but the action plans to ensure that its key objectives are delivered are basic and still under development in some areas. Capacity within the HR and training function has been weak due to gaps in key posts.
- 120** Workforce planning is at a basic stage in the Council and detailed workforce plans have not been developed. The Council has not yet done a comprehensive skills audit in order to identify future organisational development needs and gaps. This is important if resources are to be in place at the right time, with the appropriate level of skill and knowledge to meet future aims and plans. The lack of a comprehensive plan will impair the Council's ability to recruit, retain and train its workforce to meet the changing needs of customers.
- 121** The Council's training function has also suffered from a lack of capacity, due to a delay in recruiting to a vacant post. Although training has been successfully implemented for customer service staff, there is a mixed picture when it comes to the delivery and impact of training on other issues. For example, equality and diversity training was delivered in 2004, but few staff could recall it and only seven councillors participated. Some councillors would welcome other forms of training and assistance, particularly with some aspects of IT and related equipment.

Investment

- 122** The Council has been very successful at attracting and securing inward investment to improve local services and access to them. The following points highlight the Council's success in this.
- Inward investment of over £2 million has been obtained by the Council from ODPM through the Liveability Grant. This is being used to fund developments to amenities, parks and open spaces throughout the district. Many of the improvements are being targeted at facilities for young people and are designed to overcome problems which may lead to anti-social behaviour.
 - Neighbourhood Renewal Funding (NRF) is being used by the Council to improve the most deprived areas in the district. The Council has qualified for funding for the past five years. And now qualifies for two transitional years of NRF funding commencing on the 1st April 2006. This equates to £1.6 million over two years. £800,000 will be directed by the Local Area Agreement, £600,000 to other earmarked initiatives, with a further £200,000 available to the Council to use in other areas.
 - The Council has been awarded £250,000 Big Lottery funding to develop the 'Cornwall Heartlands' project at Pool. The total project cost is expected to be around £33 million. A further bid is being submitted with the aim of attracting up to £25 million for the project from the Big Lottery Fund. The Heartlands Project is one of only 30 left nationally in the competition out of an original 500 applicants.
 - The Council's successful bid to the Department of Communities and Local Government's Ethnic Minority Innovation Fund for a Cornwall Gypsy and Traveller Renewal Project secured £55,000 to fund repairs or replacements to the vans of Gypsies and Travellers.

Partnership working

- 123** The Council uses partnership working effectively to improve its capacity to deliver improvement for local people. The strategic partnership with Penwith District Council in the West Cornwall Together (LSP) is strong and particularly significant. It has already helped improve access to services through the e-government agenda. Strong partnership working is also apparent with the police and local primary care trust (PCT) through the LSP. This is also helping to focus action on improving services and access in some of the most deprived parts of the district. However, some partners pointed to the need for the Council to move and act more swiftly to clarify develop and implement its key strategies and plans.
- 124** Working in partnership with an Urban Regeneration Company (one of the first in the country) the Council is significantly boosting its capacity to improve. The company is leading on regeneration of Camborne, Pool and Redruth with over £150 million being invested over ten years.

- 125** The Council is also engaged and working effectively with other councils in Cornwall on a number of joint working initiatives. The main components to this are the Council's work with the County Council and neighbouring councils in developing the Local Area Agreement and in improving joint work in equalities and procurement. A county-wide equality and diversity group is developing a Local Area Agreement for Cornwall (Strong 5) aimed to '*build a cohesive society based upon equality of opportunity*'. Work is progressing well in this and funding from it is being used to strengthen capacity to deliver and improve the equalities agenda and related schemes across the county. It is also planned that this will deliver improved opportunities to raise awareness and celebrate success, improved project management, better information and engagement and joint training in equalities and diversity.