

Service Inspection Report

May 2008



Access to Services

London Borough of Harrow

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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 coordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's 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 London Borough of Harrow provides fair 'access to services' with uncertain 'prospects' for improvement.
- 2 Customer access is an important cross cutting theme for the Council and is clearly reflected in corporate improvement documents. The Council has recognised that there is no overall strategic approach to access with inconsistency in the ease of access to services and is working to address this.
- 3 The Council has a broad understanding and knowledge of local need. Needs analysis has been undertaken, though this is not comprehensive or coordinated within the Council or with partners, and this information is not updated on a regular basis. As a result it is not able to ensure that access to services is planned, prioritised and delivered where it is most needed.
- 4 There is good access to services through the Council's one stop shop and contact centre known as Access Harrow, with full disabled access, translation services, and a self-serve kiosk for payments. This is giving local people increased equality of access to services. However, this level of access is not yet available at all Council services.
- 5 In some parts of the borough there is an absence of physical access points and access to services outside of office hours is limited. There is an acceptance by the Council that it needs to look at the geographical spread and plans are in place to review out of hours services in a number of areas including Access Harrow. In this way the Council aims to improve ease of access to services for all residents.
- 6 The Council acknowledges that it does not have corporate and consistent customer service standards in place and that as a result customers are not clear about what standards of service they can expect. However, there are currently no specific plans to update these.
- 7 There are a good range of mechanisms in place to engage with service users and local people. However, feedback to those consulted and the wider community is inconsistent and it is not always clear how this is used to improve services. The Council does not currently use its website for feedback, although this is planned for 2008.
- 8 The Council has a good strategic approach to equalities and diversity and understands the complexities of delivering services to a diverse community. This enables the Council to make service improvements which reflect the diverse needs of its communities. Performance in key access indicators in this area has been mixed. For example, in 2006/07 although the Council achieved level 4 of the equality standard for local Government in England, only 62 per cent of its buildings were compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act, against a target of 70 per cent. The Council plans to increase this to 80 per cent in 2007/08. Service users and potential service users may therefore not have equal access to services.

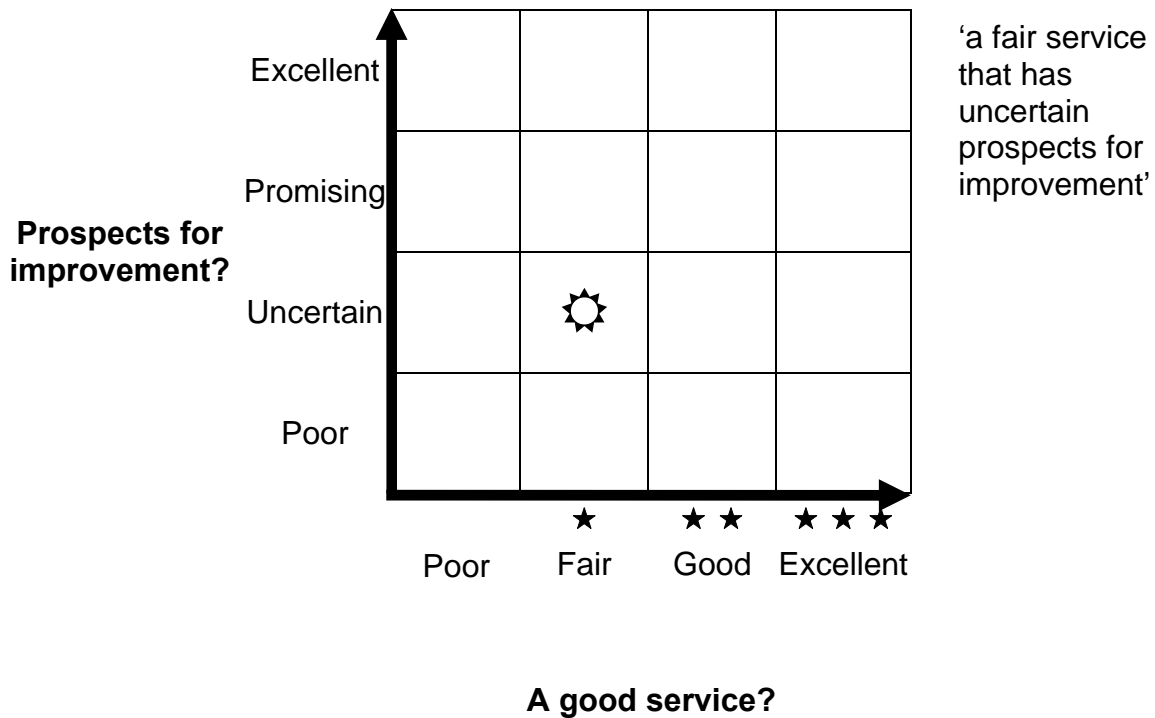
- 9 Service outcomes are not routinely or consistently collected outside Access Harrow. This means that the Council is unable to demonstrate that access to services is effective in meeting local and national objectives.
- 10 The Council's track record in delivering value for money (VFM) in access to services is limited but developing. Performance in Access Harrow has improved over the last two years and some areas now compare well to other London Boroughs, for example one stop shop average transaction times and calls answered within 60 seconds. Unit costs are calculated quarterly and are showing reduction between 2006/07 and 2007/08; however, the Council has limited comparative cost and service quality data for access to services.
- 11 The Council has implemented a substantial change programme since 2006 through the Business Transformation Partnership (BTP). A number of key elements of the Council's access strategy have been developed including the building of the one stop shop and contact centre at the civic centre. As a result, access to many services has been consolidated into a single point of contact.
- 12 Overall performance in access to services is mixed with no sustained track record in delivering improvement. Some services have been rated as 'excellent' and 'good', however, the rate of performance improvement in some other key areas, such as public realm, is below other Councils in the latest audited data for 2006/07. Access Harrow has been delivered and can demonstrate some improvements in the accessibility of services for some customers. This has however been limited by capacity and is only recently demonstrating the levels of performance originally envisaged for its first year in 2006/07.
- 13 User satisfaction is recognised by the Council as a key issue and work is in progress to improve this, for example, through improving communication with local people. The Council acknowledges that user satisfaction levels are poor in a number of areas in comparison to other councils and are showing deterioration over the last three years.
- 14 The Council's aims are based on a sound knowledge of the challenges and opportunities faced. Short and medium term aims and objectives for the expansion of Access Harrow have been agreed. The inclusion of key services, such as adults' and children's services, was originally planned for the medium and longer term, and as a result, is yet to be developed.
- 15 Performance management arrangements are being strengthened with councillors and senior officers clear about their roles, maintaining a focus on performance improvement. Access Harrow has good performance management arrangements. However, the Council is slow to respond to complaints and they are not used systematically to improve service delivery and performance. Knowledge about performance is used to solve problems but this is not systematic or consistent.

- 16 The Council is working to increase its capacity to improve. Planned development programmes for councillors and managers aim to increase leadership and management capacity. Limited progress is being made in tackling high sickness absence, recruitment and retention of staff remains a key risk and workforce planning is under developed. The financial capacity of the Council was weak in 2006/07 but there are clear plans to address this from 2007/08. Strategic partnerships are being used well to increase capacity and additional funding has been committed for 2008/09 to increase the capacity of Access Harrow to deal with calls.

Scoring the service

- 17 We have assessed London Borough of Harrow as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 18 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- customer access is a key cross cutting theme for the Council;
 - good access to some services is provided through Access Harrow's one stop shop and contact centre;
 - there is a strategic approach to equalities and diversity and the Council understands the complexities of delivering services to a diverse community;
 - use of technology to provide access to services is adequate;
 - a wide range of mechanisms are employed to consult with residents, customers, partners and other stakeholders;

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.

- Access Harrow, including the building of the one stop shop and contact centre and associated technology, was delivered on time and to budget and performance is now improving;
- effective partnership working is helping to improve access to services; and
- there is a clear focus on value for money.

However:

- there is no strategic approach to access covering all services across the Council;
- there are inconsistent levels of access to different services;
- knowledge management is under-developed;
- there is an absence of physical access points in some parts of the borough;
- there are no corporate customer service standards in place for access;
- feedback to customers from consultation exercises is inconsistent;
- levels of user satisfaction are poor;
- there is a low level of satisfaction with complaints handling and complaints information is not used consistently to improve services; and
- there is limited comparative cost and quality information for access to services to demonstrate value for money.

19 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- there is no sustained track record of improvement;
- there is a poor track record of improvement in satisfaction rates which remain low;
- improvements by Access Harrow in the accessibility of services for some customers has been limited by capacity and as a result the pace of improvement has been slower than originally envisaged;
- there is a lack of clear leadership for customer access at a corporate director level, although there are plans in place to address this;
- a performance management culture is being developed but performance management at an individual officer level is inconsistent and not yet embedded;
- regular information and intelligence is produced, but data on public contact, transaction completion times and satisfaction levels is not routinely or consistently collected outside Access Harrow;
- the response to complaints is slow and the outcomes from complaints are not used systematically to improve service delivery and performance;
- knowledge about performance is not used systematically or consistently to solve problems although there are some examples where this does take place;

10 Access to Services | Scoring the service

- the financial capacity of the Council was weak in 2006/07 but there are clear plans in place to address this from 2007/08;
- limited progress is being made in tackling sickness absence which remains high; and
- the recruitment and retention of staff remains a significant challenge for the Council and workforce planning is under developed.

However:

- a substantial change programme has been implemented since 2006 through the Business Transformation Partnership (BTP). One of the key projects delivered is the First Contact phase 1 which includes Access Harrow;
- Access Harrow can demonstrate some improvements in the accessibility of services for some customers;
- improvements in the housing benefits service have been sustained;
- aims for customer access are based on a sound knowledge of the challenges and opportunities faced. Short and medium term aims and objectives for the expansion of Access Harrow have been agreed but longer term plans are yet to be developed;
- councillors are willing to tackle difficult problems and take tough decisions to resolve these and the Chief Executive provides active and visible leadership;
- there are many examples of motivated staff who are striving for improvement in access to services;
- councillors and senior officers are clear about their roles and maintain a focus on performance management;
- Access Harrow has good performance management arrangements and its capacity to deal with calls is being increased;
- the Council understands its strengths and weaknesses in the context of the challenges faced. It is learning from its own experiences and those of others but there is no overall or corporate approach;
- ICT capacity and infrastructure is adequate to support access to services;
- a clear medium term financial strategy is in place, linked from 2007/08 to the service planning process, and increased capacity to deliver its key objectives is committed for 2008/09; and
- strategic partnerships are being used well to increase capacity.

Recommendations

- 20 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 Improve access to services and customer experience by:

- *developing a strategic approach to access covering all services in consultation with customers and key partners;*
- *analysing data and performance information for access to services outside Access Harrow and using this to inform service developments; and*
- *developing a corporate approach to measuring the performance of access to services.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- improved access to services for customers.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2009.

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 Improve the management of complaints corporately by:

- *ensuring that complaints are dealt with in a timely and positive way;*
- *analysing issues and trends in complaints data; and*
- *systematically using the outcome from complaints to improve service delivery and performance.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved satisfaction with complaints handling;
- improved response rate to complaints;
- the Council will be seen as more open and transparent; and
- learning from complaints is used effectively to improve services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2008.

Recommendation

R3 Develop and implement a set of corporate standards for all forms of customer contact:

- *ensure customers are consulted on the content of the standards when they are in development;*
- *ensure that the agreed standards are widely publicised; and*
- *monitor against the standards regularly and ensure that results are shared with customers.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- clear and comprehensive standards which are understood by customers;
- staff are clear about what is expected of them; and
- consistent standards for all customer contacts.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by September 2008.

Recommendation

R4 Develop the approach to managing and improving value for money for access to services:

- *establish a set of cost and performance indicators for access to services across the Council; and*
- *build on benchmarking information already available expanding where possible comparative information on cost and quality.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved cost effectiveness of access to services;
- increased awareness of the value for money provided by access to services within the Council; and
- demonstrating the benefits for customers from investment in access to services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2009.

Recommendation

R5 Develop a coordinated approach to knowledge management both within the Council and with partners that ensures:

- *learning from existing good practice is shared within the Council; and*
- *knowledge both within the Council and with partners informs the strategic approach to access to services.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- a comprehensive needs analysis to inform strategic planning.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2009.

Report

Context

The locality

- 21 Harrow is the twelfth largest borough in London with a population of 214,600³ and an area of 5.047 hectares (50 square kms). It has an average density of 41 people per hectare which is below the London average of 46, but above the Outer London average of 35 people per hectare.
- 22 Harrow is ethnically and culturally diverse with 52.5 per cent of the population from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities, a figure higher than the London average of 42 per cent. The Asian community (consisting of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and other Asians) makes up 31 per cent of the borough's total population, of which Indians comprise 21 per cent. There is also a sizeable Irish population, with a lower proportion of black Caribbean and black African people. The most recent BME arrivals are from Africa, such as Somalis, but also include smaller numbers from southern Asia such as Tamils and Eastern Europeans. The different groups have distinct settlement patterns. The white population is most highly concentrated in the north and west of the borough. Asian communities are well-established in the southern part, while black groups are more dispersed and spread through the south and middle of the borough. The borough is the most religiously diverse region in the United Kingdom, with a high density of Hindus across the borough and a significant Jewish population in the north.
- 23 The proportions of the population in each age bracket are close to the average for London. The percentage of people aged 0 to 19 years is 25 per cent, the percentage of people of working age is sixty four per cent and the percentage of people aged 65 and over is 14 per cent. This compares with London averages of 24 per cent, 67 per cent and 12 per cent for these respective age groups. The borough's population is forecast to grow to around 220,000 by 2021 and this growth is projected to be mostly in the BME population. The proportion of over 60's is due to increase by approximately one third by 2023, so that this group will then comprise almost one quarter of the total population. This has implications for the future planning of services.
- 24 Overall there are low levels of deprivation in Harrow, with the borough ranking 205 out of 354 local authorities in England in terms of average deprivation (1 is most deprived). However, while the borough has some of the country's most affluent wards, for example, Stanmore Park and Hatch End, some wards such as Marlborough and Wealdstone, are among the country's most deprived.

³ Population estimates by ethnic group (experimental), ONS, 2004

- 25 Harrow is a prosperous borough with higher than average income levels. In March 2007, the level of general unemployment was 6.3 per cent, lower than the London average (7.4 per cent), but higher than the national average (5.3 per cent).⁴ The local economy has a relatively high dependence on small business activity and there were 8,035 VAT-registered businesses in the borough in 2006.

The council

- 26 Harrow Council is led by a majority Conservative administration elected in May 2006. The Conservatives have 37 councillors, Labour have 24 councillors and there are 2 Liberal Democrats. Before May 2006, no party had overall control of the Council but it was led by the then-largest group which was Labour. The borough has 21 wards with three councillors in each. The council's cabinet comprises 10 councillors. The function of overview and scrutiny has been restructured and since July 2007 has comprised an overview and scrutiny committee and a performance and finance scrutiny sub-committee.
- 27 The Council is made up of five directorates: community and environment services; children's services; adults and housing services; finance, and; strategy and business support. The Chief Executive took up post in April 2007 and at the time of the inspection had begun consultation on a new structure for the Council.
- 28 A Corporate Assessment was last carried out in the borough in 2007 and assessed the Council as performing adequately overall, meeting minimum standards.
- 29 The Council was awarded two stars by the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) in 2007 and is assessed to be 'improving adequately'.
- 30 The net revenue budget for 2007/08 is £155.1 million and the band D council tax for 2007/08 is £1,423.00.

Access to services

- 31 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. For customers, it means that they should be able to contact councils in a range of accessible and DDA compliant physical localities. They should also be able to contact councils through a range of other remote methods. This includes a fully accessible, easy-to-navigate website. There should be appropriate arrangements for electronic transactions, electronic communication and consultation.

⁴ Labour Market Profile: London Borough of Harrow, NOMIS

- 32** 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 this is possible.
- 33** In 2001 the Council undertook a cross cutting best value review, the 'First Contact' review of access to services across the Council. The review resulted in a series of recommendations including the development of a one stop shop and contact centre. The Council entered into a strategic partnership to help deliver improved access to services.
- 34** In February 2005 the Council developed an Access Strategy with its strategic partner which defined how it wanted to relate to customers. Following this a detailed specification was drawn up which led to the creation of Access Harrow, including the contact centre, one stop shop and all related telephony and customer management systems. Initially high volume but low risk services were introduced into Access Harrow. Currently it contains general enquiries, revenues, benefits, public realm, community safety, housing repairs, parking, allotments, sports pitch bookings and education admissions. Future transfers include planning and building control and potentially more of housing services.
- 35** Another element of the strategy is the move to electronic channels through a new transaction based website and publicity campaign. This is being delivered through the channel migration work stream.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 36** Customer access is a key cross cutting priority for the Council reflected in corporate documents including the Corporate Plan 'Investing for the future 2008 - 2011'. This document sets out the Council's vision of being 'recognised as one of the best London Councils by 2012 in a borough that is cosmopolitan, confident and cohesive'.
- 37** In line with the vision a focused set of corporate priorities have been determined which include 'improving the way we work for residents'. This priority aims to get better value for money (VFM), cut waste, improve Access Harrow, improve communications, achieve efficiency and improve customer satisfaction. It includes specific actions to improve access to services for example to 'improve access to services through the contact centre' with associated targets:
- increasing to 85 per cent calls answered in 30 seconds; and
 - receiving and processing 500 electronic forms a month compared with the current level of around 100.
- 38** The Council developed an Access Strategy with its strategic partner in February 2005 which focused on how services would be offered to customers currently and in the future. The strategy is built on two key principles:
- that customers are able to access services in a way that suits their needs and preferences, thus improving customer satisfaction; and
 - that the Council is able to reduce the cost of delivering services through the appropriate use of technology.
- 39** In conjunction with its strategic partner the Council developed the Access Harrow specification which involved the creation of the contact centre, one stop shop and all related telephony and customer management systems. The original vision for Access Harrow was to:
- enable the Council to deliver its services efficiently and effectively;
 - change the way in which frontline staff deliver services and improve the customer experience; and
 - facilitate the sharing of information across the Council, its customers and its partners.
- 40** Access Harrow opened in April 2006 and is located at the Civic Centre. It brought together staff from across the Council as well as newly recruited staff who have been trained in customer service technology and other services. Initially the strategy was to introduce high volume, low risk services into Access Harrow. The level of service provided by Access Harrow is different for each service and calls are passed to the back office at agreed stages.

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- 41 The one stop shop at the Civic Centre is the main access point for services. Councillors took the decision not to introduce further access points across the borough. Instead they decided to implement the channel migration strategy as a means of relieving pressure on the one stop shop and supporting alternative means of access. There are other reception points for services outside Access Harrow, for example children's services and housing, as well as local facilities such as leisure centres.
- 42 The original vision for Access Harrow was that all services would operate through it unless there were strong business reasons for them to be excluded. In February 2008 this vision was reconfirmed by the Corporate Strategic Board. Plans for future transfers include planning and building control and potentially more housing services. Planning will be fully integrated into Access Harrow when further space is created in the ground floor of the Civic Centre. Homelessness and asylum seekers services have been considered but deemed not suitable for inclusion in the one stop shop. The process of determining suitability for other services, such as adults' and children's services was originally planned for the medium and longer term and as a result has not been completed.
- 43 The Access Strategy also outlined migration to electronic channels through a new transaction based website, an associated publicity campaign and changes to the Council processes to support electronic access to services. This is being delivered through the channel migration project. This project aims to encourage customers to access services in certain ways. For example much of the work will be to shift customers from using the telephone to using the website for transactions. The key drivers for the project are:
- to improve VFM - it aims to identify the most cost effective channel for delivering services for the customer and encouraging customers to use these channels. The aim is to achieve a reduction in cost to the Council for each customer transaction; and
 - to improve customer access and satisfaction - a key role is to improve the customer experience and improve choice in the way the Council is contacted, allowing customers to drive the process and access Council services, at a time that is convenient for them.
- 44 New business cases are being developed including the housing, revenues and planning (HARP) programme which links to the design principles and original vision for the Access Harrow service. The desired outcomes and aims for this programme include:
- a single view of the customer and all associated information with the aim of avoiding duplication so that information is collected once and shared with many;
 - enabling staff, managers and customers to track the status of their application or query;

- increased performance and efficiency through the ability to accurately measure the productivity of individuals and teams and eliminate the amount of re-working within the departments and across the Council; and
- increased efficiency through mobile working.

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

Customer and community focus

- 45** Customer access is an important cross cutting theme for the Council and is clearly reflected in corporate improvement documents. However the Council has recognised that there is no strategic approach to access covering all services. In the 2008/09 draft corporate plan one of the corporate priorities is to 'Improve the way we work with our residents' which includes explicit actions to improve access to services. Also the Council has put in place a 9 step improvement plan which includes a step to improve communication, customer access and satisfaction levels. This ensures there is a focus on access issues but the lack of a comprehensive approach means there is inconsistency in the ease of access to services.
- 46** Decisions about access to services are based on a broad understanding and knowledge of local need. Needs analysis has been undertaken but is not comprehensive or coordinated either within the Council or with partners and this information is not updated on a regular basis. Examples which demonstrate the Council's broad understanding of customer needs are:
- in preparing its access strategy the Council divided customers into groups or segments, based for example, on geography, age, disability, and ethnicity, (including hard to reach groups) and looked at the characteristics, access needs and preferences of each group. This ensured that their approach to access puts customers' needs first and is based on what customers want; and
 - Harrow Vitality Profile is a multi-agency evidence base about Harrow and its communities. It uses information gathered by the Harrow Strategic Partnership and key datasets provided by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The profiles show the diverse nature of Harrow and those areas which have the greatest need. The profiles have informed service planning and bids for external funding.

However, the lack of a comprehensive needs' analysis with partners means the Council cannot fully ensure that access to services is planned, prioritised and delivered where it is most needed.

- 47 Some services have been designed and situated in response to customer need. For example, the children's centre programme has been developed following engagement with customers and partners. Four children's centres have been delivered and are located where the identified need is greatest. Good partnership working with schools and external partners enables expert face to face navigation to the various agencies and services for parents. This helps to ensure that services are effectively meeting identified customer needs.

Ease of access for all

- 48 The Council has a planned approach to access and knows the broad access preferences of its customers. This is demonstrated through the access strategy developed in 2005 with its strategic partner. The strategy is informed by an adequate assessment of customer needs and preferences through a survey undertaken initially in 2001 and updated in 2005. Both surveys showed a strong preference for a one stop service with telephone access for most routine contacts and face to face for more complex enquiries. The number of people with a preference for internet access rose greatly in the updated survey in 2005. Using this data ensures that the Council is better placed to meet customer needs and preferences.
- 49 There are inconsistent levels of access to services. There is good access to services through Access Harrow, with full disabled access, translation services, and a self-serve kiosk for payments. However, this level of access is not available at all other services across the borough. The Council is taking action to address this lack of consistency. For example, it has set up joint visiting teams targeted at vulnerable people within its community. The teams provide a one stop service for people in their homes who are unable to access the Access Harrow service. The Council has also improved its web services so that customers can now make payments on line for rent and council tax. These are positive initiatives giving a broader range of access options to local people. Despite these initiatives the Council has much more work to do before it can show equality of access to services for all local people.
- 50 There is an absence of physical access points in some parts of the borough. The location of the one stop shop in the civic centre was agreed based on no other sites being available and the results of a survey in 2001 showing that 66 per cent of users wanted to come to the Civic Centre. There is an acceptance by the Council of the need to look at geographical spread of its buildings open to the public and map this to the population. The Council's information and communication technology (ICT) systems allow Access Harrow to be delivered in multiple locations.
- 51 Limited access to services is available outside office hours. The one stop shop is open office hours only and an out of hours message directs customers to relevant emergency numbers. Access Harrow started with longer working hours, including Saturday mornings, but there was limited demand for this and the decision was taken on VFM grounds to stop this and open during office hours only. The Council is currently reviewing out of hours services in a number of areas including Access Harrow.

- 52 The Council has a good focus on improving levels of disabled access, aiming to increase the number of buildings that are DDA compliant from 62 per cent in 2006/07 to 80 per cent in 2007/08. The Council worked with voluntary sector partners when reviewing disability access levels to its buildings. It acted on recommendations made by the partners, for example in the Pinner Road children and families reception, and is providing capital funding to deliver access improvements for disabled people. Access Harrow is fully compliant with DDA requirements and facilities are being further improved with the introduction of web cam services to provide British Sign Language support for deaf and hard of hearing people. This level of access is not yet available at other Council offices and buildings. Disabled people are benefiting from the improving levels of accessibility to some services.
- 53 The Council has improved access to services through its transactional website. The website was re-launched in July 2007 having been redesigned with input from users through focus groups of staff from service areas and external web users. It also ran a web survey to canvass views from existing users. This supported the move to a more transactional service. The site provides both information and a wide range of transactions such as housing benefit changes or reporting street problems through the use of on-line forms. Since the re-launch of the website there has been an increase in the use of on-line forms for such transactional purposes. The Council is just commencing a promotional campaign to raise awareness of what is available through the website. Such a website enables people to have access at all hours to a range of council services.
- 54 The Council is making some use of technology to support ease of access to services, but is not taking advantage of all the potential benefits ICT offers. An automated queuing system in the one stop shop and a customer relationship management (CRM) system in both the contact centre and one stop shop have been deployed to manage customer contacts and assist staff in responding to requests. However, this is only integrated with a limited number of back office services and there are no plans currently to roll the CRM out to other contact locations within the borough. Use of mobile technology to take services out to customers, for example for housing benefits assessments, has been considered but is only at pilot stage. As a result technology is not yet being used to maximum effect in facilitating access to services.
- 55 Peaks and troughs in service demands are being managed adequately in Access Harrow. Demand peaks are identified using the IT systems and required staffing levels estimated from this. This ensures effective use of resources and improved access for customers.
- 56 The physical environment at access and reception points is generally good. For example, at the civic centre, in children's services and at resource centres the environment was welcoming and user friendly. Investment in improvements has been made at the civic centre and in children's services, for example in Pinner Road. However some access points did not meet these standards; for example, housing services, where conditions were very cramped for the level of usage, were providing a poor level of service for customers.

- 57 There is some publicity about access methods to local people but its effectiveness has not yet been fully assessed. For example a new A-Z of services has been produced which will be included with the 2008/09 council tax bills. This includes contact details for all services but it is not clear which services are accessed through Access Harrow and there are a large number of contact numbers still included. This may cause some confusion with customers.

Customer service standards

- 58 There are no corporate customer service standards in place. The Council acknowledges that it does not have consistent standards for customer access or customer care. However there are currently no specific plans to address this. One of the recommendations from the 2001 best value review of access to services was 'that the authority adopts a common set of standards for all customer contacts'. These were drawn up at the time, with customers consulted on the content, however these are now out of date and their adoption is inconsistent across the Council. As a result customers are not clear about what standards of service they can expect from the Council.
- 59 Customer service standards are in place for a limited number of services. For example standards for Access Harrow have been agreed and are monitored closely. The standards are publicised in the Civic Centre along with performance against them but they are not easily accessible on the website. Similarly there are some service standards in public realm services but many of these are out of date. The leaflet, 'Your guide to recycling and refuse services in Harrow sets out the commitment to customers', for example, 'we will collect bin or box on the scheduled day' and 'we will pick up a missed collection by the end of the next working day'. Some of these commitments are monitored internally but this performance information is not routinely shared with customers.
- 60 Website accessibility standards have been developed. The Council has devolved web publishing to authorised staff and has developed a set of standards to ensure that quality and usability is maintained. The website content standards indicate awareness of diversity issues in web access and usability. However, the standards have some omissions, such as lack of provision for non-English readers and the use of spoken word web page reading technology. Overall adherence to accessibility standards assists in making service access via the website more available.

Engagement

- 61** The Council has a good range of mechanisms in place to engage customers and local people including:
- the revised scrutiny process which provides opportunities for local people, partners and the voluntary sector to get involved in scrutiny including, suggesting topics for review and participating in reviews and gathering evidence events;
 - the ten Prosperity Action Teams in place across the borough have a specific budget to resolve local issues outside of the normal budgeting and planning process. Completed projects to date relate mostly to open space improvement. This allows the Council to directly address local priorities quickly;
 - open question time for the Cabinet allows members of the public to raise questions about the operation of the Council. It is run by an independent facilitator with the turn out to date varying between approximately 175 down to approximately 60. Responses are summarised and made available in the minutes; and
 - the re-established citizen panel through surveys raises questions about the way services can be developed.

As a result there are a number of opportunities for customers and local people to engage with the Council and feed in their views around access to services.

- 62** The Council works well with partners to engage both users and non users of services. The Council has a contract for the management of leisure facilities in the borough. As part of the contract, monthly user forums are held to allow users to feed into the delivery of the service. A wide range of issues are raised in these meetings, ranging from complaints about the level of cleanliness and decoration to infrastructure issues. Areas for service development are also raised. New services have been provided following these user forums, for example women only fitness sessions and a net ball league for community groups. This helps to ensure that services are redesigned around the needs of users.
- 63** The Council makes use of the website for consultation but the potential of the website to support engagement and consultation is not fully realised. There is a consultation finder system on the site, accessed from the 'Say It' button on the home page and on-line responses to some consultations are possible. For example, an on line survey was used to get people's views on how the Harrow People Magazine could be improved. Some consultations on transport issues have been run on the website and the council also used an on-line petition for 'Fair Deal for Harrow' which sets out the Council's case for additional central Government funding. However, some information is out of date. There has not been a wide use of this capability and as a result the Council is not maximising its capacity for consultation.

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- 64 The Council actively seeks customer views and preferences in relation to access. Focus groups were held with a cross section of customers to test ideas for promoting the use of the internet. The Council listened to its customers and used the preferred campaign 'Harrow Clicks' to promote internet usage. Customers' involvement in the design of campaigns helps to ensure greater likelihood of success.
- 65 The Council's approach to feeding back on consultations is inconsistent and it is not always clear how this is used to improve services. The way feedback is given depends on the response rate, for example, if there is a small response rate then individual feedback would be provided, however, this method is not appropriate for high numbers where a leaflet or booklet is provided. The internet is not consistently used to provide feedback although the software is currently being tested on the intranet and the plan is to use the web to feedback in the future.
- 66 The Council's approach to communication with residents is developing from a low base. Work with Westminster City Council is helping to improve the Council's communications service. A new communication team of ten people based in Harrow Council have responsibility for improving communications and contributing to improvement in customer satisfaction ratings. New channels of communications include the re-launch of the residents' magazine, following consultation with residents and staff, the production of a new A-Z of services, to be included with all council tax bills and supporting work on the re-launch of the website. However it is too early to assess impact from these initiatives.
- 67 Learning from complaints is not used consistently to improve services, although there are some examples where this has taken place in social care. The Council has comprehensive complaints procedures. Procedures for managing corporate complaints and for complaints about social care give comprehensive guidance to staff and aim to move towards an open culture in terms of receiving and responding to complaints. Clear and accessible leaflets are available on how to make a complaint and the support available to do so. However there is no systematic process for sharing learning from complaints.
- 68 The Council recently improved its customer feedback and complaints system for Access Harrow using the CRM system. Prior to this limited information was collected on complaints in Access Harrow and so it was not clear how this information was used to improve services. Complaints are now logged and monitored centrally. The system alerts service managers where complaints are not resolved within ten days. This helps to ensure complaints are dealt with quickly and appropriately.

Diversity

69 The Council has a good strategic approach to equalities and diversity and understands the complexities of delivering services to a diverse community. The Council's comprehensive race equality scheme' (RES) incorporates previous, separately drafted schemes on equalities. The accompanying race equality action plan sets out actions under eight equality areas. These include:

- establishing priorities for gender equality and disability equality;
- improving customer services to the borough's diverse community; and
- involving service users and the wider community in how services are designed.

Such an approach enables the Council to make service improvements which reflect the diverse needs of its communities.

70 Nevertheless, performance in key access indicators has been mixed:

- the Council has achieved level 4 of the equality standard for local government in England and shows a good trend in improvement (BV2a);
- the Council has second quartile performance nationally for the duty to promote race equality at 4 per cent (BV2b);
- the percentage of local authority owned buildings open to the public in which all public areas are suitable for and accessible to disabled persons is improving, from 32 per cent in 2004/05 to 62 per cent in 2006/07. The Council reports that for 2007/08, 80 per cent (unaudited figure) of its buildings are now DDA compliant; and
- the percentage of staff with disabilities (BV 16a) expressed as a ratio of the percentage of working age in the population with a disability (BV 16b) has decreased and is third quartile.

As a result of mixed performance in key performance indicators service users and potential users may not have equal access.

71 The Council has a sustained focus on integrating equalities and diversity into service planning. Access Harrow provides a single point of contact for key services, including a one-stop-shop and a contact centre. It is fully DDA compliant. Front office staff have a range of languages which they can use for non-English speakers, and language line is available to provide interpreting services. Staff are trained in signing and integrated technology is available for Braille as well as providing all customer stations with an induction loop system. The Council recently carried out a detailed equality impact assessment (EIA) of its services. The EIA contained a broad range of information founded on research and consultation on service provision. The Council can use this to deliver improved levels of access and services to its customers. One of the practical changes from this assessment was to place a powered door in Access Harrow.

- 72 Use of technology to provide access to services is adequate. The Council's website has some features to support access by disabled users such as variable font sizes and Browsealoud software, which reads out web page for blind and partially-sighted people. Authorised web publishers in the Council are trained in writing in a clear and accessible manner according to defined standards. There is a link from the main page to the DisabledGo website. The Council also commissioned an external review of usability and is acting upon the recommendations. Social inclusion and the digital divide is recognised in the ICT strategy and measures to address this include assistive software and hardware for visually impaired and disabled users on People's Network terminals in libraries. However, the website does not provide support for non-English speakers despite the large black and minority ethnic (BME) population within the borough. Despite these improvements, not all people who are able, or may want to use the website, can do so.
- 73 The Council is working to ensure diversity and equality form part of the day to day work of the Council. Regular monitoring reports go to Cabinet on workforce and recruitment matters. A new induction programme has recently been developed with elements on diversity, with the aim to inform staff of the Council's standards and how this relates to their service. This helps to increase understanding of the Council's policies around diversity.
- 74 The Council is working to ensure hard to reach groups have equal access to services, however, the voluntary sector report that access remains difficult for some hard to reach groups. Examples of specific services include the housebound library service which supports those who cannot visit a branch and the 'silver surfers' programme for older people. Also having identified Tamil names on the electoral register the Roxeth library now stocks Tamil books and information from Harrow Association of Somali Voluntary Organisations (HASVO) has led to Somali newspapers and children's books being stocked in specific branches. As a partner on the Local Strategic Partnership the Council established the Somali taskforce which specifically addresses the needs of this community. This ensures that the needs of this group are identified and heard.
- 75 Data is not used effectively to understand diversity. The Council collects data on complaints but this is not broken down to enable an understanding of issues and trends in communities or within vulnerable groups. Data is collected on the number of complaints in adults and children's social care services, however this data is limited and does not, for example, give information on ethnic breakdown, age of complainant and outcome. This information is therefore not available to assist the council to plan services to meet diverse needs.

Service outcomes for users and the community

- 76 Service outcomes for customers are improving in Access Harrow but this has been slower than initially planned due to capacity issues. It is only now achieving the service levels envisaged in its first year 2006/07. Also access outcomes are not routinely or consistently collected outside Access Harrow. This means that the Council is unable to demonstrate that access to services is effective in meeting local and national objectives.

- 77 The Council is working well in partnership with the voluntary sector to improve access for service users. A third party reporting initiative allows access to services and constructive support for victims of crime in marginalised groups such as refugees and asylum seekers who may have difficulty in directly approaching a statutory agency such as the Council or the Police. This project involves over twenty statutory and voluntary agencies working in partnership to enable victims of race or hate crime to report confidentially within their own communities. Eleven third party reporting centres have been established in the community to ensure victims receive an appropriate and sensitive service.
- 78 The Council is involved in a series of operational partnerships to improve access to services such as housing repairs, highways maintenance and leisure centres. These partnerships take some time to work effectively, for example the contract for housing repairs initially had over ambitious targets for activity. The Council has worked with its strategic partner to address this and the relationship is now improving. Similarly the partnership for highways maintenance has been recently scrutinised by the Council to ensure it is delivering improvements as effectively as possible.
- 79 The Council works effectively across traditional service boundaries to improve access to services. For example, a Joint Team has been set up between Harrow Council and the Pension Service, Job Centre Plus and the voluntary sector to provide access to both benefits and benefits advice. One home visit is undertaken by a visiting officer who gathers information and passes it to a range of other agencies. This ensures elderly residents are able to access the benefits service and receive their full entitlement. In 2006/07 the Council helped residents share in an extra £1.5 million in benefits.
- 80 Some access points are shared with other service providers however this is limited at present. The Wealdstone Centre based in Wealdstone town centre provides an example of the Council co-locating with other partners. Services operating from the centre include:
- the Wealdstone library, including free internet access for members and non-members, and room hire used by a wide range of voluntary and community groups;
 - the Harrow Healthy Living Centre and Red Brick Café (a charitable organisation); and
 - a Youth centre.
- As a result customers are able to access some council and other services in a convenient location.

User experience

- 81 Overall user satisfaction levels are poor. Performance data for 2006/07 shows that overall satisfaction rates are low at 42 per cent and have not improved. Low satisfaction rates are recognised by the Council as a key issue and work is in progress to improve these.

- 82 Customer feedback on the one stop shop is very good. In a survey undertaken in September 2007, over 75 per cent of respondents rated the service they received as good or excellent and almost 90 per cent thought that the one stop shop was set in a friendly environment. In relation to the time taken to see a one stop shop advisor, around 87 per cent of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied. The comfort of the facility and the attitude and knowledge of staff are appreciated by customers. The Council are undertaking a survey to gauge the expectations of callers in terms of call waiting times and the experience of callers in terms of speed to answer and the professionalism of the staff that answer their call. This will enable the Council to be more aware of the customer experience of contact.
- 83 Partnership working with the voluntary sector is good overall but is not maximising their capacity. The voluntary sector report good relationships but a lack of transparency and timeliness regarding decisions in relation to funding. The sector also reports an intermittent understanding at senior level and with councillors of the value of working in partnership. There is good access to the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council with agreement to formalise this on a more regular basis. However the sector report that they don't often get feedback on their comments and simply see the finalised document which means they are not clear how their comments have been used by the Council.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 84 The Council provides adequate VFM in access to services and there is a clear focus on VFM issues in Access Harrow. The Access Strategy clearly recognises in its goals that the Council needs to balance customer needs and preferences with reducing the costs of delivering services through appropriate use of technology. The strategy clearly states 'in order to improve customer satisfaction while also driving costs down, we need to ensure that the channels we offer each customer group meets their expectations and enhances their experience of the Council customer service'. However this goal has not yet been fully achieved.
- 85 The Council is actively seeking to drive efficiency through its strategic partnership and the business transformation programme (BTP). The initial programme involved delivery of projects in three main areas including the delivery of Access Harrow. Efficiencies arising from the initial projects are estimated to match the total cost of the projects over a ten-year period. Projected efficiencies were slow to materialise and as a result the Council renegotiated its contract with its partner and planned savings were achieved in 2006/07, and they are on track to exceed the savings target for 2007/08. The strategic partnership is targeting investment at improving access through detailed analysis of customer needs and this is resulting in better access to services.

- 86 The Access Harrow programme has achieved efficiencies by bringing services together. The last tranche of services to be brought into Access Harrow was student finance, schools admissions and the sports pitch booking service. Prior to the transfer into Access Harrow these services ran independently in different departments and costs totalled £142,800. Post transfer costs were estimated at £113,700, making a total cost reduction £29,100 per year, or a 20 per cent reduction.
- 87 The Council actively promotes methods of improving VFM. The Harrow Clicks campaign aims to increase the number of residents who transact and access the Council via its website so that the number of customers who contact Access Harrow (by telephone or face to face) reduces over time. This forms a key part of the Council's channel migration project. The Council estimates that improvements to the website enabling customers to pay for services on-line have saved residents over £900,000 over seven years.
- 88 There is some good information on unit costs for Access Harrow which is used internally by managers to understand costs. Cost per transaction for the one stop shop (face to face) and the contact centre (telephone) are calculated and used by managers to look at how costs are moving over time. Costs are reducing for both the one stop shop and the contact centre as they work more efficiently, dealing with more calls and customers and increasingly matching resources to demand. As an example, some full time posts are being replaced with part-time staff who are able to work at peak times. The cost per web visit is also calculated and from the data it is clear that this is the least expensive form of contact. This links to the Council's channel migration project. As a result managers have a good understanding of the transaction costs for Access Harrow.
- 89 Limited comparative cost information is collated for access to services. Access Harrow is part of a London wide benchmarking group but it does not currently compare financial data. Taking into account the difficulties in comparing costs the Council has tried to benchmark costs using available data. Where this has been possible Access Harrow transaction costs compare favourably. For example, a group of Northern authorities calculated average transaction costs for different contact methods including face to face, telephone and web visits. Access Harrow costs fit into the lower quartile for face to face and telephone and fit with median costs for web-visits compared to the Northern authorities. The Council recognises the value of cost benchmarking and has asked the London wide benchmarking club to examine financial comparisons.

- 90 Access Harrow regularly compares available performance information. As part of the pan-London benchmarking group some comparison of performance is undertaken, for example, calls answered as a percentage of calls presented in 60 seconds and one stop shop average transaction time. At the start of 2007/08, Access Harrow performance was relatively poor in comparison to other London Boroughs. However, by February 2008 performance had improved, matching some of the best performing London Boroughs for the specific indicators measured. However, the measures provided only measure the speed dimension of performance. There is limited assessment of quality and effectiveness and so managers do not know how the quality of the service compares to other authorities.
- 91 There is limited use of benchmarking and statistics for the website. Since the re-launch there has been a significant increase in the number of web form submissions, even prior to the recent promotional campaign. However, this information has not been benchmarked against other boroughs even though the Council works with other boroughs in the West London Alliance. As a result, the Council does not know how well it is performing in relation to other similar Councils.
- 92 Clear cost and performance information is presented and used to assist councillors in decision making. The growth proposal for Access Harrow as part of the 2008/09 budget was supported by clear information on the range of performance that could be delivered at varying levels of growth. Growth of £300,000 for 2008/09 has been estimated by the Council to deliver performance of 87 per cent of calls answered in 30 seconds, an abandonment rate of 7 per cent and improve average wait time from 23 minutes to 15 minutes. These levels of performance represent a high performing contact centre. This information has been used to set challenging targets for Access Harrow in 2008/09 and enables Councillors to make clear choices about the level of performance they want to achieve.
- 93 Procurement is being used effectively to deliver improved VFM. For example:
- the Council's Invitation to Negotiate (ITN) for the BTP had an explicit and strong theme of VFM throughout. The proposed pricing mechanism, evaluation criteria, penalty regime, performance improvement incentives, efficiency saving realisation and sharing arrangements all detail how VFM will be enhanced. By maintaining a clear focus on VFM the ITN document has provided a good basis to work with prospective partners and to secure a competitive and mutually beneficial contract; and
 - the Council changed to co-mingled collection for its recycling service in 2007, which required a change to using a Materials Recycling Facility to subsequently sort the collected waste. These costs were budgeted at £30 gate fee plus £10 transport. Over the initial changeover period these costs rose to £48 per tonne because of start up difficulties with the initial service provider. The strategic partner identified another interim provider at a combined price of £16.75 and this has been in place while a permanent solution has been tendered.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 94 The Council does not have a sustained track record in delivering improvement in access to services. Overall trends in performance are mixed. Whilst some services have been rated as 'excellent' and 'good', the rate of performance improvement in some other key areas, such as public realm, is below other Councils in the latest audited data for 2006/07. Access Harrow has been delivered and can demonstrate some improvements in the accessibility of services for some customers, but this has been limited by capacity and is only recently demonstrating the levels of performance originally envisaged for its first year in 2006/07. User satisfaction levels are poor in a number of areas in comparison to other councils and are showing deterioration over the last three years.
- 95 The Council has implemented a substantial change programme since 2006 through the Business Transformation Partnership (BTP). Three key projects have been delivered: First Contact phase 1 which includes Access Harrow, enterprise resource planning (ERP) and management information systems (MIS). These projects are focussed on improving the Council's management of finance, performance and human resources and increasing customer access to services.
- 96 The Access Harrow programme has delivered a number of the key elements in the Council's Access Strategy. These include the:
- building of the one stop shop and contact centre at the civic centre;
 - implementation of the customer relationship management software and new call centre telephony;
 - provision of a new transactional website;
 - development of the skills and knowledge of staff to deal with customer queries; and
 - implementation of modelling tools to allow appropriate staffing levels to be programmed.

The impact has been the consolidation of access to many services into a single point of contact, allowing staff to view all customer details and previous interactions with the Council, and providing new methods of access by the website. As a result many customers are able to access services more easily in a way that suits them.

- 97 The Council's overall performance is mixed with no sustained track record of improvement. Key performance indicators (PIs) for the Council show below average improvement, with 59 per cent improved in the last three years, which is below the average range for all single tier authorities (61.9 per cent to 64 per cent). Harrow has some excellent and good services, for example housing benefits has retained a score of four out of four and children's services have improved from a score of two to three out of four in 2007. Nevertheless, the rate of performance improvement in some other priority services is below other Councils. Most notably street cleaning and housing services performance has declined and adult social care services have retained a one-star rating. The Council's direction of travel was assessed as improving adequately in 2007.
- 98 The Council is reporting improvements in some customer access related PIs during 2007/08. These are unaudited and include an increase in recycling to 40 per cent and an increase in the number of direct payments from 69.8 per cent in 2006/07 to 84.2 per cent for quarter three in 2007/08. Nevertheless challenges remain in some key areas such as numbers of people helped to live at home and the amount of household waste collected.
- 99 Access Harrow can demonstrate some improvements in the accessibility of services for some customers but this has been limited by capacity. When launched early performance was affected by a large volume of calls related to the Council's re-cycling campaign in the summer of 2006. This required emergency measures to set up off site facilities to handle the volume of calls and was made possible through the additional capacity brought in through the Council's strategic partner. This delayed the introduction of further services into the contact centre, and impacted on the pace of improvement in this service. In addition, Access Harrow shared in the Council wide constraints on expenditure and in year savings in 2006/07 leading to significant staff shortages, and inability to meet agreed service levels the first year of operation (2006/07). This is increasing the ease of access to services for customers.
- 100 Performance against targets in Access Harrow has been mixed but has improved throughout 2007/08 recently meeting service levels that were envisaged in a year earlier. In January 2008, of the 60,094 calls answered, 76 per cent were answered within 60 seconds. The measure of calls answered within 60 seconds is a reduced target rather than the 30 seconds originally seen as achievable. Abandonment rates in January 2008 were 9 per cent against a target of 5 per cent.
- 101 The Council's housing benefits service has maintained its strong performance retaining a score of four overall and within each theme, including user focus. Performance is in the upper quartile across the majority of indicators. In particular, the average time to process new claims and changes of circumstances had reduced. The Council introduced new technology within the service in 2002, and this has contributed to the continued improvements. Vulnerable people in the community are having their need assessed quickly, which contributes to improvements in quality of life.

102 The Council has a poor track record of improvement in resident satisfaction rates. Overall resident satisfaction levels are poor with a number of areas showing a deterioration over the last three years.

- Performance data for 2006/07 shows that overall satisfaction rates are low at 42 per cent and have not improved. Satisfaction with waste collection, recycling facilities, planning applications, sport and leisure facilities are all worst quartile and have not improved over the last three years. There are some exceptions, including parks and opens spaces which has improved and is now third quartile, and libraries which has improved and is best quartile.
- The Council's 2007 residents' satisfaction survey shows that 66 per cent of residents are satisfied with their part of Harrow as a place to live which represents a slight decline over the last three years. Just under half of residents are satisfied with the way the Council is running the area, however this represents a three percent fall in satisfaction compared to 2006.
- Resident satisfaction with complaints handling (BVPI4) is poor (in the worst quartile) and has not improved over the last three years.
- The Council's 2007 residents' survey shows that a low proportion consider the Council provides good value for money. Only 14 per cent of residents agree that the Council provides value for money and residents are more inclined to disagree with this statement than in previous surveys.
- The Council's 2007 residents' survey shows that significantly more respondents said they contacted Harrow Council in the last year, than did so in previous years. However, there has been a noticeable fall in resident attitudes to staff and the proportion of residents who are satisfied with the outcome of their enquiry has fallen dramatically since 2005.

The Council recognises that these satisfaction rates indicate that it has significantly more work to do to improve the perception of its customer services.

103 The Council has made good use of service reviews and inspections to improve services. The best value review of access to services in 2001 recommended investment in a one stop shop through a strategic partner as the Council did not have the capacity to deliver this. An action plan was developed and as a result the Access Strategy and business transformation partnership (BTP) were developed. The Council is undertaking a series of comprehensive service reviews and using these to plan and prioritise improvements to customer access. As an example the review of public realm services has been used to inform the blueprint for its integration into Access Harrow. Steady progress is being made in taking forward the recommendations from the Corporate Assessment and a clear action plan has been developed to take forward the findings of the recent peer review of the Council by the Improvement and Development Agency.

- 104** The Council's track record in delivering VFM in access to services is limited but developing. Access Harrow has been in operation for two years and over this time performance has shown some improvement in some areas. For example, one stop shop average transaction times and calls answered within 60 seconds now compare well to other London boroughs. Transaction costs, for example cost per call or cost per visit are currently calculated quarterly and are showing reductions between 2006/07 and 2007/08. Limited cost comparisons have been made, however, where they have, costs compare favourably, but it is not clear whether they are like for like comparisons. The track record in delivering VFM is not clear for services outside Access Harrow.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 105** The Council's aims are based on a sound knowledge of the challenges and opportunities faced. Short and medium term aims and objectives for the expansion of Access Harrow have been agreed. The inclusion of key services such as adults' and children's services was originally planned for the medium and longer term and as a result is yet to be developed. Performance management arrangements are being strengthened with councillors and senior officers clear about their roles, maintaining a focus on performance management. Access Harrow has good performance management arrangements. However, the Council is slow to respond to complaints which are not used systematically to improve service delivery and performance. Knowledge about performance is used to solve problems but this is not systematic or consistent.
- 106** The Council has set out a clear vision with customer access a key cross cutting priority. A new Council Vision which is to be 'recognised as one of the best London Councils by 2012 in a borough that is cosmopolitan, confident and cohesive' and supporting set of corporate priorities was adopted in July 2007, together with a set of flagship actions that contribute to their achievement. These are reflected in corporate documents including the Corporate Plan 'Investing for the future 2008 -2011'. Corporate priorities include 'improving the way we work for residents'. This priority aims to get better value for money (VFM), cut waste, improve Access Harrow, improve communications, achieve efficiency and improve customer satisfaction. It includes specific actions with associated targets to improve access to services, for example, to 'improve access to services through the contact centre'.
- 107** In addition, a nine step improvement programme has been established by the Chief Executive and is seen by the Council as fundamental to building the capacity and infrastructure to drive forward improved service performance. Access to services is again a clear priority with one of the areas covered by the plan being 'First impressions - improving customer access and communications to increase levels of customer satisfaction'. Clear priorities enable the Council to focus on what it wants to deliver.

- 108** The Council's aims are based on a sound knowledge of the challenges and opportunities faced. A Year Ahead Statement was agreed by Cabinet in November 2007 setting the vision, corporate priorities and flagship actions for 2008/09. This involved an analysis of: performance indicators; inspection findings; delivery during 2007/08; an annual externally commissioned Quality of Life Survey and value for money performance. Initial proposals were consulted on with the re-established residents' panel. These processes enable the Council to focus on the key changes and improvements needed to deliver better outcomes for local people.
- 109** The Council recently reconfirmed this original vision for Access Harrow as part of its planning for the expansion of Access Harrow. This means that all services will form part of Access Harrow unless there is a good reason for this not to happen. The Council also acknowledges that this may mean taking the Access Harrow concept and technology out to some service areas, for example children's centres, rather than physically bringing services into Access Harrow.
- 110** Short and medium term aims and objectives for the expansion of Access Harrow have been agreed. The inclusion of key services such as adults' and children's services was originally planned for the medium and longer term and as a result is yet to be developed. Future agreed transfers into Access Harrow include planning and building control and robust blueprints for delivery are in place. Discussions are currently underway to agree the vision for the further expansion of Access Harrow into the low volume and high risk services. Included in the debate is the option of using schools and children's centres as access points in the heart of the community as a means of delivering high performing schools alongside Access Harrow. This reflects the Council's acknowledgement of the need to consider more equitable geographical access to services.
- 111** The Council has developed some medium term plans to increase access to services outside of Access Harrow but these are not integrated into a whole Council strategic approach. As an example, additional investment has been agreed to improve sports and leisure facilities in the borough with building work to begin on the new flagship leisure centre in March 2008. Plans for the centre have been consulted on and changes have been made as a result, for example, female only changing facilities. In addition, three neighbourhood resource centres are planned to be completed in 2009 to provide local access to adult social care services. However, the lack of a comprehensive strategic approach to customer access means that there is no clear linkage between these plans and, for example, the expansion of Access Harrow. The Council may not be maximising its capacity to deliver improved outcomes in access to services as a result.
- 112** The Council has a clear vision for moving to less expensive methods of access and has identified the process changes needed to achieve this. It has plans to migrate access to high volume services to more flexible and cost effective methods (mainly web and direct debit for payments). This is in line with national Gershon and transformational government drivers.

- 113 The Chief Executive provides active and visible leadership and has developed plans to strengthen leadership at corporate director level. There are many examples of motivated staff who are striving for improvement in access to services. Nevertheless there is a lack of senior strategic coordinated leadership for the customer access agenda. This is recognised by the Council which plans to address this through a restructure of senior management. This plan is currently out to consultation but has the active support of councillors.
- 114 Councillors are willing to tackle difficult problems and take tough decisions to resolve these. Examples include the difficult decisions that were made in the savings plan for 2006/07. The new administration was elected in May 2006 and inherited the previous administration's budget that had £10 million of savings already identified, including £2 million in public realm services. Further pressures were identified making a total of £19 million of savings to be made in 2006/07. As a result a number of difficult decisions were made, including a significant reduction in management posts, reducing home care subsidy and converting the hot meals on wheels service into a frozen meals service. A further example is the development of the first state aided Hindu School in the country which has been a difficult decision and has been sustained by Councillors and officers.
- 115 The Council is strengthening its performance management arrangements in recognition of the need to put in place a performance management culture. Following a fit for purpose review of its arrangements in 2007 the Council developed a comprehensive integrated business planning, budgeting and performance framework. The new framework clearly illustrates the links between the sustainable community strategy, corporate, service and individual plans. Specific elements are strengthened such as the challenge to the service improvement plans and consultation with residents. The new framework was launched for the 2008/09 planning cycle and is currently being implemented. As a result it is too early to assess the impact of the new framework.
- 116 Councillors and senior officers are clear about their roles and maintain a focus on performance management. The Cabinet sits in the role of Performance Board on a quarterly basis to receive the strategic performance report. Improvement Boards, chaired by the Chief Executive are held quarterly for all directorates and include the portfolio holders and different levels of officers. In addition, portfolio holders and the corporate strategic board monitor the council improvement programme monthly. Portfolio holders receive weekly monitoring information on key performance indicators and the budget. The introduction of the new Performance and Finance Committee as part of the revised scrutiny arrangements is leading to an increased focus on performance. These mechanisms help councillors and officers to monitor progress against the council's vision and corporate priorities and identify corrective action where necessary.

- 117** The use of individual appraisal and personal development plans (IPAD) is being developed to enable performance management of individuals. IPADs link to corporate and service objectives, review progress against objectives, set new objectives and identify training and development needs. This enables the management of individual performance, building the capacity of the workforce and facilitates staff knowing how they contribute to key priorities. However, the proportion of IPADs reviewed is significantly short of the Council's own target of 70 per cent. The Council has reviewed the format and the data collection process in order to achieve greater compliance and consistency.
- 118** The Council produces regular information and intelligence. However, data on public contact, transaction completion times and satisfaction levels is not routinely or consistently collected outside Access Harrow. The Council is developing a corporate approach to measuring the performance of access to services.
- 119** Access Harrow has good performance management arrangements. The service plan is used to model and set team and individual targets which are then measured and managed. The performance of each individual is plotted daily and team leaders meet with each person weekly to review performance and identify where further support and learning is needed. Managers also listen into calls to monitor quality of service. Weekly performance reports are produced giving performance information on an individual basis and against the main services. This enables robust monitoring, action to be taken to address underperformance and the learning from staff suggestions.
- 120** There is a corporate approach to managing VFM which incorporates access to services. Information on costs and performance are regularly collected and used within Access Harrow to manage performance but these are not routinely reported to councillors. However, cost and performance information is brought together to inform decision making and used in committee reports, for example, to support Access Harrow's growth bid. Outside Access Harrow cost and quality information is clearly collected in reviewing performance. However, access to services is not explicitly reviewed and as a result VFM for access to services across the whole Council has not been evaluated.
- 121** The Council is slow to respond to complaints and the outcomes from complaints are not used systematically to improve service delivery and performance. Response rates to the Ombudsman have not improved overall in the last three years and remain slow. Satisfaction rates with complaint handling remain poor. Data is collected on complaints but this is not broken down to enable an understanding of issues and trends in communities or within vulnerable groups and to enable learning from complaints.
- 122** Knowledge about performance is used to solve problems. For example, data on peaks in demand is used in Access Harrow to inform staffing levels. However this is not systematic or consistent. Similarly, involving customers in service monitoring and review is underdeveloped, although there are some examples, such as in children's services, where this takes place.

123 The Council understands its strengths and weaknesses in the context of the challenges faced. It is learning from its own experiences and those of others but there is no overall corporate approach to knowledge management. Examples of learning include:

- being open to external challenge through the Improvement and Development Agency Peer Review;
- learning from others through regional and national networks; and
- internal learning from the Innov8 campaign which aims to capture staff views on improving the way the Council works and turning them into reality.

The lack of a systematic approach means that the Council is missing opportunities to learn from itself and others' experience's to improve performance.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

124 The Council is working to increase its capacity to improve. Planned development programmes for councillors and managers aim to increase leadership and management capacity. However limited progress is being made in tackling high sickness absence, recruitment and retention of staff remains a key risk and workforce planning is under developed. Financial capacity for the Council was weak in 2006/07 but there are clear plans to address this from 2007/08. Strategic partnerships are being used well to increase capacity and additional funding has been committed for 2008/09 to increase the capacity of Access Harrow to deal with calls.

125 The Council is working to improve its leadership and management capacity at all levels. A management development programme is being developed as part of the Council's approach to improvement in Harrow. Each programme (senior managers, middle managers and first line managers) proposes four days of direct delivery, classroom style, in addition to course work, assessment and accreditation. Staff will be able to access a range of support which includes online communities, e-learning, specific managers' events and networks of interest, including contact with partner organisations. Managers at Harrow will be expected to complete the course within a six month period from the date of attending their first training session. A councillor development programme is also being developed. Both programmes are being funded by over £500,000 from Capital Ambition and aim to increase leadership and management capacity in the medium term.

126 The Council is making limited progress in tackling sickness absence which remains high. There are some examples where sickness absence has been significantly reduced through good management processes such as Access Harrow and public realm services. Nevertheless key services such as housing retain high levels of sickness absence. The need to ensure there is the necessary data to manage absence has been recognised by the Council and the planned update to the Council's finance and resource planning system aims to ensure that managers have the data on their desk tops from May 2009. High levels of sickness absence limit the Council's capacity to deliver its services.

- 127** Recruitment and retention of staff remains a key risk for the Council and workforce planning is under developed. Plans are in place to mitigate these risks but they remain an issue in specific services, such as adult services. Workforce planning groups have been established in each directorate, but there are mixed progress in agreeing and implementing a workforce strategy. Children's services have made good progress in increasing the capacity of their workforce through an agreed workforce strategy. As a result of the workforce strategy the staffing structuring in children's services was benchmarked against other authorities. Additional funding of £300,000 was secured to fund the resulting staffing establishment and a rigorous approach was taken to move agency staff to permanent contracts. The service has now moved from a position of 60 per cent of staff being agency and a staffing overspend of £900,000, to being fully staffed with no overspend on staffing. The impact has been a saving £600,000 per year and the establishment of good standards of practice. Nevertheless, the learning has not been consistently applied across the Council to increase staff capacity.
- 128** The Council is working to increase capacity in Access Harrow. As detailed earlier in this report due to a lack of financial capacity some posts were frozen or cut in Access Harrow in 2006/07. A growth proposal went to Cabinet in January 2008 and an additional £300,000 has been committed by the Council for 2008/09 to enhance Access Harrow. The new staffing structure has been modelled aiming to ensure maximum efficiency. An innovative approach is being employed to recruit benefits staff who have been difficult to recruit. The Council is working in partnership with IRRV and Harrow College to deliver a 'grow your own' scheme with a training programme for new recruits with little or no experience. A major recruitment drive is underway with very good levels of interest. Increased frontline capacity provides a sound foundation to improve customer access.
- 129** Good capacity has been built in housing benefits services. This service has an established performance management framework, which is monitored for its effectiveness. It has a training programme for staff, and some advisers are cross-trained in a number of benefit disciplines. There is joint working with social care services and the local citizens' advice bureau, providing a comprehensive approach to service delivery on site at Access Harrow and, where identified, a home service for vulnerable people. The service has established home working for some members of staff, making good use of staff resources without loss of service delivery. The benefits service is achieving continued improvements in performance, which is contributing to better outcomes for local people in need.
- 130** The Council's ICT capacity and infrastructure is adequate to support access to services. The service is provided in-house and its role is to provide and support back end 'utility' computing including networking, telephony, desk top support and server management. Some elements are run to the IT Infrastructure Library (ITIL) standard but the standard is not met across the whole service. Staffing levels and skills are under review; there is currently some use of contract support but the aim is to recruit to fill these roles. The existing ICT strategy runs only to 2007/08 and many of the aspects of this that relate directly to access to services were overtaken by the Access Harrow programme. A new strategy is in preparation. The service is in a good position to support the demands placed upon it by the ongoing user facing technology developments.

- 131** Financial capacity for the Council was weak in 2006/07, but there are clear plans to address this from 2007/08. A clear medium term financial strategy is in place linked from 2007/08 to the service planning process. The Council is increasing its capacity to deliver its key objectives. Additional funding of £1.9 million has been committed by the Council for 2008/09 to achieve flagship actions. This includes:
- £1.3 million to be spent on delivering cleaner, safer streets including a brand new town centre police force;
 - £300,000 in Access Harrow to ensure that calls are answered within 30 seconds; and
 - increasing grants to the voluntary sector by £100,000 to increase their capacity to deliver services.
- 132** Strategic partnerships are being used well to increase capacity. The Council is working to strengthen its capacity to manage these partnerships. As an example the Chief Executive meets key strategic partners on a regular basis to discuss issues and scrutiny has reviewed the contract for housing repairs. Business cases and service plans for the strategic partnership are signed off at Chief Officer level to ensure transparent and senior leadership and ownership. Strategic partners and contracts are also being used in children's services to increase capacity. Examples include:
- a new contact centre delivered with a voluntary agency as the provider;
 - an external provider contracted to provide adoption services with the result that the service has significantly improved its performance; and
 - the contracting out of the management of the one remaining children's home to a large nationally recognised provider as a means of providing additional managerial capacity and skill, providing an efficiency saving of £200,000.