

# **Access to Services**

**Weymouth and Portland Borough Council**

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

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we ensure that public services are good value for money and that public money is properly spent.

### **Copies of this report**

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0844 798 7070.

© Audit Commission 2008

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 020 7828 1212 Fax: 020 7976 6187 Textphone (minicom): 020 7630 0421

[www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk)

# Contents

Service Inspection	4
<b>Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Scoring the service</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Report</b>	<b>12</b>
Context	12
The locality	12
The Council	13
Background	13
<b>How good is the service?</b>	<b>14</b>
What has the service aimed to achieve?	14
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?	15
Is the service delivering value for money?	22
<b>What are the prospects for improvement to the service?</b>	<b>24</b>
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	24
How well does the service manage performance?	26
Does the service have the capacity to improve?	28

## 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 (KLOEs) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk).

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

## Summary

- 1 The Council provides 'fair' access to services for its customers. It has established a clear vision for customer care and improving access to services that runs through all key strategic plans. The Customer Contact Centre is well established and provides an accessible one-stop-shop for the vast majority of enquiries making it easy for customers to access its services.
- 2 The Council is aware of the broad access needs of its customers and is developing a good understanding of the access needs of all sections of the community. But there is no corporate customer database and the information about customers held by individual service units is not consistent. Information about its customers and learning from their experiences can't be shared easily across all service providers.
- 3 The Council has made good use of information technology to support access to services and its website is rated highly by independent observers. A corporate complaints and feedback system is used to drive improvement to services but the Council is not able to monitor all customer contact against published service standards.
- 4 Awareness of equality and diversity issues is improving and becoming integrated into service delivery. However, the Council is only at Level 2 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government<sup>1</sup>.
- 5 The Council has developed strong partnership arrangements with Dorset County Council and other district councils in Dorset that are improving access to services and value for money. However, overall customer satisfaction levels with the Council remain low and efforts to promote itself locally have not been entirely successful.
- 6 The Council has promising prospects for improving access to services. It has a good track record of introducing changes that improve access to services. The Council is fully engaged with the Dorset Pathfinder project, one key aim of which is to provide coordinated and seamless service delivery to customers across Dorset. This is driving improvement in access to services.
- 7 The Council is making good progress on improving physical access to its public buildings and there are plans to address the remaining assets through redevelopment or disposal. Satisfaction with services is improving faster than most similar authorities, especially in environmental health and recycling.
- 8 The Council's improvement planning has been revised and now follows a process of continual improvement. However, the action plans supporting performance management are not always SMART<sup>2</sup> or kept up-to-date.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Equalities Standard for Local Government has five levels and provides a common approach for dealing with equality for race, gender and disability. All councils are expected to work towards Level 5 as soon as practicable.

<sup>2</sup> SMART means specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound

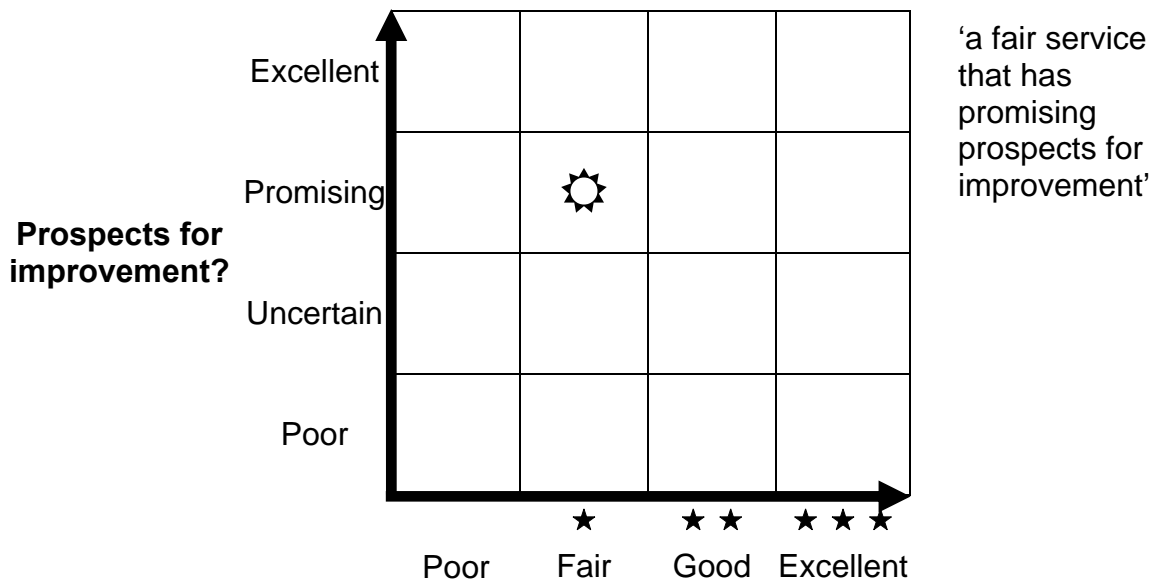
## 6 Access to Services | Summary

- 9 The Council has recognised the importance of communications and image, and has developed a new communications and consultation strategy. This strategy is clearly focused on improving brand recognition and raising the profile of the Council. Internal communications and leadership are good and helping to maintain a well motivated workforce.
- 10 Although the Council has good financial management it remains in a challenging position, having to balance improvements in access to services against high implementation costs. It is increasing capacity and improving value for money in access to services by actively seeking out best practice at other organisations and forming effective partnerships for shared services.
- 11 Modern procurement methods have been introduced by the Council and partnership working is improving access to external funding.

## Scoring the service

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

**Table 1 Scoring chart<sup>3</sup>**



**A good service?**

Source: Audit Commission

- 13 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- the Council is focused on customers through its key strategic plans, vision and strategy for customer access;
  - its fully accessible Customer Contact Centre provides a highly effective one-stop-shop first point of contact to access Council services;
  - it has made effective use of information technology to provide a wide means of access which is available remotely and outside normal working hours;

<sup>3</sup> The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

## 8 Access to Services | Scoring the service

- service standards are clear and well publicised;
- it is using consultation, complaints and feedback to improve the quality of access to services; and
- modern procurement methods combined with good partnership arrangements and increasing use of shared services and resources are improving value for money.

14 However, there remain some gaps in the Council's knowledge about how its customers access services:

- it does not know the specific access needs of all its community;
- physical access to some Council buildings does not meet in full the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act;
- it has only recently increased awareness of equalities and diversity to achieve Level 2 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government from a low base;
- the Council does not make full use of Customer Relationship Management technology to share customer information across all services;
- residents' overall satisfaction with the Council is low and the Council's promotion of its image and success have not been a complete success; and
- the Council's workforce is not fully representative of the local community.

15 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- there is a good track record for introducing changes that improve access for its customers;
- it has an improvement plan for developing access to services;
- its involvement in the Dorset Pathfinder project seeks to provide seamless delivery of public services across Dorset;
- it is well placed to achieve Level 3 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government during 2008;
- alternative service delivery reviews are identifying opportunities to make savings and improve customer access;
- the Council has good leadership in access to services and a well motivated and enthusiastic workforce;
- the Council is self aware and eager to learn from best practice at other organisations; and
- effective procurement and partnership working is increasing capacity by maximising scarce resources and attracting incoming investment.

16 However:

- not all Council strategies are up-to-date or supported by SMART action plans;
- there is no corporate system to monitor customer contact against its published service standards and targets; and
- implementation of the performance management framework by service managers is inconsistent.

## Recommendations

- 17 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 costs<sup>4</sup> 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 the overall customer experience by:*
- *implementing corporate customer relationship management (CRM);*
  - *developing a consistent approach to capturing information about the Council's users and non-users; and*
  - *making best use of information to enable targeted design, planning and delivery of services.*

The expected **benefits** of this recommendation are:

- service standards closely aligned with users needs; and
- more cost effective service delivery.

The implementation of this recommendation will have **high** impact with high costs. This should be implemented by April 2010.

### **Recommendation**

- R2 Help to ensure equal access to services by:*
- *reinforcing the Council's commitment to equalities and diversity and increase the rate of progress towards achieving a greater degree of compliance with the Equalities Standard for Local Government.*

The expected **benefits** of this recommendation are:

- improved awareness of equalities and diversity issues; and
- equal and fair access to services for all customers.

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

---

<sup>4</sup> Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

**Recommendation**

*R3 Improve arrangements to ensure better access to services by:*

- *identifying the access needs of all sections of the community;*
- *reviewing and revising Customer Charter targets to ensure they meet customers' needs, for example the 10 day response to emails; and*
- *identifying the cost of access to services methods;*

The expected **benefits** of this recommendation are:

- consistent approach to access to services across all service units and partners;
- improved customer experience.

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

# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 18 Weymouth and Portland Borough Council is a district council on the South Coast of England in Dorset, based around the historic port of Weymouth and the Royal Manor of Portland. The Borough is small, covering an area of 42 square kilometres and is mainly urban but close to an area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB) and adjacent to the 'Jurassic Coast'.
- 19 The population is 64,459 of which almost 4 per cent are from black and minority ethnic communities. Around 23 per cent of the population are of pensionable age, 5 per cent higher than the national average and almost 60 per cent of the population are of working age, which is about 3 per cent lower than the national average. The proportion of residents with a disability is 3 per cent above the national average and the black and minority ethnic population is 9 per cent lower than the national average, at less than 4 per cent. The population increases by over 200,000 tourists during the summer. The projected population growth rate, at 8 per cent by 2016 is higher than the regional and national averages.
- 20 Unemployment in the Borough is close to the regional and national average at 2.1 per cent but average earnings are low at £358 per week compared to the national average of £447 per week. The average house price in the Borough is high at around £199,420 and has risen at a much higher rate than earnings. The Borough is ranked at 125 out of 354 districts/boroughs in England, which is within the 35 percent most deprived. There are also some significant areas of deprivation within the Borough, with half (18) of Weymouth and Portland's super output areas (SOAs) in the 10 per cent most deprived SOAs in Dorset.
- 21 Post 16 further education is provided by Weymouth College and Budmouth Technical College and in 2006, 57 per cent of pupils achieved 5 or more GCSE grades A\* to C or equivalent, slightly below the national average of 58 per cent. In many cases young people have to travel outside of the Borough to access specific skills training or higher education, the nearest being Bournemouth University.
- 22 The Borough has good public transport links by bus, rail and sea. However, access by road is limited and the Borough suffers from road congestion problems. The number of householders with a car is 74 per cent, in line with the national average. Over 55 per cent of people travel to work by car. Only 9 per cent of people commute by public transport but 16 per cent cycle to work which is above the national average.

## The Council

- 23** The Council comprises 36 elected councillors with no overall political control since 1980. Currently there are 14 Conservative, 11 Liberal Democrat, 6 Labour and 5 Independent councillors with elections due in May 2008. A Management Committee is responsible for overall governance with councillors responsible for specific briefs reflecting corporate priorities. The Council is accountable to the Scrutiny and Performance Committee and supported by the Policy Development Committee, the Audit Committee and a number of regulatory committees.
- 24** The operational management structure consists of the Chief Executive, 3 corporate directors and 15 service managers. The Council employs 430 full-time equivalent staff across all services, increasing by 25 percent in the tourist season. In 2007/08 the budget requirement for providing all the services of the Council, is £11.3 million.

## Background

- 25** 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 technology to support access to services;
  - reaching all parts of the community; and
  - partnership working.
- 26** For customers, it means that they should be able to contact councils in a range of accessible and Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant buildings and places. They should also be able to contact councils through a range of other methods. This includes through a fully accessible, easy-to-navigate website. There should be appropriate arrangements for electronic transactions, electronic communication and consultation.
- 27** Councils should have an e-enabled programme informed by citizen/user needs and aspirations. Council services, and access to those services, should be focused on the needs of the whole community. They should ensure equality of access and take proper account of equality and the diversity of all service users. There should be appropriate arrangements for consulting, engaging and communicating with users and non-users of services. Councils should use partnership working with neighbouring councils, organisations and businesses to provide seamless and high quality access to services wherever possible.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 28 This section is for context only and helps inform key judgements by establishing the background and future plans for improving access to all services in the Borough.
- 29 The Council's Corporate Plan for 2007 to 2012 is based around four major Corporate Priorities:
- *'Promote Improvement in the Local Economy;*
  - *Meet the Housing Needs and Aspirations of the Borough;*
  - *Protect and improve the natural and built environment; and*
  - *Be a Well Managed Council.'*
- 30 Corporate priority 4 - Be a Well Managed Council, is supported by the following specific objectives that aim to improve Weymouth and Portland as a place to live, work and visit; to improve the quality of life of local people; and provide the best possible services within the resources available to the Council:
- *'Improve customer service and satisfaction with the Council and its services;*
  - *Have in place effective channels of communication between the Council and local communities so that they know exactly what the Council does and how well we are doing it;*
  - *Achieve clarity about our objectives and how well we perform in meeting them;*
  - *Focus our resources on achieving our priorities and use resources efficiently to achieve value for money;*
  - *Plan effectively for our staffing needs and develop and empower staff and members;*
  - *Plan effectively for financial resource needs; and*
  - *Have efficient decision making processes and governance arrangements that are transparent to the community, members and officers.'*
- 31 The Council established a strategic approach to access to services in June 2005 with the launch of its Customer Contact Centre (CCC). The Council's strategy is to work towards the achievement of a 'one-stop shop' for access to services centred on the North Quay office. The Council revised and outlined its vision and strategy for customer access in its document *'Customer Access in Weymouth and Portland - Vision and Strategy 2008 to 2012'*. This vision is for:
- 'A customer focused can do Council putting the Customer at the heart of all it does. We aim to make Weymouth and Portland a great place to work, live and visit.'*

- 32 The Council's customer access strategy has established a clear vision and plan for developing and improving access to services. The Council developed its strategy by reviewing and consolidating the vision and aims for customer access originally articulated in a number of separate strategies and plans. The strategy is supported by a comprehensive improvement plan with SMART<sup>5</sup> targets.
- 33 Community focus and improving access to services is a common theme that runs through all of the Council's key strategic plans including the:
- Corporate Plan 2007/12;
  - Medium Term Financial Plan;
  - Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy - December 2006;
  - Community Plan for Weymouth and Portland 2008/16;
  - Dorset Community Strategy; and
  - Dorset Pathfinder Project.

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

### **Customer and community focus**

- 34 The Council is focused on its customers and communities. The Customer Access Vision and Strategy for 2008 to 2012 acknowledges the improvements required to fully transform the customer experience. The strategy outlines the importance of engaging with all sectors of the community and ensuring that services meet their access requirements.
- 35 A variety of methods have been employed by the Council in planning and delivering new services which have included:
- holding community workshops in various locations to introduce changes to refuse collection and wheeled bins;
  - forming community groups to manage parks, open spaces, play areas and allotments;
  - playing a key role in local partnership arrangements such as Partners and Community Together (PACT) meetings; and
  - encouraging residents to become actively involved in the scrutiny process through changes to the democratic arrangements allowing the public to speak at committee meetings.
- 36 There remain some gaps in the Council's knowledge about how customers access services. The Council has developed ward profiles of their customers but the overall community profile is not complete. The CCC monitors and records personal information about callers and the Customer Charter includes a monitoring section asking customers to identify themselves by ethnicity, disability, gender, age, sexuality and religion. However, this information is not available to all service departments through a corporate customer database.

---

<sup>5</sup> SMART means specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound.

### **Ease of access for all**

- 37 The Council provides a range of responsive services which are easy to access and have been developed in conjunction with its customers. The Borough is compact and mainly urban, well served by a network of local and regional bus routes. All of the Council's customer service points are accessible on foot, by car and public transport. Car parking is available close to all Council offices and includes a number of clearly marked spaces for drivers with disabilities. It is easy for all customers to access the Council's services.
- 38 The CCC 'one-stop shop' in the North Quay office is welcoming, fully accessible and provides a wide range of customer and family friendly facilities including:
- self service internet terminals;
  - comfortable and secure interview rooms;
  - hearing loops and translation service;
  - accessible toilet with baby changing facilities;
  - play area with a TV showing programmes for children; and
  - management of queues by CCTV.

Regular customer satisfaction surveys demonstrate that most customers enjoy a good experience when accessing Council services through the CCC.

- 39 The Council is widening access to services away from North Quay. Its corporate livery for its fleet of vehicles incorporates the CCC telephone number displayed in a prominent position. Visiting officers provide housing advice surgeries in a number of different locations including Sure Start, Women's refuge and Wave's (a local organisation supporting young homeless people). Council officers will arrange home visits for anyone unable to access housing services through the usual channels and also provide help in the home with applications for housing and council tax benefits when necessary. A portable hearing loop is available for visiting officers. The Council's concessionary travel scheme has been extended beyond the statutory provision and has a high take up of 72 per cent. Access to Council services is improving for all customers throughout the Borough.

- 40 The Council's website [www.weymouth.gov.uk](http://www.weymouth.gov.uk) provides a good range of remote and self service options for access to services. The website has been designed to be accessible to individuals' specific needs and conforms to the AA standard of the Web Accessibility Initiative Guidelines (WCAG). The website was rated above average (transactional) by SOCITM<sup>6</sup> when compared to all council websites nationally, ranked at 125 out of 463 overall and in the top ten websites for the number of visits and revisits. The website has a number of strengths including:
- a wide range of e-forms for service requests or complaints and feedback;
  - a subscription facility for e-news and electronic versions of the Council's newspaper 'Insight';
  - clear links to other councils, local businesses and voluntary sector websites;
  - the ability to pay Council bills securely using most major credit or debit cards;
  - the facility to book tickets online for the Pavilion Theatre; and
  - access to planning information and applications through the Government's Planning Portal.

It is easy for customers to access services remotely or outside normal office hours using the Council's website.

- 41 The telephone is one of the most important means of accessing the Council's services. The CCC's Call Centre uses an automated call handling system to manage all non-direct incoming telephone calls. The Council has a single main contact number (01305 838000) with a range of service specific direct dial numbers associated with specific services. The call handling system automatically directs the incoming caller to the most appropriate call handling agent, an approach preferred by customers during consultation. The Council provides an emergency out of hours phone number and it is also possible to pay Council bills by telephone using an automated system 24 hours a day and 7 days a week.
- 42 However, the CCC is not meeting its published targets for answering the telephone. The Customer Charter target is for all telephone calls to be answered within five rings. In the three months ending December 2007 between 15 to 20 per cent of calls to the CCC were either diverted to voicemail after 5 rings or the caller hung up before being answered. But, the speed of telephone answering and the abandoned call rate are improving and calls diverted to voicemail are treated as a high priority.

---

<sup>6</sup> SOCITM - Society of Information Technology Management is the professional association for ICT managers working in the public sector. SOCITM carries out an annual survey of all local authority websites reported in its publication '*Better Connected*'.

- 43 Physical access to the Council's public buildings is good. The Council has taken a strategic approach to managing its public buildings and has a fully-funded capital programme to enable full compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). Currently, 71.4 per cent of the Council's buildings meet the requirements of the DDA. The Council has an ongoing refurbishment programme for its public conveniences which ensures that all new and refurbished toilets are fully accessible and incorporate baby changing facilities. However, physical access to the Council's Harbour Office and the Pavilion Theatre complex are not currently fully accessible but are the subject of longer-term redevelopment plans.
- 44 The Council does not yet make full use of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) technology across all services. It developed its own CRM using scripts and an online information manual but it is not possible to roll out the system across the Council. This means that the information held by different service units within the Council is inconsistent and not always available across services. Customers may have to repeat information and personal details previously provided and officers' ability to provide efficient answers to requests from the public may be limited. The Council is not making best use of information about its customers to support the targeted design, planning and delivery of services.

### **Standards of service**

- 45 The Council's corporate customer service standards are comprehensive and clearly publicised. The Customer Charter is available in hard copy and on the Council's website. It incorporates the following mixture of time-based and quality standards.
- *'Answer telephone calls within five rings (15 seconds).*
  - *Give an informative reply to correspondence within ten days.*
  - *We will respond to voicemail messages within one working day.*
  - *Email enquiries will be replied to within ten working days.*
  - *When you visit the Council Offices you will be seen by a member of staff within ten minutes.*
  - *We will make information about our services available at Council customer service points and via the Council website.*
  - *We will provide a polite, welcoming and efficient service.*
  - *We will be responsible and accountable for the accuracy and quality of our work.*
  - *No matter what the enquiry, our staff will deal impartially and with discretion. All matters will be treated in confidence.*
  - *We will offer you a private room to discuss your enquiry.*
  - *We will provide staff with the training and support required to deliver an excellent service to you.*
  - *Customer facing staff will wear a name badge so you can easily identify them.'*

The Council's customer values are prominently displayed over the reception area in the CCC at North Quay. This means that customers can expect to receive a consistent level of service across all Council services. However, the Council does not have the systems required to measure and monitor performance against all of its targets.

- 46 The Council's CCC provides a 'one-stop shop' to access Council services and resolve the majority of customer enquiries at the first point of contact. All Council services are now integrated into the CCC apart from Licensing and Legal, Property Services and The Pavilion. The CCC provides face-to-face customer advice to personal callers to North Quay as well as handling enquiries by telephone, email, internet and letter.

### **Engagement**

- 47 The Council encourages and uses customer complaints and feedback to improve the quality of access to services. It implemented a corporate system in 2005 complemented by an online complaints form on the website. Recently it added an equalities monitoring form to both the online form and complaints leaflet. This form enables the collection, coordination and analysis by disability, age, ethnicity and gender of all complaints and feedback. Examples of improvements to access to services as a direct result of complaints include:

- production of a standard letter sent to customers submitting insurance claims outlining the process once a claim has been passed to the Council's insurance company;
- changing the application form for street collections to provide clear guidance for customers;
- process changes to ensure that applications are dealt with in a more appropriate manner when dealing with vulnerable clients; and
- provision of plants/flowers information boards in various parks in Braille for the visually impaired.

However, the Council's system for monitoring its customers is fairly new and its customer information is incomplete. The Council does not yet fully understand the access needs of all of its customers and is unable to use this information to inform service delivery across all service units.

- 48 All staff have access to the electronic feedback system and are encouraged to log examples of positive feedback as well as complaints. The complaints system is managed and monitored by the CCC. This provides regular update reports to Service Unit Managers, Management Team and the Scrutiny and Performance Committee. Customers can opt to receive a confirmation email which provides a reference number and a named officer to contact. The responsible officer is required to enter the action taken to resolve the issue and comment on lessons learned. Unit Managers are encouraged to use the lessons learned information at team meetings to improve customer access.

49 The Council uses consultation and engages effectively with its customers across a number of services. It has developed a 'Statement of Community Involvement' setting out consultation procedures for the Council as a whole. There is a Citizens' panel of 1,100 residents which is consulted three to four times a year and the Council has developed good links with local disabled people's groups, youth forums, specific interest groups and user groups such as the 'Friends of' and housing tenants groups. The Council engages with a wide range of partners and neighbouring councils to provide some services, for example West Dorset District Council and Dorset Police through PACT meetings. However, councillors report a mixed picture of success with PACT meetings and the Council plans to revisit the administration and support provided. Consultation with local residents has led to improvements in access to services, for example:

- development of the Community Plan through the Weymouth and Portland Partnership;
- establishment of service standards and the Customer Charter;
- improved revenues and benefits services through the WestWey partnership;
- design and layout of the CCC in North Quay; and
- amendment of bye-laws to allow cycling along the Esplanade.

50 The Council's efforts to promote itself locally and ensure wide coverage of good news stories have not been entirely successful. It has developed a good relationship with local radio and TV stations but achieving a balanced image in the local newspapers has proved more difficult. The Council produces a community newsletter 'Insight' which contains interesting local articles and is easy to read. However, 'Insight' is not instantly recognised by some local people as being from the Council which may account for the relatively high number of residents who claimed not to have received a copy. The Council's strategy for Communication and Consultation for 2007/10 recognises the importance of clear branding and external image and has developed an improvement plan focused on:

- external communications;
- internal communications;
- external promotion; and
- consultation.

## Equality and diversity

- 51** Equality and diversity are not yet fully embedded in the delivery of all Council services. The Management Team approved a comprehensive Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy in December 2006. The portfolio holder for social inclusion attends the monthly equalities group and progress is reported against the improvement plan to the Management Committee and Performance and Scrutiny Committee. A comprehensive handbook 'Access for All' has been produced to help staff provide services which are equally accessible to all customers. The Council has delivered in service training to all staff and some councillors and established a network of equalities champions. Awareness of equality and diversity issues is improving.
- 52** The Council has only recently achieved Level 2 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government<sup>7</sup>, having started from a low base. Staff have been trained to carry out Equality Impact Assessments (EQIA) and a three-year programme of assessments identified. EQIAs have been completed for the CCC and initial assessments completed for all aspects of access to services. It is not until higher levels are achieved (Level 3 and above) that people will notice a real difference in how the Council addresses equality and diversity.
- 53** The Tourist Information Centre (TIC) provides good levels of accessibility for all visitors and residents. Access to the TIC includes improved access for people with disabilities with ramps, wide automatic doors, hearing loop and a wheelchair accessible counter. Members of staff include French and Spanish speakers and LanguageLine is available to provide translation services if required. The English Tourist Board carries out an annual mystery shopping assessment and the Council uses feedback from this assessment to improve services in conjunction with its own complaints and feedback forms and regular exit surveys. The Council's 'Guide for people with disabilities', compiled in conjunction with the local Access Group, is designed to improve awareness of facilities in the area.
- 54** The Council has developed a broad understanding of its community but neither the Citizens' Panel nor its own workforce are fully representative of the community profile. However, the number of people with disabilities employed by the Council has increased and is above average.

## User experience and outcomes for users

- 55** Residents' view of the Council is poor. There was an improvement of 4 per cent last year in the proportion of those who were very or fairly satisfied with the way the Council runs things, against a falling national trend. However, at 42 per cent, satisfaction levels are well below the average of 55 per cent and on this indicator Weymouth and Portland is among the worst councils.

---

<sup>7</sup> The Equalities Standard for Local Government has five levels and provides a common approach for dealing with equality for race, gender and disability. All councils are expected to work towards Level 5 as soon as practicable.

- 56 The customer experience when contacting the Council through the CCC is good. The CCC aims to resolve 80 per cent of all customer-facing queries at the first point of contact and is currently exceeding this target by resolving 85 per cent of calls. However, it is not so easy to determine the customer experience for services not integrated within the CCC, such as Licensing and Legal, Property Services and The Pavilion, or where direct dial extension numbers remain. The Council does not have an integrated corporate system to enable consistent monitoring of its performance against all targets in the Customer Charter.
- 57 The CCC responds well to enquiries submitted by email. In our 'mystery shopping' exercise the response to email enquiries exceeded the Customer Charter target of 10 working days. Responses were very quick, with two the same day and the rest within three days and provided a friendly, helpful response to the query. Customers' satisfaction with enquiries submitted by email is high although the target of 10 days is not very challenging.

### **Is the service delivering value for money?**

- 58 The Audit Commission's recent Annual Audit and Inspection Letter reported that, overall, the Council is using its resources more effectively to achieve better value for money (VFM). Although the overall assessment for use of resources in 2006/07 improved, the Council is achieving only adequate VFM principally because the average council tax per dwelling is above average compared with nearest neighbours, and does not closely and consistently enough match quality of service outcomes nor public satisfaction with services. However, spending patterns are broadly in line with Council priorities and the distribution of spend between services is in similar proportions to most councils.
- 59 The Council has developed a corporate approach for VFM as a key part of its overall Strategic Financial Framework. There are clear links to other Council Strategies including: the Procurement Strategy; Asset Management; and Financial Strategy. All services are subject to performance and cost benchmarking and other forms of benchmarking are being used depending on the nature of the service, for example:
- performance and cost benchmarking against 15 other similar councils;
  - service cost comparison compared to the costs in other councils;
  - simple comparison of fees and charges with other local authorities and/or the private sector; and
  - cost of a process or transaction.
- 60 The Council does not yet know if access to services provides value for money. There is a lack of historical benchmarking data against other councils and it is only in the early stage of identifying costs of providing access to services, for example, face-to-face, telephone, and website.

- 61** Partnership arrangements are being exploited to improve access to services and provide value for money. The WestWey revenues and benefits partnership with West Dorset District Council is now delivering a fully integrated service with common service standards. The partnership is achieving cost savings of 7 per cent. The Council has also joined with West Dorset District Council and Purbeck District Council to jointly fund a single post to develop a common IT Strategy.
- 62** The Council has adopted a strategic approach to partnering to improve access to services. The Dorset Access Board is part of the overall Dorset Pathfinder Project and aims to develop a single approach to CRM based around a common system and infrastructure enabling all participating councils within Dorset to benefit from a standard approach. The Council's rolling programme of Alternative Service Delivery Reviews has led to a number of examples of improved value for money through partnerships and shared services, including:
- transfer of swimming pool management to external organisations; and
  - closure of the cash office and provision of alternatives in conjunction with a local Credit Union;
- 63** Reviews by the Performance and Scrutiny Committee have also helped to target investment and improve performance and access to services, for example:
- investment in the purchase of 100 sun beds in response to customer demand for alternatives to the more traditional deck chairs; and
  - provision on an enhanced concessionary travel scheme.
- 64** Procurement practices are providing VFM. The Council is introducing a fully integrated e(electronic)-procurement system with private sector partners. A comprehensive e-market place is being developed for small businesses, to include e-tendering, e-quotations and accreditation of e-suppliers. The Council estimates that the e-market place will reduce the cost of transactions from £58 to £18. New electronic trading, ordering and invoicing processes will integrate with the existing financial system to provide accurate budget information. Modern procurement systems are improving efficiency and capacity.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

### What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

#### Improvements in service delivery

- 65 The Council has a good track record of introducing changes that improve access to services for its customers.
- 66 Access to services for customers in Weymouth and Portland is improving as a result of significant investment in the development of the CCC. The Council has expanded the CCC to include more services and performance now exceeds the Council's target to resolve 80 per cent of enquiries at first point of contact. The North Quay offices provide a one-stop shop with a number of front line services such as Environmental Health and Housing Advice integrated into the CCC. The Council provides a good single point of access for face-to-face enquiries, telephone calls and emails for a wide range of services.
- 67 The Council has invested in services to improve customer access. A variety of physical improvements have been introduced following an audit of all Council buildings. For example automatic doors, ramps and altered counters have been fitted in the TIC, and hearing loop systems have been installed in all buildings. The TIC is open seven days a week and is able to deal with enquiries and complaints about Council services via the intranet. A new destination management system has recently been introduced which is used across Dorset and the West Country and will improve information and booking for visitors.
- 68 Housing options are improving for tenants of Weymouth and Portland. The Council introduced a choice based lettings system for tenants in 2006, well ahead of the statutory deadline of 2010. The Council updates and advertises its vacant property list weekly. This allows prospective tenants to make a bid as soon as properties become available. There is an assisted service for people needing help with bidding. Housing Advisors work closely with customers and other agencies such as support workers and social workers to support the home choice system.
- 69 Environmental health improved strongly last year. The Council's checklist of best practice improved from 89 per cent to 100 per cent, among the best councils nationally. The Council has targeted cleanliness of food premises and published the ratings of 885 premises on the Council's website and 250 displayed on posters around the borough.

- 70** Housing benefit services are improving following a dip in performance shortly after the merger. The Council works in partnership with West Dorset District Council through the WestWey Partnership to provide revenues and benefits services. After the creation of this partnership in the autumn of 2006, the Council's performance deteriorated in terms of timeliness and correct processing of benefit claims. Performance was below average during 2006/07 and continued to deteriorate in the first quarter of 2007/08. However, the recovery plan introduced during 2007 is now taking effect and performance has improved during 2007/08, to a level equivalent to the national average for 2006/07. There are service standards and a customer charter and these have been widely consulted upon with representative community groups. Dedicated housing and council tax benefit appointments have been introduced and specialist Visiting Officers visit customers who are unable to access the Council Officers for regular appointments.

### **Improvement in outcomes and performance**

- 71** The Council's overall performance is continuing to improve. It has reported improvement in 59 per cent of its performance indicators (PIs) over the last three years. This rate of improvement is above the national average and ranks the Council at 162 out of 388 councils overall. In 2006/07 the rate of PI improvement and the percentage of high-performing PIs was the same as the national average. The Council's performance is better than most similar authorities.
- 72** The Council has delivered recent significant performance achievements. During late 2006 a two-weekly wheeled bin system of refuse collection began which was accompanied by a weekly collection of food waste. Recycling and composting rates improved to 35.9 per cent in 2006/07 and by the second quarter of 2007/08 had further improved to 42 per cent. Customer satisfaction with this service is now among the top quarter of councils. The roll out of the scheme was achieved with minimal inconvenience due to a combination of:
- effective publicity campaigns in the local media;
  - personal visits to residents; and
  - road shows throughout the Borough.

The Council has also tailored the scheme in a number of ways to cater for individual service users' needs, for example:

- assisted collections for infirm or elderly residents;
- kitchen caddy option for small households; and
- full recycling facilities in the Council's offices.

## How well does the service manage performance?

### Improvement planning

- 73 The Council's overall improvement planning process has been updated and advanced during 2007. The Council adopted its current corporate plan before the Dorset Strategic Plan and local community plan were finalised. Following a process of continual improvement, the Council now intends to review and update its corporate plan to align the three strategic documents. This approach will enable the Council to set or confirm priorities for the medium-term and provides a sound basis for improvement planning.
- 74 The Council's customer access strategy outlines its vision and plan for developing and improving access to services. It is supported by a rolling improvement plan with a comprehensive set of SMART targets aimed at delivering the following outcomes:
- provision of excellent customer access and high levels of satisfaction;
  - improved consultation and communications with customers;
  - customer friendly services provided in a manner convenient to customers; and
  - equal access to all services and information.

Delivery of the customer access strategy along with participation in the Dorset Pathfinder project should lead to improved access for all users of Council services.

- 75 Customer focus targets are outlined in the Council's key strategic documents. The Corporate Plan 2007/12 contains a specific objective to 'Improve customer service and satisfaction with the Council and its Services' which is supported by three aims. Customer focus is also included in the best value performance plan for 2007/08.
- 76 Equalities and Diversity frameworks are improving. Since the Council published a comprehensive Equalities and Diversity policy in November 2006 it has implemented a planned programme for Equalities Impact Assessments (EQIAs) including some assessments carried out in conjunction with neighbouring councils. A recent EQIA of car parks identified a number of improvements including widening spaces and improving signage.
- 77 However, a number of the Council's strategies and action plans are out of date. The Council's IT strategy approved in April 2001 covered a five-year period, and the supporting action plan covers the same period and has not been updated. The e-government statement does not reflect the current service environment. The Council's Web Strategy and supporting action plan is also out of date as is the action plan which accompanies the Council's Equalities and Diversity policy. These documents do not support the current service requirements.

### **Continuous improvement**

**78** Internal communications between staff and management are good. The Chief Executive issues a weekly electronic bulletin by email and there are monthly management team newsletters and a quarterly staff newsletter, 'SeeViews'. The Council operates a system of monthly service team meetings and staff have regular one to one meetings with their managers. Staff feedback is encouraged through the annual staff survey and on line staff suggestion scheme. This is helping to maintain a committed and enthusiastic workforce.

**79** Senior managers and councillors are accountable for corporate priorities. The Council has developed an accountability document that supports the Corporate Plan, which identifies the:

- director responsible for each of the four corporate priorities;
- councillor responsible for the four priorities and the two cross-cutting priorities; and
- managers responsible for PIs linked to the various priority areas.

This should help to improve consistency in monitoring Corporate Plan targets.

**80** The Council does not yet have a culture of consistent performance management. The new performance management software implemented by the Council enables progress to be reported against corporate priorities through:

- monthly meetings with councillors who lead service areas;
- performance reports to the management team; and
- quarterly reports to the scrutiny and performance committee.

However, the method of reporting to councillors is free-field text with a mix of quantitative and qualitative information. It does not draw systematically on the range of PIs available for each of its objectives but relies instead on the director's choice of measurements. This leads to selective reporting against priorities.

**81** Implementation of the Council's performance framework by service managers is inconsistent. The system is not being used consistently across the Council as managers have adopted it with differing degrees of commitment and enthusiasm. There is now an intention to replace the Council's stand-alone performance management software and become part of the system used by most of the other councils in Dorset. After an initial commissioning period, the new system could be more efficient in the long-term.

- 82 The Council does not have a corporate system to monitor customer contact against all of its Customer Charter targets. The telephone system produces accurate statistics for calls processed through the CCC but is not able to produce reliable statistics across all service units. Similarly, response times for contact by letter and email is managed within individual service units and may not be consistent. There is currently no accurate means of measuring waiting times at reception areas. The Council is not yet able to monitor and report to customers how it performs in all of its services, so that:
- all customers receive the same high standards of service consistently across the Council;
  - corporate targets outlined in the Customer Charter are met;
  - the costs of dealing with calls are driven down; and
  - customers can be confident that enquiries will be logged and dealt with in a timely fashion.

### **Does the service have the capacity to improve?**

#### **Skills, tools and finances**

- 83 The Council's capacity to deliver improvements in access to services is mixed. Although it has good financial management it is in a challenging financial situation exacerbated by the high cost of providing the extended concessionary travel scheme. The Council has had to make some difficult budget decisions, for example making community and sports development posts redundant, consequently making it more difficult to engage with some hard-to-reach groups.
- 84 Targeted training is improving customer focus throughout the Council. The Council runs a range of training courses such as induction training for officers and councillors that include an element of customer care training. Other customer focused training is run for front line staff and visiting officers. Staff and councillors are encouraged to visit the CCC and learn at first hand about the customer experience.
- 85 The Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion working group is driving improvement in customer access. The Council has a network of equalities champions from each service unit who meet regularly with the Councillor with the portfolio for social inclusion. Officer and member workshops on equalities and diversity were attended by 21 councillors and complemented by induction training for new councillors. Training has also been delivered on Equalities Impact Assessments (EIA). The Council has now achieved Level 2 of the Equality Standard for Local Government and is well placed to achieve Level 3 during 2008.

- 86 The Council is a learning organisation, actively seeking out good practice at other organisations to improve service delivery. For example, the Council has collaborated with Bristol City Council (which has won a Beacon Award for race equality) to provide equalities and EIA training. As part of the Parks Best Value Review, the Council sought professional advice from Brent Council, a beacon council for improving urban green spaces. This led to a complete change in parks maintenance and management resulting in Greenhill Gardens achieving national recognition for accessibility for people with disabilities through the Green Flag scheme.

### **Human resources**

- 87 Human resource management systems are improving. Currently the management team get quarterly reports on absence, turnover, equalities, grievances and other issues. However, plans are well advanced for joint procurement of a human resource (HR) and payroll system with Purbeck District Council and West Dorset District Council. The new system will provide managers with up-to-date staff information allowing quick and easy identification and resolution of HR issues and development of workforce planning.

### **Procurement and partnership working**

- 88 The Council has implemented modern, effective procurement practices. It is introducing a fully integrated e-procurement system to reduce transaction costs and the time taken to pay invoices. The Council procures a high percentage of its small work contracts through local small and medium sized businesses. In order to ensure these arrangements can continue it is working proactively with these suppliers to develop their computing and e-trading skills to ensure that they can continue to work with the Council in future.
- 89 Effective partnership working is improving the Council's capacity for service delivery. Examples include the WestWey partnership, provision of legal services to a neighbouring council and joint working with private and voluntary organisations to improve services. The Council operates Weymouth Swimming Pool in partnership with a private company and a charitable trust is responsible for Boscawen Swimming Pool.
- 90 The Council plans to improve efficiency and service delivery through partnership working. It is a partner in the Dorset Pathfinder project which aims to deliver seamless service delivery to customers through partnership working. The renewed Dorset Strategic Partnership provides strong effective links between leaders and senior councillors of all seven member councils. The project also seeks to empower neighbourhoods and encourage community involvement through parish and town councils.

### **Investment**

- 91 The Council is investing in partnership working to improve capacity. It has demonstrated this through its preparation for the 2012 Olympic Games and through other partnership initiatives outlined above. The Council is also investing in improving its capacity through the Dorset Pathfinder project. In this it is working with Dorset County Council and other districts to explore more efficient ways of organising and delivering services. One of the key objectives of the Pathfinder project is to provide seamless delivery of public services based on information built around and influenced by the citizens and communities that use them. Customer access is one of the four Pathfinder elements that recognises the need for a county-wide approach to customer focus.
- 92 Partnership working and community development is improving access to external funding. The Council involves the local community in the active management of the Council's parks and open spaces. The five 'Friends of' groups have secured £35,000 of lottery funding for the Council's parks during the past two years. The 'Friends of Greenhill Gardens' were instrumental in achieving the national Green Flag Award, working with the Parks Department. The Parks Service and Weymouth and Portland Housing Company Ltd. developed a Council-wide play strategy in 2007. This partnership attracted lottery funding of £200,000 for two specialist play areas in the most deprived areas of Dorset, including tennis courts and play areas.