

Service Inspection Report

June 2008



Cultural Services

West Berkshire Council

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Contents

Service Inspection	4
Summary	5
Scoring the service	7
Recommendations	10
Report	12
Context	12
The locality	12
The Council	13
The Council's cultural services	14
How good is the service?	16
What has the service aimed to achieve?	16
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?	18
Is the service delivering value for money?	24
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	26
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	26
How well does the service manage performance?	28
Does the service have the capacity to improve?	30

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 West Berkshire Council provides fair cultural services that have uncertain prospects for improvement.
- 2 Broad cultural aims for the Council are not yet in place, and those that do exist are detailed and project-based. The contribution culture can play in helping to achieve the Council's priorities is not explicit and its higher level aims and objectives have yet to be agreed. The Council is developing a Cultural Strategy to highlight the importance of culture in achieving the ambitions of the Community Strategy. But as there has not been a strategic approach to delivering culture, it is difficult to assess how cultural services are contributing to community priorities.
- 3 The service works effectively with partners and the voluntary sector to provide a wide and diverse range of cultural activities in West Berkshire that are well-used by some members of the community. Facilities and activities are generally well-distributed, accessible and affordable to many target communities, and the quality of the visitor experience overall is satisfactory. Consultation with some community groups is effective and contributes to the service's understanding of these customers' needs. However, it has gaps in understanding the needs of some of its users and non-users, and there is a lack of awareness and lower than average participation rates for some services. Access is weak in some areas. It is also unable to show equity in the provision or take-up of services by all communities.
- 4 Cultural services make an impact on national priorities and on some of the Council's local objectives. For example, services for younger people are of a good quality and are well-used, and rural communities are also served relatively well, considering the fairly remote nature of the area. The service contributes effectively to the quality of life for disabled people and some deprived communities. The service also provides a well-used variety of health initiatives to improve people's fitness and well-being. However, it does not engage successfully with some people, and it does not effectively tackle some local and national objectives, for instance, safer communities. Satisfaction with cultural services overall is moderate.
- 5 Value for money is fair, with average costs for cultural services and average resident satisfaction. Parks and open spaces offer better value for money than other services. Libraries are poorer with higher costs and lower use. Procurement methods are effective, with two major investments in cultural services displaying improving value for money as well as increased customer benefits.
- 6 The Council has a mixed track record of improving cultural services. Most cultural services demonstrate an increase in participation, and satisfaction rates are rising. Value for money is improving. It has also improved some of its weaknesses and invested in modernising facilities including some of the leisure centres. However, it has not improved a number of key weaknesses and can be slow to implement changes from external challenges. There is little evidence of improved outcomes for some aspects of the services.

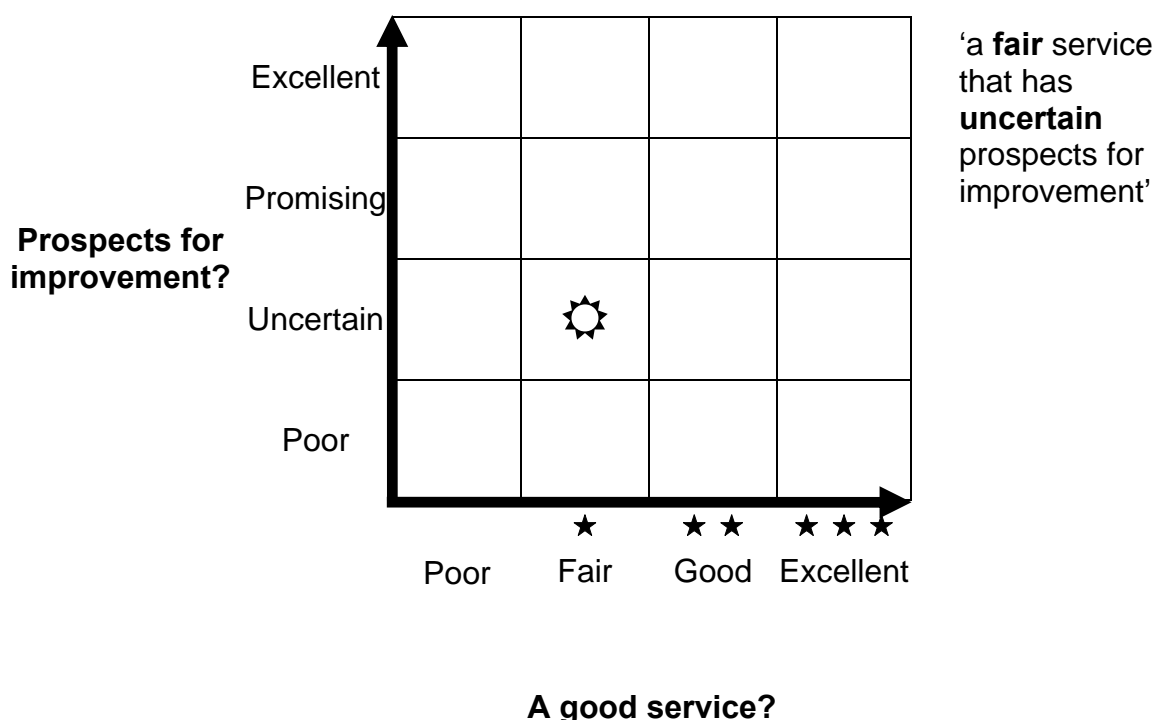
6 Cultural Services | Summary

- 7 The service has a lot to do to deliver improvements. It has not yet agreed an explicit vision for culture. Its service and team plans do not explicitly state what the Council is trying to achieve as a whole through its cultural services. Strategic performance management in the service is inadequate and target setting is weak. However, the Council recognises it needs to improve these issues, and has been working hard to establish a vision and direction for the service, as well as planning to understand the needs of some harder to reach people.
- 8 The service's strategic capacity and leadership to improve and promote culture's role in meeting the Council's aims has been insufficient. At an operational level its staffing, financial and partnership capacity to deliver individual improvements is sound. However, in the absence of a clear vision these improvements may not contribute effectively to the Council's and the community's aims.

Scoring the service

- 9 We have assessed West Berkshire Council 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

- 10 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- planned cultural services improve the quality of life for some community groups such as younger people, disabled people and those in rural or deprived communities;
 - valuable consultation with some community groups informs the service's understanding of customer needs;
 - it works well with partners including the voluntary sector to deliver some effective cultural services;

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

8 Cultural Services | Scoring the service

- a wide range of cultural facilities and services is available throughout West Berkshire, enabling participation by rural and deprived communities;
- it offers an increasingly well-used range of activities to improve people's health and well-being;
- satisfaction is fair and around average; and
- its value for money is adequate and improving.

11 However:

- the service has gaps in its understanding of some users and non-users needs;
- physical access to some buildings, such as the museum, is weak and the quality of some leisure centres is poor;
- the opening hours of some facilities, such as libraries and the museum, are limited;
- outcomes from some services are not measured effectively;
- public awareness of and engagement in cultural services remains low;
- it does not measure or show equity in take-up of cultural services; and
- the service has no systematic approach to diversity.

12 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- it has not yet agreed overarching aims for culture as a whole, nor approved supporting plans for the draft Cultural Strategy;
- the Council Plan and Community Strategy do not provide a visible focus on culture and are not clear about how it contributes to the area's priorities;
- performance indicators have not improved as fast as other councils' cultural services and there is little evidence of improved outcomes for some services;
- it can be slow to complete changes resulting from external challenge;
- the quality of target setting is not uniformly good;
- performance management is weak in culture;
- data to assess progress against targets is not uniformly available or good; and
- its strategic capacity to improve is weak.

13 However, its strengths include:

- increased public participation in culture;
- improving resident satisfaction;
- effective service level agreements and sound contract management;
- the recent restructuring giving culture a greater focus;
- good operational leadership and staff within cultural services;

- working towards establishing a vision and direction for the service, including planning to understand the needs of some harder to reach people;
- improving the cultural offer over the last few years, for example by investing in facilities; and
- securing external funding and partnership support for cultural projects.

Recommendations

- 14 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 Engage better with all residents in order to:

- *better understand their needs;*
- *provide appropriate cultural services to meet these needs, including those from harder to reach groups;*
- *identify and remove barriers to access; and*
- *increase all residents' awareness of and participation in the cultural offer in West Berkshire.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are cultural services that meet the needs of all residents and increased participation.

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

Recommendation

R2 Clarify the Council's vision for culture and:

- *ensure strategic leadership, support and resources for the vision;*
- *set out clear aims and objectives for culture;*
- *be clear about culture's contribution to community and Council aims and priorities; and*
- *adopt delivery plans integrated into the Council's performance management system.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are that councillors, managers, staff, the public, partners and other stakeholders are clear about:

- what the service is trying to achieve;
- why it is trying to achieve these things; and
- what it will do to achieve them.

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

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

Recommendation

R3 Improve performance management in cultural services by:

- *developing SMART outcomes and targets for the service to achieve its aims and objectives;*
- *improving the quality of performance data by identifying and collecting indicators and data sets that show how well the service is meeting its aims, objectives, milestones and targets;*
- *monitoring the indicators and reporting them using the Council's performance management system; and*
- *accurately measuring, controlling and managing costs.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are that the service will manage its performance better to meet its aims, objectives, and targets, including improving value for money.

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

Report

Context

The locality

- 15 West Berkshire is in central southern England and geographically makes up half of the old administrative county of Berkshire. The district comprises three distinct areas: the Kennet valley where the four main towns of Hungerford, Newbury, Thatcham and Theale are; the suburban areas close to Reading; and the rural chalk downlands which are Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and cover around three-quarters of the district. In these rural areas population density is low (the lowest in the South East). Delivering accessible services there is a challenge to the Council and its partners.
- 16 West Berkshire has a population of 148,300 people, most of whom live in the four main towns or within the suburbs adjoining Reading. The population has steadily grown over the past decade and there is an increasing elderly population which will increase further over the next 20 years. Ethnic diversity is low for the region at 2.6 per cent, but the number of migrant workers, mainly from Eastern Europe, has increased.
- 17 The area is fairly affluent and the district ranks 125th out of 150 in the government indices of deprivation (where 1 is the most and 150 the least deprived). There are small areas of relative deprivation in Newbury, Thatcham, Lambourn and Calcot.
- 18 Education levels are high with 65 per cent of pupils achieving five or more grade A-C at GCSE level in 2006 while 80 per cent of primary schoolchildren achieved KS2. The health of the district is mainly good but there are challenges for the Council and partners including high mortality rates from cancer and circulatory diseases. There are also high rates of teenage pregnancies and problems with drugs and alcohol in some localities. While crime remains low and West Berkshire is a safe place to live, residents increasingly fear crime.
- 19 The area's closeness to the M4, A34 and Heathrow airport gives it good transport links but public transport is poor, making accessing services difficult for some people.

The Council

- 20** West Berkshire Council was created in 1998 as one of the six unitary authorities in Berkshire. A new Conservative administration has 36 of the 52 seats and took control in 2005. There are 16 Liberal Democrat councillors. An Executive provides political direction and the Leader, Deputy Leader and 10 Portfolio holders share responsibility for the Council's work. The Council has an Overview and Scrutiny Committee and three Policy Development Commissions that support both the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Executive. This involves a broader range of councillors in making policy. The Council also has non-executive and regulatory committees, for example, development control, standards and appeals and complaints.
- 21** The Council employs 5,542 staff, making it one of the largest employers in the area. The Chief Executive and three Corporate and Strategic Directors provide leadership while Heads of Service are responsible for service delivery.
- 22** The Council planned to spend £278.4 million (gross), including Dedicated Schools Grant, on services in 2007/08, with a capital programme of £21.7 million, including external funding.
- 23** The Audit Commission's first corporate performance assessment in 2002 assessed the Council as 'fair'. The Council subsequently improved its performance and achieved 'three-star' (good) rating in December 2006 and the Audit Commission assessed it as 'performing well' in the 2007 corporate assessment.
- 24** The current Community Strategy (2006-09) *A Better Future for All*, developed by the West Berkshire local strategic partnership, has five main aims:
- to ensure that children and young people are: healthy; safe; enjoying life and are achieving; making a positive contribution and are able to be involved; and achieving economic well-being by being employable;
 - improving the quality of life, well-being and health of all;
 - reducing crime, disorder, fear of crime and the harm caused by the misuse of alcohol and drugs;
 - working through partnership to improve local transport and the economy; and
 - working through partnership to improve the environment and access to affordable housing.
- 25** A new draft Community Strategy (2008-26) *A Breath of Fresh Air*, is out for consultation, and is underpinned by new draft local area agreement objectives. Its five proposed themes are: prosperous; accessible; greener; safer; and stronger. It is due to be agreed this summer.

- 26 The Council approved its Council Plan in 2007. It shows 16 outcomes the Council plans to achieve between 2007 and 2011 and has three priorities for the next four years:
- safer communities;
 - a cleaner and greener West Berkshire; and
 - successful schools.

The Council's cultural services

- 27 Until 2006, most cultural services (arts, leisure, tourism and heritage) were within the children and young people's directorate. A restructure moved these services, and libraries, into the community services directorate. Parks, open spaces and countryside service remain within the environment directorate. The total number of staff employed in cultural services is 119 full-time equivalents, of which 56 are library staff.
- 28 The cultural facilities and services the Council provides, which are the subject of this inspection, comprise:
- nine libraries, two mobile libraries and a community information vehicle;
 - eight leisure centres;
 - West Berkshire Museum;
 - Newbury Tourist Information Centre;
 - Shaw House;
 - 32 play areas, several parks and open spaces;
 - arts and leisure development and outreach work;
 - tourism services; and
 - heritage and conservation work including promoting the sustainable management of the historic environment resource and large parts of the countryside as well as overseeing 700 miles of public rights of way.
- 29 Until 2007, three different contractors ran five of the Council's eight leisure centres and the Council ran the other three. The Council reviewed its options and decided it should have a single partner to run all its centres. Now, Parkwood Leisure manages the five leisure centres, and the Council plans to transfer the remaining three to Parkwood shortly.
- 30 The Council also has contracts with the private sector for some recreation grounds and maintaining parks, play areas and open space. Other financial arrangements for commissioning services include grant aiding and service level agreements with the Corn Exchange arts centre (£457,000), Watermill Theatre (£48,000) and the Pang, Kennet and Lambourn countryside project. The Council is also responsible for the historic archive collections at the Berkshire Record Office, which is managed by Reading Borough Council.

- 31 The total net revenue budget for all cultural services in 2007/08 is £7.9 million, which is around 8.2 per cent of the Council's £96 million net revenue budget (excluding schools). Major areas of expenditure include: arts and leisure £1.7 million; heritage and tourism £630,000; libraries £2 million; countryside £890,000; and parks £840,000.
- 32 The Council is developing a cultural strategy, *The Time of Our Lives*, with the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). The strategy is out for consultation with partners and is due for approval in autumn 2008, after the LSP has agreed the Community Strategy. It does not yet have agreed aims and objectives, but links to the five main themes in the Community Strategy.
- 33 In this report we use the following terms about the Council's cultural services. 'The service' or 'cultural services' refer to the whole range of cultural services as set out above, irrespective of which Council department is responsible for managing them. The service's contribution to the national priorities of 'quality of life' and 'healthier communities' are examined in detail in the following sections.

How good is the service?

- 34 The Council provides fair cultural services.
- 35 The Council has no broad cultural aims and has not had a strategic approach to delivering cultural services. It is therefore difficult to assess how the service has aimed to achieve wider community priorities. At an operational level, however, the service has more detailed objectives, showing how it intends to meet local needs and ambitions via individual services.
- 36 The service gathers information on cultural needs in various ways, and uses this to plan and deliver cultural services. It works well with other stakeholders to provide a wide and diverse range of cultural activities throughout West Berkshire. However, it has gaps in engaging with and understanding the needs of some of its users and non-users. And access to some facilities is weak. It is also unable to show equity in the provision or take-up of services by all communities.
- 37 Cultural services make an impact on national priorities and the Council's local objectives, particularly for younger people, disabled people, and some rural and deprived communities. This helps to improve their quality of life. The service also provides an effective range of health initiatives to improve local people's fitness and well-being. However, it does not engage successfully with some people such as black and minority ethnic communities, and it cannot demonstrate outcomes in some local and national objectives such as safer communities. Resident satisfaction with cultural services overall is moderate.
- 38 Value for money (VFM) is fair, with around average costs for cultural services and average resident satisfaction. Parks and open spaces show slightly better than average VFM, but libraries are poorer. Procurement methods are effective, with two major investments in cultural services demonstrating improving value for money as well as increased customer benefits.

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 39 Culture does not feature prominently in key corporate or community documents. West Berkshire's existing Community Strategy (2003-2008) contains two specific objectives related to culture as part of the local area agreement (LAA) for 2006-2009. These two objectives link to national priorities and are:
- participation and engagement of young people, especially those who are identified as likely to achieve low, or no academic qualifications, are able to demonstrate their abilities and employability through increased participation and engagement in a range of cultural activities; and
 - to improve the health of targeted at risk groups by increasing the attendance at Activity for Health sessions.

- 40 The Council Plan (2007-2011) contains reference to how culture can specifically support a few of its 16 outcomes. For example, it aims to improve the healthier life outcome by increasing participation in the Activity for Health schemes, and the cleaner and greener outcome contains a few cultural objectives such as reopening the Nature Discovery Centre.
- 41 Cultural services plans contain some detailed objectives for community and user needs for individual services. The Cultural Services and Youth Services Service Plan for 2007/08 contains three high-level objectives, although these do not feature in any other plans and have no outcome focused targets. Its accompanying action plan contains a selection of targets from the art and leisure, libraries, and heritage and tourism team plans. These link to the Council's 16 outcomes and include targets such as: enabling six events to take place in Newbury market place; a 10 per cent increase in visitor numbers recorded at libraries; and a 10 per cent increase in visitor numbers to the museum.
- 42 Many cultural services' individual strategies and accompanying team plans have clear objectives at a detailed level. For example, the library service's 2005 ten-year strategy Beyond Books had nine objectives linked to the Council priorities at the time, and this has been revised to reflect the new Council Plan priorities. And the Countryside and Environment Service Plan for 2008/09 contains an objective to increase participation in Walking for Health - one of the overarching Activity for Health schemes. This means that services are clear about their individual contribution to meeting local cultural needs.
- 43 The Council understands its position within the local cultural market. It stimulates and supports provision through a wide range of private, voluntary and community providers as well as complementing this through direct provision. For example, it has worked with developers and the private sector to provide a cinema for local people. It also has many joint arrangements in place such as being responsible for the archive collection at the Berkshire Record Office, and helping not-for-profit organisations and the voluntary sector such as the Corn Exchange Arts Centre and Greenham Common Trust. This shows the service enhances the cultural experience by joint working and supporting other organisations.
- 44 Higher level aims for culture are being developed. Although the Council has not agreed culture's role, it is developing a Cultural Strategy to highlight culture and its importance in achieving the aims of the Community Strategy.

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

Customer focus, access and engagement

- 45 The needs of the community are based on a good understanding of what local people want, though more work is required to ensure the service's analysis is comprehensive and covers harder to reach groups. Decisions are based on a wide range of knowledge gained from various sources. These include a comprehensive annual resident survey, close working with parishes, and various consultation exercises including the online consultation finder rated as excellent by SOCITM. Action plans for culture are based on this sound intelligence. For example the District Profiles have identified the size, locations and needs of migrant populations in advance of census data. Also parish planning has identified the need for local sports and community facilities which are then provided using contributions from developers. The service recently consulted widely on its new leisure contract. This included seeking out the views of local committees as well as holding a stakeholder day. Specific initiatives with children and younger people, for example in designing the new Hungerford library, also ensures target communities have opportunities to express their cultural aspirations.
- 46 However, the service has gaps in its understanding of the needs of some harder to reach people. It does not know the detailed needs of specific groups of cultural users or non-users such as disabled people, those on lower incomes, the increasing migrant population or black and minority ethnic (BME) communities. For example, the leisure centres do not monitor individual user details. Most services do not fully understand why non-users do not use their services. This means that not all cultural services are user-focused or planned and delivered in a non-discriminatory way.
- 47 The service is effective in working with others to offer improved cultural services that it could not supply on its own. For example, it has proactively worked with developers and operators for a much-wanted cinema in Newbury, and building is underway. It also works with other providers, for example, by inviting the local nature centre to display creatures at a recent library event. It works closely with the voluntary sector, for example, by enabling them to refurbish a disused athletics track and repair bridges. In addition to its role as a service provider, this influence helps draw together key providers to support and widen the cultural offer. This also allows the services to achieve more than they could by working alone.
- 48 Access to cultural services is mixed. Not all cultural services comply with the access needs of the community. Examples of poor access include:
- opening times for some facilities are not always convenient; for example, the libraries and the museum do not open on Sundays;
 - the Public Library Service Standards (PLSS) do not meet two access standards; for example, opening hours per 1,000 population in 2006/07 were 108, which is short of the 128 standard;

- physical access to some facilities is poor, such as the museum, due in part to the historic nature of the building; and
 - partners report facilities such as community centres and multi-use games areas are sometimes locked.
- 49** The service has tackled some of these problems, for example by extending library opening hours and making physical adaptations, such as platform lifts at Shaw House, where possible. However, due to the relatively rural nature of the area, transport is an issue for some users, particularly younger and older people. Although this is outside the remit of cultural services, it is an additional barrier to participation and adds to access problems.
- 50** Remote or electronic access to cultural facilities is fair. The Council's website is adequate, with video clips of some cultural activities, but electronic resources - such as the museum collection - online booking and prices are not available for most services. Common ethnic languages such as Polish are not offered. SOCITM rate the website as 'standard'. However, the service has recently launched a separate tourism website which is attractive and easy to read, with clear links to visitor attractions. This site had 50,000 visits last year - twice as many as was targeted. Staff reply promptly and helpfully to online forms, emails and phone calls, ensuring the services can be accessed more effectively.
- 51** Many services are planned to ensure they are available and affordable throughout the area. For example, the service provides outreach facilities such as a popular rural touring theatre. Eight leisure centres are situated around the district, and the leisure team makes sure that pricing is competitive and affordable. Most leisure prices have risen by around four per cent this year, although library charges and Activity for Health sessions have not increased. The prices are not seen as a barrier to participation and many projects, such as Street Active, are free. The service also works hard to ensure the countryside is available to everybody, such as improving signs, clearing footpaths and opening up the towpath around Newbury. Although the service is working to enable a new leisure centre in the east, facilities and activities are generally well-distributed, accessible and affordable to many target communities. This is a good achievement given the rural nature of the area.
- 52** Engagement with the community is not always effective. Arrangements are in place to interact with the community, although these do not always lead to increased participation. Many services use a variety of initiatives to promote and engage users, such as the archaeology team delivering talks to parishes on local heritage, and well-attended library 'fun days'. Customer-friendly standards, designed with input from users, are publicised for the leisure centres and libraries, although not for the museum and tourist information centre. Despite a variety of communication methods and widespread publicity, active library borrowers and visitors to the museum remain lower than the national average. Many staff report of a lack of awareness of the cultural offer in the area, and effective engagement remains a key challenge for the service.

Diversity

- 53** Equality and diversity in service provision is mixed. The service has taken steps to ensure fairness in its service provision, but more remains to be done, and the service is unable to fully demonstrate equality in take-up by users. One reason for this is because detailed visitor information is not recorded on a day-to-day basis. For example, a leisure discount card is available for carers, and although 92 have been issued, the service is unaware how often the cards are used. Staff have completed equality impact assessments but they are basic and with no clear evidence that they have improved outcomes. The service acknowledges it needs to review these to ensure they are acted upon. It also recognises it needs to develop a more systematic approach to diversity. Currently the service cannot be confident that its cultural activity is reaching everyone.
- 54** The service is not always successful in ensuring equal access and take-up of cultural services. Annual user surveys in leisure centres provide an overall figure of usage by BME communities, and figures show little difference between the population and user profiles. The percentage of library membership by people from BME communities is higher than the area's BME population, but the Council's 2005 countryside and rights of way survey established that only four per cent of those visiting the countryside were registered disabled. The gender and ethnicity staff mix across the Council reflects the local population, although the percentage of staff with disabilities is very low compared with the population. Overall, the service recognises the need to adopt a more systematic approach to engaging all communities.
- 55** Cultural services cannot fully demonstrate equality in service provision for BME communities or migrant workers. For example, few multi-cultural events are held in the area. Staff and partners acknowledge that more needs to be done to engage these groups, including the increasing migrant population. However, the library service has ensured a range of world fiction, which is well-used. Overall though, cultural services cannot be certain that it is improving the quality of life or ensuring equality and diversity for these community groups.
- 56** The service aims to improve the quality of life for gypsies and travellers. For example, in 2007 the Street Active scheme was attended by 40 young travellers, who took part in a range of activities such as skate boarding, drumming and face painting. This helped bring transient and permanent people from a travellers site together to diffuse previous tensions. Libraries have made their services accessible to this community group by offering books without proof of address and access to computers, although it is not clear how successful this has been.

Service outcomes

- 57** Cultural services have made progress to achieve the objectives set out in team plans. Some of these objectives contribute towards improving the quality of life and local and national objectives for healthier communities. The service can show evidence of planned benefits for children, disabled people and rural or deprived communities. It can also demonstrate the impact it has had on improving the health of targeted community groups.

- 58 However, some outcomes are mixed and the extent of the service's impact cannot be demonstrated for all areas. Outcomes towards some of the Council's main priorities, for example safer communities and cleaner and greener objectives, or in engaging the increasing migrant population, are not measured and their impact is limited.

Quality of life

- 59 The quality of the visitor experience overall is satisfactory. The outdoor environment is well-maintained by the service and public open spaces are well-used and well-regarded by local people. The built cultural heritage is maintained to a high standard and opportunities are maximised for people to use them. For example, the service worked hard to gain grants to restore Shaw House, a building of national heritage significance, to open it as a conference centre and heritage attraction. This demonstrates the Council values its heritage and appreciates how it contributes to quality of life. Refurbishment of some leisure centres has increased attendance (for example, gym membership has doubled at Northcroft Leisure Centre). However, the appearance of some leisure centres is poor and physical access to the museum and library opening hours are limited. Overall, facilities are of reasonable quality, which is important to local people and visitors in extending their visit or returning.
- 60 Services for younger people are of a good quality and are well-used. For example, the service participates in the accredited national arts award scheme, which recognises the cultural development of young people. Twenty nine schools in the area, including referred units, received the award last year, and as a result the Council was chosen to enable 40 young people to participate in a 'master class' with a TV personality. This ensures their enjoyment and achievement is rewarded, as well as contributing to the LAA objective of engaging young people and one of the Council's main objectives of successful schools. The service's Street Active pilot, which provides a range of outreach arts and leisure activities through the summer for children, including travellers, had over 400 attendances, and was so successful it is being repeated this year.
- 61 Rural communities are also served relatively well, considering the fairly remote nature of the area. Despite transport being a barrier to participation, the service improves the quality of life to rural people by, for example, changing mobile library routes to ensure new communities are visited. A service level agreement is in place with the Watermill touring theatre to ensure productions are staged in community halls throughout West Berkshire. Furthermore, over £800,000 of lottery funding has been used to provide sport facilities, such as a climbing wall and multi-use games areas, in areas where access to facilities is an issue.

- 62 The service contributes effectively to the quality of life for disabled people. For example, the library service runs a visually-impaired readers group, with around 15 attendees each month. It also takes on four work experience students with learning disabilities each year. The countryside team runs a well-attended scheme with volunteers including adults with learning difficulties to improve access to the countryside, for example by installing gates to enable access for wheelchairs. Another good example is the Council's Morpheus Theatre where activities and events are held that provide rehabilitation and occupational training for children and adults with a learning disability.
- 63 Deprived communities also benefit from cultural services. For example, Pass It On projects were held in deprived wards and engaged communities by enabling them to produce their own DVD highlighting local people, scenes and service providers. Over 50 people attended art workshops with a well-known artist and 60 members from the community attended the local film showing. The evaluation of these projects evidenced improved self-esteem and the value that residents placed on getting to know their neighbours. Due to its success, the project, taking on board the lessons learnt, is continuing this year in another deprived ward to improve social inclusion.
- 64 Services for older people are mixed. There are a number of initiatives which support independent living for older people. However, the recent move of cultural services from the children and young people's directorate has yet to be fully effective in focussing on and improving the quality of life for older people. Cultural services sometimes dovetails with others, such as adult social services, to enable an effective home library service for those unable to visit libraries, and the leisure centres work well with the PCT to deliver popular classes for older people. Although there is not a wide range of high quality consistent services for older people, cultural services are seen by some as a valuable contribution to their quality of life.

Healthier communities

- 65 Cultural services work proactively in partnership to improve the health of the community. The service works well with the Primary Care Trust and the local leisure contractor to implement a variety of physical activity initiatives which specifically aim to improve health and general well-being towards targeted people. These initiatives run as part of the innovative and increasingly successful Activity for Health scheme, set up in 2005, which is well-regarded by GPs and users alike. The scheme is targeted to address locally identified health issues. For example, it focuses on improving health for older people, childhood obesity and heart problems. It also contributes towards national targets for healthy living and improvement in exercise rates, coronary heart disease and mental health programmes. However, longer term outcomes in reducing heart disease and obesity rates have yet to be demonstrated.

- 66** The service can evidence good and increasing user participation in its health schemes. For example, an average of 200 people attend 21 discounted specialist classes held each week at its leisure centres, referred from their GPs. Weekly attendances include 120 attendees at 'Steady Steps' fall prevention classes (compared with 50 last year); 45 attendees for 'Easy Breathing' classes; and 30 attendees on the 'Activ8' referral scheme for children (compared with five last year). One leisure centre has inclusive fitness accreditation, ensuring the facility has adapted fitness equipment for those with disabilities. Around 35 people are also visited each week at sheltered housing and day centres if they are unable to visit a leisure centre. Most of the ten initiatives within the Activity for Health scheme have full classes and increasing participation rates, leading to extra classes being run each year. The scheme has also surpassed its LAA targets. Nearby councils are using this scheme as a blueprint to launch their own.
- 67** The service works proactively with the voluntary sector to deliver health initiatives. For example, it has trained 35 volunteer walk leaders to deliver its Walking for Health scheme. Almost 4,000 people attended this scheme in 2006/07 - exceeding last year's attendance by 1,000 and the Council's LAA target of 3,430. Comments received by the service from walkers include: 'I can walk further without getting out of breath'; 'I have better lung function and muscle tone'; and 'walking has improved my health and I have made new friends'. This helps improve quality of life as well as bringing health benefits to participants.
- 68** Cultural services work adequately with schools to improve children's health. Joint work with the PCT led to around half of the area's schools to achieve national healthy schools status last year. The service also runs a Go Kinetic scheme to encourage children to walk to school; as well as contributing to their health, this led to an 8 per cent drop in school traffic for 15 schools, and 9 schools increased their walkers by 10 per cent. This however, did not meet the Council's targets for 2007. But the number of schools participating in the scheme has increased from 42 to 66 in the past year.
- 69** The service provides a wide range of opportunities to tackle health inequalities. However, only parts of cultural services are used to achieve health objectives - mainly the leisure service and the parks and open spaces service. The Council has now begun to investigate the role that areas, such as libraries, with their new Books on Prescription scheme, can play in improving the community's health.

User experience and satisfaction

- 70** Resident satisfaction with cultural services is fair. Performance is average when compared with other councils. The 2006/07 survey to inform national performance indicators shows near average satisfaction rates of:
- 77 per cent with parks and open spaces compared with 74 per cent nationally;
 - 41 per cent with theatres and concert halls compared with 41 per cent;
 - 40 per cent with museums and galleries compared with 40 per cent;

24 Cultural Services | How good is the service?

- 71 per cent with libraries compared with 72 per cent; and
- 56 per cent with sports and leisure facilities compared with 58 per cent.

- 71 These moderate satisfaction levels are supported by other data reflecting a fair cultural user experience. Most of the public library service standards (PLSS) have been met and participation and volunteering in sport and active recreation is in the best 25 per cent of all councils. For example, the Sport England Active People survey showed 26 per cent of people regularly participate in sport and active recreation in the area, compared with the national average of 21 per cent. User (as opposed to resident) satisfaction with library services overall is very high at 95 per cent, and most partners state cultural services compare well with others and that they are very satisfied with the quality of partnership working. Many residents, staff and partners comment on the good quality of the parks, open spaces and access to the countryside. External accreditations include Green Flag status for two Council parks and Quest accreditation for two of the eight leisure centres, helping the service assess and demonstrate the quality of its cultural activity.
- 72 Other performance indicators show weaker performance. Important library indicators for opening hours, number of visits and the percentage of active borrowers are poor, and the number of character appraisals³ of conservation areas carried out remains at zero. The Council's current service assessment score for culture is two out of a possible four. This score is based on previous similar inspections, current performance against the PLSS, national satisfaction data and other library service related indicators.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 73 Value for money (VFM), as measured by cost per head and resident satisfaction, is fair. Overall cultural services costs are not significantly higher or lower than other councils. When compared nationally, the service spends slightly lower than average, but when compared to similar 'nearest neighbours', costs are slightly higher. Satisfaction is also at the median, demonstrating VFM is adequate. Parks is an exception that shows better VFM. The service is low cost at £12.61 per head of population compared to the national average of £13.66, yet has high quality parks, open spaces and play areas, and higher than average satisfaction rates. Conversely, libraries are high cost at £19.65 per head of population, with below average resident satisfaction rates and low usage, demonstrating poorer VFM. The service's own VFM matrices show a similar picture. Furthermore, the Council scores well on its Use of Resources VFM rating, scoring three out of a possible four. Overall, there is an average relationship between costs and the range, level and quality of cultural services provided.

³ The purpose of a character appraisal is to define the historic, archaeological, architectural and natural components of the conservation area that are considered important and contribute most to the area's character.

- 74 Information on service costs is not always accurate or used well to manage or improve VFM. For example, although the service's VFM matrices show that libraries are high cost at £4.34 per visit, the main causal factor being support service recharges. The library costs were examined in 2005, which resulted in additional investment in the service such as a wider range of stock and additional opening hours, although good VFM has not yet been demonstrated. This means the reasons for the differences are still not fully understood and identified areas of potential cost through support recharges have not been used to improve potential poor VFM for this service.
- 75 Cultural services procure effectively and follow a procurement strategy that reflects good practice. For example, the procurement of a new library management system has been undertaken with other library authorities. By participating through this consortium to purchase the system, the service has benefited from a full-time project manager who has been able to offer a larger and more attractive package to potential suppliers. The project risks and costs have also been spread across all the participating authorities, who have benefited from economies of scale. The new system will be more accessible to customers, for example with a shared catalogue already available and a self-service method due shortly. Although the service has had delays in getting the system to work fully, the project demonstrates effective procurement partnerships.
- 76 Other service reviews have also led to improvements in cost-effectiveness and efficiency. For example, following an extensive transparent evaluation exercise, the new leisure centres contract was taken on an objective value for money basis involving stakeholders such as sports groups and leisure centre users. Demonstrable improvements in VFM have been achieved through this process. For example, the new contract has already led to revenue savings in 2007/08 of £79,000 with a projected saving of £2,942,000 over the next ten years. The contract is also resulting in uniform pricing, staff training and refurbishment of some leisure centres. The agreement includes a programme of further investment over the ten years of the contract such as better performance management through a new leisure card system, increased planned maintenance and re-provision of facilities that are no longer fit for purpose. This shows that cultural services can manage VFM well, focussing on costs and benefit to the customer.
- 77 The service makes adequate use of resources through grant aiding cultural activity. Grant aiding to organisations such as the Watermill touring theatre at £48,000 per annum and £78,000 to other smaller bodies ensures that outreach arts and recreational services are provided that offer VFM to the community. Service level agreements with large organisations such as the theatres are renewed every three years ensure that the money is well-spent on what the service wants to achieve. The grant to the Corn Exchange appears high at £457,000 per annum, although a study, albeit in 2000, demonstrated the Council was content that this was offering VFM and providing a much-needed art facility in the area. Overall, the service monitors that the monies are well-spent and delivering what it wants to achieve.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 78 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement.
- 79 The Council has a mixed track record of improving its cultural services. It has improved some of its key weaknesses and some of its facilities. Participation and resident satisfaction and some aspects of the service's value for money are improving. However, it has not improved many key weaknesses, is unable to demonstrate a range of improved outcomes and can be slow to implement changes from external challenges.
- 80 The Council is not well placed to deliver improvements in its cultural services because it does not yet have an explicit vision for culture. It has not yet approved its cultural strategy and its service and team plans do not start from what the Council is trying to achieve through its cultural services. Strategic performance management in culture is inadequate and target setting is weak.
- 81 The service's strategic capacity and leadership to improve culture's role in meeting the Council's aims has been insufficient. At a more operational level its capacity to deliver individual improvements is sound. However in the absence of a clear vision these may not contribute effectively to the Council's and the community's aims.

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 82 Participation in cultural activities is increasing. It showed a steady increase to April 2007. For example, visits to cultural facilities, including leisure centres and libraries, per 1,000 population rose by 7 per cent in the year to 2007. Volunteers worked 27 per cent more hours over the same period. However, participation levels between April and December 2007 were mixed. Visits to leisure centres and libraries fell as did tourism enquiries. The poor weather and floods in summer may be to blame. On the other hand, attendance at heritage and tourism venues and volunteer hours rose. Overall the use of Council cultural facilities is increasing.
- 83 Resident satisfaction with most services has improved steadily since 2004. For example satisfaction with library services has risen significantly from 65 to 71 per cent between 2003/04 and 2006/07, and up to (unaudited) 79 per cent in 2007/08. Satisfaction with sports and leisure facilities rose from 50 per cent to 56 per cent between 2003/04 and 2006/07. Satisfaction with parks and open spaces, museums and theatres and concert halls dipped in 2006/07 but rose again in 2007/08. Twice as many residents said that the Council's cultural services have improved as said they had declined over the last three years. This means that residents increasingly recognise the improvement in the Council's cultural services.

- 84** The Council has successfully addressed some weaknesses in its cultural services, resulting in improvements for users. For example it has:
- engaged a wide range of residents by arranging and facilitating programmes such as Go Kinetic, Pass It On, Street Active, and Activity for Health schemes which are increasing in popularity;
 - increased the use of some leisure facilities by improving the quality with £475,000 of investment in five leisure centres, for example, a £206,000 refurbishment of the Northcroft Leisure Centre;
 - increased use and satisfaction among sports clubs by facilitating the provision of new sports pitches such as the Crookham Athletic track; and
 - gained Green Flag status for two of its parks in 2007.
- 85** It has also improved some of its facilities. For example, it has provided new and better libraries at Hungerford, Theale and Wash Common with extended opening hours and restored the Grade 1 listed Elizabethan Shaw House. This may have contributed to improved satisfaction levels but there is no evidence of other positive outcomes such as increasing the proportion of active library borrowers. This has declined from 14.5 per cent of the population in 2005/06 to 11.6 per cent in 2006/07 and is well in the worst quarter of councils.
- 86** The Council has not improved many key weaknesses. For example:
- some cultural indicators have not improved over the last three years;
 - the Council has fewer top performing culture performance indicators than most unitary councils;
 - the Council's CPA service assessment score for culture has remained unchanged at two out of four;
 - 33 per cent of residents say that cultural facilities needed improving, which is significantly higher than the national average;
 - public awareness of the Council's cultural offer remains low; and
 - use of the West Berkshire Museum fell by a sixth in 2006/07.
- 87** The service can be slow to implement changes from external challenge. For example, in late 2006 the Council adopted an Audit Commission recommendation to develop a more strategic, planned and targeted direction for cultural services. However, progress has been slow and the Council's new cultural strategy is still in draft and not underpinned by delivery plans.
- 88** Some aspects of the service's value for money are improving. For example, the service procured the new library management system in partnership with other councils in the South to share costs and risks. Furthermore, the cost per head of library services fell from £5.72 to £4.36 between 2005/06 and 2006/07. However, it is still well above average and the cost per visit is among the most expensive. Value for money is improving in some areas but it is still around average overall.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 89 The Council has no clear over-arching cultural vision, aims or objectives. The latest draft of the Community Strategy, *A Breath of Fresh Air*, does contain cultural actions but does not provide an all-embracing rationale for the Council's cultural activities. The Council Plan does not explicitly show how culture is contributing to promoting the economic, social and environmental well being of West Berkshire and does not provide a visible focus on culture. The Council and its partners are preparing a new Local Area Agreement containing more targets for culture than the current one. When it is agreed it should provide greater focus on some aspects of culture. The Council recognises that it needs to ensure the cultural contribution to local and national priorities is more comprehensively captured in the forthcoming adopted versions of the Council Plan and Community Strategy. Nevertheless the Council's strategic direction and leadership for culture is currently unclear.
- 90 Taken together, the Council's service strategies for culture are inadequate. Council strategies for each of the main aspects of culture such as libraries, archaeology and parks and open spaces are mainly derived from the previous Council Plan. They are stand alone plans that do not relate to each other or to an overall strategic direction on culture. Some are out of date, from as early as 2004 pre-dating the current Council Plan. This means that the service strategies are not sufficient to drive strategic improvement in culture.
- 91 At a more operational level, managers, staff and councillors have a good understanding that the Council wants to increase participation in cultural activities and improve access to them. However, this does not appear explicitly in service plans or team plans. The Cultural Services service plan for 2007/08 contains three objective for Cultural Services but these do not link either to higher level plans or to team plans. Consequently there is no 'golden thread' from the Council's cultural aims.
- 92 The service's annual service and team plans do not address key issues. However, they do contain action plans, based on sound intelligence of much of the community's needs, that detail what the service is going to do over the next year but in no particular order of priority. The action plans link each action to one of the Council Plan's sixteen outcomes. This provides some link between developments in culture and the Council's strategic outcomes. Nevertheless there is no clear rationale for planned actions and they do not address key issues such as increasing the proportion of regular library users.

- 93 The Council has recognised the need to improve its strategic approach to culture. It is developing a Cultural Strategy, *The Time of Our Lives*, in conjunction with the LSP. It links culture to the five themes of the community strategy. It is due for approval in autumn 2008. However, it is largely aspirational and has yet to develop clear aims for how the Council will use culture to achieve its community priorities. It is unclear at the moment for example, whether cultural services should be re-configured to ensure they better meet future needs, or the rationale behind providing a wide range of services. Nevertheless it should be a good starting point for moving forward and developing a 'golden thread' from aims to detailed action plans as well as targets.
- 94 The service's approach to diversity is fair. The amended version of the draft cultural strategy recognises the need to focus on harder to reach groups such as black and minority ethnic people, migrants and those on lower incomes, as well as older people, younger people, disabled people and people in rural areas. As a result of using the IDeA's Single Improvement Tool⁴, the service has also developed an improvement plan to ensure a better understanding of user and non-user profiles and the needs of the community. This is important in ensuring that all parts of the community are taken into account in planning the delivery of cultural services.
- 95 High level performance management is weak in culture. The corporate performance management system is good and the Council is starting to apply it to culture. However the service has no explicit high level or strategic targets and even though it monitors performance data, mainly performance indicators, many of these are not relevant at the strategic level. This means systems do not allow councillors and officers to manage cultural performance strategically.
- 96 At the team plan level the quality of target setting is mixed. Some targets are SMART⁵ but targets for attendances at libraries and leisure centres are unambitious and based on the previous year's performance. Others such as 'reduce overall operational costs and increase investment in service improvement' are not specific. Targets also vary between documents. Without SMART ambitious targets, the service is unlikely to perform to its full potential.
- 97 The Council's approach to measuring cultural services' outcomes and benefits for local people is underdeveloped. Some data, such as attendances at libraries and leisure centres, is readily available. Other information such as the use of discount cards and the numbers of regular library users will become available over the next few months as new computer systems become fully operational. It is important that the service collects relevant data to assess the impact of its actions.

⁴ The Single Improvement Tool (SIT), developed by the Improvement and Development Agency, is a self-improvement tool for councils that want to identify their strengths and weaknesses in culture and sport.

⁵ Specific, Measurable, Ambitious/ Achievable, Realistic/ Relevant, Time-based

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 98** Culture has not been a Council priority for improvement and it has lacked a strategic focus and direction. The Council has maintained its revenue spending and invested in new facilities such as the Hungerford Library. It has also recently committed to investing over £5 million capital expenditure in culture over the next five years. However, there is no explicit vision for culture or resourced plans to deliver the Council's strategic aims for culture. The Council is now developing its vision of how culture can help deliver the Council's and the community's aims in the form of a draft culture strategy. The Council's focus on culture is increasing although it still has much to do.
- 99** The capacity within individual cultural services is good. The recent restructuring, that saw cultural services largely unified and moved into the Community Services directorate, gave it greater focus. Operational leadership and management is sound and its quality is recognised by staff and partners. Communication within and across the departments and services providing cultural service is effective. Staff are well-motivated and clear on what is expected of them. They display clear ownership for the delivery of high quality services. Partners and local people praise positive staff attitudes and their willingness to embrace change. The appraisal system linked to work planning and personal development is effective. Many staff are engaged effectively in planning for the future at service level. However, lack of staff capacity is holding back some improvements to access for example increasing outreach work and library opening hours. Overall, good operational leadership, good staff, partnership working and securing external funding mean that the service has the capacity to deliver some individual improvements.
- 100** Community capacity building works well. For example, the service offers volunteering opportunities, including in libraries and museums and as leaders for community activities. This supports individual services' capacities as well as enriching the lives of the volunteers. The service also supports voluntary and community groups and helps them raise money for their own projects. Sound partnership working is an important source of capacity in future. Partners have an extensive skills base and will continue to support improvements. By using partnerships well, the service is making better use of resources and providing more than it could by working alone.
- 101** Partnerships with cultural service providers are effective. Working relationships with partners are open and constructive, such as the well-regarded Berkshire Record office, where the Council is responsible for the archive collections for Berkshire. Much of the cultural offer in West Berkshire is provided by partners such as the Corn Exchange, the Watermill Theatre and town and parish councils. The service has effective individual service level agreements with its partners. Contract management, for example the parks contract, is also sound. This partnership working enhances capacity.

- 102 The service works well with funding partners, especially Vodafone, English Heritage and the Greenham Common Trust, who have provided funding for major projects such as Shaw House. The Council was instrumental in setting up the Greenham Common Trust when the United States Air Force left the airfield at Greenham Common. The Trust now earns several million pounds a year from renting commercial sites and donates most of this to good causes in West Berkshire, including culture. The Council also gains external revenue support for some services and has introduced supplementary planning guidance to lever in increased developer contributions for cultural purposes. All this means that the Council can get external funding for many of its cultural projects.
- 103 The Council's corporate financial planning and resource allocation is effective. The recent corporate assessment found that it has an effective corporate financial framework. This means that when the Council has clear ambitions for culture it should be able to use its finances well to deliver them.