

Service Inspection

June 2008



# **Access to Services**

**Basildon District Council**

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## Service Inspection

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

Audit Commission service inspections should:

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater 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](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

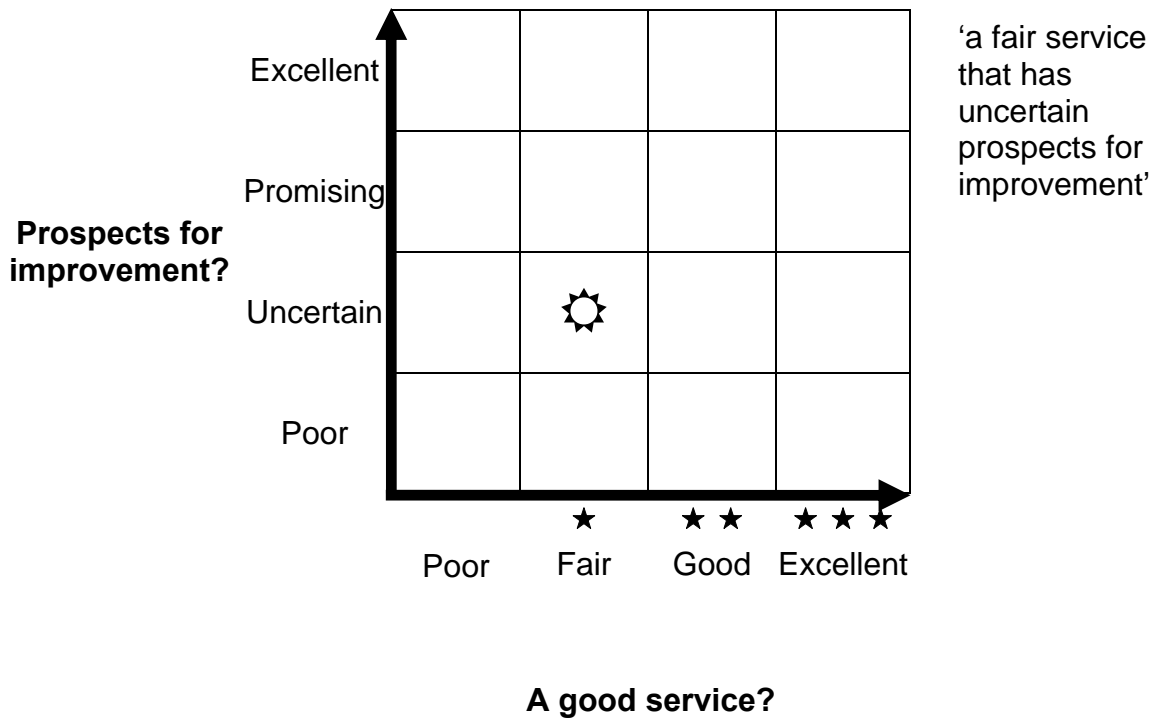
- 1 Basildon is situated in the southern part of Essex and is the largest district in the eastern region. Total population is 168,600 with 61.5 per cent of the population is of working age, which is below the national average. People from black and minority ethnic communities represent 3.1 per cent of the population. 25.7 per cent of the population is aged between 0 and 19 years which is above the regional and national average.
- 2 Access to services (the service) is a cross-cutting theme applicable to all councils and council services. It covers four broad areas: ease of access to services; using e-government to support access to services; reaching all parts of the community; and partnership working. For customers, this means that they should be able to contact councils in a range of accessible and DDA compliant physical localities. They should also be able to contact councils through a range of other remote methods. This includes a website which is fully accessible and easy to navigate with appropriate arrangements for electronic transactions, electronic communication and consultation.
- 3 Accessibility means that Council services, and access to those services, should be focused on the needs of the whole community. They should ensure equality of access and take proper account of equality and the diversity of all service users. There should be appropriate arrangements for consulting, engaging and communicating with users and non-users of services. Councils should use partnership working with neighbouring councils, organisations and businesses to provide seamless and high quality access to services wherever this possible. Councils should also have an e-government programme informed by citizen/user needs and aspirations.
- 4 Basildon District Council's approach to accessing its services is 'fair' because there is effective consultation and engagement with young and old people. The Council is easy to contact, responsive and seeks to deal with customers' enquiries at the first point of contact and both physical and remote access arrangements are improving. The quality of information promoting Council services is good, many services can be accessed electronically and satisfaction with individual services is above average. The Council's approach to value for money is adequate and improving. However, the Council is still developing a comprehensive understanding of community and customer needs to inform its service design and target improvements. Improving but limited consultation with some hard to reach sections of the community is restricting its understanding of their access needs and preferences and satisfaction with the overall Council and the way complaints are handled is poor. The Council's approach to adhering to some diversity legislation is inadequate and its approach to applying equalities and diversity considerations in practice is mixed.

- 5 The Council's prospects for improvement are uncertain. Corporately the Council has a track record of delivering improvement and it has strengthened its business and financial planning processes. However, whilst the Customer First programme identifies some elements of accessibility and there is a clear verbal commitment to improve access to services, this is not supported by robust or resourced plans. There are no plans in place to address a key weakness of understanding community access preferences which is essential if accessibility is to be improved. Stretched capacity and currently a lack of clear managerial leadership driving accessibility improvements has resulted in work to improve accessibly being sidelined by other priorities.

## Scoring the service

- 6 We have assessed Basildon District 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 chart<sup>1</sup>**



Source: Audit Commission

- 7 The service is a fair, one-star service because:
- there is effective engagement and consultation with most sections of the community (young and old people);
  - the Council is easy to contact, responsive and seeks to deal with customers' enquiries at the first point of contact;
  - the quality of information promoting Council services is good and many services can be accessed electronically;
  - both physical and remote access arrangements are improving;
  - satisfaction with individual services is above average;

<sup>1</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

- mystery shopping exercises show user experience is good; and
- the Council's approach to value for money is adequate and improving.

However:

- the Council is still developing a comprehensive understanding of community and customer needs to inform its service design and target improvements;
- Improving but limited consultation with some hard to reach sections of the community is restricting its understanding of their access needs and preferences;
- service standards are not consistently informed by users to ensure their needs are met;
- the Council's approach to adhering to some diversity legislation is inadequate;
- its approach to applying equalities and diversity considerations in practice is mixed;
- benchmarking of access to services is underdeveloped;
- satisfaction with the way complaints are handled is poor; and
- overall satisfaction with the Council is in the worst 25 per cent of councils nationally.

### 8 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement due to the following.

- Whilst the Customer First programme identifies some elements of accessibility and there is a clear verbal commitment to improve access to services, this is not supported by robust or resourced plans. Access to services is not underpinned by a clear vision and priorities for the future informed by an analysis of user needs and actions to address them.
- There is no overall coordinated approach to improving accessibility - plans are being refreshed but the Council does not yet have a detailed or sound understanding of its community and their access needs which is essential to inform future plans.
- There is currently an absence of clear managerial leadership to ensure accessibility is seen as a key issue which underpin all activities of the Council. As a consequence it is sidelined by other priorities.
- The use of consultation and engagement to inform policies and plans for accessibility improvements is mixed. Mechanisms to engage with disadvantaged groups are underdeveloped.
- Capacity of the Council is stretched resulting in delays to projects and progress in developing and implementing the Access to Services project initiation document. Future financial capacity is expected to get tighter. There is no robust analysis of the human and financial resources required to deliver improvements access to services to ensure there are the skills and resources to deliver plans.

However:

- corporately the Council has a record of delivering improvement and addressing areas of identified weakness;
- performance management arrangements have been strengthened and are effective in improving services; and
- training and development is helping to increase the knowledge and skills of councillors and officers.

## Recommendations

- 9 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>2</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 Develop and implement a strategy supported by a robust and SMART action plan with clear outward facing targets to:*

- *define what accessibility means;*
- *identify users needs;*
- *prepare actions to address and improve accessibility especially those needs identified by users;*
- *identify user focused and measurable targets to ensure successful delivery of improvements to users; and*
- *identify and allocate human and financial resources required to implement improvements.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved understanding within Council about what accessibility means to ensure key issues are addressed;
- engagement with users to inform and improve future service delivery;
- identification and provision of resources to deliver improvements; and
- enhanced coordination and focus on accessibility to ensure issues are addressed by all sections of the Council.

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

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<sup>2</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**

*R2 Develop deeper understanding of community and customer need to inform the strategy, service design and delivery by:*

- *conducting ward and district profiling;*
- *setting up regular mystery shopping of all services, user and access groups;*
- *developing means of capturing, analysing and reporting customer contact data; and*
- *work with partners to assess performance against service access objectives and share learning.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved customer and Council focus, awareness of and involvement in access to services;
- more coherent and cohesive strategic approach to access to services; and
- inclusive services informed by users and residents.

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

**Recommendation**

*R3 Extend and improve the Council's approach to consultation and engagement by building on the work undertaken to date and engaging with:*

- *users and non-users;*
- *marginalised groups; and*
- *developing existing forums, such as the Citizens' Panel, into effective consultation groups by ensuring its representation reflects the community profile.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- Council services will be better informed by an accurate and complete assessment of needs; and
- the Council will provide inclusive services which are informed by all residents and users.

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

# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 10** Basildon District lies in the southern part of Essex, 30 miles east of London. Covering some 42.5 square miles, it includes the towns of Basildon, Billericay and Wickford. Basildon is the largest district in the Eastern Region, with a population of 168,600 (2006). 61.5 per cent of population is of working age, which is below the national average (62.3 per cent). 25.7 per cent of the population is aged between 0 and 19 years which is above the regional and national average. The district has a BME population of 3.1 per cent. Ethnicity does vary at ward level; ethnic minority groups are predominately located in Basildon New Town, in the wards of Nethermayne, Vange and St Martins. There is also a significant gypsy/traveller community in the area; the most recent count of gypsy and traveller caravans (July 2007) showed Basildon has the highest number of unauthorised caravan sites in Essex.
- 11** A relatively affluent area, Basildon is ranked 136th out of 354 when compared with all other local authorities, with a rank of one being the most deprived. Four areas within the district fall within the 10 per cent most deprived in the country. At 1.7 per cent, the latest claimant count rate (November 2007) is below the national average (2.1 per cent) and average earnings are relatively high. The Community Health Profile highlights that teenage pregnancy rates remain high and are linked to areas of high deprivation and low educational attainment. Physical activity rates are well below average, and cancer death rates remain high.
- 12** Basildon is designated as the 'Business Hub' in the Thames Gateway South Essex national priority area for sustainable development. At a ranking of 31 it is the only Thames Gateway South Essex district nationally in the top 150 for Economic Competitiveness (Source: Thames Gateway Knowledge Forum). The District is one of the largest employment locations in the county, offering around 84,000 jobs, with an unemployment rate of 2.3 per cent. However, the District has to take into account the diversity associated with having areas of contrasting high prosperity and significant deprivation - 20 per cent of the population live in areas that are amongst the most deprived in England whilst 23 per cent live in areas that are amongst the most affluent. Despite significant improvements over the last few years, educational attainment remains below the Essex average.
- 13** Basildon is an urban area but with at least 70 per cent green space within its boundaries. The rural land between settlements is generally designated as green belt, and there are scattered developments and large areas of open farmland across the District. With 42 wildlife sites covering 850 hectares, the District has a remarkable variety of natural habitat sites, including the Thameside Grazing Marshlands that are unique in Europe and recognised as of international importance.

## The Council

- 14 The Council is led by a Conservative administration (May 2007). The Conservative party hold 28 seats, the Labour party 11, and Liberal Democrats have three councillors. The Council's Scrutiny and Overview arrangements include committees for Leisure, Arts and Customer Services and Environment and Regeneration.
- 15 In Autumn 2004, the Council carried out a major management reorganisation. Over the last two years this has been reviewed and refined. Currently a top team is in place consisting of a Chief Executive, three Executive Directors and seven Heads of Service (HoS). These groups form the Council's Strategic Management Team. In addition, there is an Operational Management Team (OMT) consisting of all third tier managers. The Council employs approximately 1,269 staff (full time equivalents). The Council has a Medium Term Financial Strategy (2008-2011) and the general fund revenue budget for 2007/08 is £29.4 million.
- 16 The Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) 2008-2030 and the Council's Strategic Improvement Plan (CSIP) 2008-2011 are the key vehicles for the delivery of national, regional and local priorities. The Community Strategy vision is "To make Basildon District a fair and inclusive place, where the community have a healthy, safe place to live and work and to improve the quality of life now and for future generations". The CSIP supports this mission and has been recently revised to meet identified local, national and community needs derived from various consultation and information sources. These three priorities are regeneration, environment and community.

## National context

- 17 The Government sees customer access as important and in its 'Strong Leadership – Quality Public Services' white paper it identified seven key tests for local government (joined up, accessible, delivered or supported electronically, delivered jointly, delivered seamlessly, open and accountable, and used by e-citizens). In the Local Government Act 2000, new reforms and targets required local authorities to move towards electronic delivery in their services to the local community. The intention was that 100 per cent of dealings with Government, including local government and the NHS, should be capable of being conducted electronically by the public by December 2005. BVPI157 required local authorities to review all of their services over a five year period and to challenge the existing methods of service delivery. Other national drivers include the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, Human Rights Act 1998; Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 and the white paper, 'Modern Local Government – In Touch With the People' which sought to put local government in touch with local communities by improving local democracy, increasing financial accountability and improving local services. Councils should have plans to meet the impending legislative requirements to actively promote disability, gender and age equality as well as meeting the current requirements to promote race equality.

- 18 Access to services is a cross-cutting theme applicable to all councils and council services. It covers four broad areas: ease of access to services; using e-government to support access to services; reaching all parts of the community; and partnership working. For customers, it means that they should be able to contact councils in a range of accessible and DDA compliant physical localities. They should also be able to contact councils through a range of other remote methods. This includes through a fully accessible, easy-to-navigate website. There should be appropriate arrangements for electronic transactions, electronic communication and consultation.
- 19 Accessibility means that Council services, and access to those services, should be focused on the needs of the whole community. They should ensure equality of access and take proper account of equality and the diversity of all service users. There should be appropriate arrangements for consulting, engaging and communicating with users and non-users of services. Councils should use partnership working with neighbouring councils, organisations and businesses to provide seamless and high quality access to services wherever this possible. Councils should also have an e-government programme informed by citizen/user needs and aspirations.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 20** The Council is an active partner in the local strategic partnership (LSP). The Sustainable Communities Strategy is currently being refreshed to incorporate the sustainability agenda and reflected learning from the original strategy. It has been based on an extensive assessment of factual data about the District drawn from a number of sources including the Indices of Multiple Deprivation, draft Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (Health) and the Strategic Assessment (Crime & Disorder Reduction Strategy). There has been wide consultation on the emerging themes with partners, councillors, the voluntary sector, and the Residents/Citizens Panel. The refreshed SCS is due to be adopted at the March 2008 LSP Executive, and then endorsed by key partners through their respective boards.
- 21** The LSP has actively involved itself in the debate on the Essex local area agreement. As a result, many of the priorities in the draft LAA reflect the priorities of the District.
- 22** The SCS underpins the Council's approach to access to services. It is explicitly covered by the 'promoting inclusive communities' theme, 'to promote equality, renew disadvantaged neighbourhoods, protect the vulnerable and ensure equal access for all members of the community to services and opportunities'. In addition, access to services is also recognised under the 'SCS Elements' section that it is in fact an agenda that cuts across most of the other themes and runs through partners' goals, and in particular:
- providing homes for the future;
  - improving health and wellbeing; and
  - raising educational attainment.
- 23** Whilst the final SCS (2008-2033) is not yet fully adopted, the themes have been used to inform the development of the Council's Strategic Improvement Plan (CSIP). The CSIP 2008-2011 supports this mission and has been recently revised to meet identified local, national and community needs derived from various consultation and information sources. These three priorities are regeneration, environment and community. It is much more focussed than previous iterations as it concentrates on the areas where councillors want to see strategic improvement. It is not intended as a full statement of the Council's service provision, nor a comprehensive list of all the Council's priorities. Given this tighter focus, the Council is introducing a Corporate Development Plan to complement the delivery of the CSIP. In addition, individual service plans set out priorities for each service, including support for the CSIP and CDP.

- 24 The Council uses e-government to support access to services. It met the government target of 100 per cent electronic service delivery by 31 December 2005. It is part of the Essex Online Partnership which aims to join up and make local government services easier to access online and reduce the cost of implementing e-government through collaboration. The website is a priority for improvement and a complete restructure and redesign is set for 2008.
- 25 The Customer Contact Charter seeks to ensure an accessible, responsive, and quality experience for customers when dealing with the Council.

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

#### **Customer and community focus**

- 26 Detailed analysis and design of service improvement across all services is underdeveloped. All services can show to varying degrees how they have tailored provision to make it more accessible. For example, using 'Allpay', Council bills can now be paid at 65 outlets across the district covering Post Offices, Paypoints, Payzones and Local Area Housing Offices. However, a detailed understanding, coordination and management of needs across all services within the Council is hindered by a lack of comprehensive community profiling information. The Council were aware of this and commissioned Essex County Council to do this work, expected results in January 2008. However, received information has not addressed this need and without this, it is difficult to develop a strategic approach to improve access to targeted groups.
- 27 The Council's approach to needs based service design is mixed. There are a number of examples where services have been active in identifying the needs of users such as in relation to affordable housing, engaging with user forums and advisory groups such as the tenants' forum, leisure users' forums, planning agents' forum and disabled users group. Feedback from these groups has been used to shape services. For example, the introduction of the 'Fast Card' in April 2006 has enabled the leisure service to reduce charges to those most in need through the revision of their charging policy. The new membership system has also enabled leisure services to introduce a young person's scheme known as 'Fully Loaded'- a programme of diversionary activities that target young people aged between 11 to 16 years. As a result, take-up of these services has improved by over 70 per cent during the first 18 months. However, the Council acknowledges it has had limited success in engaging with black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, and the gypsy and traveller community to assess need and therefore cannot be sure whether services are meeting their needs or are being delivered in a non-discriminatory way.

## Ease of access for all

- 28 Council services can be effectively accessed through telephone contact, fax, minicom, letter, e-mail and face to face during normal working hours of 9.00am to 4.45pm Monday to Friday. An out of hours emergency service and individual services numbers are available via the A-Z index on the website, and there are extended opening hours for the Revenues and Benefits service (which are being reviewed to increase customer accessibility). In addition, Basildon is the first council in Essex to provide a continuous police presence at its shared main reception desk. This has enabled customers to report crimes who may not have previously done so as they felt uncomfortable walking into the police station. However, as access to services is currently restricted to normal office hours, this makes it difficult for in work customers to get information or resolve queries.
- 29 The Council is using its website effectively to increase access to services and information for customer, including disadvantaged groups. Users can report problems, make planning applications, make payments such as council tax, view Council job vacancies and download an application form and make comments/complaints about Council services. The website has a 'browsealoud' facility whereby users can listen to the content being read out loud, and has a 'text only' option which can make it more legible for visually impaired users. The Council's website is classified by SOCITM as 'transactional', is linked to the County Council website and has been awarded the Crystal Mark award for clarity.
- 30 The Council has improved access for customers through technology. The Essex Online portal provides access to information and services for Basildon. Essex Online partnership (EOLP) includes all district and borough councils in the County, Essex Police, Essex Fire and Rescue, the Strategic Health Authority and the County Council. The portal provides a one stop shop for a wide range of Essex-based services, organisations and information and includes an Essex wide A-Z.
- 31 The Council is proactive in improving physical and remote access to council services to meet the access requirements of its community. Eighty per cent of Council buildings and leisure centres are accessible for disabled people and the Council has employed an access officer for a number of years who works closely with the disabled users group to help ensure that their needs are consistently met. For example, trials are being held to determine a suitable barrier that can allow access for wheelchairs and prams to council parks but still restrict motorbike access. The Council supports DIAL, an independent charity who provides free and impartial advice to anybody with a disability, via a service level agreement and is located on the ground floor of the Council. Remote access improvements include the Benefit Section operating both a telephone claim service and offering home visits to claimants who require assistance when making benefit claims, computerised booking and payments systems at leisure centres, on-line special collections booking service and telephone payments can be made through the Council's personal credit/debit card line.

- 32 Council information is presented and made available in ways that take account of user needs. Council information is generally of a high quality, widely available in a range of formats and documents are produced in a corporate style. A Council newsletter, the 'District Diary' is distributed to all households however it is unclear how frequently this occurs. Copies of documents are available in Braille, audiotape and other community languages through an interpretation and translation service. A wide range of information leaflets are available at the Council reception area. Users therefore have access to a wide range of information in a variety of formats.

### **Standards**

- 33 The Council has corporate service standards and local performance service targets to ensure customer needs are met. There is a Customer Contact Charter in place for visitors to the council, replying to letters, e-mails, complaints and answering telephone calls and service standards exist for most large service areas. All standards are available on request, detailed in fact sheets displayed in the council reception and published on the council's website.
- 34 There is a mixed approach to users being involved in setting service standards. The Council publicised a Customer Contact Charter for all externally facing services in December 2005 but some services did not consult with users, eg planning. Until all service standards are informed by users, the Council will not know if their needs are being met.
- 35 There is limited evidence that customer care standards apply to services provided by contractors and partners. Partners were aware of the Council's corporate service standards and while some partners have been consulted, others have not.
- 36 External reviews have started to be used to improve service standards. The Council has recently commissioned Mystery Shopping Ltd to benchmark against three other Essex authorities to improve face to face, e-mail and telephony access channels but it is still early days for analysing best practice.

### **Engagement**

- 37 The Council uses a range of mechanisms to consult and communicate with users and non users but its approach is not yet comprehensive or inclusive of all sections of the community, eg such as a range of local community groups. The Residents/Citizens' panel, an innovative community TV scheme, business liaison groups and individual service consultations provide corporate and service-based opportunities to influence service design and delivery. The Citizens' panel includes representation across most demographic groups but the Council are aware that they need to increase representation from young people. To address this, a single corporate source of customer data linked to service delivery is being developed which will help the Council achieve inclusion.

- 38 The Council has had mixed success in consulting and engaging with all sections of the community. The Council has a good track record in consulting with young and old people and there is good engagement with housing tenants, for example in preparation for the recent survey on the proposed establishment of an ALMO. Engagement with the disabled users group has also been effective and feedback from this group is actively used, for example to improve the accessibility of Council services, to study plans for the accessibility of proposed regeneration developments and to lobby partners, such as the County Council, on issues such as their community transport needs. However, the Council acknowledges that it has had limited success in engaging with black and minority ethnic groups and the gypsy and traveller community, and one of the objectives of the recent appointment of the Inclusion & Diversity Manager is to create capacity to improve this.
- 39 The Council does not yet have effective communication, consultation, complaints and engagement strategies in place, and recognises it needs to improve. Much work is coming to fruition but it is too early to gauge its likely impact. For example, the Council recognises that the current Consultation and Engagement Strategy does not include preferred consultation methods of customers or their access preferences. There is also limited evidence regarding feedback mechanisms to consultees regarding resulting outcomes. Until this work is complete, the Council will not be consulting and engaging with customers by their preferred access mechanism.
- 40 Some key engagement methods are not yet effective. For example, a focus group of members of the Residents/Citizens' Panel were unaware of the Panel or that they were members of it. They remembered receiving a telephone call some twelve months previously and being asked some questions about the Council, but did not know that they were being consulted and received no feedback on their responses or how the information had been used. They heard no more until they were invited to attend a focus group that the Council set up for this inspection. It is therefore clear that the Residents/Citizens' Panel is not yet an effective mechanism for establishing a meaningful dialogue with local people.
- 41 Complaints and compliment data is not analysed to understand different levels of satisfaction by all sections of the community. Complaints and compliments data is collated centrally but is not systematically analysed to identify trends or learning points. The absence of an equalities monitoring form means the Council is not able to assess whether satisfaction or dissatisfaction with services has been disproportionately high amongst certain groups.

## Diversity

- 42 The Council's approach to adhering to Diversity legislation is inadequate. In August 2007, the Council received a statutory Compliance Notice from the Equalities & Human Rights Commission (EHCR) for failing to comply with the specific duties of the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000. It was identified that the Council's Race Equalities Scheme did not include the required three year action plan and that there had been a failure to carry out equality impact assessments. The Gender Equality scheme was only adopted by Cabinet in January 2008 despite the fact this should have happened in April 2007. However, the Council are currently rectifying this situation as it recognises that its approach to this agenda is not sufficient.
- 43 The Council's BVPI performance in respect of equality and diversity is good. Performance indicators for 2006/07 show that the Council is performing either above average or in the top 25 per cent of Councils for the proportion of BME and disabled staff, both throughout the Council and in senior management; the duty to promote race equality and the proportion of women in senior management. The Council has achieved level two of the Equalities Standard for Local Government with plans in place to meet level three by March 2009. Equality Impact assessments (EIAs) are now being completed and have been prioritised by the amount of interaction the service, policy or function has with their customers. All EIAs will be completed and published by March 2009.
- 44 The Council has started to use equalities monitoring to inform service improvements. Changes have been made to services following direct customer feedback or through a general awareness that certain groups are not accessing the service. For example, recreational services now have sessions specifically for muslim women and there are now established systems in housing, benefits, and Human Resources. However, plans to address the needs of the gypsy/traveller community are still at the development stage.
- 45 The Council approach to applying equalities and diversity considerations in practice is mixed. For example, there are effective employee monitoring mechanisms in place and recruitment and selection practices have been improved to enable the Council to continually work towards having a workforce reflective of its diverse population. Most managers, staff and councillors have now undergone specific equalities and diversity training but it is still early days to demonstrate the impact of this training in service planning. In addition, there is limited evidence of implementation of equalities considerations in contracts. However, the Council is aware that it needs to strengthen this area as the corporate procurement strategy states the Council will require contractors to have policies on equality and diversity relating to employment and services.

### **Service outcomes for users and the community**

- 46** Some specific service consultation and engagement activities with vulnerable users have successfully informed service improvements and supported access to mainstream services. For example, home visits are provided in relation to disabled facilities grants and revenues and benefits where users may have difficulty accessing council offices. New and improved premises for the George Hurd Centre have been achieved enabling Basildon's older population to access a number of additional local voluntary services (including the CVS, Basildon District Volunteer Carers, Community Transport and Age Concern), essentially making it a one-stop-shop for older people's services within the town.
- 47** The Council is working collaboratively with local communities to improve access. It has a community development fund of £175,000 which has been used to 'pump prime' a number of community facilities such as community centres and refurbish village halls and existing centres to improve access and facilities, particularly for disabled people.
- 48** The Council is working effectively with partners to deliver improved outcomes for customers. Reductions in crime figures have been achieved through the successful actions of the Basildon Crime and Disorder Reduction partnership which include targeting specific crime hot spots through multi-partner community safety action zones. Together with Essex County Council, the Council funds the Basildon District Voluntary Cares (BDVC) which provides a range of information and advice services and also a transport service to medical and social care appointments for people who would otherwise have difficulty getting there. The Council is therefore proactive in engaging partners to deliver services more efficiently and effectively.
- 49** The Council is effectively meeting its e-government targets. It has recently reviewed its website to increase the amount of information and to extend its functionality. For example, electronic access has improved in many ways including being able to apply for housing, job applications and to obtain information on special collections for bulky refuse items. Reporting of environmental problems such as fly-tipping, missed bins, and abandoned vehicles and benefit fraud is now easy. Councillors make good use of ICT, with many of them having direct contact by email via the Council's website. The Council is therefore taking advantage of developments in technology to enhance access to services.
- 50** Processes for handling complaints and learning from complaints are ineffective. Complaints handling is in the worst of 25 per cent of Councils nationally. To address this, the Council is ensuring that services report monthly and a Corporate Complaints Monitoring Report is produced annually to identify areas of service improvement.

### User experience

- 51 The Council adheres to its Customer Contact Charter. The mystery shopping exercise, conducted in January and February 2008 by Mystery Shopping Ltd, revealed a timely, satisfactory and customer focused response to our enquiries by post, mail, telephone and personal visits. Frontline staff were helpful, polite and knowledgeable and waiting times were kept to a minimum, generally less than a minute at first point of contact due to the Council introducing Floor Walkers. Telephone calls were answered within 20 seconds and timely advice and information were received.
- 52 Users' experiences of accessing Council services is good. A focus group of residents held consistently positive views on how effectively they felt the Council met their needs, using words such as 'excellent, efficient, helpful, and friendly'. The 'Customer First' programme is the Council's key driver in improving customer service and accessibility. It has provided comprehensive training for all front line staff giving them the confidence to make full use of the CRM system. As a result, telephone access and response times for all services have improved against the targets specified in the customer charter. A purpose built customer contact centre, enabling full DDA access, is to open in March 2008 enabling customers to deal with their enquiries in one ground floor location. There are good levels of service at the Customer Contact Centre.
- 53 Overall satisfaction with the Council is in the worst 25 per cent of councils nationally but satisfaction with individual services is above average. In the last major survey (2006/07), 45 per cent of people were satisfied with the Council's services overall (61 per cent is average for all councils). Public satisfaction with other key services, for example parks and open spaces, sports and leisure facilities and recycling facilities is above average when compared to other councils. However, the triennial Best Value General Survey indicates worst quartile or below average for:
- keeping people informed about standard of service they can expect;
  - keeping residents informed about services and benefits it provides; and
  - treating all types of people fairly.

A Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) survey was conducted in 2007 and findings showed overall satisfaction with the Council had increased by five to 50 per cent.

## Is the service delivering value for money?

- 54** Corporately, value for money is adequate and improving. The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) sets out clear plans for revenue and capital needs for the next three years and resources follow priorities through the service planning and budgeting processes. Gershon targets have been exceeded in 2006/07 with savings of £731,000. The rate of performance improvement is above average although this is not consistent in all areas. Waste collection performance is below average but cost of waste is above average. The Council does not consistently report cost to performance analysis against priorities. An approved approach to value for money has led to identified savings but this approach is not yet consistent.
- 55** Value for money in accessing services at Basildon District Council is mixed. Some comparative work is being undertaken for access to services to determine service and unit costs, how these compare to others and to the quality of services. However, benchmarking data regarding the level of service provision at the Council is limited as management information is only available in relation to the volume of calls and not the profile of people accessing the Council. The Council acknowledges this and measures are being established to collect more in-depth data. This is a feature of the new CRM system which has recently been implemented and will provide the Council with more useful information in relation to customer access performance and costs. Nationally, there is little comparative data available to allow an assessment of the relative value for money being achieved by councils in relation to access to services. In the absence of such indicators, it is therefore currently difficult to assess the value for money being achieved.
- 56** The Council has strengthened its monitoring process for capital projects. The Council aligns its capital programme with policy decisions. Capital projects have a full options appraisal against corporate and service priorities which ensures that the Council is investing in capital projects which meet its aims. Both Housing and General Fund capital programmes are monitored on a monthly basis, with ongoing support as necessary in the interim. A monthly position statement is provided to SMT and all cabinet members also receive a monthly statement. This has enabled major access to services projects to be monitored more effectively and completed to timescale and budget, eg the new Customer Contact Centre.
- 57** There is evidence of specific procurement savings and efficiencies delivered over the last three years in some departments to improve access to services. Outsourcing 'Careline' (contact centre for the elderly) has led to £37,000 savings by working with other councils to increase service provision to customers at a lower cost. Re-negotiation of the Welfare Catering contract has led to £35,000 savings and customers have a greater choice of meals resulting in increased take-up. £6,000 savings have been secured through the re-negotiation of the Council's mobile phone contract ensuring officers have the necessary equipment to deal with customer enquiries more responsively. This is enabling the Council to provide services in a cost effective way.

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

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

- 58 At a corporate level, the Council has a record of delivering improvement although pockets of poor performance remain. Over the last three years, 57 per cent of performance indicators (PIs) improved which is above the average range for all district councils. In terms of improvement, the Council is ranked 196th out of 388 (with 1 being the highest). It has improved some poorly performing services including benefits, recycling rates and determination of major planning applications. However, only 29 per cent of PIs are in the best 25 per cent which is below average for all district councils (33 per cent) - the amount of household waste collected, percentage of urgent repairs completed on time and percentage of the population served by a kerbside collection of recyclables remain in the bottom 25 per cent. This demonstrates the Councils ability to implement improvements.
- 59 The Council is having mixed success at meeting its own targets. In 2006/07, it met only 67 per cent of its own targets for BVPIs or local indicators against a target of 90 per cent. Indicators not met included satisfaction with opportunities to participate - 57 per cent compared to a target of 76 per cent. More recent unaudited data for 2007/08 indicates the Council is making progress towards achieving its priorities set out in the Corporate Strategic Improvement Plan. Failure to meet targets indicates that target setting is unrealistic or resources not used effectively to ensure they are met.
- 60 The Council has addressed many of the weaknesses that have been identified in previous assessments. The corporate priorities have been rationalised and project management, performance management and scrutiny is now more effective. For example, improving the Benefits service. By addressing weaknesses, the Council ensures it is better placed to secure future improvements.

- 61 Actions to improve access to services is more mixed. The 'Customer First' programme continues to be implemented resulting in improved telephone access and response times for all services - for example, streetcare down to 20 seconds from over 200 seconds and housing repair centre down from 180 seconds to 25 seconds. A new customer services centre in the office at Basildon is expected to open at the end of March 2008. The website has been improved and is now speech enabled thereby improving access for people with limited vision, dyslexia, low literacy levels, learning disabilities or English as a second language. However, there are areas of poor performance and further gaps remain. Overall satisfaction with the Council and satisfaction with complaint handling remain in the worst 25 per cent. Detailed knowledge of the local community, especially the more vulnerable groups which are hidden within it, to inform access preferences and future service delivery is weak and has not improved. Without such knowledge the Council cannot be sure that the actions it is taking to improve accessibility are actually meeting the community's needs, especially the most vulnerable and those unlikely to come forward voluntarily.
- 62 Some vulnerable sections of the population have been provided with greater access to services - the Council has funded an additional Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) advisor based in Northlands Centre one day a week which enables people unable to access the CAB in Basildon to receive advice. The take up of unclaimed benefits has been increased by £570,000 through joint working with a range of benefits organisations. However, representatives from smaller, special needs groups within the district stated that to date, the Council had not sought to identify what needs their respective members might have.
- 63 Action has been taken recently to improve equalities. Level 2 of the Equality Standard has been achieved but the Council has received a compliance notice from the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) requiring more work on the Race Equality Scheme to ensure compliance. For a considerable period of time the Council has had no officer leading the equality and diversity work which has led to limited improvement. However, a new Inclusion and Diversities Manager was appointed in January 2008, the Council has responded to the compliance notice and the EHCR are satisfied that the Council is no longer failing to comply with the specific duties of the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000. The number of equality impact assessments completed was behind target but plans are now in place to complete the assessments by March 2009. Such actions assist those persons who are most in need of help.

- 64 Value for money is adequate and has improved in some areas. The planning and budgeting process is assisting resources follow priorities and the rate of performance improvement is above average. Satisfaction with individual services, but not the Council overall, is improving although sometimes from a low base. Gershon targets have been exceeded in 2006/07 with savings of £731,000 but by November 2007 only £0.2 million of the required £0.4 million savings and efficiencies had been identified for 2007/08. However, the Council does not consistently report cost to performance analysis against priorities. Current information on service related value for money is patchy but the Council starting to work with other councils through the Pan Essex Customer Services Group to generate some comparative data. Without information of costs linked to performance the Council can not be sure its resources are being used effectively.

### **How well does the service manage performance?**

- 65 Overall the Council has made good progress to put in place and implement plans to sustain future improvement. A fundamental review was undertaken in June 2007 and the revised Corporate Strategic Improvement Plan (CSIP) 2007-2011 now identifies key measures and targets which are aligned to service plans. Service planning has been strengthened to improve consistency and quality and a project steering group of key officers and councillors challenged 2007/08 service plans to focus on coordination, allocation of resources and achievement of corporate priorities. However, whilst the plans are effective in focussing on and helping delivery of the priorities of regeneration and environment, the plans to support improvement of accessibility are not well developed.
- 66 There is a clear verbal corporate commitment to improve access to services but this is not supported by robust or resourced plans. The CSIP contains no specific reference to improving accessibility or knowledge of community needs to inform service delivery. A Corporate Development Plan was initiated in March 2008 and contains ten priorities including customer service and satisfaction, communication, equalities and diversity and localism but, at the time of the inspection, this plan contains little detail of outcomes the public would recognise, targets or resources required. A draft project initiation document (PID) 'Improving Access to Services' was prepared in June 2007 to develop a three year action plan. The plan identified existing weaknesses including a lack of coordination with other corporate priorities and objectives and actions which would stretch and divert resources from other priorities. However, the PID has not been developed further and there is no plan setting out what action is to be taken to improve accessibility or the resources in terms of staff time, skill and funding required to improve accessibility, despite elements already being identified in the Customer First programme. It is therefore unclear what the Council proposes to do corporately to improve accessibility further and whether it has the means to do so.

- 67 There is no overall coordinated approach to improving accessibility. A number of corporate plans and strategies which relate to accessibility are being revised or prepared. The consultation and engagement strategy and corporate communications strategy are being refreshed to take into account the demographics and preferred consultation methods of customers - but the Council has yet to undertake work so that it fully understands the needs of all sections of its community. The 'Customer First' programme is effectively helping the Council to improve customer services but this does not include actions to improve the understanding of the community which is essential if accessibility needs are to be fully met. The Council was relying on work undertaken by Essex County Council to provide community profile information but this work has not provided the detail required. The Council is now undertaking this work through a research company and aims to complete it by September 2008. The absence of coordinated plans means that the Council can not be sure it is using all its resources in an effective and efficient way to improve and address accessibility issues.
- 68 There is clear political leadership for access to services but managerial leadership is less evident. Two Cabinet members are responsible for customer services and the community. They recognise the importance of accessibility and how it should underpin all activities. However, whilst officers are enthusiastic and supportive there is currently no clear managerial leadership. A number of senior officers are leading on different projects, such as the implementation of the customer services centre, but there is no evidence of overarching accessibility leadership recognised throughout the Council. Progress on developing the access PID was halted due to a lack of capacity and other priorities and the overall approach is reactive rather than proactive. Effective leadership is essential to ensure support and resources are provided so that accessibility underpins all services and activities of the Council.
- 69 The use of consultation and engagement to inform policies and plans for accessibility improvements is mixed. There are a number of examples where engagement with a small part of the community has led to improvements - for example the provision of five health clinics in the Northlands centre to meet specific local needs. There is effective engagement with elderly and young people which have informed strategies but engagement with other groups of disadvantaged persons is limited. Service users have not systematically been involved in setting service standards and comments and complaints are not routinely coordinated and analysed to inform future access improvements. The Citizens' Panel is being refreshed since it is not fully representative of the community and very limited use of the panel is made to understand access needs. The Council undertook over 80 consultation exercises in 2006/07 using focus groups, postal and web based surveys and face to face interviews but it is unclear how this informed and improved accessibility.

- 70 Corporately there is commitment to managing performance. A new performance management framework was introduced in early 2007 and supported by councillor and officer training. Performance information is regularly reported to the Cabinet, Scrutiny Committees, the Executive Management Team and service Performance Monitoring Reviews and poor performance is now more effectively challenged leading to improvement - for example telephone answering times. The Overview Scrutiny Commission and three Overview Scrutiny Committees have set up a number of Task and Finish groups to investigate in detail particular issues such as the housing allocations policy. As a result the allocations policy has been amended to prioritise those most in need rather than length of time on waiting list thus ensuring the needs of more vulnerable persons are met. However, the focus of performance management is still on quantity or outputs (eg time taken to answer telephones) rather than on outcomes or quality (time and quality of final response to enquiry) and this is reflected in targets which still do not primarily focus on outcomes the public would recognise. Customer services monitor the time to answer telephones but the time taken to provide substantive answers to enquires is not monitored or managed.
- 71 Performance management of partnerships is variable. There is some reporting of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) thematic groups but no formal reporting of the overall performance to the LSP executive. Links between and reporting of performance of the Corporate Strategy Improvement Plan and Community Strategy are underdeveloped. To address some of these weaknesses a LSP coordinator has undertaken a review of performance management arrangements in the LSP but it is too early to see the impact of this work. There is joint management of performance between St. George's Community Housing and the Council which has led to some improvements - for example in repairs service leading to reduced complaints. Effective performance of partners is important to ensure the Council's values and equality of service provision is maintained.
- 72 The Council does not effectively learn or share information and good practice on a systematic basis. Customer comments and complaints are collected but not comprehensively analysed to identify reoccurring issues so that they can be addressed. There is little effective learning and sharing of information within the Council despite some individual services taking action to improve performance or accessibility. However, in respect of customer services, the Council is starting develop ways to learn from others. It now chairs the Pan Essex Customer Services Group which is developing a number of initiatives, such as benchmarking of service standards and a cross county mystery shopping programme which will be used to improve service standards and provision. Ineffective learning and sharing of knowledge and expertise means the Council is not sharing learning to improve other parts of the Council.

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

- 73** The absence of a clear and coordinated approach to improving access to services supported by a clear identification of outcomes and resources required means that the Council cannot be sure it has the necessary resources needed to improve accessibility. The corporate development plan is at an early stage of preparation and is not supported by a robust analysis of what it needs to undertake and what skills, staff time or funding will be required and whether this will be available. Likewise, the PID contains no indication of resources required. As a consequence the Council cannot be sure it will have the capacity to deliver access improvements.
- 74** The financial capacity of the Council is becoming increasingly stretched. It is unclear how the Council will deliver all of the future efficiency savings required. For 2007/08 the budget included £0.4 million procurement and efficiency savings but in November 2007 only £0.2 million had so far been identified. The Council is revising its service plans and aligned business (service) and financial planning to give greater focus on value for money, efficiencies and alignment of resources to priorities but challenges remain. Some major capital projects are reliant on securing significant amounts of external funding which may not be forthcoming - for example £143 million to ensure the housing stock meets the decent homes standard. Customer service improvements receive £100,000 per year but some initiatives have relied on savings generated from vacant posts or acting as a pilot which secured the CRM system.
- 75** There are clear corporate efficiency targets but it is unclear how these are to be met. The Council described its future financial position as 'very tight' and 2008/09 service plans are to give a greater focus on value for money and efficiencies, which may affect a range of priorities such as accessibility. There are clear corporate efficiency targets but it is unclear how these are to be met. An Efficiencies Working Group has recently been set up to identify alternative resources but to date there is no clear plan on how future efficiencies will be delivered.

- 76 Organisational capacity is being enhanced but lack of capacity has delayed projects and progress. The Organisation Development Strategy has been refreshed leading to the introduction of a management development programme for all second and third tier managers to provide specific training on coaching and project assignments. A comprehensive programme of customer focus and diversity training for officers and councillors has been delivered and resulted in a greater emphasis on service delivery throughout the Council. Fifty officers have been trained to undertake equality impact assessments ensure equality issues are taken in to account in policy and service delivery. Investors in People accreditation has been retained and the staff appraisal system strengthened to links to priorities and identify training needs. A graduate recruitment programme and modern apprenticeship scheme are now in their second year and are helping to build the workforce of the future. Sickness levels have been high (12 days against a target of 8.5 days) but recent data shows that this has now reduced to 5.75 days (in year) as a result of a range of sickness management initiatives. The lack of progress on developing and implementing the PID was caused by a lack of capacity and conflicting priorities with officers and managers stating that they are often reactively 'firefighting' rather than proactively able to manage workloads and priorities. Enhancing skills ensures the Council has the necessary capacity to deliver priorities.
- 77 Procurement has generated savings. A revised procurement strategy is now in place but it is too early to see any impact. Previous procurement practices have generated some savings - for example £30,000 for the print contract and £20,000 by working with a private company. The Council utilises the Essex Procurement Agency and secures stationery, computer hardware and agency staff through the agency resulting in savings. However, the Agency ceases to exist at end of March 2008 and it is not clear what impact this will have on the Council.
- 78 External funding has been secured for a variety of projects. £5.3 million has been secured from EEDA, Veolia ES Cleanaway Pitsea Marshes Trust and Heritage Lottery Fund to develop the Wat Taylor County Park including improvements to access to all parts of park. Contributions from developers through section 106 obligations and £1.2 million from Family Mosaic is enabling the relocation of the George Hurd Older Peoples Centre which will incorporate a multi agency activity centre. External funding enables the Council to undertake activities or projects which would otherwise not always be supported.

- 79 There is some effective partnership working. Interlock, the neighbourhood management pathfinder, includes a project placing learning mentors in two local schools to work with children who have been identified as being at risk of underachievement, social exclusion and/or low self-esteem in order to identify and break down their barriers to learning. To date 69 children have passed through the programme with 36 referred to outside agencies to access help that otherwise would have not been forthcoming. The Pan Essex Customer Services Group will support joint working and sharing of expertise. The Council has undertaken an assessment of all 68 partnerships with which the Council is involved to determine how effective each partnership is and identify opportunities for improvement. A number of thematic weaknesses were identified and plans put in place to address these. This baseline will provide a foundation for further reviews.