

Service Inspection

June 2008



# **Access to Services**

**Berwick-upon-Tweed Borough 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 Making services more accessible is a stated priority for the Council. However, the Council does not have a consistent and strategic approach to improving access and responsibilities to lead improvement are not clear. The Council is at very early stages of developing an understanding of access needs across all strands of the community by direct interaction with them. The Council has achieved level 2 of the Equality Standard and are making good efforts to understand the needs of the increasing number of migrant workers in the area. Activity to identify local public or visitor needs is limited and there is no information on the needs of non-users of services or of the significant number of people who own second homes in the area.
- 2 The Council is not providing a wide range of quality options for residents to access services face-to-face. Council offices provided for public access to the Council are in Berwick town. The facilities are basic and of poor quality although plans are in place to improve the main reception area during 2008. There is only limited effort to provide services in the rural areas, though there are some examples of the Council sharing facilities with other organisations and agencies to make access easier. Choice of access is restricted for residents with poor access to transport.
- 3 Information Communication and Technology (ICT) systems are not used to their fullest extent and opportunities to identify public needs are not explored. The absence of a content management system has resulted in a poorly designed website that does not achieve one of its main objectives which should be to promote 'Berwick online' services and opportunities from e-enabled channels. There is only limited promotion and take up of electronic-enabled services, the use of which would lower some transaction costs.
- 4 The Council provides good information to enable the local community to contact service departments, but there is no corporate system for analysing complaints and requests for service to focus on areas for improvement. It produces a clear easy to read guide to services in an A-Z format and contact details are available on various local media including the website, leaflets and council publications. However, though the annual residents' survey shows most respondents find staff helpful and competent, there is a high level of dissatisfaction with complaints handling and information provided by the Council.
- 5 Clear standards have been set for frontline customer services to respond to customer contact. The Council's Customer Charter includes target response times for telephone answering, e-mails, internet enquiries, letters and arranging appointments. However, although standards and guidelines are in place for responding to customers, there is no monitoring and consequently no reporting of performance against the standards. Available statistical information is not converted into meaningful information to identify and improve services performing below standard.

## Scoring the service

- 6 For this inspection we have only published judgement 1, the assessment of the quality of the service provided. This limited approach has been adopted because Berwick upon Tweed Borough Council and the other Northumberland councils are engaged in the process of implementing the proposal for local government reorganisation which will result in a single unitary council for Northumberland. Prospects for improvement for this service are so inextricably linked to local government reorganisation that it is not possible to make a judgement on this issue at this time.
- 7 Access to services in Berwick is assessed as a poor, no-star service because:
- there is a lack of strategic leadership and clear responsibility to deliver the access to services agenda;
  - there is no overarching approach to researching and developing understanding of community and user needs; activity is project or issue based;
  - public areas for accessing Council services are poor quality;
  - opportunities to access the full range of Council services in rural areas are limited;
  - there are only limited examples of the Council sharing facilities with other partners to make services more accessible particularly in rural areas;
  - there are gaps in web-based service provision and the Council is not taking all opportunities to encourage and support people to use new access channels particularly to overcome rural isolation;
  - the benefits of corporate IT systems are not being maximised and usage is inconsistent;
  - there is no monitoring of compliance with standards or guidelines set for communication and inspection checks found that the Council was not meeting its own response standards; and
  - there is no clear analysis of how access methods chosen or rurality factors impact on service costs or how the Council delivers value for money through its access arrangements.
- 8 However:
- the annual resident survey shows that most residents are satisfied with helpfulness and competence of staff;
  - the A-Z of services provides a quick reference guide to Council services with contact number and email details;
  - there are good guidelines on producing accessible communications as part of communications and community engagement toolkits;
  - outreach work in relation to arts, sports and leisure is increasing participation;

- *Bear Facts*, the Council magazine, is a useful means of communication;
- the Council has regular meetings with parish and county councils under the Tripartite Agreement; and
- the Council has resourced plans in place which aim to improve the quality of the main reception area.

## 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>1</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 makes the following recommendations.
- 10 As a result of local government reorganisation, the current two-tier councils in Northumberland will be abolished in 2009. They will be replaced by a new unitary authority which will assume responsibility for all of the services currently delivered by or on behalf of county and district councils, including Berwick. Given this time frame for improvement our first recommendation is for Berwick Council to pursue over the next 6 months; the second recommendation should be pursued by the Council with the Joint Implementation Team or by the successor authority because it is aimed at ensuring good access for people in the Berwick area in the longer term.
- 11 In this context the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

### **Recommendation**

*R1 To improve access to services in the short term the Council should:*

- *clarify responsibilities and champions' roles for delivering improved access to services to raise the profile and the importance of accessing services;*
- *make better internal use of electronic systems such as e-diaries and e-mails;*
- *make better use of its data to understand more about access needs, user access preferences and performance; and*
- *communicate standards clearly, apply them, monitor application of them and feedback performance to customers and staff.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a more responsive Council with a greater understanding of user and non-user needs;
- improved performance management and information to local people;
- increased focus on improving customer services; and
- better use of resources in priority areas for improvement.

<sup>1</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.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented within six months.

### **Recommendation**

- R2 To improve access to services in the longer term the Council should work with the Joint Implementation Team or the successor authority should:*
- *develop a full understanding of access needs in the Berwick area, using appropriate groups and paying particular attention to rurality and other diversity strands;*
  - *carry out a gap analysis to ensure comprehensive access opportunities are provided for all;*
  - *encourage routine customer feedback on responsive performance, rather than wait for complaints, collate feedback centrally and analyse to identify issues and good practice;*
  - *actively promote self service via e-channels, establish and monitor progress towards targets for take-up of services and develop a strategy to maximise use;*
  - *develop partnership working arrangements to meet access needs more effectively; and*
  - *increase the use of Council and other facilities in rural areas to improve access to Council services.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- through a better understanding of access needs deliver a comprehensive service accessible to all; and
- better use of resources integrated with other service providers.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented as part of plans for the new unitary authority in order to have an impact on access to services in Berwick provided by the new authority.

# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 12 The borough of Berwick-upon-Tweed is located in Northumberland and is the northern-most borough in England. The borough is bordered to the north and west by Scotland and to the east by the North Sea and covers a mainly rural area of 370 square miles.
- 13 The resident population is 26,300, making Berwick-upon-Tweed the second smallest local authority area (by population) in England. The borough is mainly rural, with half the population living in the town of Berwick and no other settlement exceeding 2,000 people. The black and minority ethnic population is very low, standing at 1.4 per cent. Almost 23 per cent of the population are of pensionable age, compared with a UK average of 16 per cent.
- 14 During the summer months an influx of visitors increases the borough's daytime population to an estimated 100,000. Many visitors stay at holiday centres and camps located in the coastal areas. There has been a marked increase in the high number of second/holiday homes in the Borough. This usage accounts for 8.46 per cent of the total housing stock compared to 1.73 per cent in Northumberland and 0.64 per cent nationally.
- 15 The employment rate in the borough is 73.8 per cent compared to 71.1 per cent in the North East region and 74.3 per cent nationally. The number of people claiming job seekers allowance is 1.9 per cent, below the regional average of 3.2 per cent and national average of 2.2 per cent<sup>2</sup>. There are a high proportion of small businesses in the borough and high seasonal fluctuation in employment. The wage rate in the borough is the second lowest in England and house prices are high relative to wage levels. The borough is ranked the 133rd most deprived of 354 districts in England with no wards within the 20 per cent most deprived in the country.

### The Council

- 16 There is no overall political control of the Council with 13 Liberal Democrat, 10 Conservative and 6 Independent councillors. The Council has one policy committee and an overview and scrutiny committee. There are also working groups established to consider particular issues or services.
- 17 The Council employs 145.4 full time equivalent staff in three directorates: Environment; Regeneration and Development; and Corporate Services. The Council's expenditure in 2006/07 was £15,717,818 (£4,530,412 net).

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<sup>2</sup> NOMIS February 2008

- 18 The Council in its corporate plan outlines its vision as:

*'To create, with others, and within the next fifteen years, communities across the Borough which are better places for people to live and work in, and for others to visit.'*

### **The Council's customer services**

- 19 The Council does not currently have an overall customer services department. Each service department is responsible for its own customer contact. Wallace Green reception is the main point of contact for Council enquiries. Services currently provided there include environmental services enquiries such as for refuse collection, pest control, car parking permits and concessionary travel passes. The Council has plans to improve this area to become more accessible, especially for people with a disability, and to introduce private interview facilities and extend the range of services provided. The expected completion date for these improvements is June 2008.

### **The Inspection**

- 20 Access is about focusing services to meet the needs of all sections of the community and to improve outcomes for all. An accessible and user focused organisation places the customer at the heart of service delivery; it knows what people want and need and has organised itself to deliver these.
- 21 The scope of this inspection is to establish the quality of the current arrangements for access to services provided by the Council to improve the quality of life for local residents and users of Council services.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 22** Improving access to services is a stated priority for the Council, but aims for access are unclear. To 'make services more accessible', is the seventh of twelve priorities but the Council has not articulated a consistent and strategic approach to improving access. The Council's number one priority is the Continuous Improvement Project which is facilitated by its Customer Services Strategy, but responsibility for delivering improved access to services is not clearly defined. There is no customer services department and no one person has overall responsibility for improving access. The approach is not co-ordinated across all sections of the Council. A lack of a clear strategic approach which can be referenced through operational documents and activity weakens the Council's ability to deliver good access to services.
- 23** The Customer Services Strategy identifies areas for improvement to access services, access information and community involvement.
- Access to Services proposals for improvement aim: to provide an improved main reception area in the offices at Wallace Green; and to provide DDA compliant public facilities.
  - Access to Information objectives are: to provide online information for all services; and to improve information available at initial contact.
  - Aims for involving communities in local issues are: to strengthen the understanding of local democracy and responsibilities; and to encourage young people to be involved in democracy.
- 24** Without an overarching strategy to improve access the Council's approach to improvement is through individual projects, this limits its ability to deliver co-ordinated actions. The Council has some individual plans in place to improve access and opportunity. For example:
- the Play Strategy aims to improve play sites across the borough;
  - the Sport and Physical Activity Alliance (SPAA) Action Plan 2007-2011 objectives are to ensure residents of Berwick Borough have access to a healthier lifestyle by developing sport and physical activity as a key element of health improvement programmes and initiatives; and
  - the Future of Berwick Masterplan aims to provide: centres where people can access a wider range of retail, professional and public services; and focal points for planned and coordinated public transport, and gateways to the rural hinterland.

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

### How easy is it to access services?

- 25** The Council does not have a strategic approach to access and is providing a limited range of access options to residents. These are mainly through face-to-face contact, by telephone, letter and contact with either district or parish councillors. All call-in contact offices, other than Tourist Information Centres (TICs), are located in Berwick town and are only open during standard office hours. The two TICs outside of Berwick are not promoted as Council access points for enquiries other than for tourism. This means that people can find it very difficult to have their enquiry resolved at their first point of contact.
- 26** The Council does not promote use of all electronic payment options effectively. Although Direct Debit is used for 68 per cent of payments and the number of people using the touch tone telephone payment system is increasing with 84 transactions in a six week period April to May 2008 there is low take up of the on-line payment option available on the Council's website. Information on alternative methods of payment are not clearly advertised at physical payment points. This means that value for money (VFM) is not being maximised.
- 27** In the more rural areas there is only limited effort to provide effective and easy access to services. The Council is not taking the opportunity to share facilities with other organisations and agencies to make access easier. Although there is some use of community facilities to conduct Council business, this tends to be one-off such as for consultation on the recent 'Belonging Communities' meetings to discuss the unitary council or for major planning applications. They are not used as regular access points. This limits access opportunities particularly to those living outside Berwick town.
- 28** Housing services provide face-to-face contact through offices in Berwick, home visits and some limited drop in sessions in Wooler and Seahouses. Although predominantly provided for tenants, housing staff are able to take enquiries for other services and organisations and pass them on. Signposting to council services works well. However, the Council is not yet clear how this will be maintained when the housing transfer takes place in August 2008 and after the transition to the new Unitary Council.
- 29** The Council provides a clear easy to read A to Z guide to services on paper, on its website and in the local media. These include all service details, e-mail addresses and councillor details. They also include contact details for Northumberland County Council services. In addition the Council's magazine *Bear Facts* has been viewed by residents as a useful source of information and has raised the Council's profile locally. However other public services and voluntary and community partners are not included in the Council's publications and this is a missed opportunity to ensure that all of the Council's stakeholders' information is freely available.

## 14 Access to Services | How good is the service?

- 30 Council offices and information provided for public access to services are basic quality. There are four reception areas in the main Council offices. These are for general enquiries/cashiers, benefits, planning and housing. Signposting and the quality of furnishings and decoration is poor. Proposed works to refurbish the main reception as a single point of contact at the Council offices aims to improve access is programmed for completion in June 2008. In the main reception/cashiers there are good levels of information on some other Council services but currently no information on display on how to make payments. In the TICs the only information provided other than for tourism is the Council's Customer Charter. Unwelcoming reception area environments and limited information means that local people and visitors are not encouraged to call in and are not well informed about what services the Council can offer.
- 31 User satisfaction with the quality of access is low. Although most annual resident survey responses find staff helpful and competent, there is a high level of dissatisfaction with complaints handling and information provided. Satisfaction from the 2006/07 annual survey gives a mixed picture.
- Customer satisfaction with contact with the Council is mixed. Overall 66 per cent were satisfied with the various aspects of contact with the Council. Most customers were satisfied with the helpfulness and competence of the staff but least satisfied with the final outcome.
  - Customer satisfaction levels with information provide by the Council are low. Only 44 per cent felt overall well informed by the Council, however 87 per cent felt well informed on how to pay bills to the Council.
  - There are high levels of dissatisfaction with how the Council deals with complaints. 50 per cent of respondents were dissatisfied with the way in which a complaint was handled.

For individual service areas.

- Satisfaction with the Council's planning service is low. Only 57 per cent of users agreed they were given the advice and help that they needed to submit their application form correctly and even fewer (32 per cent) agreed that the Council had kept them informed about the progress of their application; and 42 per cent agreed the Council dealt promptly with their queries.
- Satisfaction with the Swan Leisure Centre facilities is low. In the joint Open Space Study survey only 47 per cent rated the facilities good/very good.
- There are generally high levels of satisfaction with access to the Revenues and Benefits service. 79.6 per cent agreed that overall they were satisfied with the experience of visiting the local authority benefits office and 73.4 per cent agreed that the benefit office was easy to get to, but opening hours of the benefit office were inconvenient to 37 per cent. Overall 77.3 per cent agreed that they were satisfied with the ways in which they could contact the benefits office. There were similar levels of satisfaction for contact by telephone and for the service provided by staff.

- 32 The accessibility of environmental services has improved. The Council has received positive feedback of improved responsiveness since Environmental Health queries have been dealt with by the main reception from September 2006. Improved more efficient contact increases resident confidence in the Council to deliver good services.

### **Service standards**

- 33 Clear standards have been set for responding to customers, but they are not based on a good understanding of customer needs. The Council's Customer Charter includes target response times for telephone, e-mails, internet enquiries, letters and arranging appointments. The Council aims to increase the percentage of queries resolved at the first point of contact to 70 per cent by 2008 from a baseline of 20 per cent in September 2006. Standards and targets which meet user defined needs are important tools for driving improvement and ensuring good customer focus.
- 34 The information contained in the Customer Charter is not well publicised. Response times and targets for query resolution are clearly stated in the Customer Charter but are not explicitly stated as 'standards' in other guidance, such as for telephone calls. There are two different sets of standards in circulation and there is confusion amongst some frontline staff as to what the standards are, resulting in an inconsistent approach.
- 35 The Council does not know how well it currently performs, against its standards. Although standards and guidelines are in place for responding to customers they are not monitored or reported and available data is not analysed. Available statistical information such as telephone contact data is not converted into meaningful information to identify and improve services performing below standard. External e-mail requests generated as a test during the inspection confirmed that the Council is not meeting its three day response target. Clear measurable and comprehensive standards which are monitored and performance managed help drive improvement.

### **Is the Council using new technology to support and improve access to services?**

- 36 There has been no major drive to make greater use of ICT. E-Government grant funded investment in excess of £1 million has resulted in the implementation of some electronic access channels and E-government targets were met. However, e-channels/self service enabled transactions have not been evaluated or expanded further to reduce pressure on face-to-face and telephone interactions. For example, other councils are using customer data to record and then analyse the types and frequency of service requests to improve services, reduce avoidable contact and move towards paperless billing on council tax. These initiatives would help to improve VFM.
- 37 The Council does not have a functioning CRM system. The Council with partners invested in a system which was found to be not fit for purpose and consequently has not been implemented. As a result the Council is unable to monitor local citizen requirements and previous service interactions with the Council.

- 38 Newer technologies and wider application of existing technology have not been introduced. Examples, which other councils have implemented, include wireless network hotspots, use of personal digital assistant devices for senior staff and councillors and using SMS to promote council activities, job vacancies and to confirm housing repairs appointments with tenants. Remote logon facilities for councillors and senior staff are available but are not taken up extensively and not made available to other staff. Council efforts to engage with young people have met with little interest. SMS messaging was explored but not developed and the No Limits e-mail address for young people was established but the Council did not receive one e-mail in the year from September 2006. As a result the potential benefits of improved communication channels have not been maximised.
- 39 The Council lacks the strategic vision and planning ability to integrate access channels such as those possible through the internet. The role of designated councillor and officer 'champions' with responsibility to drive forward technology related improvements are not clearly defined. There is no structured approach to integrate the introduction of technology with customer service processes. As a result existing ICT systems are not used to their fullest extent, do not demonstrate value for money and opportunities to engage with all communities of interest and identify public needs have been missed.
- 40 The website is poorly designed and there is no system to effectively manage the content. This does not achieve one of the main objectives of the website to promote 'Berwick online' services and further opportunities arising from e-enabled channels. Each department is responsible for ensuring accuracy of its own website information but there is no corporate quality assurance process to monitor compliance. The basic requirements for online payments along with the availability of frequently asked information for planning, environment, benefits and tourism enquiries are available, but links are not always working and some information such as the Customer Charter and public events is out of date. Recent improvements to the website have resolved many of the issues identified. However, shortfalls in website provision and irregular updates can misinform the public and discourage usage.
- 41 Online processes for requesting services from the Council are not sufficiently joined up and the Council has not evaluated whether it is meeting the needs of the community. The links between the web available forms, related guidance and payment facilities are not comprehensive. This is in part due to the absence of a Customer Relationship Management System to enable the Council to better record interactions with users and understand and identify future demand areas.
- 42 The community has not been consulted and involved in the design of the website and has not been made aware of what is available. The Council has a lack of appreciation as to what can be delivered through electronic access channels. It has not implemented technological advances, such as a customer relationship management system integrated with the back office systems or the introduction of self service channels to reduce face-to-face contact, which could assist in improving the efficiency of services and allow the public to interact with the Council remotely.

- 43 The intranet has not been well developed and internal ICT systems are not used to their fullest extent. Internal communication channels are also not being used effectively. Some staff demonstrate resistance to using electronic corporate information systems such as e-mail and e-diaries. Some staff suggest that the reasons for not using systems well are linked to unmet training needs. This is resulting in duplication of effort and increasing workloads and means that the Council is not using its limited resources effectively.
- 44 The Council is not making best use of new technology to improve access and service delivery. The Council acknowledges that it is high cost generally but it has not performed an analysis of how rurality affects access methods and associated costs. The Council has done very little to support the community to make good use of available ICT and e-solutions to deliver better VFM. Effective use of new technology would make them more accessible to local people in instances where the wide geographic spread of small communities and poor transport links makes face-to-face contact difficult.
- 45 Similarly, the Council is not analysing usage or promoting on-line transactions to reduce costs. It does not analyse website statistics to determine the most and least used services and identify where resources should be targeted. There is only limited use and no promotion of e-services which would lower transaction costs. Direct Debit and online internet payment options are available. The cost of processing cheques and handling cash is significantly greater than online payment or Direct Debit. However, these options are not actively encouraged or promoted, consequently take up is low and VFM is not being maximised.

#### **How is the Council using customers' feedback and complaints to improve service quality?**

- 46 The Council does not have a strategic approach to learning from customer feedback. There is no system for analysing complaints and requests for service. Services respond to complaints on an individual basis to correct incidents of poor service but the information is not used for improving access overall. The informal monitoring of complaints at a corporate level is not tackling recurring complaints such as planning matters, housing matters or financial based complaints. All environmental health requests are logged and each one is responded to individually, but there is no systematic analysis to identify issues and hotspots. Similarly data from the '101' single non-emergency telephone service has been collected but not analysed to inform service delivery. This restricts the Council's ability to identify issues and respond appropriately; it also limits opportunities to identify and share good practice.

### **Is the Council reaching all parts of the community?**

- 47 The Council does not know whether it reaches all parts of the community. There is no robust and systematic mechanism for gathering information on access needs to inform development of accessible services which meet user need. Efforts are being made to identify the needs of some potentially disadvantaged groups and some service areas have attempted to obtain a better understanding of access needs of their customers and potential customers. At present there is no clear statement of what are the key access needs of citizens and users of services in Berwick.
- 48 The Council produces some good guidance for communications, but its overall arrangements, although improving are not applied consistently. The community engagement and communications toolkits are helpful guidance for staff. Documents developed with partners such as the migrant workers survey do not comply with the Council's communications standard, neither does the TIC website.
- 49 Until very recently the Council has not had a comprehensive, systematic and focussed approach to engagement to help it to identify access needs and solutions for the whole of the community. Consequently the information on which the Customer Services Strategy was developed is very limited. There has been no direct work with the community and no attempt to involve non users or vulnerable groups including remote and rural groups to develop the strategy.
- 50 The Council is now at very early stages of developing an understanding of access needs across all strands of the community through direct contact. It recognises that it has some significant gaps in its understanding of vulnerable groups. It is beginning to take some action to address this by engaging with some of the diverse groups within the community through, for example, a new Equality Forum and the use of an area based grant to increase resources to support better integration and understanding amongst diverse communities. Although the Council does not have a comprehensive understanding of the needs of increasing numbers of migrant workers, it is now starting to address this through increased contact and involvement in the North Northumberland Migrant Workers Group. There have been no attempts to understand the needs of significant numbers of second home owners in the area and the Council can not be sure that it is meeting the access needs of the whole district.
- 51 The Council has not ensured that all users have fair access to services. There are some examples of supporting access, such as improving access for people with a disability in some of its venues and supporting the Villages Online initiative. But the access to council offices for people with a disability is not always satisfactory. There are access ramps to all reception areas at the Council offices in Berwick and a hearing loop at the main reception but facilities such as low wheelchair accessible counters are not provided and not all doors are easy to open. Forthcoming work on the main reception aims to improve access, make it DDA compliant and will provide a single access point to the main council offices in Berwick.

- 52** The Council is increasing awareness of diversity issues amongst staff and councillors. It now has a clear and comprehensive set of plans in place, supported by training of councillors and staff, aimed at ensuring that it meets legislative requirements and addresses diversity and equality issues. The Inclusive Equality Scheme, updated in 2007 contains a programme of commitments, action plans for each theme. A programme of Equality Impact Assessments (EIA) has commenced and action is being taken as a result. The Council has achieved level 2 and is working towards reaching Level 3 of the Equality Standard by December 2008, along with the other Northumberland authorities. Increased awareness of diversity matters by staff and councillors helps ensure that the needs of all residents are considered.
- 53** The Council is identifying needs of communities with regard to open space, sport and recreational facilities. A joint study with Alnwick District Council included extensive consultation and resulted in actions for improvement at particular locations around the borough. Comprehensive consultation ensures local needs are clearly understood.
- 54** The Council is developing a better understanding of the current needs for affordable housing in rural areas. It is updating information and has commissioned the Federation of Northumberland Development Trusts to assist. By using local people with an understanding of the local communities it aims to develop a good understanding of the specific needs in the area.

#### **How is the Council improving customer access through partnership working?**

- 55** The Council is not taking all opportunities to improve customer access through partnerships. The Council has difficulty influencing strategic decisions with partners that will improve access to their services. There is also only limited sharing of resources to improve access to services, to provide, for example, regular contact opportunities for rural residents. Joint working examples which have been identified however include:
- sharing facilities within Scremerston sheltered housing to provide post office facilities available to the community and also support non English speaking communities to access services;
  - funding of the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and core cost of joint accommodation in Berwick for Rural Transport, Community Action Northumberland and others to enable them to provide services for which there is a local need;
  - working with partners to improve facilities for children and young people. The Council's Play Strategy outlines the two year plan from October 2006 for the Berwick Borough Play Partnership to deliver improved play opportunities in all areas of the borough. Extensive consultation has identified facilities and needs in each parish;

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- working with partners to increase learning opportunities. A proposal being developed by the Berwick 14+ Local Area Learning Partnership for an Online Prospectus is primarily aimed to provide access to current information and advice for all within the Berwick area community about their local area learning offer; and
- rotating meeting in rural locations during spring and summer months increases direct contact with communities and the Tripartite arrangement is good for maintaining contact with parishes and the county council for information exchange.

**56** The Council is engaging with some key groups to develop plans for the borough. It has involved parish councils and Community Development Trusts (CDT) to assist plan development. Examples include working with Berwick CDT to develop the Berwick town centre masterplan, Glendale CDT to improve social housing and Seahouses CDT to establish the Seahouses Town Centre Partnership, increasing the Council's contact with tourism businesses.

**57** The Council with partners are assessing the needs of migrant workers and increasing contact with them. The language line assists contact with migrant workers and the Crime & Disorder Partnership New Workers Survey assesses North Northumberland migrant workers needs. A test questionnaire through CAB will be revised and then issued to employers known to employ migrant workers for distribution. There is training planned for Polish awareness for frontline workers, also events for Polish communities with the Council, police and fire services. The survey will confirm the way forward.