

Inspection report

August 2004



# Cultural Services

London Borough of Brent

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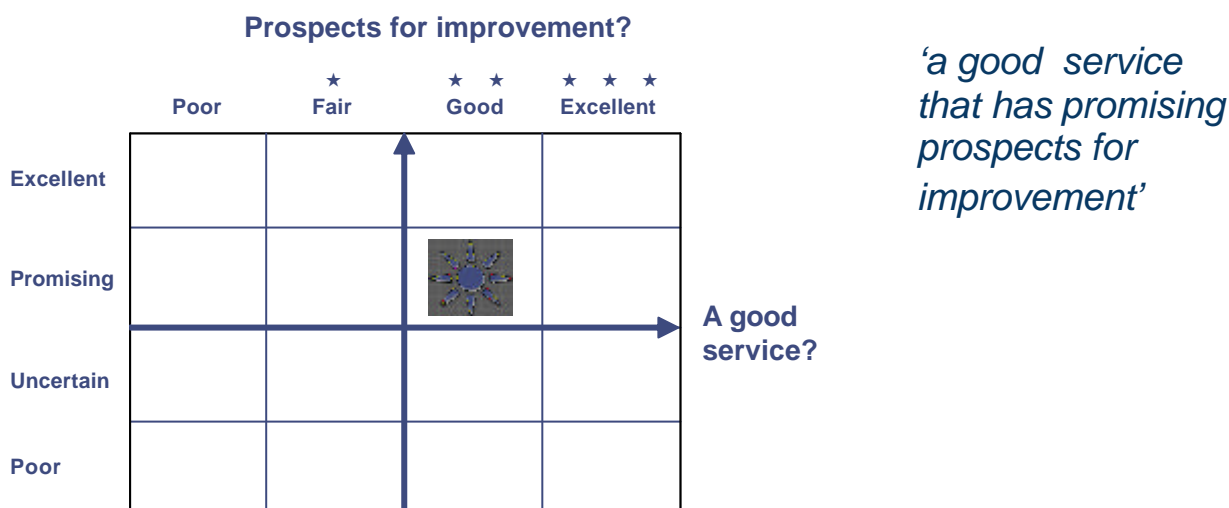
## Summary

- 1 The London Borough of Brent has a population of 263,464 people. Fifty five per cent of the population comprises people from black and ethnic minorities. This is the second highest proportion in all of the London boroughs. Ranked 58<sup>th</sup> on the index of deprivation with acute concentrations of deprivation, the borough has 14.9 per cent of its population living in the ten per cent most deprived wards in the country and 24.2 per cent of unemployed people are classed as long term unemployed compared to 15.4 per cent in London.
- 2 Brent has a labour controlled administration with a leader and cabinet model. The council achieved an overall CPA rating of 'fair' in 2003. The council spent £376 million on services and the housing revenue account was £100 million in 2003/04. The council has achieved 'beacon' status for 'Improving urban green spaces'.
- 3 The council has yet to finalise its Public Service Agreement (PSA) but a draft focuses on addressing crime levels, low educational attainment and achievement of the decent homes standard (DHS).
- 4 This inspection has considered cultural services which are currently provided through two directorates. The environment directorate is responsible for the delivery of both the sport and the parks service whilst libraries, museums and arts comes within the remit of the education, arts and libraries (EAL) directorate. The management of the leisure facilities is contracted out to an external operator, Leisure Connection, except for the Bridge Park complex where management remains directly with the council. The overall net budget for delivering cultural services across the two directorates in 2004/2005 is £11.4 million.

## Scoring the service

- 5 We have assessed the council as providing a “good” two star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

### Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>: London Borough of Brent - Cultural Services



- 6 Cultural services in Brent are good because:

- ◆ clear links can be demonstrated between the ambition for cultural services’ and the ambition for the local area and this has been developed through extensive consultation with local stakeholders;
- ◆ projects to improve physical access have now been addressed in light of DDA legislation and the website has been developed as an effective tool to encourage participation;
- ◆ all the cultural services can demonstrate outcomes against local priorities and are applying programmes targeted at the needs of local people in this diverse community;
- ◆ though not all service areas are delivering to a consistent standard the progress made in sport over the past eighteen months is significant and the quality of service in parks and libraries is strong; and
- ◆ a sports strategy entitled, ‘A strategy for Sport and Physical activity’ has been developed and approved by the Executive.

However:

- ◆ satisfaction ratings in the sports service as measured by MORI are low at 38 per cent;
- ◆ while improvements are noted in the sports service, these now need to be sustained in the long term and the pace of improvement maintained; and

<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.

- ◆ the outcomes and impacts of some local projects are not being measured and it is therefore difficult for the council to demonstrate the added value of such projects.

7 Prospects for improvement are promising because:

- ◆ clear leadership from councillors and senior managers is evident and the two directorates which share responsibility for the provision of these services work and communicate effectively together;
- ◆ capacity has been increased and performance management systems are in place to support further improvement;
- ◆ the directorates have mainstreamed equality and diversity issues into service planning and partnerships have been used to increase capacity and attract resources; and
- ◆ the strategic planning framework effectively links cultural priorities with relevant priorities in corporate plans and other directorate plans and these have benefited from external stakeholder engagement. However it is early days in the embedding of this framework and the council needs to keep focussed on ensuring appropriate mechanisms are in place for monitoring and reviewing existing and future plans.

However:

- ◆ with some exceptions, the quality of the building stock is deteriorating. While this is partly related to the age of facilities it does also demonstrate corporate weaknesses in asset management in recent years;
- ◆ improving the infrastructure for cultural services will require significant levels of investment. The challenge of identifying these levels and then putting in a robust framework to attract them has not yet been tackled; and
- ◆ whilst we found some service operational plans to be of a high standard, some need to be more rigorous in their specification of targets, action, deadlines and the assignment of tasks to staff.

## Recommendations

- 8 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. In this context, the inspection team makes the following recommendations:
- ◆ The council should target activities and actions that will improve the existing levels of customer satisfaction recorded through the three yearly survey conducted by MORI.
  - ◆ Improve the marketing of services, particularly in respect to sport, to encourage back previous users.
  - ◆ Ensure that the improvements being made in the sport service are sustained.
  - ◆ Measure the impact that cultural services have on local and national shared priorities and act on the findings.
  - ◆ All service operational plans (SOP) should be of a consistently high standard by:
    - ensuring that all actions detailed within SOPs are SMART; and
    - initiating cross-departmental SOP peer review for cultural services.
- 9 We would like to thank the staff of the environment directorate, particularly Jo Markandu and Elaine Girney, who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

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**Dates of inspection: 28<sup>th</sup> June – 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2004**

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# Report

## Context

This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission (the Commission) following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

## The locality

- 10 The London Borough of Brent has a population of 263,464 people. Fifty five percent of the population comprises people from black and ethnic minorities. This is the second highest proportion in all of the London boroughs. Ranked 58<sup>th</sup> on the index of deprivation with acute concentrations of deprivation, the borough has 14.9 per cent of its population living in the ten per cent most deprived wards in the country and 24.2 per cent of unemployed people are classed as long term unemployed compared to 15.4 per cent in London.
- 11 In terms of its physical cultural provision the borough comprises over 1000 acres of managed parks which include play provision, four leisure centres, of which three are managed by an external contractor, 12 static libraries, a mobile library service, the Grange Museum, and the Brent Archive.
- 12 The London Plan (2003) identifies Wembley and Willesden junction in part of the west London 'opportunity area'. Willesden junction is defined as an 'Area for Intensification' to take an additional 3,600 new jobs and 500 new homes by 2016. In Wembley, whilst the focus is the construction of the new national stadium due for completion in spring 2006, this generates considerable regeneration potential of which culture is recognised as a key component.

## The council

- 13 Brent has a labour controlled administration with a leader and cabinet model. The council achieved an overall CPA rating of 'fair' in 2003. The council spent £376 million on services and the Housing Revenue Account was £100 million in 2003/04. The council has achieved 'beacon' status for, neighbourhood renewal, removing barriers to work and for improving urban green spaces. The whole of the environmental services directorate has ISO 14001.
- 14 The council's priorities are identified in its corporate strategy, 'Building a Better Borough 2002-06,' and focus on a vision to achieve a high quality of life, excellent services, being a progressive council with pride in supporting a diverse population. This vision identifies several themes to which cultural services contribute including; 'supporting children and young people', the 'promotion of the quality of life and the green agenda', 'regeneration and priority neighbourhoods' and 'tackling crime and disorder'.

The Community Plan for Brent 2003-08' identifies the following priorities:

- ◆ health and social care;
- ◆ local housing;
- ◆ environment and transport;
- ◆ regeneration and employment;
- ◆ community safety and crime prevention; and
- ◆ education and lifelong learning.

- 15 The council has yet to finalise its Public Service Agreement (PSA) but a draft focuses on addressing crime levels, low educational attainment and achievement of the decent homes standard (DHS).

## **The service inspection**

- 16 The service we have inspected consists of the parks service and sports service which are located within the environment directorate and the library service, heritage service, out of school support service and cultural services which are located within the directorate for education, arts and libraries. For the purpose of this report the services that fall within EAL's remit are referred to as Cultural Services (Arts). References to 'cultural services' should be read as the whole spectrum of services and thus includes parks and sports in addition to those services referred to as Cultural Services (Arts).
- 17 The combined budget for all the cultural services for 2004/05 is £11.4 million, an increase of 10.8 per cent on the previous year budget which was £10.3 million. The overall increase in budget to cultural services over the past three years since 2002/2003 is 23.5 per cent.
- 18 Our inspection has considered how the London Borough of Brent delivers its cultural services in their entirety and to assist in developing our judgements we have probed into the sports and parks services.



## How good is the service?

### What links can be clearly illustrated between the council's cultural services' ambitions, and the ambition for the local area?

- 19 Inspectors look to see how ambitions for cultural services support ambitions for the local area and evidence that the ambitions are focused on improving quality of life for all sections of the community by balancing national, regional and local priorities.
- 20 Inspectors also look for evidence that the council's cultural services support and contribute to shared priorities.<sup>2</sup>
- 21 The council can demonstrate clear links between the ambitions for cultural services and the ambition for the local area. Though not all of these links are formalised, their relationships are sufficiently developed to ensure they are meaningful and robust.
- 22 The themes in the community plan of greatest significance to the cultural agenda are:
  - ◆ health and social care;
  - ◆ environment and transport;
  - ◆ regeneration and employment;
  - ◆ crime prevention and community safety; and
  - ◆ education and lifelong learning.
- 23 Under these themes, objectives are identified which are challenging and if delivered, will make a positive contribution to the quality of life of people living in the borough. For example, within the environment theme a stated objective is for... 'all parks to have safety improvements and park patrols using innovative approaches to crime'. This objective is reflected in the council's corporate plan where it states 'by working with local communities, it aims to reduce the fear of crime and support measures to improve resident's personal safety'. This is stated under the 'promoting quality of life and the green agenda' theme and has been partly delivered within the cultural sector through the park wardens programme which has benefited parks users through helping tackle fear of crime concerns.
- 24 The other corporate plan themes where cultural services have a visible role to play and which reflect the community plan are:
  - ◆ supporting children and young people;
  - ◆ regeneration and priority neighbourhoods;
  - ◆ tackling crime and community safety; and
  - ◆ achieving service excellence.
- 25 In the same way as the link has been demonstrated in the example above, different examples can be mapped across these related themes which provide further evidence that the policy framework is being prepared in a coordinated fashion. The priority areas in the corporate strategy have been adopted within the draft cultural strategy though illustrated differently under three distinct themes:

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<sup>2</sup> Shared priorities have been agreed between local and central government and are set out in Appendix 2 to this report.

- ◆ civic pride – Brent as a place to live;
  - ◆ social and environmental regeneration – safe, healthy, cohesive communities; and
  - ◆ employment – building a cultural economy.
- 26 These themes both reflect the wider policy framework and equally the ambition for cultural services within the context of the local government national shared priorities and priorities identified at the local level. The seven shared priorities include objectives for healthier communities, stronger and safer communities and community cohesion and this is very much the language of the draft cultural strategy and the policy framework within which it sits. An example of this is the opening of a teen area at the Ealing Road library which demonstrated an achievement against both the corporate priority of 'supporting children and young people' and supporting the development of cohesive communities which addresses both local cultural and national shared priority objectives. This also provides an example of responding to local views and understanding the local community.
- 27 The council can demonstrate a track record of effective consultation and have used a range of techniques to engage with their diverse communities. When preparing the community strategy, in addition to the annual Brent householders' survey, black and minority ethnic communities were approached through targeted seminars and comments were invited through the Brent magazine which is delivered to every household in the borough. Stakeholder events have been held at key stages in the preparation of the draft cultural strategy which has also benefited from the introduction of the cultural forum which comprises a range of interested parties both from within and external to the council. This draft strategy is currently out to a final round of external consultation and is due for formal adoption by the council in November 2004.
- 28 The council has also targeted specific groups, for example, as part of the council's consultation to guide its development of the cultural strategy it funded 'the drama workhouse', a registered charity which held creative drama workshops on four consecutive Saturdays with a cross-section of young people in Brent ranging in age from seven to fifteen years old.
- 29 In making clear its ambitions, the council has identified what are not its priorities for cultural services at the current time though it does recognise they have a valuable contribution to make. These are:
- ◆ tourism – not a current priority though this position will be reviewed once the new Wembley stadium is completed in 2006;
  - ◆ support to voluntary organisations – will only be prioritised where the organisation can demonstrate that support will contribute to the direct achievement of a stated corporate priority; and
  - ◆ sport – support to individual sports will not be a priority unless they are one of the eight sports identified in the sport and physical activity strategy for which specific development plans are to be prepared.
- 30 The identification of these areas are known to councillors and relevant staff and are clearly stated within their respective service areas. For example, the sports strategy states the eight sports to which resources will be focused and the criteria for support to voluntary organisations states clearly the need to address corporate priorities.

## How effectively do cultural services contribute to local area priorities and achieve service priorities

- 31 Having considered the ambitions that the council has set for the service, inspectors make an assessment of how well the council is meeting these ambitions. This includes an assessment of performance against specific service standards and targets and the council's approach to measuring whether it is actually delivering what it set out to do. Inspectors look for evidence of outcomes and impacts for various sections of the community and consider the council's track record of delivering continuous service improvement.
- 32 We have found a range of evidence across cultural services that support the newly emerging policy framework for cultural services, demonstrate that outcomes against local priorities are already being delivered on the ground for local people.
- 33 Equalities and diversity issues are mainstreamed into the direct provision of services and a key vehicle for driving this is the festivals programme, which coordinated by cultural services, works closely with other council departments and external stakeholders.
- 34 The council supports a varied festivals programme recognising the diversity within Brent. The respect festival held in Roundwood Park in July 2003 attracted 20,000 visits representing all communities within the borough, many of whom from groups traditionally considered as 'hard to reach'. This festival was used as a 'window' to promote other council services on the day and this principle is recognised across their programme where they see culture being a vehicle to help engage with 'hard to reach' groups on other issues.
- 35 Customer satisfaction for the library service is high and programmes are being developed to meet the varied needs of the diverse community. Delivery is focused upon the 12 static libraries and within these we found a mixed picture in terms of physical condition. Recent growth bids have resulted in improved book stock and longer opening hours, including Sunday opening at Willesden Green and Ealing Road. This has contributed to the 55 per cent of residents recorded as using libraries with a 10 per cent increase in usage over the past year. Outcomes resulting from a specific consultation process at Ealing Road library include a new 'teen area' and redecoration to reflect its high usage from the Asian community. Since this was completed usage of this library in 2003/04 has increased by 25 per cent and the loan of materials has increased by 11 per cent, (un-audited figures).
- 36 The service provides a number of activities targeted at specific communities including 'ImaginAsian' which, in partnership with the private sector, promoted Asian literature and specific material is available at Willesden Green for older people. Recent projects, for example the 'Welcome to your Library' initiative, have also targeted the needs of asylum seekers helping to integrate them into the local community. Whilst these initiatives are to be supported, their measurable impact upon local priorities is unclear. This is an area for development as it is important to know how effective programmes like these are and the extent to which they represent value for money.
- 37 However, the council recognises that the ability of the libraries to contribute to local priorities is being constrained by factors such as the deteriorating physical fabric of some of the facilities and the fact that there is an identified need to rationalise and relocate provision. These are difficult and sensitive issues which must be tackled if the service is going to realise its potential for further improvement.
- 38 Within the heritage service that includes, primarily, the museum and archive services, the Grange museum has generated 7,000 visits per annum. The museum has seen itself as much a community resource as local history museum.

Many of these visits have been from local schools and the museum has a good reputation which spreads outside of the borough. Heritage services and the Library service have worked together to develop a combined online catalogue containing digitised images of objects / books from all the collections. This catalogue makes it possible for users to simultaneously search across Brent's Library, Museum and Archive catalogues. The 'My Life our Community' project, recently completed, involved working with the Social Inclusion Unit and targeted the younger and older generations to prepare work inspired by living in Brent which led to a final exhibition being displayed at the museum. This project was recognised by the West London Alliance as a pathfinder for community cohesion.

- 39 The museum has successfully worked with the Brent youth offending team to offer placements to three young offenders since October 2003, which has received positive feedback from the team, the young people and their parents. This provides a good example of how the service can help meet wider corporate and social objectives and where the impact has been measured to demonstrate its value. Museum staff will temporarily move their offices to Kingsbury Library following the closure of the museum from where they will develop the new museum permanent display to be housed within the Willesden Green Library Centre once the enhancements are completed.
- 40 The council have worked in partnership with Kensington and Chelsea to develop the arts information project which through a dedicated website provides a directory of local artists and support information about activities, events and funding. We noted a number of public sites across the borough where organised community art projects are being encouraged as a diversion for young people from being involved in graffiti and other anti social behaviour. The council works effectively with partners to address key priority areas and ensure resources are used efficiently.

## Sports probe

- 41 In delivering services on the ground, the sports service has made considerable progress in the two years since it was inspected and scored as providing a poor service. It has managed to reengage with many of the voluntary sports clubs in the borough and visible improvements are evident in the leisure centres despite the ageing infrastructure where, at both Charteris and Vale Farm, the building stock is in need of significant investment. Sports development programmes are in place to meet both sport specific and wider corporate objectives.
- 42 The Strategy for Sport and Physical activity expresses in detail priorities that come through community strategies. Although this framework is not yet formally adopted, we found evidence to confirm that outcomes are delivering impacts for various sections of the community.
- 43 Examples of projects which have delivered real outcomes for local people include:
  - ◆ The recent award of the Football Association level 1 coaching certificates to 16 young people, mainly from a housing estate in a recognised area of deprivation. This project was undertaken by the sports service in partnership with Crime Concern, Youth Offending Team, Community Safety and local sports clubs and voluntary youth service providers with the objective to increase opportunities for young people in priority neighbourhoods to participate in sport through the provision of suitable coaches. This project has succeeded in both increasing locally available opportunity and providing skills training to increase employment opportunities and help improve quality of life for both the coaches and participants of the sports programmes since established.
  - ◆ The sports development team are working in priority neighbourhoods delivering sports activities for young people. Examples we found included

working with the Parks Service and EAL to access Neighbourhood Renewal Funding to deliver specific programmes in the parks and primary schools and actively promoting a healthier lifestyle to residents with long term/chronic illness in south Kilburn.

- 44 The restructure of the service has encouraged improved links with schools. The sports development team are working more closely with teachers and this has resulted, for example, in teams being entered into the London Heathrow youth games this year for all eight priority sports. This is helping to provide sporting opportunity for children from local schools to participate in a pan London event.
- 45 The level of satisfaction in sports services presents a mixed picture.
- 46 In the residents' satisfaction survey undertaken every three years by MORI overall satisfaction has declined and was recorded at 38 per cent in 2003/04 against 41 per cent in 2000/01. This is clearly an area that the council needs to address.
- 47 Additional annual surveys of users commissioned by the council, show that 91 per cent of users were either very or fairly satisfied with the leisure centres which is an improvement from 77 per cent in the previous year, however, this cannot be used as a direct comparison as the question differed.
- 48 Accessibility is another key criteria used by the inspectors to determine the quality of the services provided by the Council. In terms of meeting the DDA requirements for Charteris and Vale Farm have works programmes on site now and will be compliant by October 2004. These programmes relate primarily to non structural works including the fitting of electric doors, improving access to changing rooms and, at Vale Farm, providing new disabled parking and repaving the external area to the entrance. The Willesden sports centre will not comply but this is closing imminently and the new PFI sports centre will be fully compliant. The council's approach appears to be satisfactory.
- 49 The service is successfully promoting access to sport through its website which has recorded a 400 per cent growth in 'hits' over the past two years currently running at approximately 16,000 per month. Sports provision, both provided by the council and the voluntary sector, is mapped onto a GIS database which can be searched by postcode over a two mile radius and brings up fields on that activity and relevant contact details. Of particular merit is that the website provides information on sports provision in the adjacent boroughs recognising that people will generally access facilities based on convenience rather than within borough boundaries. Progress made on the promotion of website access is significant in a borough with higher than the national average access to internet at home and where all schools and libraries provide free access.

## **Parks probe**

- 50 The parks service clearly demonstrates a positive contribution to the achievement of community and corporate priorities. This service is a strength for the council.
- 51 The community strategy 'A Plan for Brent' details as its third key objective under the environment and transport theme the aim to improve the environmental quality and security of parks and open spaces. To address this objective additional resources have been made available to the parks service, which has enabled an additional five park warden posts to be established, taking the complement from 15 to 20.
- 52 Evidence of outcomes in terms of residents' perception of crime in the parks is contained within the service's operational plan for 2004-05 which details the increased security ratings that have been achieved. The security ratings are

based on the 10 per cent of households' survey and audit results. Ratings of 5.8 and 7.2 were achieved for unsupervised and supervised parks respectively. The 2003/04 London ILAM/KMC group's average score for supervised sites was 6.61. This is an example of where the parks service has developed a meaningful local performance indicator in the absence of nationally determined outcome performance measures.

- 53 Partnerships in parks have also been used to help increase visibility and presence thus encouraging a safer environment. The café in Roundwood Park is an example of where a lease has been given to an external operator who now provides a community service that seems to be appreciated by a wide cross section of the community.
- 54 The consultation work undertaken whilst formulating the council's corporate strategy showed that 20 per cent of respondents cite the parks service as one of the top four services provided by the council. The strategy details under its environmental theme, 'promoting the quality of life and the green agenda' the priority to improve the local quality of the local environment in part through the increased investment in parks and by tackling environmental crimes such as graffiti.
- 55 The council has significantly increased the budget provision for the parks service and has provided evidence of a continued financial commitment for the next two years, which is until the end of the current administrative term. The outcomes from this increased investment are clearly demonstrable, for example, by the high quality provision of children's play areas within the parks, all 39 of which have been improved over the last two years.
- 56 Furthermore, work has been undertaken in collaboration with Kamala Arts to channel the artistic abilities of graffiti artists in a more positive direction. Examples of this work include a project to paint over a sports pavilion and work with young people from Wembley High School.
- 57 It is evident that work has been completed to address the needs of different sections of the community in terms of age, ethnicity and geographical location. The improvement programme as detailed above on children's play areas for example and the development of a quiet area at Gibbons recreational ground are two examples of how various age groups' needs are being catered for.
- 58 The Parks Service works with PATH (Positive Action Training Highway) and Local Employment Access Projects (LEAP) to help reach 'hard to reach' sections of the community. However, this is another example of projects which are being promoted in Brent where the outcomes and impacts for local people are not being measured. Although very likely to be providing benefits, it is important to monitor projects and be able to measure an outcome so that lessons can be learnt from them and they can demonstrate their value in helping to achieve stated priorities.
- 59 The council has analysed its provision of open space and identified areas that are classified as being deficient. In response, improvements have been and are being targeted on those facilities in these areas. As part of this work improvements have been made on the following sites: AEI site, Dudden Hill Lane, Hazel Road, River Brent Phase 1, Gladstone Park and Gibbons recreational ground.
- 60 The quality of the service is also evaluated by inspectors, in terms of satisfaction, access and the use of ICT.
- 61 In terms of providing a quality service and using satisfaction as a measure of quality, the service can demonstrate a track record of improvement. The BVPI MORI survey of residents' satisfaction 2001 showed that 59 per cent of the

respondents were satisfied with the parks service. The 2004 survey shows that this has now increased to 66 per cent. However, in terms of the residents' satisfaction with the parks service the council is ranked 17<sup>th</sup> of the 29 London boroughs contained within the 2004 MORI comparator group. The parks service's '1 in 10 household survey 2003' shows that 90 per cent of customers were satisfied compared with 85 per cent in the previous year.

- 62 The parks service has also received external recognition of the quality of their work in terms of:
- ◆ achieving Beacon Status for 'Improving Urban Green Spaces';
  - ◆ retaining ISO14001 across the service;
  - ◆ obtaining a Charter Mark in 2003;
  - ◆ obtaining a Green Flag for Roundwood Park;
  - ◆ ISO9002:2000 accreditation, which has been successfully obtained across all parks service areas;
  - ◆ IIP successfully retained; and
- has consequently successfully raised the service's profile.
- 63 With regard to access, the parks service have undertaken an audit of all of the parks facilities in conjunction with Brent Access Group, the findings of which have been used to prioritise the capital programme. The parks broadly meet the compliance standards required from October 2004 under DDA legislation though a number of pavilions do fall short of this requirement. A prioritisation programme for upgrading pavilions resulted from the playing pitch strategy and when these works are carried out specific DDA issues are being addressed.
- 64 Investments in ICT have also been made. The investment has been made in part to facilitate the easier use of the available facilities: for example by providing the functionality to make bookings for allotments, halls and sports pitches on-line. A service development officer with responsibility for IT and website development was appointed to address these issues and the tasks assigned achieved on schedule as shown in the service's Best Value Fundamental Review Improvement Plan. One quantifiable measure that demonstrates the improvement the investment is making is the number of hits on the website, which has increased by 250 per cent over the past two years.

## **How good are cultural services at providing a quality user experience?**

- 65 In order to judge the quality of cultural services it is important to find out the views of people who use those services as well as the views of those who don't. Inspectors look at levels of user satisfaction and consider the views of stakeholders such as voluntary sector groups and community organisations. In addition, access and the use of ICT are also assessed.
- 66 To come to a judgement the inspectors have reviewed the BVPI 119 MORI Survey scores as well as the satisfaction scores from surveys undertaken by particular services.
- 67 Overall the BVPI MORI survey scores for 2004 are low. This is a household survey that requests responses from both users and non users of the services. Satisfaction scores have fallen: the cultural and recreational services overall fell from 43 per cent to 30 per cent, museums / galleries from 30 per cent to 25 per cent, and sports / leisure facilities from 41 per cent to 38 per cent. Satisfaction with libraries remained static at 56 per cent whilst the satisfaction score for the parks service as

detailed above rose from 59 per cent to 66 per cent. This is clearly an area that the council needs to address.

- 68 The council has invested significant resources into research and customer surveys. The key means by which satisfaction is measured include:
- ◆ a comprehensive survey at the leisure centres: over 1500 customers completed questionnaires in October 2003;
  - ◆ an annual 1 in 10 household survey re: parks – data for 2004 used below;
  - ◆ the annual CIPFA PLUS survey across the environment directorate units includes parks & sports and can be completed on line;
  - ◆ the public library user survey CIPFA 5000 response 2003; and
  - ◆ a 1 in 10 museum survey of visitors.
- 69 The findings from the above paint a different picture from the MORI survey's findings, and are detailed below for each of the cultural services:
- ◆ sports: 73 per cent satisfied;
  - ◆ parks: 90 per cent satisfied;
  - ◆ libraries: 85 per cent satisfied;
  - ◆ museums: 83 per cent said exhibitions were good or excellent; and
  - ◆ cultural services: 92 per cent said Diwali festival was as good as or better than other festivals they had attended.
- 70 What is clear is that there is a significant mismatch between the views captured by the BVPI and the views of users and respondents to the service specific surveys. However, the low satisfaction score as detailed within the MORI survey is an area that the council needs to address.
- 71 The council is pro-active in trying to understanding the needs of non-users. After reviewing usage data at the Grange museum it was identified that Asian males were under-represented in terms of visitors. Consequently a study of Asian non-users was commissioned with support from London museums agency. The study had five aims to:
- ◆ ascertain whether Brent's Asian residents are interested in the current core activities;
  - ◆ develop suggestions for new museum projects that would be of specific interests to specific sections of the Asian population;
  - ◆ provide suggestions for ways of communicating information more effectively;
  - ◆ help develop the focus for a forthcoming exhibition on Ealing Road; and
  - ◆ develop a community consultation toolkit or checklist for use by other museums.
- 72 To achieve these aims two focus groups of Asian non-users aged 16-25 and 25+ were held. The findings lead to a restructuring of 'A Day in the Life of Ealing Road,' a temporary exhibition, as well as changes in the way the museum markets its exhibitions to Asian residents in the north of the borough.
- 73 The council has shifted resources to address accessibility issues. In the three years from 2000, the council allocated over £2 million across all services to address building accessibility issues with further allocations in 2003/04 and 2004/05 of £363,000 and £470,000 respectively.



- 74 The position with regard to sport and parks has been covered earlier in the report. With regard to the other cultural services, the Grange museum is not DDA compliant, but it will be closed imminently to be relocated to the Willesden Green site where the current buildings, including the library are compliant.
- 75 Audits have been undertaken at all the libraries and a range of works to move toward compliance have been initiated at the relevant sites. Examples of projects recently completed include the installation of automated doors at Cricklewood, Kensal Rise, Kilburn and Neasden, the upgrading of toilet provision at Kingsbury and the installation of a lift to the first floor at Harlesden. Automatic doors and induction loops have been installed at all of the borough's twelve libraries. Whilst full physical compliance will not be achieved by October 2004, many of the priority projects will have been completed and there is a programme in place with funding requirements identified.
- 76 In terms of access beyond making physical alterations to buildings the council can demonstrate considerable achievements which improve services for local people, for example:
- ◆ the provision of free internet access points at 11 libraries and 21 North West London online centres in community facilities;
  - ◆ staff in council services have now completed a common disability awareness programme;
  - ◆ language cards and deaf people cards have been introduced at all contact points;
  - ◆ more staff with multiple languages recruited to one stop shops; and
  - ◆ the website has been redeveloped to conform to national accessibility standards and is now speech enabled.
- 77 Investment in ICT is delivering improvements for the residents of the borough. Using the internet to contact the council has increased significantly. Doubling since 2001 in some instances. As a result the internet is now the second most popular method of contacting the council. In Brent, 74 per cent of the population now have access to the internet. The 2004 MORI survey asked respondents to comment on the council's website. The majority of users find the website easy to use, 87 per cent and 82 per cent say it is easy to find information.

## Summary

- 78 The council can demonstrate clear links between the ambitions for cultural services and the ambition for the local area. Though not all of these links are formalised, their relationships are sufficiently developed to ensure they are meaningful and robust and do reflect a balance of national, regional and local priorities.
- 79 Whilst not all services within the cultural sector are delivering to the same level of quality there is a breadth of evidence across all services to demonstrate that outcomes are being delivered on the ground for local people. Effective local consultation has informed local service delivery.
- 80 Equalities and diversity issues are mainstreamed into service provision.
- 81 Promotion of the website to encourage increased interest in the services has been successful.
- 82 However, resident satisfaction levels are low, particularly in the sport service. The deteriorating quality of the building stock, particularly in sport and libraries, continues to impact upon quality and access issues.

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

### Does the Council have the capacity and systems to deliver its cultural ambitions and drive improvements in cultural services for all sections of the community?

- 83 In assessing the council's capacity, inspectors will look at the following areas;
- ◆ service leadership;
  - ◆ financial management;
  - ◆ Performance management
  - ◆ addressing equality and diversity; and
  - ◆ successful partnerships.
- 84 In high performing councils, senior managers and councillors know what matters to local people and use this information to set clear and consistent priorities. They focus on achieving impact in priority areas and concentrate effort and resources in proportion to priority.
- 85 Successful councils have sound performance management systems and effective financial management including flexibility to move money and people to tackle the most important problems. They have clear lines of accountability for action and have the skills to build effective partnerships to help bring about improvements.
- 86 Since the inspection of sport and leisure in 2002 the council has focused upon increasing capacity and putting in systems to ensure improvement in service delivery. Across cultural services, capacity and systems to deliver its cultural ambitions and drive improvement are now broadly in place.
- 87 Political engagement is evident with a clear recognition supported by the strategic policy framework for the contribution cultural services can make to achieve the council's wider ambitions.
- 88 Cultural services are provided through two directorates; the environment directorate is responsible for the delivery of both the sport and leisure and the parks service whilst libraries, heritage services and cultural services (arts) comes within the remit of the education, arts and libraries directorate. Leadership from councillors and senior officers therefore also comes through different avenues, for example, libraries reporting to the EAL portfolio holder and sport reporting to the environment portfolio holder. We found a good understanding between members at different levels and across parties of how their agendas interrelate which is required to foster a common ownership for the value of cultural services. There is also in place a programme of regular meetings between senior officers and managers across the two directorates to ensure effective linkages and communication.
- 89 Councillors and senior officers are supported by forums, both internal and external, which help to ensure that service ambitions are owned by both staff and external stakeholders. For example, councillors and senior officers sit on the cultural forum with a range of external parties and this group will be responsible for driving the implementation of the cultural strategy. Equally, staff commented that they now feel engaged and valued by councillors and senior officers which is reflected in the increased staff morale across the services. It is early days for the cultural forum, particularly as the cultural strategy has yet to be adopted, but we feel that it has been established in a structured manner which will help ensure it contributes to building cohesive and sustainable communities and improving the range of opportunities available to local people. To date the involvement of schools in Black

History Month, an initiative driven from a senior level, has been a good example of building improved community cohesion.

- 90 Robust systems are in place to ensure budget management across the services. Resources from the council have been increased for this sector in recent years with modest growth planned for the next two years, as detailed above. The overall budget increase allocated to cultural services over the past 3 years has been 23.5 per cent.
- 91 This growth has enabled increased capacity to be brought into specific service areas. In sport a new assistant director was appointed in April 2003 and this post has been responsible for restructuring the service introducing both a new head of sport and ensuring that staff have the ability to do the job to which they had been appointed. For example, under the old structure the officer responsible for contract monitoring was in reality being pulled into a different work area. Through increasing staff capacity at the Bridge Park complex this officer is now able to focus on contract monitoring which has seen significant recent improvements in the services provided by Leisure Connection at the centres.
- 92 Funding has been approved from within environment for the appointment of a PE adviser and this post will be managed within EAL thus creating a strong link. The post will support primary and secondary schools to deliver their PE lessons and will be the point of contact for all national initiatives to do with school sports. The council is currently in the process of recruiting a suitable candidate.
- 93 In recent years the council has focused upon addressing its financial position and this has added to the recognised concerns regarding a legacy of underinvestment in facility provision in the cultural sector. The council's financial position is now stabilised but the issues regarding the quality and need for investment in facility stock remain. Whilst we recognise some significant initiatives are in place, examples being the Willesden PFI, relocation of the Grange museum and the playing pitch strategy which provides a programme for prioritising investment for the pavilions in parks, the overall picture remains unclear. This is an area that the council needs to address if it is to realise its ambitions.
- 94 There is no effective asset management plan in place to consider the costs and opportunities of the identified need to relocate and rationalise the current provision of libraries. However, following the recent BVR of libraries, museum and archive an asset management plan for the service is being developed in partnership with an external consultant. The picture is similar with regard to the need for investment at the leisure centres, Vale Farm sports centre being a case in point with both infrastructure issues and potential development at the rear. Identifying the investment needs for sport and leisure provision in the borough warrant particular priority as the current contract with Leisure Connection will expire in April 2006 and therefore a tendering process is imminent which will require clear specification requirements to ensure the council achieves the maximum value from whatever option it finally selects.
- 95 Whilst the council must prioritise its attention on these investment concerns, we do recognise that in the past two years services across the cultural sector have benefited from sustained if moderate growth and this trend is planned for in the medium-term budget forecasting over the next two years. An example of this is in the parks service where an additional £600,000 was agreed to the budget in 2004/05 of which £200,000 is being prioritised on sport related projects such as the upgrading of pavilions and essential drainage works to some of the borough's sports pitches.
- 96 Recognising the constraints on the availability of resources from within the council, cultural services can demonstrate considerable successes in attracting external

funding, particularly through lottery funding and the use of Section 106 monies. Examples of this include £1.27 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund to secure the relocation of the Grange museum to a new site adjacent to Willesden Green library and the use of Section 106 funding to community park facilities which had been identified following consultation for the Gibbons recreation ground project.

- 97 The council recognises that constrained resource availability will continue to put pressure on services to maximise access to external funding. This is understandable to an extent but their track record of success in recent years must not obscure the significant investment issues which need to be tackled in the near future.
- 98 In the previous sport and leisure inspection the absence of effective performance management was sited as a particular weakness hindering attempts to improve service delivery at all levels from strategic policy through to individual work programmes. This has been addressed by locating sport and leisure with the parks service in the environment directorate which has a strong reputation within the council for a robust performance management framework.
- 99 We are satisfied that the performance management system in the environment directorate enables the service and individuals to drive improvement, and though there are differences in application, an equally systematic approach has been developed for the elements of cultural services which sit in EAL.
- 100 There is a corporately agreed service planning framework which all directorates are required to apply, with degrees of flexibility to reflect individual service characteristics when preparing their service development plans. From these the service operational plans (SOPs) are developed and these identify both the contribution to the identified strategic priorities of the council and the requirements from staff which will be included in their individual work programmes.
- 101 Equality and diversity is mainstreamed into all service planning with equality action plans included in all SOP's. Both sports and heritage services SOPs listed a number of actions including the production of leaflets in other languages and training programmes for staff. The mainstreaming of these actions into the service planning process ensures a direct link to budget planning so that resources can be planned and identified from the outset.
- 102 However, the robustness of the action plans detailed within the SOPs is not consistent. The plans currently mix actions and outcomes and do not provide clear target dates for completion, or at least milestones against which progress can be assessed. Furthermore, not all the plans detail to whom the task has been formally assigned.
- 103 While we acknowledge that peer review of SOPs does take place within departments, the closely shared agendas of the cultural sector within different directorates are not currently recognised through cross-department peer review. This is an area that should be explored to help embed the value of culture in meeting the council's wider corporate objectives and ensure that SOPs dovetail effectively.
- 104 Performance is reported to councillors and senior officers in different ways dependant upon circumstance. For example, the council has identified a raft of key performance indicators, known as its vital signs, which are reported to cabinet monthly. Where services have experienced significant weaknesses in the past, for example sport and leisure, senior managers are meeting with the leader and chief executive bi-monthly to discuss any issues and monitor the sustained improvement in service delivery. General service performance is reported quarterly.

- 105 The majority of existing local performance indicators provide useful operational information which helps managers to identify priorities and balance workloads. However, there are no indicators in place which can demonstrate performance in terms of meaningful community impact. The council is in a position where, now that it is collecting baseline information across the cultural sector, it can look to identify with partners some appropriate impact measures, for example around the contribution of culture to healthier communities, stronger and safer communities and sustainable communities.
- 106 Cultural services have developed a clear understanding at a strategic level of the communities it serves and this information is used to improve delivery. The strategy for sports and physical activity 2004-09, undertook a comprehensive assessment of community profiling through use of a range of tools, including leisure centre surveys, citizens panel, audits of sports clubs and schools and focus groups targeted at specific 'hard to reach' groups. The views expressed through this consultation have provided the context for the strategy and informed the preparation of recommendations and priorities to be taken forward by the strategy steering group which, in addition to the council, has representation from the voluntary sector, schools, the health authority and facility providers. The preparation of the playing pitch strategy is another effective example of where the service is able to demonstrate a robust understanding of its current and predicted future community's make up.
- 107 At the service delivery level the 10 per cent household survey undertaken by the parks service annually enables a reasonably accurate and up-to-date understanding of the community and the Grange museum employs a robust mechanism for collecting information about users of the service. Every tenth customer is requested to complete a brief questionnaire the information from which is collated to provide information on usage patterns and general observations. Whilst we recognise this model may not easily replicate to libraries and leisure centres, where throughput is much greater, we do believe the principle warrants exploration as profiling and effective consultation with users in these facilities remains an area for improvement.
- 108 The council has recognised its procurement arrangements need to be strengthened and key tasks being undertaken currently include: training, the development of an expenditure database, the adoption and implementation of an approved supplier list and the implementation of a current contract database with forward action plans.
- 109 Completing these actions must be prioritised as the leisure centre management contract expires in April 2006 and the process of retendering will need to be initiated shortly. The relationship between the council and leisure management contractor has improved recently but the council accepts there were weaknesses in the original contract specification. They will have to expose the contract to an open competition process and to maximise the benefits from any new contract they will need to be clear what they want to achieve from it and have the capacity to negotiate and monitor this effectively.
- 110 The benefits of effective partnership working to help increase capacity are recognised and addressed across cultural services. The out of schools support service works with the Brent play association to support their back room needs so that they can focus resources on delivery and the PCT is working with the council in Monks Park to deliver against key shared priorities.
- 111 However, opportunities to increase the effectiveness of partnership working remain. The adoption of a formalised strategic framework for cultural services with engagement from external partners and stakeholders now provides an opportunity for the service to agree with other parties how they can maximise use of resources to improve the delivery of services on the ground. This is important to pursue

especially taken in the context of views expressed from frontline staff and middle managers about their existing workloads and limited spare capacity, a concern noted by councillors and senior officers.

## **How effectively do the council's future plans sustain a clear focus on achieving its ambitions for cultural services?**

- 112 Successful councils have effectively integrated cultural priorities into corporate plans and focus is maintained through regular reporting. Plans are reviewed and revised to reflect changing circumstances and partners and stakeholders are effectively engaged in developing and monitoring cultural plans.
- 113 Earlier in this report we recognised that community and corporate planning reflected the role for cultural services and equally the emerging strategic framework within cultural services recognised key local priorities which reflected the regional and national agenda. Whilst action plans are broadly shared with key stakeholders they are not all costed with explicit targets developed.
- 114 This is clearly illustrated in the 'Improving Brent Action Plan 2004-2006' which sets out a programme of actions up to December 2006. This identifies key targets to be achieved in the cultural sector including:
  - ◆ increase the overall public satisfaction with the Library Service to 70 per cent by March 2006; and
  - ◆ increase the number of visits to our sports facilities by 10 per cent by summer 2006.
- 115 There is a 'golden thread' linking the hierarchy of council plans though the use of common language to help link them is not fully utilised. This concern is recognised and will be addressed through the planning cycle.
- 116 The content of plans consistently reflects areas of priority and address where the council has not achieved what it wanted to. Relocation of the Grange museum illustrates where plans were developed in recognition of the constraints of the existing provision to ensure that relocation would allow the service to develop in line with resident expectation. Sports service now benefits from a strategic framework absent at the time of the previous inspection in 2002. This framework is being used by staff to identify shared goals across cultural services and staff have welcomed the focus and direction with which they are now being provided.
- 117 Extensive engagement with stakeholders is evident in developing the cultural plans. This can be demonstrated in the preparation of the draft cultural strategy, strategy of sport and physical activity and playing pitch strategy, all of which have included external involvement from the outset and engaged with stakeholders to help monitor their implementation.
- 118 Stakeholder events and consultation exercises were planned from the outset to ensure an effective contribution in the development of the cultural strategy and the cultural forum has been established to contribute to its implementation and monitoring. This group has links to the LSP and will ensure that objectives reflect LSP priorities.
- 119 However, there are a number of areas where this stakeholder engagement can still be improved. Following the libraries, museum and archive best value review the panel concluded that plans for the future were not being fully shared with stakeholders and this raises concerns about their future engagement. We also feel opportunities should be explored to share objectives, priorities and actions with partners and for this relationship to be explicitly stated in partner strategies. For

example, the sports strategy recognises high death rates in the borough from coronary heart disease. This will feature in the priorities from the PCT but we found no sharing of joint targets in the strategic plan with this key partner. Without the clarity of fit between council and stakeholder plans it is unclear how they will move from intention to action.

- 120 There is an evolving picture in respect of having mechanisms in place for reviewing future plans to reflect changing circumstances. The council has effective performance management and forward planning practices in place and these are clearly understood both within environment and EAL. However, the comprehensive strategic planning framework is only now being formalised and ensuring they are all effectively monitored and reviewed is a future challenge for the services. We recognise external forums have been established to assist in this process for their respective responsibilities, such as the cultural forum and the sports forum, but believe this is an area requiring further consideration. The cultural services team with its strategic remit would be well placed to take this work forward.

## Summary

- 121 The council has directed sustained growth to cultural services with a commitment for this to continue in the short term. This has helped to address previous capacity issues in respect of the sports service and performance management is now operating effectively across the cultural sector. There is a demonstrable commitment to mainstreaming equality and diversity issues and the value of embedding existing and developing new partnerships is recognised in helping to deliver ambitions and drive improvement.
- 122 However, opportunities to improve partnership working remain, particularly in developing a closer recognition of shared agendas which may help identify appropriate ways of future working. Aligned to this are the benefits to be gained from identifying a range of impact based measures to more visibly demonstrate the contribution of culture in meeting local, regional and national priorities.
- 123 The strategic planning framework at community, corporate and service levels is closely linked and now provides a direction and focus for the future but there are major challenges ahead which the council is yet to fully address. These focus around the need to develop a planned programme of capital investment across the cultural sector, libraries being just one example, and the need to undertake a robust and comprehensive procurement of the existing leisure centre management contract which expires in April 2006.

## 124 Appendices

The purpose of a best value inspection is to make two judgements. The first is how good is the service being inspected? The second is what are the prospects for improvement? We carried out a range of activities to enable us to reach our judgements.

## Documents reviewed

Before going on site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that the council provided for us. These included:

Document Request
1. Culture Service Operational Plan
2. Heritage Service Operation Plan
3. Library Service Operational Plan
4. Library Position Statement
5. Library BVR
6. Out of School Support Services
7. Parks: BVR
8. Parks: Playing fields strategy
9. Parks: Service Operational Plan
10. Sport: Service Operational Plan
11. Sports: Draft Strategy
12. Vital signs
13. Cultural framework
14. Bio-diversity plan
15. BVI Survey
16. community Plan
17. Consultation strategy
18. Corporate strategy
19. Education SDP
20. Environment SDP
21. Improving Brent
22. LA21
23. Procurement strategy
24. Residents survey
25. Wembley Framework

## Reality checks undertaken

When we went on site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. We also followed up on



issues relating to the management of the review and the improvements flowing from it. Our reality checks included:

Visits to sports and leisure centres

Visits to parks.

## List of people interviewed

John Christie	Director – Education, Arts and Libraries
Christine Coppack	Operations Director – Leisure Connection
Gareth Daniel	Chief Executive
Shaun Faulkner	Head of Parks
Sue Harper	Assistant Director – Sport and Leisure
Caroline Jenkinson	Cultural Strategy Officer
Councillor John	Leader
Councillor Jones	Portfolio holder - Environment
Councillor Kansagra	Opposition portfolio holder - Environment
Gerry Kiefer	Head of Sport
Doug Lee	Head of Brent Play Service
Councillor Lyon	Portfolio holder – Education, Arts and Libraries
Marianne Locke	Acting Assistant Director EAL & Head of Library Service
Michael Read	Assistant Director – Policy and Regeneration
Richard Saunders	Director, Environment Directorate
Alex Sydney	Head of Heritage Services
Cathy Tyson	Assistant Director Corporate Policy
Tracy Walters	Head of Diversity

In addition two focus groups were held with:

- ◆ A cross-section of middle managers working within cultural services
- ◆ Frontline staff from both of the two probe areas.

## Appendix 2

### Shared Priorities

The shared priorities were agreed between the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Government in July 2002 with the intention of balancing government's legitimate interest in seeing improvements in key public services with the importance of local priorities and the need for councils and other local organisations to have the freedom to pursue national priorities in ways which reflect local needs and circumstances. The priorities cover some of the most challenging areas of public policy on which it is essential that government, councils and others work together. The shared public service delivery priorities are:

- Raising standards across our schools
- Improving the quality of life of older people and of children, young people and families at risk
- Promoting healthier communities and narrowing health inequalities
- Creating safer and stronger communities
- Transforming our local environment
- Meeting local transport needs more effectively
- Promoting the economic vitality of localities

## Improving public services

The Government has placed a duty upon local councils to deliver services to clear standards – of cost and quality – by the most economic, efficient and effective means available.<sup>3</sup> Best value is a challenging framework that is designed to improve local services. Councils are required to assess their own performance and put in place measures to ensure continuous improvement in all of their services.

Councils must show that they have applied the 4Cs of best value:

- ◆ **challenging** why and how a service is being provided;
- ◆ **comparing** their performance with others' (including organisations in the private and voluntary sectors);
- ◆ embracing fair **competition** as a means of securing efficient and effective services; and
- ◆ **consulting** local **taxpayers**, customers and the wider business community.

The Government has decided that each council should be scrutinised by an independent inspectorate. The Audit Commission performs this role.

The purpose of the inspection, and of this report, is to:

- ◆ enable the public to see whether best value is being delivered;
- ◆ enable the council to see how well it is doing;
- ◆ enable the Government to see how well its policies are working in practice;
- ◆ identify failing services where remedial action may be necessary; and
- ◆ identify and disseminate best practice.

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<sup>3</sup> This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission ('the Commission') following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.