

Inspection report

January 2004



Play and After School Service

London Borough of Southwark

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Summary

- 1 Southwark is an inner London borough located in the south of the city. It currently has a population of approximately 244,900, of which 37 per cent are from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities.
- 2 Despite pockets of affluence such as Dulwich Village and the new cultural, retail and commercial quarter at Borough and Bankside, Southwark is ranked the ninth most deprived council out of 354 on the index of local deprivation (2000). Seventy per cent of local people live in a ward which is within the 10 per cent most deprived nationally.¹
- 3 The council currently comprises 63 councillors and is controlled by a minority Liberal Democrat administration with 29 seats. The Labour Party and the Conservative Party have 28 and 6 seats respectively.
- 4 The net revenue budget for 2002/03 is £340 million. The council employs 9,336 staff across all services, including 3,097 part-time staff.²

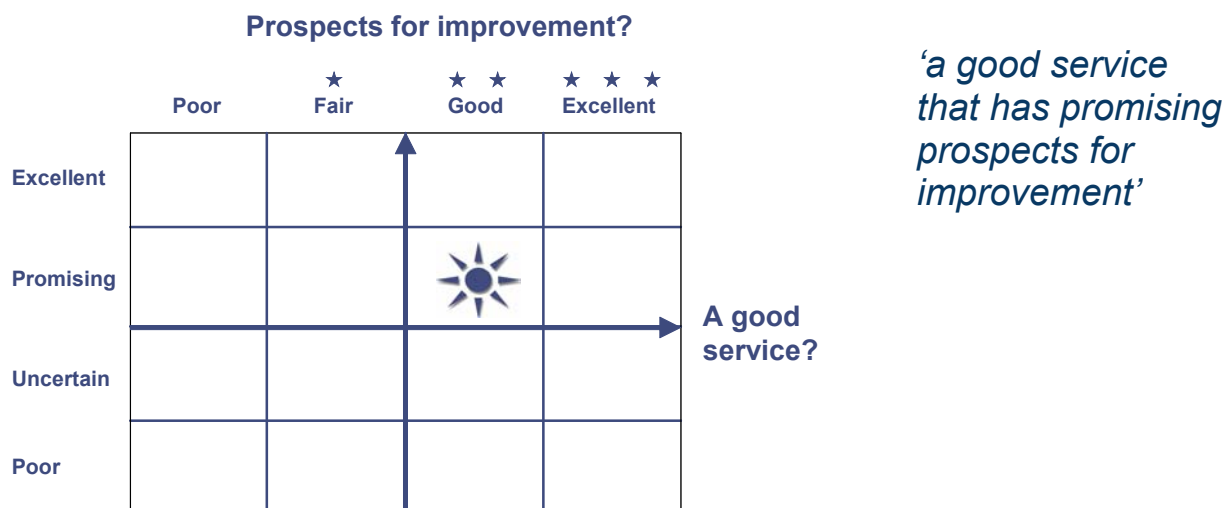
¹ DTLR Indices of Deprivation 2000.

² Employers Organisation LG Employment Survey, 2002. Employee jobs on a named basis at June 2002.

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 chart³: London Borough of Southwark - Play and After School Service



- 6 The service is good because:
- ◆ parents, children and other stakeholders trust, value and are well satisfied with the services on offer;
 - ◆ there is extensive provision of after school clubs provided both by the council and by voluntary organisations;
 - ◆ there are long established adventure playgrounds in different areas of the borough; and
 - ◆ there are now sound arrangements for the maintenance of playgrounds on housing estates and in parks.
- 7 The prospects for improvement of the service are promising because:
- ◆ there is a high level of commitment from councillors and service staff to improve and extend the service;
 - ◆ the service has a strong track record of securing funding to support its development; and
 - ◆ service management is experienced and has been successful in broadening the horizons of the service to link with wider agendas around educational attainment and community safety.

However:

- ◆ there is poor understanding of unit costs and of the relative performance of different clubs and playgrounds;

³ 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.

- ◆ attention to the service by senior management in education and cultural services has been limited but the proposed restructuring should enhance this;
- ◆ relationships with the voluntary sector are generally good though external procurement arrangements are based on historical commitments rather than assessment of need; and
- ◆ the future financial strategy for the service is not set out clearly enough.

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:
- ◆ Work out the overall cost of providing the after school and play service, including all public funding sources, overhead and re-charge costs and use this to develop comparative information on unit costs of provision.
 - ◆ Prepare a medium term financial strategy for the play and after school service based on the resources that are known to be available to each club, playground or centre over each of the next three years.
 - ◆ Ensure that the new management structures for education and cultural services enable the play and after school service to contribute to overall service planning particularly in relation to new opportunities like extended schools, children's centres and regeneration programmes.
 - ◆ Review the procurement arrangements for the play and after school service so that there is a greater degree of parity between council and voluntary sector providers taking into account levels of service, accessibility and reliability.
 - ◆ In consultation with stakeholders, clarify the relative priority of the different aims of after school clubs.
 - ◆ Review arrangements for setting fees and providing fee remission to ensure equity and financial transparency.
 - ◆ Communicate clearly and regularly the policy on sign-up to the service and the consequent fees policy.
 - ◆ Conduct rigorous surveys of potential and existing users to establish the true demand for extending access to the service, for example by extending the opening hours of after school clubs to meet the needs of parents who cannot get back in time to collect children and by providing part-time places in maintained clubs.
 - ◆ Report performance information regularly to councillors, including relative cost performance of the different sites.

- 9 We would like to thank the staff of Southwark London Borough Council, particularly Dave Wallis, Garry Martin and Sue Simmance who made us welcome and who met our requests with good humour and courtesy.

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Dates of inspection: 3 November 2003 – 7 November 2003

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Report

Context

- 10 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

- 11 Southwark is an inner London borough located in the south of the capital, immediately opposite the cities of London and the Westminster City Council. The borough covers an area of around 11 square miles.
- 12 Results from the 2001 census indicate that the borough had a population of 244,900 in April 2001⁴. In contrast to many other London boroughs, Southwark's population has risen at triple the national average rate since 1991, with an overall increase of 11.7 per cent. BME groups are estimated to comprise around 37 per cent of the population. The number of households is expected to rise from 105,800 to 122,000 by 2011⁵ with single person households increasing at the fastest rate.
- 13 Southwark has a complex socio-economic profile, characterised by pockets of affluence, such as Dulwich Village and the new cultural, retail and commercial quarter at Borough and Bankside, and areas with high levels of deprivation, such as Peckham and Camberwell. Southwark is ranked 9th out of 354 on the index of local deprivation (2000), and 70 per cent of local people live in a ward which is within the 10 per cent most deprived nationally.⁶

The council

- 14 The council currently comprises 63 councillors and is controlled by a minority Liberal Democrat administration with 29 seats. The Labour Party and the Conservative Party have 28 and 6 seats respectively.
- 15 The net revenue budget for 2002/03 was £340 million. The council employs 9,336 staff across all services, including 3,097 part-time staff.⁷
- 16 The council's priorities as identified in the community strategy are:
- ◆ stable and inclusive communities;
 - ◆ a safe place to live and work;
 - ◆ better education for all;
 - ◆ a quality environment;
 - ◆ a thriving and sustainable economy; and
 - ◆ a healthy and caring borough.

⁴ 2001 Census Day data, ONS.

⁵ 2002 Round of GLA Demographic Projections, GLA November 2002.

⁶ DTLR Indices of Deprivation 2000.

⁷ Employers Organisation LG Employment Survey, 2002. Employee jobs on a named basis at June 2002.

The service inspection

- 17 The play and after school service consists of adventure playgrounds, after school clubs and holiday play schemes. It also provides professional advice on play provision to the parks and housing services that maintain fixed play equipment. It contributes to the development of plans and proposals for play provision as part of regeneration programmes.
- 18 The borough has agreed a local public services agreement (LPSA) with Central Government that focuses on young people and the improvement of community safety. The play and after school service has the responsibility to achieve some of these LPSA targets particularly to increase the number of visits by young people to playgrounds and youth facilities.
- 19 Most of the adventure playgrounds in Southwark are well established in their local communities.
- 20 The best value review (BVR) of play and after school services also considered the provision of unsupervised fixed play areas in parks and housing estates. It also looked at how this service can make provision for children with special needs.
- 21 The contribution to the service budget from the council's general fund for 2002/03 was £3,093,000, a fall of 35 per cent from the previous year. The 2003/04 budget contribution is £2,517,000, a further decline of 19 per cent. The decline in funding from the council general fund is compensated for by increases in external grants and income from fees.
- 22 This inspection covered the services that were considered in the 2000 BVR: adventure playgrounds, after school and summer schemes and arrangements for the maintenance of fixed play equipment. It took place two and a half years after the review was completed so it focused on the present quality of services and the strategy to secure further sustained improvement.

How good is the service?

Are the aims clear and challenging?

- 23 Southwark is a densely populated urban area. It has a growing population and within that a growing proportion of young people. High traffic densities, busy arterial roads and concerns about children's safety mean that the provision of safe and challenging places for children to play is important.
- 24 Southwark as a borough has relatively high levels of unemployment and a relatively high proportion of single parent families.⁸ It is a high priority for the borough to support and encourage people to take up the jobs that are available. The normal school day is shorter than the normal working day and so after school and holiday care and play provision is needed so that children are cared for and parents are able to take the jobs that are available.
- 25 There was extensive provision of after school clubs in the borough until responsibility for education passed from the Inner London Education Authority to Southwark. A series of tight financial settlements has then meant the council has had to reduce provision. However, in recent years driven by the need to help more parents to take employment, it has started to expand again.
- 26 The education and culture department of Southwark Council has high aspirations. It aims to establish Southwark as a lead borough for education and culture regionally, nationally and internationally. This includes providing the best play services in London. The vision of the play and after school service is set out in the business plan for 2003/06:
- ◆ increase and improve children's access to free play opportunities;
 - ◆ increase opportunities for children to play and learn in safety;
 - ◆ provide more after school clubs that support and care for children within a supervised play environment;
 - ◆ provide the opportunity for children to raise their levels of educational achievement;
 - ◆ increase services for children in need and for children with special needs; and
 - ◆ provide support to parents and carers who are working or to those who wish to return to work or study.
- 27 This vision is supported by seven service objectives that specify the work that the service will undertake. Some of these objectives contain clear achievement criteria (for example services will meet national standards) whilst others state positive intentions without specifying criteria for success or stating by how much services will improve. The business plan also includes a set of targets for the service but with a few exceptions these are only loosely related to the aims and objectives of the service.
- 28 Overall the aims of the service are clear and consistent with the priorities of the borough and of the local strategic partnership (LSP).
- 29 The play service aims to provide supervised free play opportunities for children and young people aged 5-15 mainly through the provision of adventure playgrounds. It also manages a kart track that offers a valuable opportunity for young people under supervision to learn the skills and disciplines of motor sport. The service has

⁸ 10 per cent of household compared with an average of 6.5 per cent for England and Wales, Census 2001.

recently taken over management responsibility for pre-school drop in centres in parks.

- 30 The three overall aims of the after school service are:
- ◆ to raise standards of achievement in schools;
 - ◆ to provide after school care for the children of working parents; and
 - ◆ to provide free play opportunities for children.
- 31 These aims are not fundamentally incompatible but the inconsistent application of the relative priority of the different aims does have practical consequences. If the primary aim of this service is to look after the children of working parents (who pay fees) after the end of the normal school day then giving priority to these children is appropriate. However, if the primary aim is to raise achievement or to provide play opportunities for children then priority in the allocation of places should be based on the needs of the child, giving priority to those children in greatest need. This has implications for fees policy, particularly in those services provided by the voluntary sector where fee remission for families on benefits is not widely available.
- 32 The various stakeholders of the service in Southwark have not considered the relative weighting of these different aims and have not come to a collective consensus which feeds into operations.

Does the service meet these aims?

- 33 Having considered the aims that the council has set for the service, inspectors make an assessment of how well the council is meeting these aims. 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.
- 34 Overall the services do well in relation to their aims. In some cases the aims are aspirational without clear outcome targets so it is not possible to accurately assess whether they are achieved. The after school and play services directly delivered by the council are very well thought of by service users and other stakeholders. After school clubs are valued and trusted by parents. Children enjoy the activities. Headteachers also value the provision and the professional way that the service is managed. There is a range of views among both parents and headteachers about the extent to which the clubs contribute directly to raising achievement. A minority of both regard this as an important function. The majority believe that while the clubs make an important contribution to broadening children's experience, improving social skills and motivation, they do not contribute directly to raising achievement.
- 35 The clubs are popular; half of the council run clubs are full and have a waiting list. There are vacancies at other clubs but the number of available places is not monitored.
- 36 The council's after school clubs are planned and funded to open for two and a half hours at the end of the school day. For example, in those schools that close at 3.00pm the club closes at 5.30pm, this makes it tight for parents coming from jobs any distance away, which finish at 5.00pm, to get to the clubs in time to collect their children. Some parents therefore have to arrange for another carer to bridge the gap, even if very small. Most of the council-run after school clubs operate on school sites and so have to respect the constraints on behaviour and activities that arise from sharing premises.
- 37 Some parents and carers mentioned the quantity and quality of 'tuck' (snacks) which the children have available to them at after school clubs. This is usually squash and some biscuits occasionally alternated with fruit. Parents felt that this was insufficient for children, some of whom had had their lunch six hours earlier.

They were discouraged from giving their children food to bring in because this caused difficulties with those children who had brought in nothing. The council could consider providing a wider range of 'tuck' products.

- 38 A highlight of the after school club year is the annual 'showcase' where clubs come together to present a show and display their work to parents, carers and teachers. This is a positive recognition and celebration of the work that clubs do.
- 39 In addition to the after school clubs the council supports homework clubs. These operate in nine local libraries, open for two evenings per week. They are open access clubs which attract 3,500 attendances per year. There are plans in the current year to support a further 12 clubs in voluntary community groups.
- 40 The council organises holiday play schemes during the Easter and summer school holidays in each of the after school services five management areas. These schemes offer parents a choice of full-day (9.00am-5.00pm) provision or extended days (8.00am-6.00pm). These are generally well received by parents and children, although on occasion evaluations have been more critical. Where this is the case steps are taken to remedy these deficiencies in future schemes. There are a wide range of other play schemes organised by voluntary organisations, many of which are grant aided by the council.
- 41 As a direct outcome of the BVR, the arrangements to maintain unsupervised playgrounds on housing estates have been significantly improved. The council has let a contract for maintenance to a specialist contractor and has engaged another specialist to undertake quarterly safety inspections. Proposals to make improvements to the maintenance of playgrounds in parks are well advanced. The work will be undertaken by the council's own staff. While these arrangements cover the maintenance of existing play areas resources for improvement are secured from a variety of sources including regeneration funds and the delegated capital allocations to the borough's eight area committees.
- 42 The council runs eight popular and well managed adventure playgrounds. It also supports three that are managed by the voluntary sector. Playgrounds have developed and extended their services in different ways. These include residential holidays away from the borough, and football coaching schemes. Some playgrounds have now extended their work to make provision for disaffected young people either on the point of leaving school or after leaving school. This includes setting up a scheme to provide full sports based education and training. This is valuable work though it extends beyond the core purpose of the service.
- 43 One of the playgrounds supported by the council provides for children with physical disabilities. It is used by organised groups of children from special schools as well as by individual children. There is also a holiday play scheme specifically aimed at children with special needs. This has specially trained staff and welcomes children with high levels of dependency.
- 44 Each of the clubs and playgrounds produce an annual report that describes the activities and improvements that have taken place during the year. These are informative documents but do not contain any financial information to enable readers to judge value for money.
- 45 Many of the senior staff in both the play and after school services have worked for Southwark Council for a long time. This lends stability to the services, although it also means that staff lack external perspectives on service quality. Many started working as part-time or casual staff and have taken on broader responsibilities as opportunities have arisen. The majority of staff in both services are part-time or occasional.
- 46 While there is a strong body of staff who have remained with the services for a long time there is a high turnover among new and recent recruits. This is in part due to the part-time and seasonal hours that the services operate. The recruitment and

retention of sufficiently experienced and qualified staff to manage centres is a potential constraint on the further expansion of the service. The service is aware of this and has taken some steps to encourage staff to take up other part-time positions within the department or within schools which can fit with their after school club commitments.

- 47 The service does have an extensive programme of staff development and has held the Investors in People award since 1998, with the review in November 2000 reporting exceptionally high standards. Induction and child protection training are compulsory for all new staff. There are modules on first aid, risk assessment and food hygiene which staff are encouraged to attend. All senior play workers and after school club managers must attend training on supervisory management.
- 48 The impact of training is (expected to be) evaluated by line managers as part of staff annual work plan appraisals.
- 49 There have been difficulties in getting staff to attend courses which are felt in part to be due to the very part-time nature of some jobs. This began to be addressed by the inclusion in the contracts for all staff starting since 2001 that attendance at training is compulsory.
- 50 A key action in the business plan is to 'move towards 50 per cent of staff with NVQs'. The current position is unclear, though a forthcoming database of staff skills and qualifications should resolve this. There is some scepticism about meeting this target, though principally around local college difficulties in administering the scheme.
- 51 The NVQ training programme is available to the voluntary sector and is publicised in the cross-sector 'Children First' newsletter. Take up is reasonable though cover for staff attending courses poses particular problems for these groups as they are not funded for this.
- 52 Financial control and monitoring is good. The service manager has succeeded in combining the declining allocation of resources from the council's general fund with grants from New Opportunities Fund (NOF), Children's Fund and various regeneration programmes to enable the services to maintain and extend levels of activity. However, below this level the financial issues facing the services are not well understood. The financial information given in the business plan is partial and links between business planning and resource planning are weak. No-one whom we met could give us the unit cost of either of the services.
- 53 Procurement is not well understood. Approximately two thirds of after school and playground services are delivered directly by the council and about one third by the voluntary sector. This is a consequence of continuing historical arrangements and patterns of grant aid. Different voluntary organisations are funded at different rates. There is no strategy for procurement of services so that the best available organisations are commissioned to provide services in each locality.
- 54 The fees charged by the council for after school and holiday care are low in comparison with other councils (currently £15 per week). They have been increased significantly in the past two years and the council takes steps to ensure that parents are aware of the tax credit system in order to reduce the individual impact of fee increases. While the fees are relatively low, parents are expected to pay for five days per week and for the full term irrespective of whether they need the service every day of the week. This was the most frequently cited concern amongst parents and carers, for example even when a club is closed due to an INSET day at the school or due to strike action by schools-based staff, no refund is given. The service's explanation that costs continue to be incurred irrespective of events outside their control is not widely understood.
- 55 Fee levels vary considerably between different providers. Voluntary organisations have set fees at a higher level than the council (we spoke to two organisations

charging £35-£40 per week). They are also not generally able to afford to offer free places to children of families that depend on welfare benefits. This can have the unintended effect that children whose families are on income support may in fact be excluded from any provision because they cannot afford voluntary sector fees.

How does the performance compare?

- 56 Comparative data for these services is not comprehensive or readily available. Southwark is an active participant in the London play organisation and has a good reputation there for the range and quality of its provision.
- 57 Quality of provision is benchmarked against relevant quality standards. After school clubs and play schemes are regularly inspected by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) and do comply with national standards. Adventure playgrounds are internally assessed against standards devised by the London Play Organisation. One of Southwark's adventure playgrounds was awarded 'playground of the year' in 2002. The council has adopted a modified version of the NPFA standards for the provision of fixed play areas in parks.
- 58 There is one Audit Commission performance indicator, now discontinued, relevant to this inspection: the number of fixed playgrounds per 1000 children. In 2000 Southwark was in the top quartile of London boroughs with 4.9 play grounds per 1000 children
- 59 Southwark has taken the initiative within the London Play Organisation to seek out benchmarking information. It has commissioned work from a consultant to compare the costs of after school provision. This work, though, has focused on fees and the costs of service inputs and has not generated information about unit costs or service outcomes. This is a significant gap but not one that a single borough can fill on its own.
- 60 There are no arrangements to compare cost and performance of the various service sites within Southwark as a means of recognising good practice and using the lessons of this to drive improvement across the service. The presentation and distribution of financial and performance information does not give a transparent picture of the costs of service delivery or enable managers or councillors to make a judgement about the relative merits of different procurement methods.

Summary

- 61 Overall the play and after school service is doing well within the constraints of the existing service configuration. To make further significant progress will require strategic and structural change.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 62 Inspectors use the following four building blocks to judge the service's prospects for improvement:
- ◆ ownership of problems and willingness to change;
 - ◆ a sustained focus on what matters;
 - ◆ capacity and systems to deliver performance and improvement; and
 - ◆ integration of continuous improvement into day-to-day management.

Ownership of problems and willingness to change

- 63 In good and excellent councils, senior managers and councillors are committed to continuous improvement. They are willing to tackle difficult problems, take difficult decisions and stick to them. They are open about their performance and problems and welcome internal and external challenge.

- 64 The service displays a good understanding of the national policy context in which it operates. This awareness has clearly increased in recent years, partly linked to the need to obtain funding from sources linked to these various policy initiatives. The service has made effective links with the youth service, for example, and took part in the 'positive activities' programme during summer 2003. Senior play workers mentor young people identified as in need of additional support, in particular those who have been excluded from school. This has met with a degree of success so far, including some young people entering college after contact with the programme.
- 65 The education and cultural services directorate has been restructured. Early years education has been brought together with play and after school services into a single business unit called childrens' services. As a result of this, play rooms for children under five years old were brought under the management of the play manager in November 2003. This realignment of services around the child will encourage a user focus and responds to the government agenda to ensure that services to children are integrated at the local level. It will also raise the profile of the service and provide a better basis for strategic planning.
- 66 Comparative research found that the Southwark after school service charged significantly less than the London borough average per place. Over the last two years, those fees have risen from £12 per week to £15 per week to help increase the quantity of service provision. The business plan sets an income target for the after school service of £1 million by 2006 which will require the term time fee to rise to £20 per week.
- 67 Aspects of the education service not directly related to schools have received inconsistent strategic attention. Southwark Local Education Authority (LEA) was subject to critical reports from Ofsted in 1999 and 2000. As a result of this the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) directed that services provided by the LEA to schools should be outsourced and run by a private contractor. In the early part of 2003, the contractor decided to withdraw from the contract and an alternative provider was appointed. In its most recent report on the LEA, Ofsted noted improvements had been made but commented on the lack of management capacity on the council client side. This capacity has been further stretched by the need to negotiate the termination of the first contract and the introduction of the alternative provider. Rightly, the council has focused attention on resolving this very important matter. As opportunities for new developments arise such as extended schools, regeneration and children's centres this could mean that the council is not best placed to take full advantage of these opportunities.
- 68 The uncertainty around future management arrangements for education should be resolved soon. External consultants have recently completed their report with proposals on the future structure of the education service in Southwark. They propose closer integration of those services currently managed by the external contractor and those services, including play and after school services that are managed directly by the council.
- 69 Within childrens' services, managers have stretched their time and attention to cover the new agendas, broader responsibilities and take advantage of opportunities. This does not appear to have produced any significant operational problems to date and that is to the credit of the management team. Some of the capacity shortfall has been covered by 'acting up' arrangements but these arrangements are at present only temporary.
- 70 At present the after school service is organised on the basis of five areas and management of the play service is on a whole borough basis. The council has established eight community councils (neighbourhood committees) to consider council policy and delivery at local level. The youth service has reorganised its management structure to reflect this development. This enables cross cutting

development of services to meet local circumstances. The play and after school service intends to reorganise on a similar basis.

- 71 Play and after school services, particularly in the voluntary sector are financially supported from a range of sources including NOF, Children's Fund, regeneration funding such as Single Regeneration Budget (SRB), Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF), New Deal for Communities (NDC). Most of this funding is for a limited time period, in some cases it reduces year on year. There is awareness among some service managers that future funding is not necessarily secure but there is no clear forward projection of the resources that are expected to be available to the service in the future and hence the size of any potential funding gap. For example, funding for the 'positive activities' programme in Leyton Square is due to expire in April 2004, and the mobile play buses have two years funding from the Children's Fund. The Play Network, the principal agency for supporting voluntary sector providers, has funding from the Early Years and Child Care Development Plan (EYCCDP) and the council that is due to expire in 2004.
- 72 The track record of the service in successfully securing resources is good. For example, the play service is currently achieving double the amount targeted in the business plan and funding has been secured for an additional 700 new out of school places by 2006. Both the council and voluntary providers have made good links with the children's fund and collaborate over funding allocations.
- 73 Leading councillors say that they are determined that funding will continue to be found to extend and develop the service. While the amounts and sources of funding are known in general terms, there is little detailed planning to show how much additional funding will be needed to sustain each of the services over the medium term.
- 74 There is no system in place to learn from good practice in the better performing facilities in order to direct funding priorities or to focus intervention in less well performing areas appropriately. Limited use is made of internal and in-borough, cross-sector comparison to drive performance improvement. This is partly due to the difficulty in obtaining reliable comparative information from other boroughs about service costs and relative levels of customer satisfaction. Internally the information that is generated about costs, attendance levels and user satisfaction at different venues is not used to compare performance. Recently work has been started on unit costs for the play service; this is a useful start and should form the basis for work to understand why costs vary from site to site.

A sustained focus on what matters

- 75 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.
- 76 A comprehensive consultation process was conducted during the BVR in 2000. It covered all stakeholders from children, to parents and carers, through councillors, staff and headteachers. There was some attempt to engage with non-users or potential users through the MORI poll of residents.
- 77 Consultation since the review has been less comprehensive. However, there is consultative work going on in both elements of the service.
- 78 After school club managers are required to demonstrate how they have consulted children and parents and carers as part of the performance checklist, which area managers go through once each term. There are regular satisfaction surveys of after school club and summer play scheme users. Letters informing parents and carers about fees increases include a tear-off slip inviting views on the service.

- 79 There is some information about the satisfaction levels of users of adventure playgrounds, though the most recent data is 2000. However, the service does consult on a project by project basis. For example, recent consultation around the proposed Camden Park facility revealed that young people were keen that a climbing wall be included in the design; this is now being done. Similarly, three skateboard parks are now planned for the borough and there is evidence that Friday opening at Surrey Docks and Mint Street came about in response to consultation with young people.
- 80 The service does not currently consult with non-users or potential users, though we were told that schools without clubs were surveyed two years ago and there was found to be no demand.
- 81 Consulting with those who currently do not use the service but who might have need of it is important if the service is to unravel whether their non-use is by choice or because there are obstacles to accessing the service. We are concerned that a number of features of the shape of the current service in the borough might render it less useful to eligible Southwarks residents. These are:
- ◆ full Monday to Friday use of the service is required (this is not so in some voluntary groups). It could mean the service cannot be used by those who have only part-time caring responsibilities or who only work part-time;
 - ◆ there is no escort service to nearby clubs for children at a school where there is no club (some voluntary groups do provide these); and
 - ◆ there are no free places in voluntary sector run clubs. Children from low-income families in the area then have no access to after school facilities, especially if coupled with the lack of a borough provided escort service.
- 82 In this regard, we welcome the service’s proposal to conduct surveys of potential demand for these service features and their confidence that any demand can be met within the next 12 months.
- 83 The service does have a recent track record of increasing usage of both the after school club service and the play service, and has ambition to continue expanding:

Measure	2000	2003	Target 2004/05	Target 2005/06
Percentage of age eligible Southwark residents using the after school service	12%	18%	19%	No info
Number of play visits to adventure playgrounds & junior playrooms	80,000	120,000 ⁹	127,000	140,000
Number of places in after school service for children with special needs	71	142	160	170

- 84 This is clearly in line with the recommendations of the BVR. The challenge for the service is to ensure a close match between the pattern and shape of the growth and the needs of Southwark residents.

⁹ It’s acknowledged by the service that part of this increase is due to better information collection arrangements.

85 The services have a business plan covering the period 2003-06. The plan runs through the factors affecting the service and lists 21 performance indicators and targets, stretching across the period. Key actions anticipated over the full period of the plan are listed and there is a work plan for 2003/04, which sets out actions and targets against the seven objectives of the service. The plan has been presented to managers and to senior workers but it is not widely understood throughout the service. This limits its value as a tool for implementing service strategy.

Capacity and systems to deliver performance and improvement

86 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.

87 The service has been partially successful in cascading the corporate performance management system to staff. Most frontline staff and all managers whom we spoke to had a work plan which is reviewed every six months. Pay increments may be linked to the achievement of targets in the plans. Those which we examined show a reasonable spread of objectives and were monitored. Less evident is a robust and rigorous assessment by councillors of the performance of the service.

88 As previously described, the service faces predictable challenges around recruiting and retaining staff in an inner London borough, to largely part-time posts. There have been some attempts to 'scaffold' jobs around staff, providing details of other part-time job opportunities within the borough and showing flexibility which facilitates some staff to stitch together a number of similar jobs, for example, after school club worker and teacher's assistant or youth worker. There has been some success in this area with staff turnover down to around 10 per cent from what was, during 2000/01, a very high figure of 25 per cent.

89 Conversely, a number of staff have been in the service for many years. This lends stability and continuity to the service. However, the long term practice of promoting from within reduces the level of new thinking and the professional external challenge that new staff can bring.

90 The service has been successful in extending its capacity to meet its objectives, through partnerships within and outside of the organisation. The partnership between the play and youth services to deliver the 'positive activities' programme has been described in paragraph 64. The play service has managed to further extend its provision through work with, for example, the Peckham Partnership which has led to a new fixed playground at Jowett Street and a proposed new staffed one at Camden Park. The Camden park playground is to be a replacement for a playground that was demolished in the early stages of the Peckham re-development. It was originally scheduled for completion in May 2003. There have been delays in other departments of the council that have put this back until November 2004.

91 There are good arrangements in place to ensure that education and cultural services interests are represented at the early stages of planning for regeneration schemes. There are currently four major re-development areas in the borough. In Peckham there will be a new, albeit replacement, adventure playground. At Bermondsey Spa there will be a dedicated play building as part of a park re-development. Elephant and Castle and Canada Water developments are at early planning stages.

92 The after school club service has worked with the voluntary sector to increase their club provision since 2000. Liaison between the service and the LSP has helped deliver new clubs provided by the borough which previously might not have been considered, for example, the new club at Hollydale school in Nunhead.

Integration of continuous improvement into day-to-day management

- 93 Continuous improvement should be seen as part of the day job, with best value integrated with other council performance management processes, not treated as an add-on.
- 94 The BVR was instrumental in raising the profile of the service and it achieved a degree of success in refocusing its activity. The current business plan clearly links back to the outcomes of the BVR and the agenda for the service has been determined in large part by the review, as well as by national priorities and funding challenges.
- 95 The continuation of the use of the 4 Cs (challenge, consultation, comparison and competition) as improvement tools has been patchy. As previously described, the service does routinely conduct exit surveys of its users but more fundamental consultation, including non-users, would now inform how the service develops over the medium term.
- 96 Issues around competition, procurement, and around comparison, are hampered by the lack of transparency on unit costs and this needs to be resolved so that councillors can make informed 'make or buy' decisions. Some of the weaknesses highlighted by this inspection reflect broader corporate weaknesses. These include links between service planning and financial planning and strategy for the voluntary sector. Corporately, initial steps have been taken to remedy these. A new approach to the voluntary sector has been agreed and revised procedures to align service and financial plans. The play and after school service proposes to bring in the new commissioning arrangements between 2005/06 and 2006/07.
- 97 Whilst there are clearly regular challenges to the service in terms of sourcing funds, challenge about the shape of the service is not apparent. This inspection provides an opportunity to take stock and consider reconfiguring the service so that there is more equitable access to a service better geared around the needs of the user and which is clearer about its focus.

Summary

- 98 The play and after school service has a valuable contribution to make to the core priorities of the council. Regeneration programmes and recent government initiatives will provide opportunities for further development and improvement. A number of building blocks are in place to continue to improve the range and quality of current service provision. The challenge is to ensure the presence of sufficient capacity, priority and profile to enable a refocus of the service so that it can secure full benefit from these opportunities. The track record in successfully bidding for resources to promote growth and in engaging in new and broader agendas, suggests that the chances of the service rising to this challenge are promising.

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:

- ◆ Play and After School Service Business Plan 2003/06
- ◆ Libre Final Report October 2000
- ◆ Investors in People – Review Report November 2000
- ◆ Charter Mark – Application for Charter Mark 1999
- ◆ Charter Mark – Fast Track Application 2000
- ◆ Parent/Carer Survey Spa Road Junior Playground 2000
- ◆ Mint Street Documents
- ◆ Young Friends of Peckham Rye Park Future Meetings Activities
- ◆ Sports and Leisure Directory for Disabled People in Southwark
- ◆ Developing out of School Activities for Children with Disabilities – The Good Practice Guide
- ◆ Staff Training Certificates and Record Book
- ◆ Staff Induction Course Booklet
- ◆ Training Directory
- ◆ Quality in Play Folder
- ◆ After School Service Community Safety Project
- ◆ Behaviour Management and Anti-bullying Booklet
- ◆ Play and After School Service Curriculum
- ◆ Oliver Goldsmith After School Club Report
- ◆ Whole Health Promoting Play Centre Final Report November 2001
- ◆ Certificate of Registration for Providing Day Care – Gallywall Primary School
- ◆ Joseph Lancaster After School Club Annual Report 2001-2002
- ◆ Dog Kennel Hill After School Club Annual Report 2001-2002
- ◆ Southwark Children’s Fund Letter
- ◆ Awards for All Application – Osprey T&RA
- ◆ Jowett Street Participatory Youth Programme September 2001
- ◆ Jowett Street Workshops Summer Fun Day Activities
- ◆ Play Connections Southwark: Raising the Profile of Play Business Plan, 2001-2004
- ◆ London Borough of Southwark Play Policy - revised 2003
- ◆ Southwark Children’s Fund Service Delivery Plan
- ◆ Best Value Youth Service Action and Improvement Plan

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. They included exit surveys at two after school sites when we interviewed 30 parents/carers and their children.

List of people interviewed

Dave Wallis	Head of Children's services
Carol Field	Head teacher, Langbourne primary school (by telephone)
Bob Worth	Head teacher, Gloucester Road primary school
Paul Armstrong	Deputy Head teacher, Michael Faraday School
Carmen Lindsay	Camberwell After school project co-ordinator
Sue Simmance	After schools manager
Rita Ovenden	After school service forum development worker
Jo Smith	After school service forum development worker
Lydia Thillainagayam	Finance officer, Education and Culture department
Cllr Andy Simmons	Chair of Education Scrutiny Committee
Jon Sheaff	Parks Services Manager
Alfred Teye	Commissioning officer, Housing
Peter Southwick	Portfolio holder for playgrounds, Housing
Pat Turner	Sports development manager
Brian Dickens	Director, Lambeth and Southwark Sports Action Zone
Romi Bowen	Deputy Director, social services
Graham Sutton	Commissioning officer, Education and Culture department
Adrien Olsen	Head of libraries and lifelong learning
Garry Martin	Play services manager
Peter Leandre	Senior Play worker
Val Nonyela	Senior Play worker
Nathalie Hadjifotiou	Head of Social Inclusion
Sam Estop	Acting Director Education and culture department

Cllr Bob Skelly	Cabinet Member for Education and Culture (primary education)
David Wade	Heartbeat International and chair of Southwark Children's Fund
Rachel Murray	Community Care Forum – Play Network
Dusty Rhodes	Training and quality development officer
Karl Murray	Youth Services Manager
Russell Proffitt	Head of Peckham Programme and Social Renewal
Joyce Pollya	Project officer, Peckham programme
Dave Ware	Project officer, Peckham programme
Focus group of users	Children at Frederick's adventure playground
Focus group with small group of parents	Michael Faraday after school club
Focus group with small group of parents	Gloucester Road after school club
Exit surveys of parents/carers and children	Peckham Park primary school Dog Kennel Hill primary school
Focus group of after school service staff	
Focus group of adventure playground staff	

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.¹⁰ 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.

¹⁰ 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.