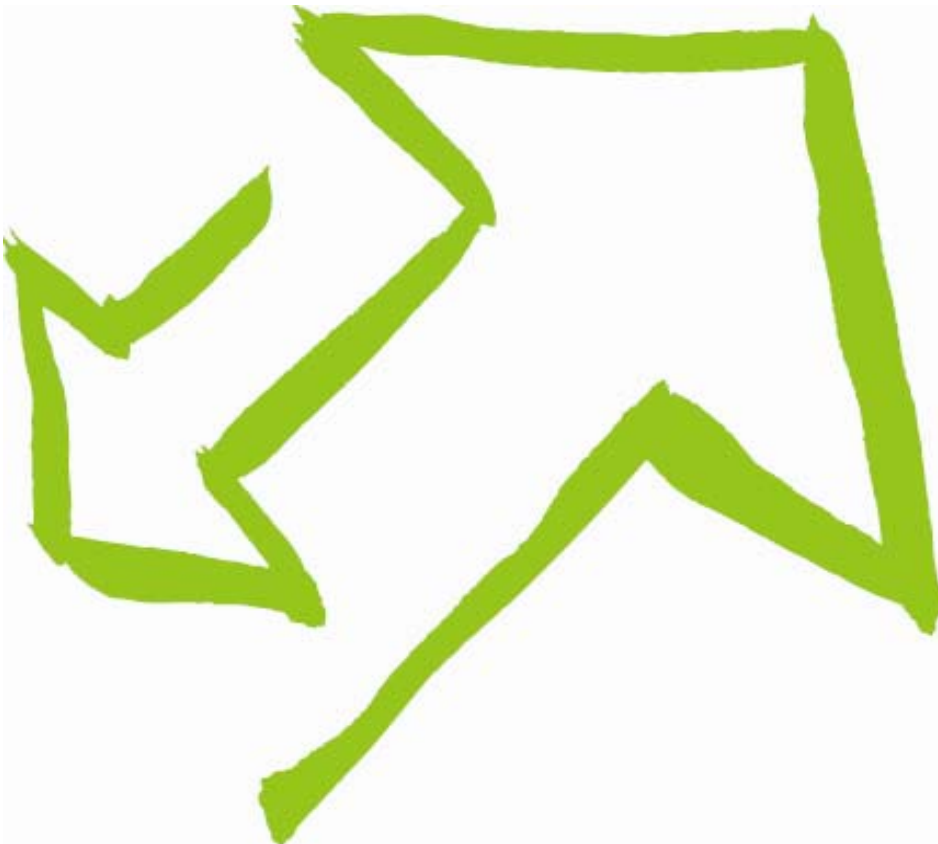


Access to Services

Waveney District Council

July 2010



Contents

Service inspections	3
Summary	4
Scoring the service	5
Recommendations	8
Report	10
How good is the service?	14
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	24

Service inspections

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

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater coordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk.

This report is issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under section 13 of the 1999 Act.

Summary

- 1 Waveney District Council (WDC) is the local authority administering an area of 370 square kilometres in north-east Suffolk. The district includes Lowestoft, which is the second largest settlement in Suffolk, the market towns of Beccles, Bungay and Halesworth, the coastal resort of Southwold and a significant rural area encompassing several attractive villages and hamlets. Waveney is a mixture of urban and rural areas and is classed as 'Significant Rural' by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). People living in Waveney earn on average less than other areas in the region and the rest of the country. Waveney is 113th out of 354 in the 2004 Indices of Multiple Deprivation. Sixteen per cent of the population live in the 10 per cent most deprived wards in the country. Unemployment is currently 4 per cent. This is higher than both the average for Suffolk which stands at 3.1 per cent and the East of England which is 3.3 per cent. More than one in five people have either a disability or a limiting long-term illness and a third of households have at least one resident affected in this way. This is in part linked to the high proportion of older people, with 26 per cent of the population being of pensionable age. There are significant levels of health inequalities particularly in Lowestoft.
- 2 Access to services (the service) is a cross-cutting theme applicable to all councils and council services. It covers four broad areas:
 - ease of access to services;
 - using e-government to support access to services;
 - reaching all parts of the community; and
 - partnership working.

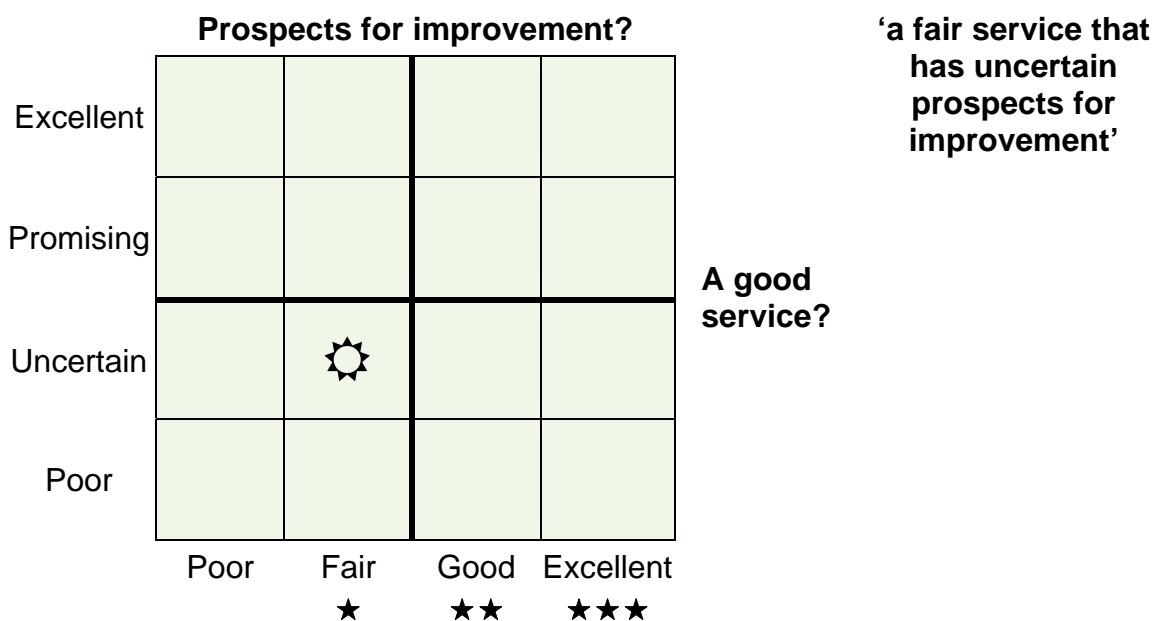
For customers this means that they should be able to contact councils in a range of accessible and Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant physical localities. They should also be able to contact councils through a range of other remote methods. This includes a website, which is fully accessible and easy to navigate with appropriate arrangements for electronic transactions, electronic communication and consultation. Access to services inspections take a high level view of customer access to services across an organisation. This is complemented by an in depth review of one or more service areas. In this instance the access to services inspection has been run in parallel with a revenues and benefits services inspection which is providing more detailed information.

- 3 Accessibility means that Council services, and access to those services, should be focused on the needs of the whole community. They should ensure equality of access and take proper account of equality and the diversity of all service users. There should be appropriate arrangements for consulting, engaging and communicating with users and non-users of services. Councils should use partnership working with neighbouring councils, organisations and businesses to provide seamless and high quality access to services wherever this is possible.

Scoring the service

- 4 We have assessed Waveney District Council as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has 'uncertain' prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 5 The service is a fair, one star service because:
- the Council is using a wide range of methods to communicate and engage with local people and uses outcomes to drive improved access to services;
 - the Council is using partnerships to enhance its knowledge of the local community and service users;
 - the Council has been proactive at reducing the impact of the recession on residents in some areas and operates pricing policies to reduce the costs of access for those groups in need;
 - councillors demonstrate a readiness to improve customer access;
 - the Council is using appropriate means of engagement to meet the needs of different community groups, young and older people and is demonstrating some service learning from experience;

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

- there have been positive outcomes in services to protect vulnerable people, and home visits are available for many services such as benefits;
- there is a developing and improving focus on young people;
- service redesign is contributing to efficiency savings in customer services; and
- procurement for capital projects incorporates public engagement to ensure the whole community is catered for and procurement processes have been redesigned to make them more accessible to local small businesses and British ethnic minority groups.

However:

- feedback from service users and non users is gathered but is not consistently used to drive improvement;
- there has been limited customer involvement in developing corporate and service access arrangements and key stakeholders do not have the opportunity to influence service standards or performance targets across all services;
- the Council does not know if corporate customer access standards are being consistently applied across the Council,
- there are variations in individual service standards and the Council is not delivering against its own customer access standards;
- access to services is inconsistent across the district for residents and physical access to council buildings is variable;
- the Council is not effectively evaluating whether customer services are delivering value for money and comparison against best practice is under-developed;
- communication with customers is inconsistent;
- engagement with the voluntary sector is mixed; and
- user experience and customer satisfaction with access arrangements remains variable.

6 The service has 'uncertain prospects' for improvement because:

- the Council has significant financial challenges which are constraining its ability to invest in service improvements;
- there is no clear strategic and operational plan for the future development of customer services across the Council;
- some improvements are recent and often from a baseline of poor service access and customer care, resulting in inconsistent outcomes for the public;
- progress in improving access for those with disabilities has been variable;
- despite significant progress in establishing corporate performance systems there is no Council wide assessment of the quality of customer service; and
- targets for customer service improvement are not challenging and performance is not benchmarked against high performing councils.

Scoring the service

However:

- the telephone contact centre, the Marina Centre and the development of an integrated customer service team are delivering improvements in customer access recognised by the public;
- the integration of front office and back office functions, whilst incomplete, is leading to improvements in customer services;
- corporate systems including information technology are developing to better support service delivery, improvement and value for money;
- the capacity of councillors, managers and staff is being improved through training and development; and
- partnership working is delivering positive outcomes and improvements in value for money for local people.

Recommendations

- 7 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the Council. In addition, we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

Recommendation

- R1** Develop and implement an overarching strategic vision and plan for the development of customer access across the Council in the short, medium and long term by:
- ensuring that the vision and plan effectively encompass and maximise the opportunities offered by local government review; and focus on exploring and implementing best practice both regionally and nationally;
 - ensuring that the strategic vision and plan is based on what is important to both users and non users of services;
 - ensuring that the plans are costed and affordable;
 - ensuring that the plan focuses on the outcomes it will deliver for local people; and
 - ensuring that opportunities to develop and deliver improved access and value for money through shared services and partnership working are fully exploited across a range of possibilities.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- that the plan will enable the whole organisation to prioritise access through service planning and resourcing.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by August 2011.

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

Recommendations

Recommendation

- R2** Continue to improve public access to services by ensuring consistency of approach through:
- implementing and monitoring corporate customer access standards across the whole council to ensure consistency of customer experience;
 - ensuring that the needs of vulnerable people and those with disabilities are understood and used to improve access arrangements across the district; and
 - ensuring that the needs of those who do not use services are understood and used to impact on the development of services across the district.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- access arrangements will meet the needs of all local people and in particular improve arrangements for those who find accessing services difficult; and
- the level of customer experience will become more consistent across services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by August 2011.

Recommendation

- R3** Drive improvements in customer access and customer experience by:
- setting challenging targets for improvements which focus on improving outcomes for the public;
 - benchmarking customer access service performance against high performing councils to identify and implement opportunities to improve quality and value for money; and
 - ensuring that learning from customer feedback, external assessment and best practice is captured and used to inform the planning and delivery of customer services across the organisation.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- improvements in access which will reflect the performance and outcomes of higher performing councils.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by February 2011.

Report

Context

The locality

- 8 Waveney District Council (WDC) is the local authority administering an area of 370 square kilometres in north-east Suffolk. The district includes Lowestoft, which is the second largest settlement in Suffolk, the market towns of Beccles, Bungay and Halesworth, the coastal resort of Southwold and a rural area encompassing several attractive villages and hamlets. It contains the most easterly point in the United Kingdom. Waveney is a mixture of urban and rural areas and is classed as 'Significant Rural' by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). People living in Waveney earn on average less than other areas in the region and the rest of the country.
- 9 Over 50 per cent of the district's population of 117,700 (2008 mid-year estimate) live in Lowestoft. It is estimated that the population will grow by 14 per cent by 2020 and 56 per cent of the population is of working age. More than one in five people have either a disability or a limiting long-term illness and a third of households have at least one resident affected in this way. This is in part linked to the high proportion of older people, with 26 per cent of the population being of pensionable age. There are significant levels of health inequalities particularly in Lowestoft. Life expectancy for men living in the most deprived areas is almost ten years shorter than those in the least deprived areas.
- 10 The population is mainly white British (97.3 per cent) and other groups are fairly small. Most minority groups are from other European Union nations such as Poland and Portugal who represent 1 per cent of the population largely living in Lowestoft. There are also long-standing communities of people of Lithuanian, Philippine, Asian, Black and Chinese origin.
- 11 Waveney is ranked 114 out of 354 in the 2007 Indices of Multiple Deprivation. Sixteen per cent of the population live in the 10 per cent most deprived wards in the country. These wards are in Lowestoft. Employment in the district is dominated by three key sectors: distribution, hotels and restaurants; public administration, health and education; and manufacturing. New forms of offshore work such as wind power generation are developing and predicted to be a significant source of employment in the future. Unemployment currently stands at 4 per cent³ which is higher than the average for Suffolk of 3.1 per cent and the East of England average of 3.3 per cent. In September 2009, 4.2 per cent of the working age population were claiming Jobseeker Allowance. This is close to the national average but above the regional average. The claimant count rate ranges from 1.4 per cent in the rural Saints Ward to 9.7 per cent in the Kirkley ward in Lowestoft.

³ December 2009

Report

- 12 People living in Waveney earn on average less than other areas in the region and in the rest of the country. Gross weekly earnings for full time workers in 2009 were £469, below the average of £507 for the region and £597 for England as a whole. Approximately 29 per cent of the district's population is aged 24 and under. Many of these young people move out of the district in search of employment and other opportunities.
- 13 As at December 2009, the average house price was £162,383, compared to an average of £193,807 for Suffolk. Recent rises in property prices have contributed to a shortage of available affordable housing. The Council manages its own housing stock of approximately 4,600 properties.
- 14 Public satisfaction is variable. Survey results report that overall public satisfaction with the area is 81.3 per cent. This places it below average when compared with similar councils. An above average number of people, 34.3 per cent, feel that older people are able to get the services and support they need to live independently.
- 15 Finances continue to be a significant risk, and therefore a strong area of focus, for the Council. Councillors have been informed of the risks associated with delivering a balanced budget including the potential impact of subsidy payback to the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP).

The Council

- 16 The Council is Conservative controlled and comprises 48 Councillors who represent 23 wards. The current political composition is 30 Conservatives, 12 Labour, 3 Liberal Democrats, 2 Independents and 1 from the Green Party. The Council's business is governed by an Executive and Leader model of governance. General spending by the Council for 2008/09 including housing revenues was £118.9 million.
- 17 The senior management structure consists of a Chief Executive with a Director of Resources, Strategic Director and an Assistant Chief Executive. The Council shares its Chief Executive with Suffolk Coastal District Council. The structure is supported by five Waveney heads of service and a shared head of service with Suffolk Coastal District Council. There are approximately 670 employees of the Council.
- 18 The Waveney sustainable community strategy 'Waveney's Future 2010-2028' identifies a vision to 'Make Waveney a great place for anyone to grow up, live, work and visit'. By 2028 'Waveney will have developed an innovative, diverse and sustainable economy that optimises environmental, cultural and enterprise opportunities'. Four strategic themes and priorities underpin this vision:
 - a prosperous and vibrant economy;
 - the Greenest County;
 - learning and skills for the future; and
 - safe, healthy and inclusive communities.

These priorities complement those in 'Transforming Suffolk' the sustainable community strategy for Suffolk and will support the delivery of the county's local area agreement targets.

19 The Council's corporate improvement plan for 2009/10 identifies a vision for Waveney: 'a safe, clean prosperous environment for our communities'. The vision is underpinned by four strategic priorities including:

- community needs and aspirations;
- community leadership;
- organisational development; and
- finance and performance management.

In identifying these priorities officers and councillors recognise:

- the need to embed a stronger culture of listening and responding to local people; and
- the need to deliver improvements in the quality of life for local people, especially for vulnerable people and those affected by inequalities.

20 The Council's aim for customer services is to provide 'high quality, consistent customer service that is recognised as one of the best in Suffolk and is seen as a strength within the Comprehensive Area Assessment'. This vision is underpinned by three key principles:

- having a professional and empathetic attitude;
- providing the right answer, the first time; and
- offering a choice for how customers can contact us.

One of the Council's key priorities outlined in the 2009/10 improvement plan is 'Community Needs and Aspirations'. Under this priority area a key action is to 'Introduce a rolling programme of customer feedback and community/customer/ 'hard to hear'/vulnerable people focus groups and workshops (in conjunction with partner organisations) across all service areas'.

National context

- 21** The Government sees customer access as important and in its ‘Strong Leadership – Quality Public Services’ White Paper it identified seven key tests for local government – that services should be joined up, accessible, delivered or supported electronically, delivered jointly, delivered seamlessly, open and accountable, and used by e-citizens. In the Local Government Act 2000, new reforms and targets required local authorities to move towards electronic delivery of services to the local community. The intention was that all dealings with Government, including local government and the health service, should be capable of being conducted electronically by the public by December 2005. All local authorities have been required to review all of their services over a five-year period and to challenge the existing methods of service delivery. Other national drivers include the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, Human Rights Act 1998; Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2005 and the white paper, ‘Modern Local Government – In Touch With the People’ which sought to put local government in touch with local communities by improving local democracy, increasing financial accountability and improving local services. Councils should have plans to meet the impending legislative requirements to actively promote equality regardless of disability, gender and age, as well as meeting the current requirements to promote race equality.
- 22** Access to services is a cross-cutting theme applicable to all councils and council services. It covers four broad areas: ease of access to services; using e-government to support access to services; reaching all parts of the community; and partnership working. For customers, it means that they should be able to contact councils in a range of accessible places that meet the requirement of the DDA. They should also be able to contact councils through a range of other remote methods. This includes through a fully accessible, easy-to-navigate website. There should be appropriate arrangements for electronic transactions, electronic communication and consultation.
- 23** Accessibility means that Council services, and access to those services, should be focused on the needs of the whole community. They should ensure equality of access and take proper account of equality and the diversity of all service users. There should be appropriate arrangements for consulting, engaging and communicating with users and non-users of services. Councils should use partnership working with neighbouring councils, organisations and businesses to provide seamless and high quality access to services wherever this possible. Councils should also have an e-government programme informed by citizen/user needs and aspirations.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

24 The Council is clear that improving customer access is important to them. The Council has adopted a new customer access strategy for 2009-2013 which provides a framework rather than a plan for development. The strategy replaces the previous Access Channel Strategy and the Community Engagement Strategy. The new strategy supports the Council's strategic direction to improve customer access to information and services by:

- ensuring the Council's customers receive an improved service;
- maximising the number of council services available through the internet;
- improving the Council's community engagement by listening to the views of customers; and
- working hard to improve equality and diversity.

The Council has recognised the need to be able to demonstrate continuous improvement in customer services.

25 The Council has already taken some action to improve its customer focus. A call centre was introduced in December 2007 to improve the poor response rate to telephone calls. Subsequently this has been improved through the introduction of new call centre technology designed to enable better management of call distribution and the measurement of calls. In August 2008 a range of customer services were moved to the Marina Customer Services Centre. This project was managed well and enabled the Council to withdraw from accommodation which was not fit for purpose. In parallel there has been a restructuring of customer services staff, including the introduction of champions in customer services teams to reflect service demands. The Council has also introduced customer access terminals at all customer service centres and in tourist information centres to enable the public to undertake self service transactions. Access to benefits advice is being improved through placing specialist staff in satellite offices.

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

Customer and community focus

- 26** The Council is effectively using a wide range of methods to improve the way in which it communicates with local people. This includes standard means of communication such as telephone, fax, website, email, but also is using more creative ways of reaching local people for example: community television; radio; and advertising on vehicles such as refuse freighters. Some services such as benefits use text messaging and the benefits service has used 'Info-point' town maps to promote its benefit fraud hotline. The Council's 'In Touch' magazine is distributed to all Waveney residents every three months and contains articles that relate to council priorities. The public can use a variety of means to find out about council services as a result.
- 27** The Council is effectively using information on customer preferences to drive improved access to services in some areas. On the basis of customer feedback the Council is maintaining a range of communication channels including face to face and telephone. In parallel it is also improving website and other forms of electronic access. For example, in the summer of 2008, the Council conducted a survey on customer preferences and access issues. This showed that 78 per cent of respondents used the Council's website. This is driving the improvements to the website which is being reviewed. The customer service team randomly identifies 20 per cent of customers who have not been dealt with at first point of contact to gauge their views on the service they receive to help identify issues which require change in behaviours and processes to address any identified issues. The Council is developing its approach to customer access on the basis of what is important to local people.
- 28** The Council is making good use of partner organisations to enhance its knowledge of the local community and service users. For example, the community cohesion team is working closely with the Lowestoft International Support group to enhance access to services for minority communities. The Council is working closely with a local disability group to ensure the needs of disabled people are met. The Waveney tourism forum is very active and involves 250 businesses in the district. The Council is improving socio-economic data on the district in partnership with the County Council to help meet its duties and obligations under the forthcoming single equalities framework. An appointed external provider undertook telephone surveys from a statistically reliable sample of Waveney users and non-users of all ages and backgrounds, male and female for use by the local strategic partnership and the Council to ensure consistency and value for money.
- 29** Councillors demonstrate a readiness to improve customer access. For example, the Scrutiny Committee is monitoring how customer access is progressing and the leader of the council undertakes his own mystery shopping activity to gauge service quality. Councillor engagement is supporting the prioritisation of access improvements.

- 30** The impact of customer needs on service planning and delivery is variable. Community engagement forums have been established in Lowestoft and the four market towns to listen to what is important to local people. The format of these has been reviewed in the light of local engagement. However, there has been limited customer involvement in developing corporate and service access arrangements. The Marina Centre was established very quickly in response to significant office accommodation problems in buildings which were no longer fit for purpose. The move was managed effectively. However consultation with customers was limited and as a result the Council is only now looking at how the centre is meeting customer needs. Some service standards have not been established through engagement with customers such as for private housing. The Council therefore does not know if arrangements meet the needs of the whole community.

Ease of Access for all

- 31** The Council has been proactive – in reducing the impact of the recession on residents. For example, invoice payment used to be around 30 days but after reminders to service managers this has reduced by half. The impact of late payment on businesses is being reduced at a time of economic hardship. Over £90,000 has been allocated to Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) to enable additional support to residents during the recession. In benefits, good use has been made of discretionary housing payments (DHP). But there was a lack of publicity around changes in the treatment of child benefit which may mean more families are entitled to help with their rent and council tax. Local people are generally receiving positive support from the Council to help them cope with the effects of the economic recession.
- 32** The Council reduces the costs of access for those groups in need. For example, the Marina theatre offers discount tickets for films for younger and older people and there is good take up. Leisure cards are available for residents to reduce costs for using local leisure facilities. People in receipt of benefits can get cheaper access to vermin control such costs associated with rat infestations. Discounted coach tickets through National Express are also provided to people on benefits. Service access is responsive to those suffering genuine hardship helping those most in need to gain access to services.
- 33** The Council is using technology and is extending customer access opportunities to services. For example, customer can serve themselves via web access terminals, which are located in various council offices around the district. The website is well-organised to enable people to carry out transactions and offers translation of documents into other languages. Some services use internet enabled devices to address customers' needs but not across all council services available to the public. Customers are able to access council services more easily.
- 34** Customer access is largely joined up within the Council but there are still some problems to resolve. Telephony at the Council provides a single point of access for the public, including to delivery partnerships for services like environmental services operated within Waveney. However, links to County Council services are not so well developed and some services are not incorporated into the access centre such as licensing. It is not clear to residents what service access is available at the town hall. This is recognised by the Council. Services are not always available in one place.

How good is the service?

- 35** The needs of non-service users are not consistently understood and not driving service improvement. For example, private housing has developed an e-form for use by other agencies that have entry to homes to help identify vulnerable people in poor housing. However this initiative has had limited success. Information on people who are eligible to claim benefits but are not is limited. Leisure services regularly survey the needs of users and non users with some subsequent improvements to services. There are gaps in the Council's knowledge required to help shape service delivery and customer access.
- 36** Although the website is improving there are still navigation problems. The Council's website received a 'transactional' rating from the Society of Information Technology Management (SOCITM) in 2009, the second highest rating. This was higher than the rating in 2008. However, it is accepted that the navigation of the website requires improvement and some service users including councillors, reported that they find it difficult to navigate around the website. At present information is available but not always easy to track down.
- 37** Robust plans are in place to improve the website. The Cabinet has recently invested £50,000 to support the implementation of a new content management system (CMS) which is endorsed by SOCITM. Local people are being consulted on their views. The project is on target for delivery by May 2010. The new system is easier to update, has lower maintenance costs and requires less support. Consequently, it will be easier for the public to find out information and access services through the internet and outside office hours.
- 38** The opportunities for the public to access services across the whole of the district are variable. There have been significant improvements to customer access, particularly for the people of Lowestoft, through the development of the Marina Centre. In addition, the Marina Centre also has a CAB presence. As a result, the public can address several issues at a single visit. Where a demand can be identified some specialist officers provide local services on a part time basis. However, access to services in satellite offices in the market towns is variable and the use of technology to provide services is not embedded. Evidence from mystery shopping identifies that callers are advised to contact or visit the Marina Centre for information they might expect to receive locally. Rural areas are currently poorly served. Some areas do not have good access to services meaning that some residents are being disadvantaged through current access arrangements.
- 39** Physical access to council buildings is variable for users. Access to some council offices is restricted. For example, although the Marina Centre is DDA compliant, there are access issues for the disabled in the council's satellite offices in the market towns. In Halesworth, whilst a wheelchair user could enter the office, it is difficult to manoeuvre inside. Signage to customer access points including the Marina Centre and market town offices is poor. The needs of some disadvantaged groups are not being met.

Standards

- 40 There are corporate customer access service standards in place but there is inconsistency in how they are applied across the Council. Service standards are not consistently displayed in all Council access points. There is no way of ensuring that corporately adopted access standards are implemented across council services. The Council does not know whether customers are getting the same standard of service across the council.
- 41 Corporate standards are not used consistently in all service areas. For example, leisure services make no reference to corporate service standards in their buildings. Service standards are not embedded in all services such as benefits. Despite this some areas of the Council seek appropriately to exceed the Council's own standards in some areas for example in the tourist information centres. A review is currently being undertaken on the complaints procedure because there has been inconsistency about what is considered to be a complaint. The Council cannot be sure that customer services are being delivered at the minimum specified by the corporate customer standards.
- 42 Key stakeholders do not have the opportunity to influence customer service standards or performance targets across all services. Advice agencies reported that they had not been consulted by the Council on developing customer service standards or performance targets either corporately or within service areas. However, the agents' forum has been instrumental in the development of planning service standards. Customer service delivery as a consequence is not reflecting the needs of key stakeholders effectively.

Engagement

- 43 There is a developing and improving focus on young people to improve engagement. As part of Local Democracy Week a 'Youth Question Time' event is arranged to enable young people to challenge and question the local strategic partnership members. The Committee team engages with young people in local democracy for example through the Waveney Young Filmmaker Competition and Ten Principles Poster Competition. The community safety and community development team organise an annual event called Crucial Crew. Almost 1,300 children aged between 10 and 11 attend one of 10 day events about personal safety each November. A Waveney Youth Council has been established but at the time of the inspection it has only met once and impact and outcomes are difficult to demonstrate. Young people are increasingly able to influence council activity and decision making.
- 44 The Council is using appropriate means of engagement to meet the needs of different community groups in individual projects that it undertakes, and is demonstrating some service learning from experience. For example, in the development of a new skate park, the Council asked young people how best to engage with them. Social networking sites, mobile phones and text messages were used to meet their needs. As a result, 400 young people engaged in the project and the design of the skate park was led by young people. The Council discovered that older people were reluctant to attend workshops and so met with them in another way by visits to the over-sixties clubs and bingo halls. Local people are able to be better informed and involved in council activity.

How good is the service?

- 45 Engagement with the partner organisations including the voluntary sector is improving with some positive outcomes for local people. Partners felt that the Council was more organised and efficient. There is a feel good factor through communications. The Council is more proactive in looking to help with a greater commitment to working together. The Council supports the voluntary sector through a series of three-year Service Level Agreements For example the Council works closely with a specialist group on disability access issues and with the CAB.

Diversity

- 46 The Council is making some progress in improving its corporate approach to equality and diversity. A single equality scheme is now in place and the Council has self assessed as being at 'emerging' level of the Equality Framework for local government. There is a focus on embedding the work so far and delivering its equality action plan. The Council has a Councillor Champion promoting its approach to equality and diversity. It is also championed by the director for strategic housing services at all management team meetings. All staff and councillors have had equality and diversity awareness training. Equality impact assessments are not underpinning improvement plans in all areas. Impact assessments are being developed for all key service areas and monitoring has recently been improved. For example, reports cannot go to committee unless a formal equality impact assessment has been completed.
- 47 The Council is working in partnership to understand the needs of minority groups but the impact of this work is still developing. The Waveney Community Cohesion Partnership is working to reach out to three marginalised groups – Youth and Aged, Faith and BME, and Disabled. The aim was to facilitate conversation and communication between the groups and assist local strategic partnership (LSP) partners and the Council to understand how their services impact on minority groups and how services might be designed and delivered differently to ensure greater access by all communities. The Council has responded to poor attendance at some events, for example by older people, by developing new and more effective approaches to engagement.
- 48 The Council has worked hard to ensure that different communities are not disadvantaged but the impact of this work is not formally assessed. For example, the community cohesion team reports good rapport with the Portuguese and Polish communities. They have been approached by the Bangladeshi and Afro Caribbean communities to develop support networks and improve access to training and education. Closer working with Muslim communities has resulted in additional training opportunities being developed in the local college. The council is working with the community to help ensure fairness and equality and build community cohesion. For example, it held a week long series of events around Holocaust Memorial Day. However, there are no formal measures in place to test the impact of this work. In addition, there is limited evidence of positive action to ensure services do not discriminate against vulnerable groups. Despite improvements the Council cannot demonstrate the impact and outcomes from this work.

- 49 There has been some positive work in services to protect people including those who are vulnerable. Environmental health has been working closely with the health and safety executive to protect the vulnerable workforce looking specifically at businesses, which employ migrant workers for example, car wash sites. This means that vulnerable people are better protected. The council has changed some of its arrangements to allow the public to hold it to account more easily before legislation required it to do so. For example, five members of the public can together 'call-in' matters to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee

User experience

- 50 Customer satisfaction is generally improving from a low base. The latest survey shows that the majority of those who contact the Council are satisfied with the service they receive although satisfaction levels vary across the district.
- 51 User experience is mixed. The council's own 2009 telephone survey showed that at the first point of contact, only 45 per cent of people felt staff were knowledgeable and only 55 per cent of people considered staff as polite although 76 per cent felt that staff were helpful. In September 2009, 80 per cent of people were however satisfied or very satisfied with the service they received. Some vulnerable service users are unaware of the help available to them. The tourist information centres are performing well with an external review of quality of service placing the Pavilion as best in the East of England for quality of service
- 52 Mystery shopping exercises demonstrate significant inconsistencies in the customer experience. Advice and guidance is not consistent. In some instances conflicting advice was given in offices based in market towns. Access to information leaflets varies across access points. Whilst translation facilities on the website are a good feature it does not work with downloadable documents or leaflets. Phone calls were generally dealt with promptly and efficiently but advice often was to visit the centre rather than using online facilities. In some of the satellite offices staff were unable to access information through the information technology available.

Service access outcomes for users and the community

- 53 The Council is working successfully in partnership to improve the life chances of young people in the district. Supported by 'Lowestoft Together', the YARD project was set up to engage NEET (not in employment education or training) youngsters not only to give them training but primarily to work on improving their self esteem. There has been a 95 per cent success rate on getting NEET young people back into training or employment. The Council in partnership with the County Council and the Learning and Skills Council has opened a new skills centre at Halesworth middle school. This offers a range of vocational courses such as hairdressing and engineering. The Council is engaging with the Dutch and German offshore industry to ensure the vocational courses meet their needs as major local employers. The Council also has a mentoring scheme and mock interviews scheme at a pupil referral unit.

How good is the service?

- 54 Access for users wishing to visit council offices is generally good but could be improved in some areas. The Marina Centre is accessible for visitors. It is close to the rail station and there are good bus services. Public parking is available in local car parks which have disabled parking bays but there is limited disabled parking immediately outside the centre and these are not designated for centre/theatre use only. There are also bus services which go to the market towns and enable adequate access to council offices in those towns. However disabled parking is not available in all of these offices.
- 55 Council engagement with the gypsy and travelling community has led to better communication. For example, the Council has delivered at over and above the numbers of pitches needed as identified by the County, in order to meet locally identified need. In addition to the additional four pitches required, the Council provided two transient pitches for the travelling community. Residents at the gypsy site did not feel that they were kept informed by other organisations. The community cohesion team addressed this issue and site manager feedback has been very positive. The site manager reports good regular contact with the benefits service.
- 56 Council investment is improving access to better quality housing. Improvement grants to bring empty homes back into use have been targeted at geographical areas and house types to meet housing needs. As a result, this year 42 homes have been brought back into use against the already challenging target of 20. Joined up working with housing providers is helping to meet housing need. The Council improved across many service areas in 2008/09. It achieved local targets for affordable housing and it is reducing homelessness. The Council has now achieved its target for decent homes a year ahead of schedule.
- 57 There are service examples of changing service delivery to meet people's needs. For example, in planning, problems were identified about the font size of planning advertisements. The font size was then increased markedly as a response and feedback has been positive. In addition, the community cohesion team engagement with the Lowestoft International Support Group has resulted in translation to Council documents that better reflect the largest migrant groups of the moment. In the revenues and benefits service, in response to comments from the public that decision letters on benefits were very long; the service started producing summary reports at the front of decision letters. This has been well received.
- 58 The development of an integrated customer service team is progressing but not yet complete. The customer service team (CST) is still developing its revenues and benefits focus. Members of staff do not currently have the knowledge and procedures in place to deal with some of the more complex revenues and benefits queries. Training in these areas is ongoing with plans to deliver improved services by March 2010. Skills levels in this high contact area are currently under-developed.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 59** The Council's investment in customer services is improving the quality of service to the public and reducing revenue costs. Since the formation of the CST, services managers report that there has been a substantial reduction in wrong transfers of calls. The number of general public enquiries direct to services has also reduced. The transformation of staff to the Marina Centre has reduced revenue costs by £30,000. As a result the public are getting better telephone service from the Council and services are providing better value for money.
- 60** Information technology (IT) is supporting improvements to access. Planning applications are available on-line and the benefits service is working on a project to deliver benefit application forms on-line, reducing the need for customers to visit the Council. An integrated housing management system is being implemented to provide one application for the management of council house lettings, rents and repairs. The Council's recently introduced voice over internet protocol (VOIP) telephone system supports the use of text messaging. This has recently been used to provide a channel of communication for young people. Effective use of IT is enabling residents to self serve reducing costs for the Council.
- 61** Service redesign is contributing to efficiency savings in customer services. The restructured and consolidated customer services have provided staffing efficiencies enabling the organisation to make revenue savings of £30,000 per annum. The move to the Marina Centre provides low ongoing building costs, half that of the previous buildings.
- 62** Staff re-structuring and other measures are improving value for money. For example, the benefits service has restructured to release £89,000 in savings. Some posts have been taken out to increase efficiency linked to a recent voluntary redundancy exercise. However action has been taken to redirect resources into priority areas such as improving subsidy monitoring and management and reducing benefit processing times leading to improved outcomes for service users.
- 63** The public are engaged appropriately with, and influence, procurement decisions for capital projects. For example, the Lowestoft Sports Centre pool improvements consultation has led to state of the art access standards for the new training pool based on comments from groups such as those representing people with disabilities. Public toilet investment recognises the need for facilities for those with disabilities as identified through engagement. New facilities take into account the needs of local people and redesigned and simplified procurement processes have made them more accessible to local small businesses.

How good is the service?

- 64 Assets are being used in a multifunctional way to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of service. The cafe and the Blue Room at the Water Lane Leisure Centre are used by community groups and businesses for meetings and social gatherings. Sheltered housing homes are being used for community consultation including the benefits take up road-shows. Age Concern is working from a sheltered housing unit, which is a template for future working with voluntary and community groups. Community Groups use communal lounges in sheltered housing schemes across the district at no charge, to provide support work to isolated elderly tenants in the community. Making more flexible use of its assets is saving the Council money and providing more joined up services for the public.
- 65 The Council is not effectively using benchmarking to evaluate whether customer services are delivering value for money. The Council has not evaluated changes to customer services in terms of cost and quality. There has been little consideration of benchmarking data to enable consideration of performance against that of other councils. Savings targets were not set as part of the transformation of customer services. There was limited business process re-engineering as part of Marina Centre move which focused more on the need to expedite change.
- 66 The costs of providing services are generally understood by the Council but it does not have information on all transaction and unit costs – the detailed cost of all processes within departments. Comparison of costs with other councils has led to some limited success in reducing costs. Such comparison has led to cost efficiencies in housing benefit and repairs services. There are no formal processes or agreed trigger levels to manage unplanned changes in expenditure.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 67** The Council is beginning to improve access to services for its customers but improvements are recent and often from a baseline of poor service access and customer care. The development of the telephone contact centre and the development of an integrated customer services team in the Marina Centre have delivered the most significant improvements for local people. Progress with the integration of front office and back office functions is good in some areas but inconsistent. There is an increasing focus on the use of information technology with increasingly good use in benefits to support access but requires further development for example in satellite offices. There has been an effective corporate response to the need to deliver efficiency savings to which customer services have made a positive contribution. Outcomes for the public remain variable particularly as the corporate approach to customer access is not applied consistently across the Council. Staff shortages have affected some aspects of service delivery. Progress in improving access for those with disabilities has been slow.
- 68** The action to improve customer access from the previous low level has been positive and effective. The move to the Marina Centre enabled the Council to close some very poor accommodation which was not fit for purpose. Nine reception points have now been consolidated into a single customer service point enabling easier access for those requiring advice from more than one service. Customer service points have been established at district offices, tourist information centres and leisure centres. Additional support and investments are being provided to enable those who are vulnerable to access services. This means that the public are finding it easier to get information and use council services.
- 69** Investment in the telephone handling system has led to improvements for the public. A telephone contact centre has been introduced. In-house IT systems enable the monitoring of aspects of performance such as calls waiting although there are some limitations for example information collected via Achieve Decision cannot be transferred directly into the UniForm call handling system. The system has improved response to the public, for example reducing the number of callers who get an engaged tone or are transferred to an answer phone. It has resulted in a significant reduction in abandoned calls. The Council has taken a positive decision not to introduce a customer relationship management system at this time although this may limit aspects of further improvement. This means that the public are getting a better response when they phone the Council but there are opportunities to improve further.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 70** Links between front office and back office functions are improving but still require further development. The Council has introduced the 'Achieve Decision' system to improve these links. This enables call centre operators to identify where queries should be directed, for example a noise complaint received in the Marina Centre can now be sent direct to a field environmental health officer. This has not yet been rolled out to other field operatives and Achieve Decision is not yet embedded for all service areas. Advice at the first point of contact with the Council is improving but is not yet embedded for the whole organisation.
- 71** The Council has taken action to make the payment of bills easier. For example, e-billing allows customers to view council tax bills online out of office hours and receive demand notices by email. Direct debit payments can be made online or using automated telephone services 24 hours a day, for example for housing rent and housing benefit over-payments. In addition, a simple password protected e-form has been developed and is used by other agencies that have access to vulnerable people in their home, as a means of requesting other services from the Council.
- 72** Despite improvements to customer access, outcomes for the public are variable over time. On the basis of the number of calls which need to be transferred the Council identifies that it is meeting its target for the percentage of calls dealt with at first point of contact. In 2008/09, performance was affected by staff shortages in the telephone contact centre and only 60 per cent of calls were being answered in 20 seconds against a target of 90 per cent. A telephone feedback survey of customers who had been transferred for back office advice identified that 85 per cent of respondents felt that staff at first point of contact were helpful but only 69 per cent felt they had received the required help at second point of contact. However only 44 per cent were felt to be knowledgeable at first point of contact falling to 37 per cent when referred to the second point of contact. A key area of concern remains that a significant proportion, 46 per cent, did not receive call backs which were promised. Improved access is not always translated into better services for the public.
- 73** Progress in making buildings accessible for those with disability has been slow. DDA requirements are met by 85.9 per cent of Council buildings. This includes some, but not all, customer access points. For example whilst the Marina Centre is fully compliant, offices in Beccles are not. Recent improvements have focused primarily on the closure of non-compliant buildings rather than additional investment. It is not easy to get access into some customer service points for those with a disability.
- 74** The Council has taken advice from partner organisations leading to improvements in physical access for customers over recent years. The Council has identified difficulties in gaining access to some of its buildings for those with disability. The Council has recently agreed to release funds to improve access such as improved disabled parking and hearing loops particularly in some of market town offices. It is working in partnership with disability organisations to improve access at the Marina Centre, and to prioritise works required at other council buildings to make them more accessible. For example, improved access to the swimming pool through new steps.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 75** The Council can demonstrate an improvement in value for money over the past two years in the services inspected although there is still along way to go, including delivering an asset management base that is fully fit for purpose. It has achieved its savings targets for both the cashable and non-cashable streams in 2008/09. This includes reductions in staffing costs of £860,000 in a full year. Recent redundancy exercises and restructuring have saved £1 million over two years, while overall performance has continued to improve. The restructured and consolidated customer services have provided staffing efficiencies enabling the organisation to make revenue savings of £30,000 per annum. The move to the Marina Centre delivered savings with building costs reduced by half. Services, including those linked to customer access, are being delivered more efficiently and effectively.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 76** Plans for the future development of customer services are under-developed. There is no clear vision or strategic plan for the future development of customer services across the Council. Despite significant progress in establishing corporate performance systems there is no council-wide assessment of the quality of customer service and the degree to which it is supporting the delivery of corporate objectives. Aspects of service planning to enhance customer access are underdeveloped, in particular the use of benchmarking data to compare the Council's services against high performing councils and the setting of challenging targets which will drive services improvements. There are examples of corporate learning, for example from complaints, but the impact of this on customer services and the customer experience is variable.
- 77** There is no clear vision or strategic plan for the future development of customer services across the Council. The customer access strategy is at best a framework for the future rather than a future plan. It does not provide prioritisation or a strategic approach. Some improvement ideas are under-developed such as how to improve access in the rural area of the district. There are no detailed plans for the migration of other front office functions into the customer services centre. Customer access improvements are identified in some, but not all, service plans and there is a lack of co-ordination between projects. Following the cancellation of the Campus project, there are no firm plans in place yet to deliver alternative joint accommodation with other agencies to improve service to the public. Discussions with other public service providers to consider joint accommodation initiatives are integral to future plans but are at an early stage. As a result there is no overall strategic management of customer access and engagement initiatives to ensure improvement supports corporate objectives.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 78** Corporate performance management has improved and is leading to some service improvements. Integrated quarterly performance monitoring reports to Cabinet incorporate service and financial performance and link this to risk. Performance is subject to challenge, for example by the corporate management team. The performance challenge board continues to provide challenge and support to heads of service and service managers. There is a focus on delivery against established plans, targets and deadlines, especially where those are not being met, corrective action is systematically taken in response to underperformance. Performance reports are published on the Council's website to promote transparency of its performance. The delivery of service plans is being monitored by councillors on a quarterly basis. Developments in information technology are supporting more effective performance management for example the benefits service makes good use of ICT to produce performance information to cover some local and national indicators. Robust and reliable performance monitoring is helping ensure that managers and councillors can make informed decisions.
- 79** Benchmarking of performance is not fully embedded in all service areas and is not supporting service improvement effectively. There are pockets of good practice for example in the tourism information centres, but benchmarking and other measures to improve the quality and efficiency of services for the public may vary across the Council and are underdeveloped in the customer access team. Some services look to other councils in Suffolk rather than seeking out best practices in a national context. Customer service performance is not yet benchmarked against other councils however this is planned for 2010/11 in order that opportunities to improve service or reduce costs can be identified. There is some benchmarking in revenues and benefits but this is inconsistent. Consequently the public are not able to fully judge the quality of services received compared to elsewhere and it is difficult for the Council to measure improvement objectively.
- 80** Service areas collect and analyse customer feedback but this is not co-ordinated across the organisation and learning is not shared effectively. Each service area collects feedback from customers about its own performance although this is not broken down in terms of age and ethnicity, which is then analysed to see where improvements can be made. Customer services has introduced its own mystery shopping and managers monitor calls so that they can provide mentoring support. There are plans to join up the feedback process and making sure that feedback is requested from customers. This will then be shared across the Council and with partner organisations where appropriate. The performance management framework reports on complaints and action to resolve them. The needs of marginalised and minority groups is not monitored effectively. Some feedback forms ask for equalities information but this is not followed up or analysed to look at the experiences of different groups. The Council is not making best use of information it has to improve access and customer service arrangements.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 81** Service plans are not consistently focused on what difference actions to improve customer access and care will make in terms of outcomes for the public. Plans to deliver improvements to customer services are not specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely (SMART) or focus on what difference they will make for the public. Service plans now include a range of key information from performance, customer engagement, value for money targets and risk. The plans are variable in terms of the extent to which they have been completed and the detail provided. Performance targets relating to customer access are not challenging and performance against these targets is mixed. Plans are not sufficiently focused on what difference they will make for the public.
- 82** There is no comprehensive overview of customer access performance across the Council. In-house IT systems have been developed to enable some monitoring of performance in the contact centre such as call waiting times. This has not been rolled out into other areas and as such there is no organisational measurement of this type of performance measure. Service areas do not measure their performance against customer service standards. There is some monitoring of non-user needs but the impact of outcomes from this work is limited. The Council does not know how easy it is for local people to access its services.
- 83** There are examples of corporate learning from other organisations but impact is variable. Visits to other councils have informed the development of the new website, the use of digital television as a method of communicating with the public and the development of customer access facilities. The Council is learning from external assessment. In response to the strategic housing inspection all staff have been on diversity and equality training to help them better understand cultural differences and improve services for different community groups. However learning across the Council is not embedded. For example, leisure services ran a successful 'You said, we did' campaign but this has not been rolled out across all services. Learning from good practice is enabling the Council to improve some services but this is not embedded across the organisation.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 84** The Council is developing its corporate capacity to deliver further improvements but significant risks and challenges remain. The Council is planning for the future and the continual improvement of its services. The capacity of councillors, managers and staff is being enhanced through training and development. There is a positive approach to the management of the financial challenges. Partnership working is delivering positive outcomes and improvements in value for money for local people. Plans are in place to further develop shared services with further opportunities to be exploited. Corporate systems are developing to better support service delivery, improvement and value for money. The Council is taking positive action to resolve the significant financial challenges it faces. Despite this its levels of financial reserves are low, constraining its ability to invest in service improvement although the council is seeking to address this through targeted investment. Further staff reductions are planned. There is no agreed plan in place to deal with the impact of the closure of the Waveney Campus project.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 85** The Council is taking positive action to deal with some of the budget issues it is facing but a risk to services remains. Provision has been made in the proposed budget for 2010/11 and in the medium term financial strategy to address the budget issues affecting the Council. The Council acknowledges the need to further build its level of financial reserves which are currently low and constrain levels of new investment. The proposed budget for 2010/11 incorporates revenue savings of £1.4 million arising from the cessation of the Waveney Campus project. The Council is liable for 17 per cent of the costs arising from the project before it was abandoned.
- 86** The Council has demonstrated strong strategic leadership in its approach to the repayment of DWP subsidy but uncertainties after 2010/11 remain. Councillors were informed of the issue and associated risks to delivering a balanced budget in a timely manner. Senior managers and leaders have taken a strong political and strategic lead to involve all relevant partners in reaching a resolution. The Council has made prudent provision in its medium term financial strategy for what it considers reasonable instalments. The DWP has agreed that the Council should repay £300,000 in 2010/11. However, until an affordable repayment model is agreed with the DWP for the medium and longer term this continues to be a significant risk for the Council.
- 87** Budget shortfalls require that the Council implement a further round of staff reductions but there is a strong commitment to maintaining frontline services. The Council will base these further reductions on service re-engineering and risk, with a strong corporate commitment to maintain or improve the quality of front line services despite the cuts. In January 2010, following a Scrutiny review, Cabinet resolved that the number of benefits assessment officers processing claims be maintained at a sufficient level to sustain the average processing time at a reasonable level of performance. Despite this both customer services and the benefits service may be affected by further restructuring with a view to enhancing efficiency and effectiveness. The Council is seeking to protect aspects of services which directly impact on the public.
- 88** The Council has invested effectively in developing management capability and capacity. An improvement plan, supported by significant external funding, is driving improvements in corporate management capacity and capability. A change champions group is driving a step change in the way services are provided to improve efficiency, effectiveness, customer focus and access to services. Restructuring of roles and responsibilities, for example in customer services and revenues and benefits is supporting a more integrated approach to customer access. Customer services champion roles have been established and are increasingly developing strong links between front office and back office functions, strengthening the quality of advice provided for the public when they first contact the Council. The Council is investing so that it can manage change more effectively.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 89 A lack of staff capacity and performance has detracted from service delivery and improvement in some areas. Staff performance in 2009 meant that the Council did not achieve its own targets with respect to the payment of invoices. A lack of resources has had a negative impact on museum visits. In 2008/09 overall visits in the year fell below the national average and Council's own target. BPA were granted the entire Home Office grant of 500,000 which was available nationally for collaboration purposes. Some of the Council run museums had limited or variable opening times due to a poor volunteer base and a lack of funding to open for longer periods. The CCTV control room was not staffed at all times due to insufficient capacity although this now being addressed through improved partnership working. A lack of staff in some areas is slowing improvements in access to some services.
- 90 The Council is investing effectively in developing councillor capacity. It has been awarded member development charter plus status for councillor training. This has led to a range of improvements such as in the role of scrutiny including the identification of target issues which are presented by scrutiny at Cabinet. There is greater member involvement across the parties now as a result. Councillors now have personal development plans and take part in 360 degree appraisals to support further development.
- 91 Staff training is contributing to improvements in service delivery. Training needs analysis have been undertaken and used to inform corporate and service training plans. Training is being used to improve the skills and knowledge of benefits staff, for example a high ratio of the revenues and benefits team have achieved professional qualifications. There is a dedicated training resource in place to fulfil the identified requirement to keep benefits service teams up to date as regulations and processes change. Training for customer services staff includes weekly learning sessions, for example sharing information between front office and back office. Customer services do not open until 9.30 a.m. on Thursdays to enable training to take place, and 80 per cent of customer services staff are undertaking a national vocational qualification (NVQ) qualification in customer care. Most staff have had some recent training on diversity. Some human rights training has been delivered for example to support the way the Council allocates licenses.
- 92 Effective partnership working is delivering improvements in cost and quality in some service areas. The Cabinet has ensured that the strategic direction of the Council is linked to other partners and that targets are reviewed. The Council has established a successful partnership with Waveney Norse for its operational services and transferred asset management to Norfolk Property Services in 2009. It works closely with Suffolk Coastal District Council, with which it shares a Chief Executive. The two Cabinets also recently approved preferred partner status for the Councils to explore further shared service opportunities as part of the council's overall partnership approach. Although the development of shared services is integral to the Council's approach, opportunities to develop this in revenues and benefits have not yet been fully exploited. Partnership working is increasingly improving the ability of the Council to deliver its priorities.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 93** The Council works closely with voluntary organisations to support vulnerable groups more effectively and extend capacity. The Council supports the CAB for example by enabling additional services from the Marina customer service centre. Plans are in place to consider a joint accommodation strategy. Partnering agreements with CAB have helped to improve local residents' access to debt and money management advice during the recession. The Council has agreed a service level agreement with the Lowestoft International Support Group (LISG) to continue their essential work in linking with minority communities in Waveney. The benefits service is working with partners to share best practice to improve take-up but impact and outcomes are mixed. Customer information on a range of relevant services offered by partner organisations is provided at offices and through the website. Common referral procedures are in place with support agencies should these be required. Partnership working is increasing the capacity of the Council to meet the needs of local people.
- 94** Improvement in cross-service working is leading to improvements in service delivery, but areas for improvement remain. Members of housing and customer service staff have received training in procedures for verifying the documents needed to support benefit claims. This provides a seamless service to customers at the first point of contact and minimises delay in processing. Despite this, staff identify the need to improve communication across the Council, particularly with the extent of change, and to deliver a move from silo working which continues to exist in some areas. Closer working between services is beginning to improve services.
- 95** There are robust human resource arrangements in place. Human resources support the delivery of corporate objectives. Information is provided for staff through an extensive staff handbook. Staff have regular one to one meetings with line managers and appraisals of their performance. Personal development plans are reviewed every six months. The Council ensures that staff work plans are robust and linked to objectives through annual audits. Training plans are monitored centrally. Sickness absence in quarter 3 is 4.92 days per full time member of staff. Low levels of absence increases capacity to deliver services and improve access.
- 96** The Council's approach to procurement is improving and contributing to improvements in value for money. The Council has developed a high level procurement framework supported by a robust procurement strategy. Corporately procurement is delivering savings for the Council. It has introduced e-tendering to improve access and opportunities for businesses to tender for work with the Council. Progress in procurements, particularly in relation to the development of the Waveney Norse partnership, led to a national award for outstanding achievements in procurement in 2009. The Council is getting better value in the way in buys goods and services.

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