

# Access to Services

Borough Council of Wellingborough  
March 2010



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# 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](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk).

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

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# Summary

- 1 The Borough Council of Wellingborough is delivering 'fair' access to its services. It is easy for customers and users to access services through a choice of access channels. The Council is responsive to the needs of vulnerable users, such as providing home visits for revenues and benefits customers who cannot travel to Council offices and running a number of initiatives to help people cope with the effects of the recession.
- 2 The Council consults with local people to identify their needs and involve them in the design of services. The ward action programme and work with the youth council demonstrate the Council's willingness to engage with the community.
- 3 Although satisfaction rates for services are mixed residents are generally positive and state services are responsive to user needs and are relatively easy to access. Access to services is simple and straightforward and the Council is helpful in resolving customer enquiries.
- 4 The Council does not have a formally stated vision or set of aims for what it is trying to achieve in relation to access to services. Expectations are not being clearly communicated to stakeholders, including local people, councillors, staff and partners. This is resulting in an inconsistent view across the Council and its partners of what the priorities for improvement are. Despite this the Customer First programme is helping to ensure that services are focused on the needs of users but this is not yet well embedded.
- 5 After a slow start and from a low base, the Council is now making progress in diversity and equality. An active corporate equality group is driving this work forward. The Council is improving its engagement with the local community but this is not yet representative of the whole community and engagement with minority groups is not yet well developed.
- 6 The Council has little useful information with which to assess the value for money of its various channels of communication with the public. It does not know how its customer contact costs compare with others or the relative costs of the different channels. Managers are required to focus on demonstrating value for money but this has not yet resulted in any significant changes to the way services are challenged or delivered.
- 7 The Council has 'promising' prospects for improvement. It has a clear understanding as to how it wishes to develop and improve services and customers access to them. But many initiatives are recent and yet to be embedded. A corporate business transformation programme is underway, with one key aim being to put the customer at the centre of service delivery. The corporate plan priorities cascade into service and staff plans. Councillor and senior manager leadership for the delivery of customer focused access to services has been strengthened and is now more effective.
- 8 There is financial capacity to deliver improvement and resources are allocated to deliver the planned investment in ICT, despite a backdrop of significantly reduced revenue. The revised corporate performance management framework now provides a more integrated approach to setting priorities, allocating resources against them and systematically monitoring progress.

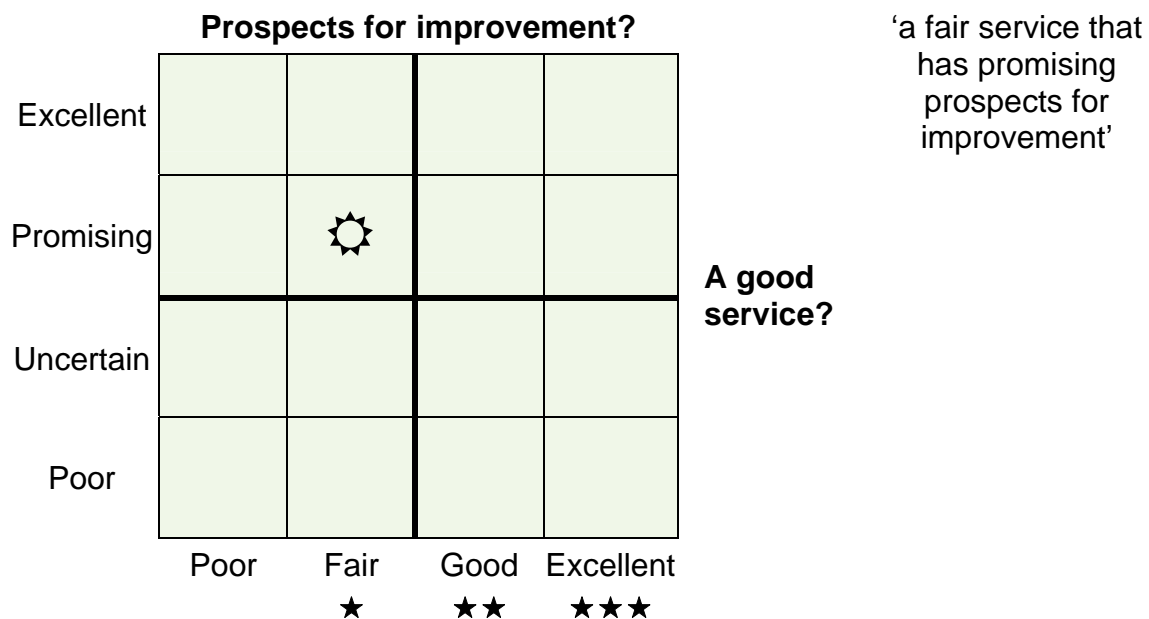
## Summary

- 9 The Council is now engaging effectively with residents and service users to plan required improvements, through the recently established engagement mechanisms. In this respect partnership working is becoming more effective. The Council is also utilising ICT effectively to support and deliver improvements for customers in accessing services.
- 10 But the specific plans for improvement for customers who visit the council in person are 'work in progress' at this stage. The corporate approach to managing risk is still developing and processes for learning from customer feedback are not yet systematic or fully joined up.

# Scoring the service

- 11 We have assessed the Borough Council of Wellingborough as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

**Figure 1** Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>



Source: Audit Commission

- 12 The service is a fair, one-star service because:

- the Council operates a variety of access channels and as a result its services are easy to access;
- the Council is developing effective arrangements for consulting, engaging and communicating with local people;
- some service provision is targeted at particular groups such as people with disabilities, young people and offenders;
- overall performance in customer contact is good with a high level of resolution at first point of contact and high customer satisfaction; and
- the corporate vision to improve customers' experience - articulated through Customer First - is clear to middle and senior managers, and is informing what they do, although it is not yet strongly and consistently promoted to staff and partners.

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

## Scoring the service

However:

- the Council does not have a good understanding of the specific needs of all its communities. A general lack of user data limits its understanding of the range of needs of all minority communities;
- an under-developed approach to service user monitoring means the Council cannot yet demonstrate that it is providing fair and equal access to services;
- service standards are not in place or communicated well for all services and service performance is not effectively communicated to staff or users; and
- although a corporate focus on value for money is improving the Council has little useful information with which to assess the value for money of its public communication channels or how this compares with others.

13 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- leadership at service level for the delivery of customer focused access to services has been strengthened and there is an increasing level of self awareness throughout the organisation;
- adequate financial resources are allocated to deliver improvement which include planned investment in ICT;
- mechanisms for engaging with the community and learning from feedback are being established; and
- an effective performance management framework is now in place to monitor, report and manage issues arising.

However:

- processes for learning from customer feedback are not yet systematic or joined-up across the Council; and
- formal plans for the Customer First initiative and workforce development have yet to be finalised.

# Recommendations

- 14 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the Council. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>1</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council should do the following.

## Recommendation

- R1** Publish customer service standards for key service areas and monitor delivery against them:
- using service standards that reflect the identified needs of the public; and
  - regularly publishing achievement against standards and identifying how any underperformance is to be addressed.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the public are clear about the level of service they can expect; and
- the public are aware of what measures are being taken to deliver continuous improvement.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by September 2010.

## Recommendation

- R2** Finalise the corporate approach to access, currently being developed as Customer First:
- clarifying longer term aims for improving access to services for all into formal plans; and
  - effectively communicating Customer First objectives to staff, service users and potential customers.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- staff are fully aware of their role in delivering improved customer service;
- the public are clear about the services delivered by the Council and how these can be accessed; and
- the public understand how their needs have been considered and are being addressed.

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

## Recommendations

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by November 2010.

### Recommendation

- R3** Fully embed the corporate approach to ensuring equality of access to services:
- by regular consultation with potentially vulnerable and minority groups;
  - systematic use of Equality Impact Assessments; and
  - systematic use of customer feedback in service planning and development processes.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- removing potential barriers to accessing services; and
- ensuring the needs of potentially vulnerable people are considered and met.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by September 2010.

### Recommendation

- R4** Improve access to services and the effective management of customer enquiries by:
- fully implementing the new Customer Relationship Management system;
  - implementing the planned improvements to the Council's website; and
  - implementing the planned improvements to the Council's telephone systems.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- cost effective customer contact services;
- improved quality of service for all customers: and
- improved choice in accessing services.

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

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# Report

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## Context

### The locality

- 15 Wellingborough is a rural<sup>I</sup> borough in central Northamptonshire in the East Midlands covering an area of 163 square kilometres. Wellingborough itself is the main town, and there are also a number of villages and smaller settlements.
- 16 It has average levels of deprivation. In 2007 the Borough ranked 168th out of 354 (where 354 is the least deprived). There is only one area which falls into the most deprived 10 per cent in England, and this is in Hemmingwell ward. In contrast Hemmingwell ward also contains an area in the 10 per cent least deprived in England, and there are similarly affluent areas in Earls Barton, Redwell West and Wollaston wards.
- 17 Latest population estimates show the population of Wellingborough to be around 76,400.<sup>II</sup> Recent projections suggest the population will increase to around 87,600 by 2020, with both the overall and older populations growing at faster rates than either the East Midlands or England.<sup>III</sup>
- 18 The 2008 population estimates show Wellingborough to have a slightly higher proportion of children and young people when compared to the East Midlands and England.
- 19 Despite being classified as a rural area, Wellingborough is more densely populated than England or the East Midlands, at 466 persons per square kilometre compared with 392 and 282 respectively.<sup>IV</sup>
- 20 The 2001 Census shows Wellingborough to have a relatively high minority ethnic community, with 11.7 per cent of the population classified as non-White British, and 9.2 per cent classified as non-White, compared to 8.7 per cent and 6.5 per cent respectively for the East Midlands and 13.0 per cent and 9.1 per cent respectively for England.
- 21 Earnings are below average in Wellingborough, both for people who live in the borough and those who work in the borough at £431 and £415 per week respectively compared to a national average of £489.
- 22 The proportion of people claiming Job Seekers Allowance in Wellingborough was 4.5 per cent in November 2009, above the East Midlands and national average. Although it represents an increase from the same period in 2008 (3.0 per cent), it also shows a decrease from the May 2009 level of 5 per cent.

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<sup>I</sup> Defra classifies Wellingborough as 'significant rural' ie a district with more than 37,000 people or more than 26 per cent of the population in rural settlements and larger market towns.

<sup>II</sup> 2008 ONS Mid Year Population Estimates

<sup>III</sup> 2006 ONS Sub-National Population Projections and AC National Study 'Don't Stop Me Now'

<sup>IV</sup> ONS 2007

### The Council

- 23** The Council is Conservative controlled with 30 Conservative councillors, 4 Labour councillors and 2 other councillors. As the population of the Borough is less than 85,000, the Council has chosen the 'alternative arrangements' model of governance, ie Committees with a Scrutiny function. The main decision making Committees are Community, Development and Resources.
- 24** The organisational structure is led by the Chief Executive. She is supported by a Deputy Chief Executive and three corporate directors. The net revenue budget for 2009/10 is £12.1 million.

### National context

- 25** The Government sees customer access as important. This is reflected in a number of legislative and national policy changes over recent years. In 1999 the white paper, 'Modernising Government', required local authorities to move towards electronic delivery in their services to the local community. The Strong and Prosperous Communities local government white paper signalled the Government's commitment to empowering citizens and communities, enabling more influence and choice with more responsive services to deliver the best solutions locally. Other white papers identified the need for local government to deliver joined up, accessible, electronically delivered, open, and accountable services. Improving customer access requires wider national drivers to be taken into account. These include the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, Human Rights Act 1998; Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995, Employment Equality Regulations for Age, Sexual Orientation and Religion or Belief. Disability Equality Duty and the Equality Act 2006. Councils should be considering their approach to Equalities as a result of the Single Equality Bill.
- 26** Access to services is a cross-cutting theme applicable to all councils and council services. It covers four broad areas: ease of access to services; using e-government to support access to services; reaching all parts of the community; and partnership working. For customers, it means that they should be able to contact councils in a range of accessible and DDA compliant physical localities. They should also be able to contact councils through a range of other remote methods. This includes through a fully accessible, easy-to-navigate website. There should be appropriate arrangements for electronic transactions, electronic communication and consultation.
- 27** Councils should have implemented an e-government programme informed by citizen/user needs and aspirations. 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.

### Access to the Council's services

- 28 Most people contact the Council by telephone, but can also do so through the Council's website, by visiting one of the Council's offices or in writing. A dedicated customer services team deal with the majority of routine telephone and face-to-face enquiries at three publicly accessible Council offices in Wellingborough Town Centre. To support this the Council also operates a range of outreach and field services, such as a home visiting service in revenues and benefits for clients who have difficulty in travelling to the Council's offices.
- 29 The Council is attempting to ensure that services are designed and delivered to meet the needs of users through its Customer First programme. This includes consulting with service users to identify their needs and carrying out satisfaction surveys and mystery shopping exercises to ensure that services are meeting the required standard. However, this programme is at an early stage and is only just starting to shape services.

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# How good is the service?

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## What has the service aimed to achieve?

30 The Council works with partners in the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) to help focus resources on agreed priorities. In 2008 local people were consulted to identify the issues that were important to them. This information was used by the Council and its partners to develop the shared priorities set out in the 2008-2011 Sustainable Community Strategy (SCS). This is the third community strategy and provides the framework for public organisations in Wellingborough to work together in a cost effective way. It identifies six priority areas.

- **Neighbourhoods** working to improve the quality of life for residents in both urban and rural areas. Promoting community cohesion and equalities.
- **Healthier** active living, concerned with improving the health of residents. This also includes meeting the needs of older people both in health and quality of life issues.
- **Safer** concerned with improving community safety in the Borough.
- **Better** environmental, cultural, transport; working to improve the quality of life for residents.
- **Prosper** economic development concerned with improving the economy of the Borough.
- **Children and Young People** addressing the needs of the young people in the Borough to ensure that they can achieve and thrive in the future.

31 These objectives link to the wider Northamptonshire Local Area Agreement (LAA) and SCS and have also formed the basis for the Council's Corporate Business Plan 2010 to 2013. This plan forms the framework for targeting the Council's services and resources to help achieve SCS priorities. The Corporate Business Plan sets out the overall vision of 'Making Wellingborough a place to be proud of'. It defines the mission of the Council as to **lead, engage and perform**. The Council aspires to:

- **lead** the community by helping people and organisations to work in partnership for the good of the whole borough;
- **engage** with local people and our partners, understand what affects the borough and use that information to prioritise what we do; and
- **perform** to the high standards people expect of us and make sure that efficient and effective services are available to meet local needs.

32 The corporate business plan identifies five strategic themes, known as 'PRIDE', that the Council will focus on over the next three years. These are:

- promoting high quality growth;
- reducing crime and anti-social behaviour;
- improving life chances for young people;

- delivering efficient and responsive services; and
  - enhancing the environment.
- 33** The Council recognises that services must be easily accessible and responsive to the needs of local people if it is going to make progress in achieving its priorities. To help achieve this it has embarked on a 'Customer First' initiative. This has a number of elements, including:
- monitoring the customer experience through 'mystery shopping', satisfaction surveys and 'customer call-back' to ensure that customer enquiries were dealt with effectively;
  - focus groups where service users provide feedback on service quality and how services could be adapted to better meet their needs; and
  - establishing a 'People's Panel' as a means of engaging with local people.
- 34** However, there is no single statement of aims that brings all the Council's access intentions together. Objectives and actions to improve customer access and engagement are not articulated clearly in service plans and there is no shared understanding across the organisation of what the Council's vision and aims are for improving access to services.

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

#### Customer and community focus

- 35** Customer focus is an important theme but this is not yet managed consistently across services. The Council is starting to set up service improvement focus groups. The first of these was held by the Housing Needs service. It identified that many users were contacting the service when their problems had reached crisis point. This made it difficult for the Council to prevent their homelessness and it was clear that earlier intervention was needed. Also, the service was seeing very few homeowners in mortgage difficulty, despite Wellingborough having a high rate of repossessions. Following the focus group a number of actions were identified to make the service more responsive to users. These included better promotion of the service via posters distributed across the borough, a more user-friendly website and training of customer advisors to improve their knowledge and understanding of the Housing Needs services. Housing options officers are planning to begin door-knocking at properties which are being repossessed and where residents have not replied to Council letters. They will give the homeowner an advice pack, explain how the Housing Needs Team may be able to help and find out why they had not contacted the Council for help. The service plans to publicise the success of the mortgage rescue scheme, carry out joint promotional work with the Citizens' Advice Bureau and include information on the Housing Needs service with all council tax bills. The Council is therefore starting to ensure that services are designed around the needs of users, although this is not yet established across all services.

## How good is the service?

- 36** The Council has designed services to meet specific needs of particular groups of users. Although 'learn to swim' sessions were available for young people with disabilities there was no provision for talented youngsters to develop their swimming skills. The Council worked with its leisure contractor, the local swimming club and a special needs school to provide developmental coaching for aspiring and talented young swimmers with disabilities. The Council provides a day centre for older residents at one of its community centres. It recognises that the needs and expectations of this section of the community are changing and consulted with them to identify their aspirations for the service. As a result it is working with partners to provide swimming sessions for attendees who would otherwise not be able to access the pool independently. It is also providing other arts and cultural activities and information and guidance on topical issues such as personalised budgets, swine flu, keeping warm in winter and nutritional guidance. It is therefore adapting services to meet the specific and changing needs of users.
- 37** The Council's commitment to customer focus and customer access is not being actively promoted to either staff or residents. While managers are familiar with the customer first initiative and are required to ensure that service plans reflect user needs frontline staff have a less clear understanding. Customer service advisors state that they contact service users to assess their satisfaction with services but receive no feedback from the Council on the results of these surveys or how the information is used to identify service improvements. The customer first initiative and the Council's customer focus aspirations have not been actively promoted to local people. Staff and residents are therefore not fully engaged or aware of the Council's approach to customer focus.
- 38** Customer feedback is encouraged as a way of learning from customers' experience. A comments, compliments and complaints procedure is in place and is promoted on the Council's website. Complaints are monitored to identify any trends or general learning points. This provides a mechanism to learn from user feedback, although most complaints tend to be of an individual nature and do not have wider relevance to other Council services.
- 39** Data on customers and users is not readily available on a segmented basis so the Council does not yet know how resident and customer experience varies amongst different groups. It therefore has limited information on user and non-user profiles and this reduces its ability to plan relevant improvements. The recently implemented customer relationship management (CRM) system should help to address this but currently there is limited segmentation of user data.

### Ease of access for all

- 40** It is easy for customers and users to access services through a choice of access channels. These include three customer service receptions in the town. Positive features for users include:
- 8am to 6pm telephone contact for customers;
  - out-of-hours emergency telephone contact for a wide range of council services;
  - a single contact number for all telephone enquiries;

- a dedicated customer services team who deal with the majority of routine telephone and face-to-face enquiries;
  - A to Z of Council services available on website;
  - a number of heavily used services are available online eg planning, payments, 'change of circumstances' and council tax account management; and
  - revenues and benefits information is available in all major languages, and Braille and other language translations of documents are available on request.
- 41 The Council ensures that its services are accessible for people who may have difficulty in travelling to Council offices. For example, the revenues and benefits service makes home visits where appropriate and during the recent postal strike delivered benefits cheques by hand. The Housing Needs service holds regular surgeries at Wellingborough library and also at the prison as a means of engaging with a group of people who may need to access the service in the future. Access for people living in rural areas is limited to telephone and web channels, however, given the small size of the borough and the availability of public transport links local people say this does not present a barrier to accessing Council services.
- 42 The Council is working with partners to improve community transport. 'Wellibus' is a Council funded 'dial-a-ride' bus service available to the elderly, people with disabilities and adults and young people who meet eligibility criteria. In addition to local journeys regular excursions are also provided. The Council also funds a volunteer car service which provides transport to medical appointments for elderly and disabled residents who are unable to use public transport. A Shopmobility scheme provides electric scooters and wheelchairs in the town centre. The Council is therefore working to ensure that the physical access needs of all residents are met.
- 43 Access to the town is promoted through the provision of free parking at Council car parks. Residents and local businesses attach a high importance to free parking as this encourages people to shop in the town rather than travel elsewhere. It also means residents do not incur parking charges when visiting Council offices which could present a barrier to access particularly for those on low incomes. There are dedicated parking spaces for people with disabilities at Council office car parks. Access is therefore promoted through free and available parking.
- 44 The Council is using partnership effectively to increase service access. For example, the Council offers subsidised sessions at leisure centres to support local health improvement initiatives. Information on cross cutting and partnership working is available from the website. For example, there is a link to the Castle website (the Council funded theatre, cinema and arts centre) which provides details of events and allows on-line booking. Information is provided via the County Council's library, for example, a display on town centre improvements as part of a consultation exercise to seek the views of local people, and health promotion initiatives with the health service. Effective partnership working enables the Council to make better use of its resources.

## How good is the service?

- 45 The Internet is used to provide information through an adequate website. The website has some good facilities and contains a lot of information, but this it is not always easy to find. The site is rated as 'transactional' by SOCITIM<sup>1</sup> - the middle of three rankings. The Council recognises that the website is in need of improvement and is in the process of implementing a new improved website. The Council has recently implemented a new CRM system but this is not yet fully operational across all services. It is also introducing a new geographical information system (GIS). The intention is that these systems will provide detailed information on patterns and location of service users and non-users which will enable the Council to deliver services in line with customer needs and preferences. However, these developments will not be in place until after the GIS is implemented later in 2010.
- 46 The Council is proactive in addressing the needs of users. It has undertaken a number of initiatives in response to the economic downturn. These include:
- working with partners to hold a 'recession to recovery' conference and 'back to work' jobs fair;
  - providing increased flexibility in council tax payment dates to help residents manage their budgets;
  - promoting benefits take-up campaigns which has resulted in a 26 per cent increase in claims since April 2008; and
  - working with partners to provide affordable loans to residents who cannot get loans from banks.

It is therefore helping to mitigate the impact of the recession for some of its more vulnerable residents.

- 47 Physical access to the main public buildings is reasonable. Reception areas are wheelchair accessible and equipped with appropriate aids, such as hearing loops and low-height reception desks and cash counter. There is access to translation facilities as required. The new Waendel leisure centre has good access for people with disabilities including fully accessible gym, pool, changing and showering facilities. Seventy six per cent of Council buildings which have public access comply with the accessibility requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). There are three pavilions and two public toilets that are not currently fully accessible to people with disabilities but there is a programme of upgrading in place which is scheduled to achieve full compliance by Summer 2011. The Council is therefore taking steps to ensure that all its public buildings are fully accessible.

## Standards

- 48 The Council's approach to service quality and review is underdeveloped. There is a set of generic service standards which cover access issues, such as opening hours, waiting and response times. However, these standards are not well promoted and so many service users will not be aware of the standards of service they can expect. Users were not involved in the development of these standards and therefore have not had the opportunity to comment on whether they meet their requirements.

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<sup>1</sup> Society for information technology management

- 49 Although the Council monitors service performance it does not systematically feed this information back to residents or staff. A range of techniques are used to monitor service performance, such as mystery shopper exercises and customer satisfaction surveys. These reveal good levels of performance. For example, mystery shopping rated 12 per cent of telephone transactions as excellent, 65 per cent as good and 24 per cent as average. Eighty eight per cent of calls were fully resolved at first point of contact. A customer satisfaction survey conducted in 2009 found that 96 per cent of users were happy with how they were treated and 79 per cent rated the quality of service as very good or excellent. However, while performance against service standards is reported to management teams more could be done to communicate this information to staff and residents to inform them how the Council is performing.
- 50 Service specific standards do not exist to challenge the performance of individual services. The Council's generic standards may be inappropriate or unchallenging for particular services and the absence of service specific standards means that services are not sufficiently challenged or monitored to meet the particular needs of users.

### Engagement

- 51 The Council is making progress in engaging with local people. A range of engagement methods are used. These include the following.
- The ward action programme - this reflects that a 'one size fits all' approach to service delivery is not appropriate to meet the diverse needs of residents. Ward councillors and a ward support team of officers meet with local residents and carry out 'ward action walks' to identify what issues are important to local people. Councillors have been given a small budget to spend on locally identified priorities. Projects have included new community notice boards, motorcycle inhibitors, a young gardeners' scheme, relocation of a taxi stand and a 'shop local' scheme. Feedback has been used to produce individual ward action plans with actions allocated to service departments. The Council intends to further develop this initiative into a strategic planning tool that links budget and service plans to identified local needs.
  - The Council is actively engaging with young people in the borough via the youth council. It recognised there was no representative forum to engage with young people, who make up 25 per cent of the borough's population. Working with Connexions and voluntary sector partners the concept of a youth council was promoted to young people and after an election process it met for the first time in September 2009. Each member represents an education, faith, sporting or other community of interest. A budget of £13,000 from 'second homes' funding has been allocated to the youth council and it is developing an action plan. It links with the councillor-led Youth Advisory Panel which provides a direct link with the Council's decision making structure. It is proposed that all Council reports affecting young people will be referred to the youth council and its members will be invited to sit on Council committees. The Council is also piloting the use of social media with the youth council as a means of communication and engagement.

## How good is the service?

- A survey of young people in the borough identified the need for homelessness advice amongst this group. The Housing Needs service developed a school based peer education programme to educate young people about the realities of homelessness and living independently. This has been positively received by young people, schools and parents and the Council intends to extend the programme.
- 52** The Council is engaging with local people in areas of greatest need. It has identified four priority intervention areas in the town characterised by higher levels of deprivation, crime and anti-social behaviour. Working with partners such as the police, housing association and the county council it has engaged with local people via residents associations and community meetings and developed action plans to address issues that are identified as local concerns. It is therefore engaging with the most disadvantaged and vulnerable communities to target services to meet their needs.
- 53** The Council is effective in engaging local people via community events. It hosts annual events such as the Wellingborough Carnival and Party in the Park and uses this opportunity to engage with local people, for example, asking them to become members of the people's panel. The panel is still in the process of being established but the Council plans to develop it into a representative forum that can be used to consult on local issues.
- 54** Engagement with marginalised groups is increasing but not yet consistent or systematic. For example, there have been specific efforts to engage in relevant and effective ways with the borough's traveller community. While progress has been made in establishing mutual trust there is a recognised sensitivity around this community in relation to service provision. The Council has responded to specific problems affecting other minority groups, for example, working with the local East European migrant community to address difficulties with waste collection arrangements. However, it does not have a strong and established formal set of relations with its BME communities, including those long established in the borough. Channels of communication exist between the Council and its minority populations, predominantly via the Victoria Centre - a voluntary sector organisation that is partly funded by the Council - but it has yet to clearly and systematically identify the needs of these users and potential users. This limits the ability of the Council to shape service delivery to the needs of all sections of the community.
- 55** The Council does not yet understand the needs of its non users so can not use this to inform future service plans. There is no coordinated approach to promoting services to non users or potential users. This makes it difficult for the Council to target its services to ensure they are accessible to all sections of the community.

- 56** The Council's approach to communication has been ad hoc and uncoordinated. It publishes a Council newspaper - the Link - which is delivered to all houses in the borough three times a year. However, a recent review raised concerns that the Link doesn't provide consistent, corporate messages, isn't linked to corporate objectives and doesn't focus on what the Council is doing to improve life in the borough. The Council doesn't know if the Link is read or valued by residents. It proposes to address these shortcomings by linking the content to its objectives, featuring case studies that residents can relate to, encouraging feedback via a letters page and changing to a more attractive magazine-style format.

### Diversity

- 57** The Council is starting to make progress in improving its approach to equality and diversity, but from a slow start. It achieved only Level 1 of the former Equality Standard for local government - 86 per cent of councils performed better than this. However, there is a clear commitment to ensuring that all sections of the community have fair and equal access to services and the Council can show that it is improving in this area. It is consolidating a consistent approach to diversity and equality. The draft corporate equality scheme 2010-2013 builds on previous strategies and incorporates the six key equality themes of race, disability, gender/trans-gender, age, religion and belief and sexual orientation. It is being effectively driven by an active corporate equalities steering group. It contains an action plan with targets that feed into service plans and managers appraisals. The Council's service planning process requires a consideration of equality and diversity issues through the completion of equality impact assessments (EIAs) and the setting of objectives, and this has helped raise awareness amongst staff. EIAs exist for all public facing services and there is a programme of update and review. All staff receive diversity training via an e-learning package. This commitment is helping to ensure that equality and diversity considerations are being routinely factored into service planning.
- 58** An under-developed approach to service user monitoring means the Council cannot yet demonstrate that it is providing fair and equal access to services. There is no systematic monitoring of take-up of services by minority groups. Consequently the Council does not have a clear picture of whether certain groups are under-represented. The groups that are being established to engage with residents and service users, such as the people's panel and customer focus groups, are similarly not monitored to ensure that they are representative of the wider community. It is therefore possible that minority groups do not have equal access to services or full opportunity to contribute to the development of services. This is something that the Council is aware of and intends to address but reflects the relatively slow progress that has been made in embedding equality and diversity issues.

## How good is the service?

- 59 There are some positive initiatives where the Council can demonstrate that it is responsive to the needs of minority groups, for example:
- a community diversity festival was held in November 2009 as part of One World Week. This was a celebration of the diversity of established and new communities in the borough and was a showcase of traditional arts, crafts and culture. The Council used it as an opportunity to raise its profile amongst minority groups and to encourage people to become involved in on-going consultation. It is proposed to make this an annual event;
  - the Council encourages and assists members of the african-caribbean community to produce costumes for the Wellingborough carnival to promote community involvement; and
  - the Council promotes a range of events at local schools and in the town to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day to highlight the potential consequences of racism.
- 60 The Council's workforce does not represent the community it serves. At a senior level BME communities and women are under represented, although people with disabilities are better represented. Within the overall workforce there is a lower proportion of BME workers but a higher proportion of workers with disabilities than the population of the borough generally.
- 61 Information on the Council's website is not fully accessible to those with specific access needs. The SOCITM survey found there are no accessibility features on the homepage of the website such as altering font size, providing a plain text version or changing the colours of the site, or icons for translation or 'Browsealoud' functions. There is also no accessibility section linked from the homepage.

### Service outcomes

- 62 The Council is developing its objectives and aspirations for customer access and the principles are well known by service managers and are being incorporated in service planning. The Customer First Strategy outlines a clear commitment to create a customer-focused organisation. Services are responding to this. For example, the Built Environment service has carried out a review of service users and identified that up to a third could have specific access needs due to visual impairment, language difficulties and mobility issues. It has taken simple steps to address this such as introducing a multi-language identifier in its reception areas and reviewing the clarity and format of information it provides to customers. This developing approach to customer focus will help to improve service outcomes for users.
- 63 Performance in customer access is generally good. There is prompt face to face contact and high resolution of service requests at the first point of contact. Call handling and abandonment rates are improving. In January 2009, 87 per cent of calls were answered and this increased to 92 per cent in January 2010.

- 64 The Council is not meeting the needs of customers in relation to privacy requirements. Consultation with benefits customers has revealed that they would like greater privacy when discussing their claims at the Tithe Barn reception. Private interview rooms are available on request, but the Council has yet to identify how it can routinely deal with such enquires in a more confidential manner.
- 65 Concessionary pricing is used successfully to provide access to facilities. The Council's leisure facilities are provided at a concessionary rate to residents over 60 and under 16, people with disabilities, unemployed and those on low income and students. Free swimming is available to those over 60 or under 16. This promotes access to leisure activities for those who might not otherwise afford it. Similar concessions are also available at the Castle, the Council-funded theatre, cinema and arts centre. It also runs a programme of community events to encourage children, adults and people with disabilities to become involved in productions.
- 66 The Council works closely with partners to deliver improved outcomes for specific access needs but this partnership working could be more focused. Examples of partnership working include:
- part-funding the Victoria Centre which provides a wide-range of support and advice activities in a deprived ward which has a high proportion of BME residents, such as information days for new migrants;
  - working with the Alliance for Black Children which provides help with literacy and numeracy for 8 to 13 year olds, mentoring schemes and holiday clubs; and
  - supporting the Wellingborough Youth Project, which runs a town centre youth café and a range of social and cultural activities for young people.

Although the Council often has service level agreements with partners that it funds these are generally vague and do not relate directly to the Council's objectives. There is limited evaluation of the outcomes that are being achieved or the value for money that the Council is receiving. The Council is starting to adopt a more rigorous approach to partnership working, for example, forming a Partnerships Review Committee to assess the value and effectiveness of partnerships. It therefore does not yet have a clear understanding of whether the services that are delivered with partners represent the best use of Council resources.

## How good is the service?

**67** The Council works effectively across traditional service boundaries to deliver a more accessible and customer-focused service. An example of this is the Hemmingwell Square regeneration. This is a 1970s estate in a deprived area of the borough. The Square is a below street-level area with some shops that are reached by an underpass. Residents perceived the Square as unsafe and there were high levels of fear of crime. The Council had regenerated the Square, turning a closed-down pub into a community café and transferring an underused community centre to voluntary sector management for use as a community and skills centre. However, the negative perceptions of residents jeopardised the sustainability of the community buildings and many were not accessing the services that had been put in place for their benefit. Through local consultation and partnership working the Council has significantly improved the local environment. The community has been involved in designing and constructing a community art piece, benches and bins have been installed and community events held. Through positive community engagement local people now see the Square as safer and more welcoming and the community facilities are now better used. By working with local residents the Council has responded to their needs and improved their quality of life.

### User experience

- 68** Users' experiences of accessing Council services and their perceptions of the Council are generally positive. A focus group of residents felt that Council services were responsive to user needs and were relatively easy to access. Particular praise was given to the Housing Needs service, which not only provides a responsive emergency service but also maintains a proactive and ongoing contact with clients to ensure that their housing and general welfare needs are being addressed. Other positive comments related to the Council's focus on young people and support for the Youth Council, a helpful and reliable waste collection service, the promotion of community events such as the Waendel Walking weekend and the provision of community transport which was particularly valued by elderly people who live in villages. Residents were concerned about the accumulation of litter on grass verges but said that the Council was generally prompt in clearing this once it had been reported.
- 69** There are good levels of service at the Council's contact points. Reception areas are welcoming and user friendly with a range of useful leaflets and posters and good access for people with disabilities. Checks revealed that the Council performs well in responding to customer enquiries. Enquiries all received a prompt and helpful response.
- 70** External evaluation shows that the quality of access is good. The Audit Commission's mystery shopping had a positive response. The mystery shopping included a mixture of telephone and email queries. Of the 12 queries, 11 resulted in a good response that provided the necessary information to answer the query or gave contact details of the service area that could provide this information. The Council responses were prompt, helpful and polite. Only one email query received an automated acknowledgement that was not followed up with further contact from the Council. This confirms the positive results that the Council has achieved in its own mystery shopping surveys. The Council is therefore helpful in resolving customer enquiries.

- 71** Customer satisfaction with services is mixed. The latest survey shows that satisfaction with a number of services does not compare well with other councils. This includes waste collection and recycling, keeping the borough clean and parks and open spaces. However, satisfaction with theatres/concert halls and sports and leisure is better than average. 42.4 per cent of residents are satisfied with how the Council runs things, which is similar to the overall figure for the East Midlands and nationally.

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### Is the service delivering value for money?

- 72** The Annual Audit and Inspection Letter (AAIL) of March 2009 highlights that Value for Money (VfM) has not improved. It remains adequate, which is the same as last year. Council tax is low but the Council provides services of mixed quality that are adequate overall, and performance is not improving overall, or in line with others. Processes for managing and improving VfM remain adequate, although the Council is developing an efficiency programme and is implementing a new VfM review process. Recent developments such as an IT shared service with a neighbouring Council aim to improve efficiency and value for money.
- 73** Since the AAIL was published the Council has taken steps to evaluate and improve VfM. As part of the budget setting and service planning process for 2010-2011 all services have had to identify 5, 10 and 20 per cent savings by aligning services to corporate priorities. Part of the criteria for identifying savings is that they should not adversely impact on local people's access to services. As a result a potential £1 million of savings have been identified for 2010-2011 which should have minimal impact on frontline services.
- 74** Investment has been made in improving the quality of services and access to them. For example, the Council has invested in a new swimming pool and leisure centre in the town centre and appointed a contractor to manage leisure services on its behalf. This has resulted in improved facilities which has helped to increase the number of people participating in sport and fitness activities. It is also investing in its ICT infrastructure to improve customer access. This includes a new Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, a new Geographical Information System (GIS), new telephony, a new website, enhanced e-payment facilities and a choice-based housing lettings system. Investment in services is helping to improve choice, quality and access for local people.
- 75** The Council has little useful information with which to assess the value for money of its channels for communication with the public. Comparative transaction costs are not available so it does not know how its customer contact costs compare with others or the relative costs of the different channels. The information it does collect about the performance of the customer advice service and other contact channels, such as the website, is only quantitative so it cannot assess their effectiveness or easily identify areas for improvement. Service managers are now required to compare the cost and quality of service with other councils and organisations in order to assess relative value for money. This should help to identify and address areas of poor VfM, but it is not yet well developed across all services.

## How good is the service?

- 76** Service reviews are helping to improve the cost and quality of services. For example, a review of cash collection is resulting in the closure of Council cash desks but customers who wish to make cash payments will be able to do so at a range of retail outlets in the town. This will provide savings to the Council, increase the number of locations where payments can be made and potentially increase custom for local traders. A review of delivery arrangements for the Link newspaper will result in a better service for half the cost - a saving of £2,500 per year to the Council. However, reviewing the VfM of service delivery is not yet routinely embedded across all services.
- 77** The Council does not have a strategic approach to partnering in service delivery. It funds a number of voluntary sector partners but the criteria for funding is often historical and does not directly reflect the Council's priorities. Service level agreements are generally vague, do not specify challenging performance targets and are not closely monitored. The Council is starting to address this, for example it has set up the Partnerships Review Committee to assess the value and effectiveness of partnerships. However, the Council's current approach is not ensuring that it receives value for money for its partnership funding.

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# What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

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

- 78** The Council's track record in delivering improvement in service delivery and the experience of customers is mixed, but there is a developing and concerted corporate approach to delivering improvement. Broader improvement is now being delivered progressively. Overall the Council improved 68 per cent of services last year, based on a basket of performance targets that it set. For example the amount of waste recycled and composted increased slightly. It met its target of affordable homes, and worked well with partners to deliver these homes that will help protect the environment and maintain village life.
- 79** Improvement has been delivered for customers of the Council's leisure facilities. The investment in a new swimming pool and leisure centre located in the town centre and the change to leisure service management arrangements, have together helped to increase significantly the numbers of persons participating in sport and fitness activities. The centre is also fully compliant in terms of physical accessibility to all of its facilities for disabled persons, ensuring that the most vulnerable members of the community have appropriate access to leisure. Customer satisfaction is improving as a result of these changes. Greater use of services makes them more cost-effective to deliver and more sustainable, whilst improving outcomes for the community.
- 80** The Council has established a track record of delivering service improvements for benefits claimants. The Housing Benefits service has been improved from the perspective of customers. The Council reduced the time it takes to process claims for benefits, despite an 11 per cent increase in the number of people making claims during the last year. Improvement to this service has a key impact on more vulnerable members of the community who are now receiving a more timely service.
- 81** Delivering services in a different way has brought about some success. Some youth projects are particularly successful because they have clear aims and are well supported, working in areas where antisocial behaviour is a particular problem. Criminal damage has been reduced by 10 per cent as a direct result. This approach reflects the Council's overall improvement in engaging with young people generally, such as its ongoing development of the Youth Council.
- 82** Similarly the Council is making progress in addressing public concerns around community safety. It has, in conjunction with its partners across the county, carried out a formal survey which shows that the proportion of people who think antisocial behaviour is a problem in their area has reduced by over six per cent during the year. Also the proportion of people who consider that rowdy or drunken behaviour is an issue reduced by almost six per cent. Effectively responding to concerns identified by the public as a priority will improve the quality of life for all residents of the Borough.

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

- 83** The Council has mechanisms in place, but is not yet consistently making effective use of, a range of techniques to measure customer satisfaction and identify potential weaknesses. Regular Mystery Shopping is undertaken between a group of district councils within Northamptonshire. Results for the most recent six month period demonstrate a high degree of satisfaction with the range of different contacts made with the Borough Council of Wellingborough. Direct feedback on customer experience enables specific improvements to be implemented swiftly to maximise impact.
- 84** Some key improvements have been delivered in a revised approach to the street cleansing service. Routes have been reorganised into areas and zones. Litter picking, sweeping and dealing with fly-tipping have been amalgamated into a single business operation, and a regular programme of cleansing based on tailored need has been implemented. A more visible and efficient service delivers better outcomes for customers, which are demonstrated through improved customer feedback.
- 85** A more systematic approach has been developed to delivering improved value for money in key services. Investment in technology has been made in the waste management service, with a direct improvement in the service experienced by customers. Efficiencies are also being delivered in the service, such as the maintenance of refuse freighters, which will cost £40,000 less now that new arrangements have been adopted. Delivery of efficiencies enables services to be sustained or improved, with more likelihood of customer expectations being met.
- 86** The Council is continuing to develop and implement a stronger corporate focus on value for money that is apparent in strategic plans and decision-making. The Zero-based budgeting approach and improved service plans demonstrate that value for money and the corporate procurement principles are becoming an ongoing feature of the day-to-day management of the organisation, to control costs more effectively and to better support the interests of customers.

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## How well does the service manage performance?

- 87** The Council's corporate priorities clearly acknowledge that services need to be accessible and aligned to the needs of the community. 'Delivering efficient and responsive services' is one of five strategic themes adopted for the Corporate Business Plan 2010-2013. Prioritising service delivery increases focus and keeps the customer's perspective as a key consideration in planning processes.
- 88** The revised corporate performance management framework now provides the basis for an integrated approach to setting priorities and allocating resources against them. The Council's corporate plans are well co-ordinated. The Corporate Business Plan shows clear linkages with the Sustainable Community Strategy, Wellingborough 2020 Vision and the broad LAA objectives, which are then incorporated into service plans and ultimately individual objectives. Plans are developed to address aims over the medium term, taking account of potential future needs, as well as immediate customer requirements. A coherent approach to determining priorities and regular monitoring of performance increases the likelihood that improved outcomes will be achieved.

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

- 89** The Council is currently developing its vision for improving customer services. This is centred on the concept of Customer First, which aims to put the customer at the heart of service development. The Council's ambition is to make all services more accessible through a variety of channels, with particular emphasis on rationalising its approach to dealing with customers who visit in person. A one-stop shop approach is intended, that will be developed in close conjunction with future plans for the Council's current range of premises around the town centre. This approach takes full account of the expressed needs of customers, whilst addressing the need to deliver cost savings corporately and the necessity of managing property assets efficiently. This will ensure that improvement is far more likely to be sustainable in the medium term financial context.
- 90** Future plans are being developed using a strong knowledge base of what is required for the longer term. A range of intelligence data has been reviewed and incorporated including the countywide Customer Insight project, consultation groups, partnership information from the Northamptonshire Observatory and the council's property estates review. Wide-ranging high quality research will enable the council to ensure that the current and future needs of aspiring customers can be effectively met.
- 91** The corporate approach to improvement planning has been significantly strengthened. The Council's range of corporate plans is appropriately co-ordinated. Priorities are clearly defined, within the 'PRIDE' agenda, and show an appropriate degree of focus on improving the outcomes and experiences that customers will receive when accessing services. The Council has developed its plans with a clear understanding of where it is coming from, in terms of performance, and where it needs to get to. Emerging aims and objectives are suitably challenging and are being determined in consultation with residents and service users to ensure that their aspirations are fully considered.
- 92** Appropriate focus is being given to improving efficiency and value for money. The Council is taking steps to prevent people from contacting the council unnecessarily. Better promotion of information about services, through the Link newspaper, partnership newsletters and the council's website are aimed at making information about services more easily available. This will reduce the number of requests for information and save time for both customers and staff, which makes more resources available to deliver services.
- 93** Improvement plans are supportive of the need to ensure that equality and diversity is a key consideration in all of the Council's activities and policies. The Council has developed a new Equalities and Diversity scheme (2010-13), informed by an equalities steering group. The scheme references all duties and responsibilities under equality legislation, and identifies links to other corporate plans and strategies. It includes information to clarify how each service relates to the equalities agenda and a requirement for each service to deliver EIAs throughout the life of the scheme. A structured and embedded approach to ensuring equality and diversity is fundamental to reducing the likelihood of discrimination.

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

- 94 A wide-ranging and rigorous Business Transformation Programme is underway across the council, which is strongly focussed on customer service. The change agenda has been communicated effectively to staff at all levels, and also promoted to external partners. For example, the Chief Executive and the Leader of the Council have undertaken a tour of all 19 Parish Council and parish meetings, to explain the change programme and to raise the profile of the Council as a community leader. Widespread engagement with plans for change increases the likelihood of acceptance of the plans and increased commitment in their delivery.
- 95 Members provide support to the access agenda through their designated scrutiny roles. Although there is no specific member champion for access to services, this is addressed by the relationship between each Committee and the corporate priorities. The Audit and Performance Committee, along with the subsidiary Partnerships Review Committee, are developing a role in ensuring that service access and satisfaction are systematically reviewed. High level and consistent member endorsement of the Council's obligation to facilitate access to services increases the likelihood of improvements being achieved that customers will recognise.
- 96 Staff demonstrate a clear understanding of what the Council wishes to achieve in delivering improvement. They know the intended aims and objectives in relation to customer service and are confident that there is a significantly increased focus on this key area. The introduction of key competencies for all staff demonstrates clarity of the culture and values that the Council wishes to promote. The competencies are themed around leadership, performance and engagement, with a strong emphasis on high quality customer service. Clearly communicated values and objectives increases staff engagement and understanding and strongly supports the delivery of change.
- 97 Service planning processes are now robust with a more integrated corporate approach. A new corporate methodology has been implemented, with a formal template being introduced and advice and guidance provided by the Head of Performance, to ensure a consistent approach and that priorities are addressed. Managers are enthusiastic about this revised approach and confident that it is improving target setting and prioritisation at service level.
- 98 There are developed plans in place to extend the use of ICT in improving access to services. The Council is introducing a more intuitive and transactional website. This will offer a greater choice of how to access services; whether to undertake transactions on-line or simply download information and will encourage even higher levels of usage by facilitating simpler and improved access. Most key services have already been using Geographical Information System (GIS) to record information. The Council is planning to update and extend the use of GIS and also to make it available to the public via the website, so that they can access information directly, saving both time and cost.

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

- 99** There are ambitious targets in place to improve efficiency and economy throughout the Council. Savings equivalent to 25 per cent of the overall expenditure budget are required to be delivered during the next three financial years, as a result of significant current financial constraints, particularly reductions in income. The Council now has put in place a revised governance structure, with the Zero-based budgeting process linked to service planning and performance monitoring, to manage and improve performance with the overall objective of improving economy, efficiency and overall value for money.
- 100** The Council has demonstrated that it can make difficult decisions and then adhere to them. Following a review of the approach to street cleansing, prompted by customer opinion, the Council has implemented a regular programme of cleansing frequency based on tailored need. Changes to working practices, and the necessary engagement of staff, have realigned the service to better address the requirements of the community.
- 101** A coherent and structured performance management framework is now in place with effective measures to monitor and report performance. The framework, identified as a key necessity to deliver sustained improvement, links individual and service plans with corporate objectives and strategic aims so that staff can clearly see how their work contributes to improving access to services. The Council publishes its performance against a basket of key performance indicators, which enables clear comparison against historical performance and current targets. The system incorporates regular reporting to the Audit and Performance Committee using a consistent format that gives councillors a better understanding of trends and highlights key issues. Publishing performance information increases the opportunity for appropriate challenge from members, stakeholders and the wider community.
- 102** The Council has strengthened its financial control, supporting the prospects for more effective performance management. There is a more robust approach through the use of Zero-based budgeting processes and robust budget monitoring. Effective financial control is fundamental to ensuring that performance is managed within the overall corporate hierarchy.
- 103** Risk management has been strengthened. The revised service planning process requires service heads to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats pertinent to their service area. However, risk management is not yet systematically embedded into the performance monitoring regime, giving managers and members adequate assurance that risks are being effectively managed at service level.
- 104** Effective use of some feedback is made to understand the quality of frontline customer service and identify potential improvements. Mystery Shopping is consistently used as a means of identifying opportunities to implement improvements for customers at their first point of contact with the council. But use of feedback is not yet fully embedded into service development and planning process, nor fed back to front line staff on all occasions. Routine measurement of customer experience enables the council to understand where people may be experiencing difficulties in accessing services and to better address their needs.

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

**105** The Council has demonstrated a willingness to improve through learning from others. An external Challenge Board, comprising peers and key stakeholders, is currently assisting the Council in developing and embedding its improvement plans. Previously highlighted weaknesses, such as community engagement and equality and diversity, are being addressed with advice and assistance from peers and partners. The establishment of customer focus groups is one area to have benefited from this approach, providing an improved opportunity to seek the community's views.

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## Does the service have the capacity to improve?

**106** The Council has adequate officer capacity within its services in place to deliver the planned improvements to service access. There is a settled management structure in place, which has been strengthened by the addition of a Director of Resources. The necessary skills and knowledge are largely in place to systematically deliver the range of corporate improvement plans. A key tool of the approach to improvement is the Customer First concept, which is being progressively embedded across the Council, through its implementation at service level. Effective and committed teamworking to deliver common goals strengthens capacity and increases opportunities to deliver improvement for customers.

**107** Members demonstrate an understanding of their role in ensuring that the council provides good customer service. Personal contact with customers has indicated to members that people are primarily concerned with obtaining a timely and high quality front line service. Members periodically undertake mystery calls, to personally measure the quality of service being provided.

**108** Members demonstrate an improving understanding of their strategic and operational roles, responsibilities and accountabilities. There is an appropriate regime of corporate governance in place to support improvement initiatives. Responsibility and accountability are defined across the organisation between members and officers. Members have benefited from recent training in a range of disciplines, such as effective scrutiny. The Council's scrutiny function has been redefined, to increase capacity and effectiveness, and is now discharged by the Audit and Performance and Partnerships Review Committees. This provides the opportunity for a more robust challenge to the leadership and management, as well as championing improvements in both customer service and value for money.

**109** There are appropriately motivated frontline staff in place to deliver effective access to the Council's services. Frontline staff demonstrate a clear understanding of, and commitment to, the Council's intentions in implementing Customer First to ensure good customer access and better customer care.

**110** ICT is being used effectively to support and deliver improvements for customers in accessing services. There are clear links between the ICT strategy and the provision of easier access to services. It has been clearly identified that a key principle of ICT service delivery is to support transformation of services around the customer's needs. Appropriate use of ICT is a cost effective way of improving access for many, whilst potentially making available additional resources to enable access for more vulnerable people.

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

- 111** Investment in modern communications technology is a key focus for improving access to services. The CRM system has recently been replaced and is improving customer service, as staff are able to respond to a wider range of enquiries. Similarly investment in GIS mapping technology is increasingly providing a great range of information available to customers about the council's services and also those of its partners.
- 112** Investment in improved telephone technology is planned. The Council has undertaken research that shows a high proportion of customers prefer to contact it by telephone in respect of many services. Better and more efficient telephone systems will enable the Council to meet customer needs in this key area.
- 113** Technology is also beginning to be used more effectively by the Council, with partners and other agencies, to inform its planning processes. The county Data Observatory is a key source of intelligence and the Council has invested in the Mosaic system of multi-layered demographic information to provide information about customers and their needs. This will help it to identify the best ways to provide access to its services.
- 114** The Council is implementing its approach to organisational development. Specialist customer service advisers will replace a generic team. NVQs (National Vocational Qualifications) in customer service are now available to staff and many are already pursuing them. A better skilled workforce is able to deliver a higher quality of service.
- 115** Steps are being taken to increase staff capacity. High levels of sickness have historically been a significant issue for customer services. A more rigorous approach to managing absence corporately has resulted in positive progress being achieved, increasing the opportunities to deliver improvements for customers. In addition a Business Improvement Officer is to be recruited to make effective use of feedback data and ensure that it is used in transforming service delivery.
- 116** An effective financial planning framework is being established. The Medium Term Financial Strategy is supported by a zero-based budgeting process to strengthen the financial planning process, and match appropriate resource allocation to deliver priorities. Financial planning is focused upon delivering better outcomes for customers for the same or less cost. To achieve this objective the Council will move forward its business transformation programme that will enable the Council to maintain its progress whilst delivering necessary efficiencies, ensuring that service delivery in priority areas is sustained.
- 117** The Council is making more effective use of procurement processes to deliver savings to support investment in additional capacity. The shared ICT service arrangement has enabled efficiencies to be delivered and collaborative purchasing, such as the investment in MOSAIC has realised savings. Effective procurement improves the value for money that the council is able to deliver.
- 118** Better partnership working is a key feature of the Council's approach to improvement for Wellingborough. It is taking steps to engage more effectively with partners. It is improving its use of the parish councils, in addition to the Police, the County Council and a range of others, which is significant in establishing the differing needs in specific areas. The Council also provides funding to an established range of third sector partners, working closely with them to provide access to council services by signposting residents to the right places or contacts.

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

- 119 The Council has shown a willingness to obtain and be receptive to external support. The Audit and Performance Committee was established with guidance from the IDeA, to ensure that it can be a key driver for focussing improvement activity on priority areas. Advice and assistance from parties external to the council adds capacity by making available additional skills, knowledge and experience, increasing the likelihood of success.

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# The Audit Commission

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