

Service Inspection Report

December 2005



# Cultural Services

**Woking Borough Council**

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## Service Inspection

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

Audit Commission service inspections should:

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

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

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

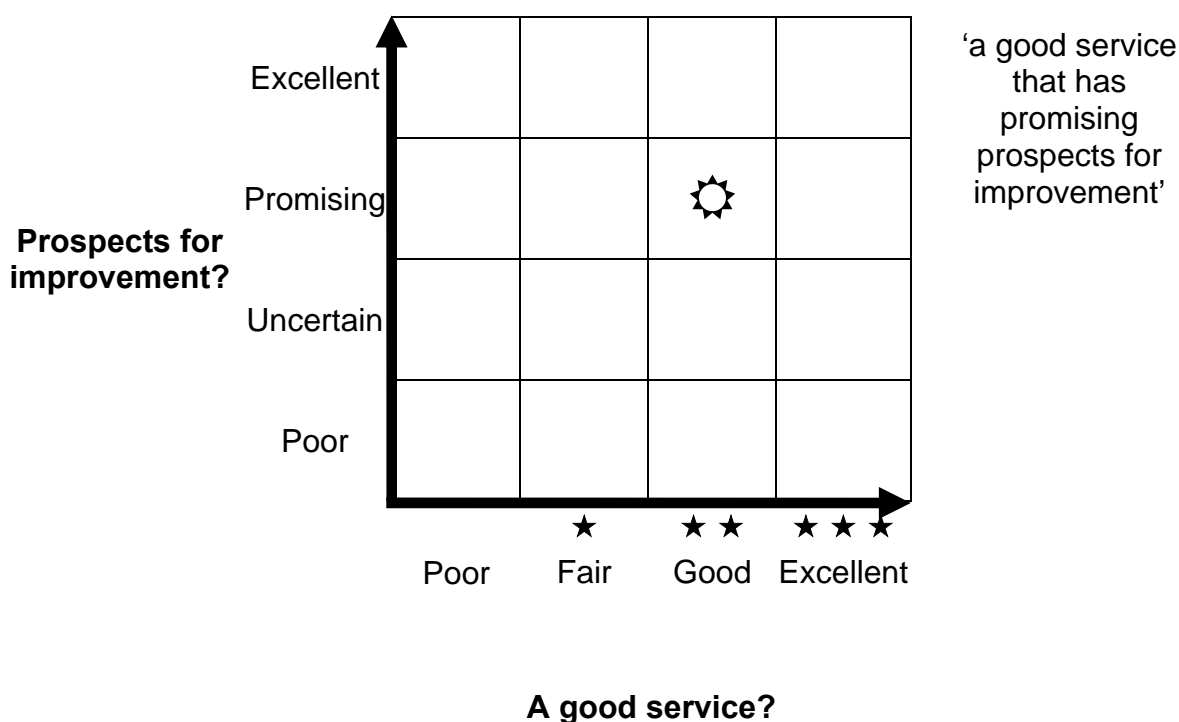
## Summary

- 1 Woking Borough Council provides good cultural services which have promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council directly provides and supports a wide range of cultural services which meet community needs. It uses its support for cultural activity well to support local priorities as set out in the community strategy. The wide range of leisure and cultural services are well used and highly valued by residents. The contribution that culture can make to the Council's ambitions for the community is clear, explicit and well-understood within the Council.
- 3 The Council consults widely on its future plans and services are responsive to the messages they hear. The Council has a good level of understanding of the needs of most residents and communicates well to most customers. The service is not however, able to demonstrate a full understanding of the needs of non-users, young people and all its minority communities. Service priorities are expressed in general terms that are all-encompassing, making it difficult for users and partners to be clear about what they can expect from the service.
- 4 Cultural services are important to the Council and are clearly linked to its priorities. Services can demonstrate a positive contribution to local, regional and national agendas on improving the quality of local life, such as promoting healthier lifestyles and safer and stronger communities. The Council has a range of approaches in place to ensure that services focus on delivering value for money. Satisfaction with cultural services is high overall and improving.
- 5 The Council's clear vision for cultural services is supported by effective leadership and a strong track record in delivering improvements in its cultural services. It successfully uses a range of partnerships with other councils, the NHS, voluntary sector groups and business to extend the scope and scale of services and has attracted significant external funding into the borough. The Council has strong systems in place for developing and monitoring service plans and budgets, and is introducing new internal systems to further support service management. It has a sound financial base, robust planning and IT systems and uses partnerships effectively to increase capacity and investment.
- 6 However, performance management in cultural services is not yet fully effective. Currently the service does not effectively measure improvement and the outcomes it achieves for users. There is no clear and robust framework for monitoring front line performance and impact for users across all cultural services. Cultural service aims are broad and there are few outcome focused, longer-term targets for services. As a result, the Council finds it difficult to measure the extent of its contribution to local priorities and wider agendas and its success in meeting all its cultural objectives. It is aware of this and has firm plans in place to improve target setting and service evaluation. The service is alert to diversity issues but the Council has yet to demonstrate how it will ensure all sections of the community can access services that will meet their needs.

## Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed Woking as providing a ‘good’ two-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

**Table 1 Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>:**



### *Audit Commission*

- 8 The service is a good, two-star service because:
- cultural services are recognised as a priority by the Council;
  - the wide range of well used cultural services delivers positive outcomes and makes a valuable contribution to raising the quality of life for local residents;
  - cultural activity is easily accessible to many local people;
  - there is a good understanding of the needs of most of the community, and the Council is addressing diversity issues through its cultural services;
  - local people are highly satisfied with services;

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

- the Council actively promotes services and events;
  - the service enjoys a high level of investment in line with council priorities; and
  - the Council has a robust approach to managing value for money in cultural services, including through modern procurement approaches.
- 9 However, weaknesses include the following:
- the Council cannot demonstrate a full understanding of community needs, particularly of minority communities and non-users;
  - information in other formats is not consistently publicised;
  - priorities and targets are not clearly expressed in service plans;
  - service standards are not uniformly available; and
  - services cannot always demonstrate what outcomes they achieve for people.
- 10 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:
- there is a strong track record of delivering improvements across cultural services that contribute to the health and wellbeing of local people;
  - leadership is clear and effective;
  - it successfully attracts additional investment;
  - it makes effective use of partnerships; and
  - it has invested in key systems such as modern procurement, project management and web-based services that will support further improvement.
- 11 Areas for development include:
- performance management focuses on high-level performance indicators and the budget. There is scope to develop local performance indicators to support further service development;
  - there are few outcome-focused, longer-term targets;
  - risk management has yet to be fully integrated into business planning; and
  - the service has yet to demonstrate how it will ensure the needs of all sections of the community will be met.

## Recommendations

- 12 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 Strengthening the understanding of local needs by:*

- *identifying gaps in consultation;*
- *addressing those gaps by targeting consultation more effectively; and*
- *communicating more effectively with hard to reach groups.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- identifying gaps in service provision;
- better prioritisation to support investment decisions;
- improving access by raising awareness of cultural activities;
- improving satisfaction rates with services and the Council overall;
- increasing participation in cultural, leisure and sporting activities; and
- improving health and quality of life outcomes.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2006.

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<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 percent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

**Recommendation**

*R2 Develop a clear understanding of value for money in cultural services by:*

- *identifying local performance indicators to drive improvement;*
- *setting clear targets for service activity focused on outcomes;*
- *measuring the impact of initiatives on service users; and*
- *developing a consistent system for the reporting and analysis of customer feedback.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved strategic decision-making;
- focusing service activity on outcomes for users;
- Improved investment decisions;
- learning from customer feedback; and
- improved customer satisfaction.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs but these could be offset by cost savings through better investment. This should be implemented by June 2006.

# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 13 Woking is situated in the heart of Surrey. It is a compact district covering only 64 square kilometres. Approximately two-thirds of the borough is in the greenbelt, and the majority of the population live in well-defined urban areas. Since the 1970s the town has undergone some major transformations with a large investment in offices, shops, roads, leisure facilities and housing.
- 14 The 2001 census showed a population of 89,400, representing a 3.8 per cent increase on 1991 figures. The majority of Woking's residents (62.5 per cent) are of working age. This figure is above the national average. Twenty per cent of residents are under 17 years of age, and 17 per cent are 65 or over; this compares to a national average of 18.3 per cent. There is a significant minority ethnic population with 8.7 per cent of residents recorded as non-white, over half of these (5.8 per cent) being Asian or Asian British. Woking is relatively affluent and, although there are pockets of deprivation, no wards are in the 10 per cent most deprived across the country; Maybury and Sheerwater are, however, among the three most deprived wards in Surrey. Unemployment levels are low at 1 per cent compared to the national average of 2.3 per cent. Woking has a highly qualified workforce with 30.3 per cent qualified to degree level. This also contributes to higher than average gross weekly earnings compared with other areas of the south east. The close proximity and good transport links to London mean Woking has a significant commuter population and competes with London and other regional centres, such as Guildford, for cultural activities.
- 15 Woking has a high quality mixed residential housing stock of 38,542 households with 68 per cent owner occupied in 2001. The average cost of all types of dwelling is £263,286. Affordable housing, including for key workers, is a key local issue.

### The Council

- 16 Woking Borough Council is a district authority with 36 Councillors representing 17 wards. The current political composition is 17 Conservative, 15 Liberal Democrat and 4 Labour. The Council has adopted the Leader with Cabinet model of executive arrangements and currently has a single party Executive of seven Conservative members, with portfolio responsibilities. Three overview and scrutiny committees (economic, environmental and social), take responsibility for scrutiny, review and consultation, but this arrangement is currently under review.
- 17 A management team made up of the Chief Executive and two executive directors supports the structure of the Council. Nine service heads are responsible for service delivery.

- 18 The Council employs 650 full-time equivalent staff. The Council's overall revenue net budget for 2005/06 is £18 million with a capital programme of £13.6 million (excluding housing). The Council has a strong financial position, and is debt-free with significant reserves. The net budget for cultural services for 2005/06 is £5.72 million (£9 million gross) which is approximately 32 per cent of the total budget.
- 19 In December 2003, the Council was rated as 'good' in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA). The assessment found that the Council was doing well in providing good leadership, effective partnership working delivering good quality services. However, the assessment found room for improvement in its approach to affordable housing provision, its borough-wide work on social inclusion and the consistent use of performance management.

### **The Council's cultural services**

- 20 The Council provides and supports a wide range of cultural services, including leisure, sports development, arts, heritage, community centres and open spaces. These are managed through the Council's recently created community services division.
- 21 The Council provides one major leisure centre, one swimming pool complex, a conference and event centre and a visitor information centre; it manages over 1,000 acres of publicly accessible common land, provides 36 children's play areas, and three centres for the community that host a range of services. It provides £200,000 in grants for cultural activities and support to a wide range of community groups.
- 22 Key partnerships include the following.
- The Ambassadors Theatre complex with two theatres, one of which is mainly for community groups, six cinema screens and the national headquarters of the Ambassadors Theatre Group.
  - Dual-use provision in several schools.
  - The biennial Woking Dance Festival.
  - The new Wokart festival.
  - The Woking Drama Festival.
  - Developing a major new gallery and heritage facility with Woking Galleries.
  - Working with Surrey Heath and Woking PCT to enable a GP exercise referral scheme and other health and social care services.
  - Town Centre Management Group.
  - Countryside partnerships, including Surrey Heathlands Project, Basingstoke Canal Authority and Surrey Wildlife Trust.

- 23 This inspection considered the effectiveness of service activity and approaches in meeting local needs, achieving value for money, delivering improvement, managing performance and ensuring there is sufficient capacity to improve services. In addition, and in line with the Government's national agenda, the inspection sought to assess how well services are delivering outcomes against the themes of healthier communities and safer and stronger communities.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 24 The local strategic partnership (LSP) has produced an overarching community strategy within which the Council plans its own contribution. LSP priorities focus on developing a strong community spirit with a clear sense of belonging and responsibility; a clean, healthy and safe environment; integrated accessible transport, access to quality and affordable housing for local people and key workers, a community which values personal health and wellbeing, and integrated and accessible local facilities and services.
- 25 The Council identifies three key corporate aims for itself:
- decent and affordable housing;
  - the environment; and
  - the contribution that leisure and community services can bring to health and wellbeing.
- 26 The key contributions that cultural services can make to these corporate aims are identified as being through encouraging social inclusion, promoting healthy lifestyles, enabling lifelong learning, and stimulating economic activity.
- 27 The Council has produced its own cultural strategy, with cultural services priorities identified as:
- building a strong local community spirit;
  - meeting the needs of young people;
  - enriching the lives of older people;
  - enhancing the borough's environment;
  - promoting Woking as an attractive destination for evening activities;
  - raising the profile of the borough as a venue for cultural activities;
  - making better use of resources; and
  - effective marketing of cultural activities.
- 28 The Council supports a number of county-wide partnerships and working groups, and more local community safety and health partnerships to further its goals through widespread partnership working.

- 29 Individual service plans contain specific priorities and aims for each part of the service. These are reflective of the Council's main priorities and to the Council's financial plans.

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

### Community engagement

- 30 Woking makes significant efforts to consult and engage with residents in decisions relating to cultural services, for example, through surveys and the Citizens Panel. The panel is made up of 1,400 members broadly reflecting the community. The members are sent questionnaires between three and six times a year. The borough is relatively compact and many groups are proactive in lobbying the Council. As a result, the Council has a good high level understanding of the majority of its citizens' needs. The Council uses road shows and displays as a means of engaging the community and holds 'listening days', sometimes on a service specific basis, to seek the views of residents. Woking carried out extensive public consultation during 2003 under the banner 'What's the Big Idea?'. This aimed to encourage people to think about the type of involvement they have in cultural activities. This exercise employed a number of techniques including public displays in the town centre, a questionnaire to local groups that was also available on the Council's website, and facilitated focus groups that were used to obtain the views of different local groups and age ranges. Regular feedback forms are also available for customers after they use a service or attend arts and sports courses or events.
- 31 The Council is improving access to its services. The overall percentage of council buildings accessible for disabled people in 2004/05 was 59 per cent, an improvement from 2003/04. This is above average for England. Seventy-four per cent of Council buildings are scheduled to be DDA compliant by 2006. The remaining buildings are sports pavilions where the costs of adaptation are prohibitive. These will be brought up to standard when they are replaced and services adjusted in the meantime. The Council now provides fully accessible changing facilities at its pool and leisure centre, as well as a pool hoist at the Pool in the Park. The visitor information centre has recently been relocated to the main foyer of the Ambassadors Theatre complex in a central, accessible location. From the Council's website, however, it is not obvious which buildings offer facilities for disabled people, including for example, hearing loops, and not all reception desks are designed easily to accommodate the needs of wheelchair users.

- 32** The Council is extending access through the use of IT. Its website has facilities for online payment of council tax, forms for reporting problems, and to register interest in the citizen's panel. The website provides information on local leisure and cultural events and facilities with links to the Council's Cultural Strategy and action plan. The website also has a variety of enquiry forms. All these facilities are available at the touch of a button in a variety of European languages as well as Punjabi, Chinese, and Tamil. A variety of leisure services can be accessed and booked via the website. The website is easy to read and explains access arrangements well. Online booking for leisure services is being introduced shortly.
- 33** The Council does not make full use of customer feedback to help direct service improvements. For example, Woking's website has a service feedback form and a complaints form. However, these do not have the facility to record details about the person. This information could help to monitor issues and concerns with certain sections of the community.
- 34** Services are located in appropriate locations and settings, and opening times are generally convenient for users. The main leisure centre and the Pool in the Park are located centrally, are well signposted, and are easily accessible. Most cultural services buildings are in good condition and are near to regular bus routes.
- 35** The Council is responding to local need based on widespread consultation and engagement. Feedback is encouraged in all service areas and there are examples where the Council has responded well; for example a survey among mother and toddler groups at the Pool in the Park showed that the service was oversubscribed for its single long session. Following consultation, this was switched to two shorter sessions, increasing capacity with no impact on other users.
- 36** The Council has removed some barriers to participation by reviewing the pricing of services. It has developed a Passport to Leisure scheme that offers discounts at varying rates to those on benefits who might otherwise be unable to access services. The discount available includes cinemas, theatres and private sector provision. Take up has been improved following a recent review.
- 37** The Council is actively addressing the needs of young people and has widened participation in cultural activities. In particular it has supported and funded the development of the summer fun attack scheme, cricket nets for young Asian boys, skate parks and multi-use games areas, and a twin town youth exchange. These programmes have all shown improved take up over time and other impacts are visible: a graffiti project in Sheerwater, for example, is well used and the surrounding area is noticeably free from graffiti elsewhere.

- 38 The Council is not making information readily available to all sections of the community. Not all Council and service publications show that they are available in other formats or languages, and partners' publications are similarly variable. The Council telephone number quoted on some publications to access these other formats was not operating effectively, with no one answering calls and no answer phone service. This means that some sections of the community are not able easily to get hold of the information they might need to enable them to access cultural services.
- 39 Service standards within cultural services are limited. While corporate service standards for general customer service exist, such as answering the telephone, specific standards for cultural activity are not generally well developed. The exception is the leisure centre and pool where a customer charter is in place. Service users are involved through user forums, and the 'service level promise' at the H G Wells centre. Here, service users can be sure of the levels of service they can expect and high levels of customer satisfaction in these particular services indicate these are appropriate and consistently delivered. However, this is not the case for all service users.

## Diversity

- 40 The Council is effectively addressing diversity issues through its cultural services and broadening participation. It targets vulnerable and isolated groups through concessionary schemes, pricing policies and promotions in its pool and leisure facilities. As a result, participation by minority communities has increased, for example through women only swimming sessions. In 2003/04 Woking performed with the best 25 per cent of councils for attendance in sport and leisure facilities and theatres and concert halls; both for older people and the population as a whole.
- 41 The service has been only partially successful in contacting hard to reach groups. It uses a range of approaches. For example the Youth Council is used as a way of capturing the views of young people, and an Older People's Forum has just been established, but these routes are limited in their impact. The Council established a forum for minority communities – subsequently wound up – and a faith forum. It does not, however, consistently use the full range of methods open to it to engage effectively with hard to reach groups, whether differentiated by age, ethnicity or geography. It cannot be sure therefore that it is routinely focusing its attention on those who could benefit most from accessing its services.
- 42 Users of all ages, disabled people and those from target groups are involved in service planning and delivery. For example, people from the Asian community helped design specific healthy walks for Sheerwater, and separate swimming lessons for Asian women, which were later opened to all women, and were followed by developing women only sessions in the gymnasium and sauna/Jacuzzi suite. The service works with bodies such as the local mosque, women's association and disability groups on initiatives such as maintenance therapy. This results in opportunities for all sections of the community to participate.
- 43 Equalities work is underdeveloped. Woking has so far only achieved level 1 for the Local Government Equality Standard, demonstrating its commitment to a

comprehensive Equality Policy. Woking's Race Equality Scheme highlights the number of initiatives in ways services can be accessed, for example, neighbourhood offices, telephone and email. A summary of its race relations policy is available in Urdu and Chinese on the website. However, the equalities impact assessment in culture has not yet been carried out as planned.

- 44 The Council is improving the range of services available across the borough through outreach work, and through its community centres and work with voluntary groups. Services are being designed and delivered to target the most deprived areas. For example, one of the biggest inclusion projects for health and well being is Lakeview, which has involved additional funding targeted on a deprived area that was isolated from other services due to known local transport difficulties. As a result more people are involved in healthier activities and in community groups.
- 45 Partnerships are also being used to further develop facilities. The Council has initiated a programme of refurbishment and upgrading for its play areas in partnership with Russell Leisure. This will increase the availability of high-quality play equipment in sites across the borough improving access for young mothers, and will include better provision for disabled children. Partnerships with schools, such as Winston Churchill to open sports facilities to the general public and the Bishop David Brown School development, open wider and more efficient use of public resources for the benefit of the community. The Woking Town Centre Management partnership attracts significant private sector input to facilities improvement in the heart of the town.

### **User experience and satisfaction with the quality of the service**

- 46 User experiences of cultural services are generally good and improving. The Council provides a range of opportunities to improve participation in physical activity and promote wellbeing. This is through leisure facilities, dual school and community use facilities in partnership with the County Council and other partners, grant aid and healthy living programmes. Swimming lessons are available for all abilities and swimming clubs are actively encouraged. As a result, more people are able to access services and participate in leisure activities.
- 47 Theatres that are supported by the Council through subsidy have also increased attendances, and user satisfaction is comfortably in the best 25 per cent nationally. As part of the development of the main commercial theatre complex the Ambassadors theatre group also manages the Rhoda McGaw Theatre, a smaller venue that is used mainly by community based drama and arts groups.

- 48** User satisfaction with individual service areas is high. Arts, sport and leisure satisfaction compares with the best 25 per cent of councils, and parks and open spaces only just fell below that level in 2003/04, despite a 6 per cent improvement in satisfaction. The latest survey in 2004 to inform national performance indicators shows high-levels of satisfaction in Woking:
- 63 per cent of people were satisfied with sports and leisure facilities compared with an average of 54 per cent nationally;
  - 75 per cent satisfaction with parks and open spaces compared with an average of 72 per cent nationally;
  - arts activities and venues were comfortably in the best 25 per cent with 79 per cent satisfaction against an average of 56 per cent nationally;
  - residents think that community activities have improved;
  - overall Council satisfaction is only just outside the top 25 per cent; and
  - a citizens' panel survey in February 2005 showed a 79 per cent satisfaction level overall with leisure and recreation services.
- 49** Cultural services effectively support the voluntary sector and volunteering through grants, outreach activity, advice, and financial support to organisations, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and healthy living partnerships. For example, local people are heavily involved as volunteers in the Council's Centres for the Community. Multi-cultural events, such as Woking 'One World Week' and the Mela and faith events, such as Diwali, are publicised in Council publications, in visitor information centres, libraries and in Council buildings. These events help maintain good intercommunity relations, reflected, for example, in the low incidence locally of racially motivated crime. Many arts activities promote self development and skills training. For example, community drama groups are enabled to organise their own drama festival using the professional quality facilities at the Rhoda McGaw Theatre. The Surrey Heathlands project, in partnership with English Nature, neighbouring councils and using lottery funding support, is actively preserving the increasingly rare heathland landscape in the county through careful management of sensitive sites. These approaches help meet the Council's broader corporate objectives for cultural activity, strengthen the local community by building community capacity and promoting community engagement.
- 50** The Council makes a good contribution to many local, regional, and national priorities. They play an active role in the Surrey Arts Partnership and engage positively with the wider regional arts agenda. Cultural services effectively target locally identified health needs and understand the role that they play in developing safer and stronger communities. As a result, participation in and levels of take up of targeted opportunities are good. However, no performance data is currently in place to assess the impact of the programmes so the Council cannot clearly demonstrate the positive outcomes it is achieving and the extent of its contribution to local priorities.

## Healthier communities

- 51** Cultural services effectively target locally identified health needs. Cultural services are recognised in the Council's aims as a key way of the Council promoting and contributing effectively to the health and wellbeing of the population. The people of Woking enjoy relatively good health. In the 2001 census, 74 per cent of Woking's residents described themselves to be in good health, this figure was 6 per cent higher than the national average. The life expectancy of both men and women in Woking is above the national average and improving, and the level of residents of working age who are unable to work due to permanent illness or disabilities is nearly half that of the national figure at only 2.4 per cent.
- 52** The Council is clear on how cultural services can contribute positively to the broad health and wellbeing agenda. Health promotion links to the service through encouraging participation, as well as realising benefits to mental and emotional health. In addition specific strategic priorities in developing services are targeted to enrich the lives of older people.
- 53** The Council is making an effective contribution to achieving its aim of improving health by working closely with the PCT health improvement programme. It has actively collaborated with a GP referral for exercise scheme with over 100 referrals to date, and a weight management programme in the deprived area of Sheerwater. This also links to the Passport for Leisure scheme to encourage ongoing participation in sports and leisure through subsidised prices for people on benefits. Arrangements are in place to ensure that the health improvement agenda is co-ordinated and the service has also participated in programmes in schools promoting healthy lifestyles.
- 54** The Council directly provides community based activities targeted at promoting health and wellbeing and combating social isolation. A wide range of services, many of which are aimed at older people, are delivered through the Council's community centres, providing a one stop shop for access to council and other services, such as chiropody and assisted bathing, and exercise and activity programmes, including music dance and the visual arts, and a programme of social outings. The service also has an integrated referral system with local GPs and other services, including social services to reduce personal isolation and to promote preventative health care. These services are widely used and highly valued by local people
- 55** The Council is developing local community capacity. It encourages and supports volunteering opportunities, for example in running many of the community centre activities, offering opportunities for participation in countryside and conservation management programmes and it has a programme of training local people to become sports coaches, furthering the Sport England programme.

## Safer communities

- 56** Cultural services understand the role that they play in developing safer and stronger communities and are effective in supporting and meeting the national objective of stronger and safer communities through their service delivery and engagement with the community safety agenda at the Council. They were the first service in the Council to undertake an assessment under section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to ensure that safety issues were mainstreamed into its services. Areas identified where the service contributes to safer communities included: designing out crime within parks, open spaces, play and provision for young people; providing adequate space and facilities for activities, sports and fun; developing a youth action group and youth citizenship approaches; developing skills with young people to challenge racism, bullying and anti-social behaviour and promoting and providing a cultural mix of activities to meet the needs of different age groups, ethnic communities and males/females within particular ward areas.
- 57** The service provides appropriate opportunities for young people that command community support. Skate parks are well located with good levels of use, and older residents we spoke to were also complimentary about the siting of these facilities.
- 58** The health and wellbeing agenda also contributes to the development of safer communities through:
- promoting healthy living initiatives for younger people;
  - making more schools available for community use out side of school hours;
  - promoting intergenerational projects, such as the launch for the Woking Galleries, and promoting inclusive communities through Community Centres and Arts and Youth initiatives;
  - providing reduced cost affordable leisure, sports and recreation facility access for those on low incomes through the Passport to Leisure scheme;
  - targeting community grants and services to priority groups and ward areas;
  - providing activities based on community cohesion; and
  - providing and developing holiday, weekday and weekend play schemes and coaching and sports development activities.
- 59** Local partners including the police are clear about the positive contribution that the Council is making to community safety, including through cultural services providing activities and venues for young people as a distraction from anti social behaviour and even crime. Crime levels are relatively low in Woking and are falling in key areas, for example race related crimes are very rare. Significantly the fear of crime is also falling. Cultural services are recognised as having played their part in this success.

## Is the service delivering value for money?

- 60** The service is using a range of processes well to ensure money is not wasted and is used effectively. The service uses grant funding to build community capacity and reduce inequalities. It has clear criteria for grant support. Grants and funding are available to organisations based in Woking and a range of festival activity is supported in this way including for drama, music and dance, and the visual arts. Small grants are available for arts, sports and young people's services to local organisations aimed at expanding take up or improving the performance of participants and are targeted to priority groups and areas. There is also a youth sports and arts fund which is restricted to one group or individual per year with financial limits. Groups are required to report on take up and achievements so the Council can assess the impact its support is having in the community and ensure future support is well targeted. This has resulted in a vibrant voluntary sector in the cultural field that is engaged with the Council, contributing actively to the local quality of life for many residents, and extending involvement in culture cost effectively.
- 61** The Council is making good use of the most up-to-date procurement methods, using the IDeA marketplace, e-tendering and bid analysis software. This has cut transaction costs significantly. The project to refurbish the leisure centre gymnasium utilised the Council's new procurement software and resulted in an estimated 60 per cent saving in process time. The Council is shortly to introduce payment cards to enable authorised staff to purchase small items direct, further reducing costs. Decisions on procurement are informed by consideration of wider issues than cost. For example, the decision on awarding the contract to refurbish the Council's 36 play areas for younger children took account of improved health gains through greater participation and use of play areas.
- 62** The Council makes effective use of partnerships to increase the range and quality of services and to attract additional external investment. The Council jointly funded the installation of state of the art infra red headsets in the Ambassadors Theatre Group cinemas that are available free of charge to people who are hard of hearing. Take up of the service is good. Over £12 million in lottery funding has been attracted to the area, often with council support, for a wide range of projects. These have included the installation of secure, floodlit multi-use games areas in a number of local primary schools that enable over 20,000 community users a year to access sports, and support for athletics, hockey, cricket, bowls and football clubs to improve or extend facilities.
- 63** The Council makes widespread use of benchmarking, working particularly with other councils in Surrey through a network of officer groups. This shows for example that support for key arts related schemes compares well with other councils, with the subsidy agreed with the Ambassador Theatre being relatively low at 49 pence per seat.
- 64** Best value reviews target key service areas and include robust requirements for option appraisal. The leisure services review, for example, resulted in service reorganisation and identified savings and efficiencies.

- 65 The Council targets its financial support to residents. Funding is directed at those residents who cannot easily afford to access cultural services. The Passport to Leisure scheme extends beyond sports related activities, and enables residents on benefits or who are under 16 or over 60 to reduced rates for activities including cinemas, theatres and cultural events. Over 1,750 admissions were subsidised in this way to theatres and cinemas in 2004/05, a 34 per cent increase on the previous year.
- 66 However, Woking's cultural services are not able to clearly demonstrate that they are achieving value for money. Expenditure on different cultural activities varies; for example, it is among the top 25 per cent of councils nationally for spending on sport and recreation per head, and above average for spending per head on culture and heritage, parks and open spaces and tourism. Despite high satisfaction levels, the Council is not able to link this level of expenditure clearly to anticipated outcomes for the public and show that its investments are the right ones in the right place.

## Summary

- 67 Woking Borough Council provides good cultural services. It is meeting community needs through its cultural services activity and is supporting local and regional priorities. All cultural services have a strong customer focus and respond well to local need based on extensive consultation and engagement. Local people have a better quality of life, are healthier and safer as a result of the Council's efforts. Residents' satisfaction is high, diversity issues are being addressed and people's experiences of cultural services are good. The Council is pursuing value for money in cultural services by driving down costs and attracting additional investment. The Council is not, however, sufficiently clear on what impact its services have and is still developing its approach to consultation to ensure it understands and can respond to the needs of all its citizens.

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

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

- 68 The service has implemented changes, derived from the leisure service inspection and best value review which have delivered clear benefits for users. The service was restructured in 2003/04, creating dedicated development officers for youth work, arts and health and wellbeing, in order to drive forward the Council's priorities on health and wellbeing, safer and stronger communities. A new marketing and research team has also been set up in response to the leisure best value review. The service has completed 14 of 19 improvement actions, concentrating on the main areas of the service that have significant benefit for the community.
- 69 The service is being responsive to the needs of users and widening participation. The service can show that it has delivered significant improvements in outcomes experienced by users. Cultural services feature strongly in the Council's corporate priorities and examples of outcomes for health and well being and stronger communities include:
- increasing numbers of people (100) have been referred through the GP referral scheme for exercise and fitness;
  - increased attendances (390) on the healthy walks initiative;
  - last year 200 local young people participated in the Surrey Youth games;
  - the discounted leisure scheme (Passport to Leisure) had an initially disappointing take-up and was reviewed in 2003/04, resulting in a simplified scheme and take-up increasing from 666 to 1,195 in 2004/05;
  - improvements to facilities have encouraged wider participation in sport and leisure, for example, a series of skate-parks; and
  - the development of high-quality facilities using section 106 money in Brookwood provided a new home for the Woking Women's Football Club, ensured league standard facilities for other local football teams and was linked to improved access to open land for wider community benefit.
- 70 Consultation with service users has led to improvements in the way services are delivered. For example, the Council reviewed its existing play provision across the borough and developed and implemented a children's play area improvement programme. Through an innovative partnership approach to procurement and consultation facilities were designed to match the communities' requirements. Consultation has meant holiday scheme sessions during summer 2005 at Lakeview were offered on the Passport to Leisure scheme for £1 per session compared with the normal rate of £4 to £5 per session. Consultation is informing service improvements resulting in community benefits.

- 71 The service can demonstrate, through national indicators, that there has been improved performance that compares well with other service providers. The percentage of residents satisfied with the Council's parks and open spaces has increased from 69 per cent in 2000/01 to 75 per cent and is in the second quartile when compared to other district Councils in 2003/04. The percentage of residents satisfied with the Council's sports and leisure service has remained the same at 63 per cent in 2003/04 and in the top quartile. In the BVPI survey 2003, 23 per cent of respondents stated that cultural facilities had improved over the last three years (74 per cent said they remained the same and 3 per cent said they were worse). Thirty-three per cent of respondents were of the view that facilities for teenagers were worse, but this included all services for young people including those not provided by the Borough Council. Overall, indicators show positive trends in satisfaction.
- 72 The Council has made good progress in ensuring buildings are accessible to disabled people. In 2002/03 37 per cent of the Council's buildings were accessible to disabled people; this has increased to 59 per cent (second quartile) in 2004/05. This improvement has been achieved through access improvements at the leisure centre and Pool in the Park, centres for the community and sports pavilions. These improvements will allow opportunities for all sections of the community to participate.
- 73 The service can demonstrate investment decisions where the full short and long-term costs of actions are taken into account as well as the long-term interest of service users. For example, long-term funding implications meant the Council reduced its initial proposed contribution of £5 million to £3.5 million into the Woking Galleries partnership.
- 74 However, progress against the cultural strategy short-term action plan has been slow. Many actions in the short-term action plan were to be delivered by mid-2005 and have yet to be completed. For example, a series of linked development plans for the next five years have yet to be completed and the cultural linked partnership, a subgroup of the LSP has not yet been established. The concessionary review has also been delayed due to systems issues. However, progress has been made against some other improvement actions, for example, the gymnasium refurbishment tender and the audit of play have been delivered. Once the development plans are in place they will allow the service to prioritise use of resources more effectively.
- 75 Value for money (VFM) is not used routinely to drive service improvements. While the Council has good processes in place, the service does not clearly demonstrate how value for money principles are embedded within its core service aims and objectives. Individual initiatives such as the Passport to Leisure deliver VFM for individual service users through providing low cost entry to a range of leisure services targets support by enabling people on low incomes, older people and young people to access leisure provision at significantly reduced rates. However, VFM principles are not clearly articulated across all cultural services within the current set of service plans. The Council has recognised this and VFM principles are included in its revised service planning framework and will be reflected more clearly in future plans.

## How well does the service manage performance?

- 76 Performance management at the Council is not fully developed. The service recognises in its self assessment that it undertakes limited formal performance measurement; for example, the service does not have management reports for each service area, there is limited baseline data on utilisation rates, SMART targets are not a feature of current service plans nor are local performance indicators (PIs) in place. The service understands it needs to develop local PIs and is, for example, undertaking work with Surrey Chief Leisure Officer Group (SCLOG) to develop a common way forward. The technology is now in place to collect basic output data so there is potential for improvement.
- 77 Effective performance management arrangements are not yet in place to drive and deliver improved value for money. Councillors and managers use information on costs to challenge how these compare to others. Examples include the approach to pricing policies, establishing a working group to examine options for the future of the HG Wells centre and a best value review of community centres that will assess issues including VFM. However, the service has not yet set targets to improve efficiency and value for money. And it provides limited opportunity for stakeholders to influence which targets are set, and how performance is measured and monitored. Service standards are incomplete and not all are readily available.
- 78 The Council is not always joined up in its approach to delivering the cross cutting agenda, for example, on inclusion. The Council's social inclusion strategy and action plan have been developed in isolation. There has been no input from the Community Services directorate into the development of the Council's corporate inclusion agenda. While some directorate actions are reflected within the social inclusion action plan these have been included without any constructive dialogue. Opportunities for synergies can be missed with this approach. In contrast, policies such as on the management of open spaces contribute effectively to the cross cutting community safety agenda. As a result of this inconsistent approach to internal consultation, the Council's cross-cutting themes are having a variable impact on service plans.
- 79 Sharing of learning is not yet systematically undertaken. While there are examples of good practice, for example, in one community centre training and development of volunteers is perceived as a real strength, this is not being shared and lessons learnt in other community centres. In some service areas there are limited opportunities for staff to meet as a group and share ideas. The service has however, run Community Service open days and has monthly managers meetings as mechanisms to share learning. The service has recently introduced 'seen any good ideas?' as a standard agenda item on team meetings to encourage the sharing of learning. The service learns from its experiences but learning is not systematic and the service could do more.

- 80** The service does not have a service-wide approach to managing complaints and using customer feedback. A corporate Online complaints form has just been developed, which will shortly be followed by a corporate paper process. Presently, individual services deal with complaints and there are examples of responsive feedback on complaints in areas such as the leisure centre. However, this is not consistent across all services and no high-level monitoring or analysis of trends takes place across the directorate. This does not allow the service to spot key common issues or trends and use these to improve services as a whole.
- 81** The cultural strategy sets out clear and challenging aims for the future which make explicit links to corporate and national priorities, including safer and stronger communities and healthier communities. The strategy has been based on extensive consultation to deliver improvements on the eight priorities that have been identified by the community but to also address known areas of service weakness by subsuming existing improvement plans. The cultural strategy action plan has a well structured hierarchy of short, medium and long-term aims that represent a challenging agenda for service development. However, the use of SMART targets is limited, so progress is difficult to monitor and manage. The development plans underpinning the cultural strategy are due to be completed by spring 2006 which will provide a clear set of service priorities.
- 82** The service is aiming to improve the level of cultural provision based on findings from consultation. Research as part of developing the cultural and community strategies suggested, for example, that the number of swimming pools and dry leisure centres is lower than neighbouring authorities and there is a strong community need for increased provision. The Council is seeking to rectify this situation by working with the education authority and the Bishop David Brown School in Sheerwater to build a second public swimming pool alongside other sports and leisure facilities, and to make these facilities more locally accessible to the community through shared use arrangements.
- 83** The Council provides strong leadership through line management arrangements and direction for staff to improve service delivery. There is political consensus to drive the culture priorities. Service managers feel appropriately supported by senior managers and there is effective leadership from middle managers that builds team spirit and keeps staff motivated.
- 84** It also demonstrates good cultural leadership by acting to improve services in a cross cutting way. For example, in Horsell Village it is using its influence to progress a scheme to develop new community facilities bringing together the owners and tenants of three neighbouring properties and using council funding to re-provide much needed new facilities.
- 85** The service has integrated its high level priorities into business plans. The plans set out the practical tasks necessary to achieve the aims for the service. The Council's performance management system allows the Council to drive and monitor progress against key improvement plans and decisions. Progress on the improvement plan and Council decisions are tracked and followed up with progress updates. Outstanding actions are identified in the 'yellow book'. Service plans have yet to be input to the system.

- 86 The Council has a good track record of sound financial management and can demonstrate that resources are used flexibly in line with priorities. A significant 32 per cent of the Council's budget is spent on culture. Performance and financial management processes are well-integrated.
- 87 The service has introduced risk management and business continuity into the service planning process but this is at an early stage of development. This will ensure that future plans are more robust and will improve the chances of successful delivery. Appropriate staff and Councillors have been trained in risk assessment and risk management. However, not all have yet been trained, so ownership of risk management is still developing.
- 88 The service understands its strengths and weaknesses in the context of the challenges it faces. It is self-aware, and this is reflected in the quality of its self-assessment.

### **Does the service have the capacity to improve?**

- 89 The Council has built capacity through its restructuring in community services and in areas such as marketing and customer research, and in developing the community sector. For example, all leisure and cultural activities are the responsibility of a single head of service, ensuring that service aims are more clearly and easily aligned with corporate aims and ambitions. The customer support services team now has overall responsibility for accessing information on the community's needs and expectations in order to continually advise on how services can be shaped to meet changing needs. The Council is well placed to continue to contribute effectively to safer stronger communities. The service is also clear about the strategic and operational roles of councillors and this is set out in clear protocols that work well to support councillors being clear about their role in delivering improvements.
- 90 The service is beginning to maximise use of ICT to deliver service objectives and improvements. ICT is being used to achieve efficiencies in operations, for example, the leisure system can be used from any Council location and will allow other staff to take bookings, the next phase is to allow direct public access enabling customers to book and pay for facilities online. Initial implementation of the SOPIS (Single Older People Information System) has commenced allowing for a common information base for all sections of the Council that are involved in the support of older people. The Council is also developing a dedicated website to act as a free portal for local community groups and organisations to have their own low-cost websites. Once the systems are implemented they will provide better management information about service and non-service users and improve access to community information.

- 91 The Council is well placed financially to deliver future service improvements. The medium-term financial plan, capital strategy and investment plan are well integrated, demonstrating the capacity to deliver key projects, such as Woking Galleries and its contribution to the Bishop David Brown School development. The Council's asset management plan also makes clear links to corporate and service priorities ensuring the most effective use of the Council's assets. The Council has a sound financial base that has meant it has faced few tough decisions in the past, but it is aware of the challenges it will face in the future and is planning carefully for these.
- 92 The service does not base procurement decisions solely on lowest cost options but on achieving greatest benefit to the community. For example, the service has secured additional health and environmental benefits in its improvement in play areas by taking an innovative partnership approach to designing facilities to match the community needs. The contract with Russell Leisure to refurbish the Council's play areas requires the contractor to undertake full consultation with local communities to ensure the individual play area design meets local need and results in increased use.
- 93 There are many examples where the service has engaged effectively in strategic partnering, with evidence of improvements in services and facilities. For example, the Winston Churchill School dual use leisure facilities allow local access to gym membership. Some initiatives have been delivered as part of the town centre management initiative, for example, the access audit and guide. The Council has established Woking's Youth Council in partnership with Surrey County Council to help plan facilities so that they best meet the needs of potential users. The health and well being section is working with a range of partners including the PCT and social services on healthy walks and access to community centres. The countryside service has forged strong partnerships in their work on the Surrey Heathland project; partners include English Nature as well as other districts. The Council also works with key commercial (Ambassadors Theatre Group, Big Apple) and voluntary/public sector organisations to deliver a wider range of cultural provision. The Council is recognised by regional and national partners such as Sport England and the Arts Council as playing an active role locally in promoting regional and sub-regional strategies for cultural services, and attracting service related lottery funding into the area to support these. Such strategic partnering is creating capacity to deliver priorities.

- 94 The service secures and maximises internal and external funding opportunities to support delivery of priorities. The service is investing in its leisure and culture provision, £1.1 million has been invested over the last three years in the leisure centre and the pool in the park. Building has begun on a new central exhibition and museum complex developed in association with Woking Galleries, with the Council contributing £3.5 million towards a £7 million scheme. The Council is also working closely with the Bishop David Brown School to develop significant new sports and leisure facilities which will be available for community use, levering in substantial external funding through the National Opportunity Fund. The YMCA Re Gen scheme in the town centre will bring a range of new services to local young people. In 2005/06 £200,000 was allocated to voluntary organisations for culture. This approach expands the scale and range of services available to local people while ensuring improved value for money. Some partners have however, raised some concerns regarding the sustainability of some investment decisions; this is an area for closer attention for the Council.
- 95 External investment is being secured and utilised through all section 106 agreements. In all section 106 agreements, £1,000 per unit of new housing is specifically allocated for cultural services, totalling nearly £1 million to date. Much of this money is allocated to improving open spaces and parks or, if the project is large, the resources are transferred to larger cultural schemes. The Council has for example invested in improved sports facilities, such as at Waterers Park and Brookwood Park using section 106 monies. Investment is being proactively secured from planning consents.
- 96 The Council is investing in a new project management system called Work Together. The system allows linked information to be stored in a document warehouse, supported by a number of templates to ensure a standard approach to the information and documentation needed for each project. The templates will also assist project managers in completing risk assessments, budget constraints and other project planning requirements. The system is presently being populated with information. This system will equip managers with the tools to take a consistent approach to managing projects across the Council.
- 97 The service uses the Council's modern procurement programme to improve VFM. The service uses IDeA marketplace, e-procurement and e-ordering and tendering and purchasing cards are to be introduced shortly. The project to refurbish the gymnasium utilised the Council's new procurement software resulting in 60 per cent process time savings.
- 98 Staff are well motivated and enthusiastic. However, systems of support are still being developed. Not all service staff are being appraised on their performance against personal objectives and given opportunities for identification of training and development needs. The service is presently developing its approach to consistent and regular appraisals and introducing team appraisal. One-to-one supervision sessions are taking place on a more regular basis. This approach will enable clarity for staff on their roles and responsibilities in delivering service priorities.

- 99 Staffing capacity is currently stretched. A recurring theme from staff across the directorate is their inability to deliver all the tasks identified within the timescales set. This has manifested itself through service closures and delays in meeting action plan targets. Where there is particularly stretched capacity, specific action is taken, such as a recruitment drive for lifeguards. The lack of a workforce plan for the service is not enabling it to plan for resourcing requirements aligned to priorities for the future. A plan is, however, being developed for March 2006.
- 100 Equalities work is underdeveloped. The service demonstrates consideration of equalities and human rights issues on a project by project basis but not strategically. The service has yet to undertake an equality impact assessment which means that it is not adequately monitoring performance in relation to key equalities legislation. Much information is not easily and routinely available in alternative formats meaning that some residents may be excluded from taking part in cultural activities. Corporate support for this area of activity is weak.

### **Summary**

- 101 The service has promising prospects for improvement because it demonstrates a strong track record of delivering improvements across cultural services. This has been enabled by effective leadership, well motivated staff, external investment and extensive use of partnerships. The service is continuing to invest in key systems such as workforce planning, procurement, project management and IT to support further improvement and its financial base is sound.
- 102 Performance measurement and management is underdeveloped in areas other than cost. There are few outcome focused and longer-term targets; and risk management has yet to be fully integrated into business planning but the Council is taking steps to address this. Improved performance management linked to outcomes for service users will enable the Council to demonstrate how it is achieving value for money from its substantial investment in cultural services.