audit
commission

Access to Services

Uttlesford District Council

Audit 2006/2007

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Audit in the public sector is underpinned by three fundamental principles:

- auditors are appointed independently from the bodies being audited;
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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 co-ordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;

- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;

- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and

- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

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

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

Summary

1   Uttlesford District Council provides a '*fair*' and '*improving*' access to its services.

2   Physical and other access arrangements are good in places, satisfactory overall and much improved. The Council is easy to contact, responsive and seeks to deal with customers' multiple and wide-ranging enquiries at the first point of contact. But user experience and meeting customer needs at the first point of contact is not yet consistently good across all access points.

3   There is a range of quality information in appropriate locations and formats informing local people of the services available to them. The Council has instigated a wide, and sometimes innovative, range of engagement mechanisms. Handling of complaints is good compared with most other councils. Reality checks show user experience is satisfactory overall and good in part. Satisfaction with services is above average, services are responsive and overall service delivery as measured by best value performance indicators (BVPI) is good.

4   However, the Council it is still developing a comprehensive understanding of community and customer needs to inform its service design and target improvements. Improving but limited consultation with some hard to reach sections of the community is restricting its understanding of their access needs and preferences. Rural isolation hinders people's access to services. While the Council has tried to lessen this with some good initiatives and outreach work there is no cross service or cross partner integrated strategy in place to address this problem. Customer care standards lack public and partner involvement questioning their fitness for purpose. Performance against the standards is not comprehensively tracked and used to improve the customers' experience. Value for money is satisfactory but benchmarking in access to services is underdeveloped.

5   The Council's prospects for improvement are promising. It has delivered noticeable improvements to the range, quality and accessibility of its services. Overall service performance continues to improve, while keeping spending below average, council tax low, and making good progress on major initiatives such its new recycling scheme, the planning application for Stansted airport and its management restructuring. The Council is committed to seeing its access improvements through.

6   The Council shows good awareness of what it needs to do to improve access and how best to do it. The capacity is in place to continue delivering improvements. It has a robust, well reasoned and researched access and transformation strategies. Delivery of key access objectives are on track and a customer focus culture is being embedded. Resources to deliver plans are built into the 2007/08 budget and medium term financial strategy. Performance management is much improved. Good leadership from Councillors and officers provides the necessary focus to deliver the Council's plans to improve access to services. It is making good use of external expertise to learn, build capacity and support improvement. Shared services and integrated partnership working feature in its improvement plans.
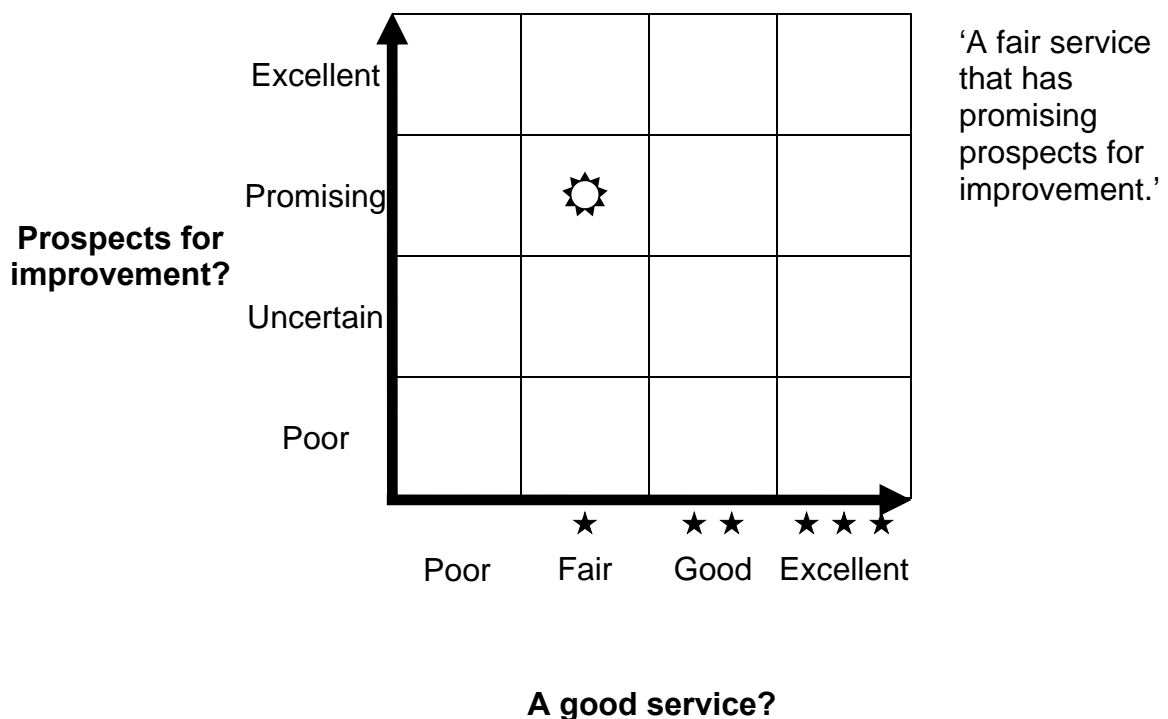
7   However, best use is not being made of internal access to services expertise. Staff skills to use equality assessments, access audits and customer contact data to improve service delivery require development. Data capture, reporting and analysis of customer contact, complaints, consultation and comments is underdeveloped. Capacity is stretched in places.

Scoring the service

8   We have assessed Uttlesford District Council 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.

Table 1   Scoring chart[1]:

Prospects for improvement?

	Excellent			
Promising		☼		
Uncertain				
Poor				

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Poor   Fair   Good   Excellent

'A fair service that has promising prospects for improvement.'

A good service?

Audit Commission

9   The Council is a fair, one-star service because:

- it does not have a comprehensive understanding of community and customer needs to inform service design and target its access interventions. For example, corporate consultation with some hard to reach sections of the community has been limited;

- while the Council has tried to lessen rural isolation with some good outreach work, there is no robust cross service/partner strategy to address this problem; and

- user experience and resolution of customers' queries at the first point of contact is not yet consistently good across all access points.

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

- Integration of services into the customer service centres and the CRM[2] system are at an early stage so the Council is still working through how it can deliver integrated services entirely from the customers' perspective.

- Despite some good features the website is only adequate. It is not fully transactional, is difficult to navigate and is out of date in several places.

- Customer care standards lack public and partner involvement, and are not being comprehensively tracked and used to improve the customers' experience.

- Value for money and benchmarking of access to services is underdeveloped.

However:

- access to buildings and customer contact arrangements are good in places, satisfactory overall and much improved;

- effective partnership working is making it easier for people to use services;

- the Council is easy to contact, responsive and seeks to deal with customers' multiple-enquiries at the first point of contact;

- there is a range of quality information in appropriate locations and formats informing local people of the services available to them;

- satisfaction with services is above average and overall service delivery as measured by performance indicators, including handling of complaints, is good; and

- the Council has instigated a wide, and sometimes innovative, range of ways to engage with the public.

10 The Council has promising prospects for improvement because:

- the Council's plans to improve access to services provide a thorough, detailed and challenging set of plans to improve access, design and tailor services to diverse needs and use customer information to improve performance;

- improvement plans are on track and many improvements will shortly be realised such as to the website, e-benefits package[3] and more seamless working with Citizen Advice Bureau offices;

- many services are improving the public's access to, and take up of services. This includes some good partnership working. Shared access points, more outreach work and new facilities are further increasing the prospects for improvement;

- it has the capacity to deliver. It has sustained an above average trend of improvement while successfully handling major initiatives such as the recycling scheme, Stansted planning application and its restructuring;

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[2] Customer relationship management - a means of ensuring customers have a common experience and level of service regardless of which service they seek or which access they choose.
[3] This is a mobile electronic benefits package to enable housing and Council tax claims to be assessed in customers' homes. It also advises the over 60s on welfare state benefits.

- it has competent; user focused and committed front-line staff; and
- leadership and commitment to embed a customer focused culture, and address performance weaknesses is strong.

However:

- data capture, reporting and analysis of customer contact, complaints, consultation and comments is underdeveloped;
- best use is not made of internal equalities and access to services expertise;
- capacity, while sound overall, is stretched in places; and
- staff capability to use equality assessments, access audits and customer contact data to improve access to service requires development.

Recommendations

11 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[4] 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 the Council should do the following.

Recommendation
R1 Develop deeper understanding of community and customer need to inform service design and delivery by: • *conducting ward and district profiling;* • *producing a rural strategy, in line with the sustainable community strategy;* • *setting up regular mystery shopping of all services, user and access groups;* • *developing means of capturing, analysing and reporting customer contact data; and* • *reviewing and improving leisure provider performance records and reports against service access objectives, and sharing learning with other services and partners.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

• improved customer and Council focus, awareness of and involvement in access to services;

• more coherent and cohesive strategic approach to access to services; and

• inclusive services informed by users and residents.

Carrying out this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs[5]. This should be implemented by end of March 2008.

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[5] Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between one and five per cent and high cost is over five per cent. Costs are not all new money.

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Recommendation
R2   *Embed equality, diversity and cohesion into service planning, design and delivery by:* • *raising awareness of equality, diversion and cohesion across the Council and sharing best practice; and* • *developing staff capability to use equality assessments, access audits and customer contact data to improve access to services.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- fairer access to services;
- better consideration of the whole community in service design;
- an embedded culture of customer access to services; and
- heightened awareness of equalities and diversity by staff and councillors.

Carrying out this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by December 2007.

Recommendation
R3   *Improve the customer experience of services by:* • *developing strategies with partners to provide seamless, and value for money, public access to a wider range of public services;* • *reviewing with the public the fitness for purpose of your customer care standards;* • *developing a system to track, review, report performance against the customer care standards internally and to the public; and* • *establishing a vision of access excellence for every service, identify gaps in service delivery against the vision and put plans in place to close any gaps in delivery.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- easier and improved access and improved customer satisfaction;
- improved cost-effectiveness of services and value for money; and
- partnership focus on public access and value for money.

Carrying out this recommendation will have high impact medium costs. This should be implemented by end of March 2008.

Report

Context

The locality

12 Uttlesford is a rural district and covers an area of 641 square kilometres, covering the largest district council area in Essex. Urban areas include Saffron Walden, Great Dunmow and Stansted Mountfichet. The district is home to Stansted Airport, the UK's third largest airport and a subject of much recent debate and concern for which the Council provides a dedicated website (http://www.stanstedexplained.info).

13 Uttlesford is rich in natural beauty with two national nature reserves and 34 conservation areas. Some 6.5 per cent of the district is green belt and it has the largest number of listed buildings in Essex at 3,592. Uttlesford was voted as the district with the best quality of life in a Sunday Times survey in 2003. However, the district faces increasing pressure for growth from M11 corridor development and Stansted Airport expansion.

14 Unemployment is low at one per cent and educational attainment is high, with almost a quarter of residents achieving NVQ level 4/5 qualifications.

15 Uttlesford is described as a wealthy area, ranked 341 out of 354 when compared with all other local authorities, with a rank of 1 being the most deprived. 86 per cent of super output areas fall within the 75 to 100 per cent least deprived in the country. The Indices of Deprivation 2004, indicate that in one of the seven domains, 'Barriers to Housing & Services' shows that in Uttlesford, over 18.6 per cent of super output areas fall within the ten per cent most deprived (for this domain) in the country.

16 The district has a low population density with a sparse population of only 71,100. The Council is a member of the SPARSE[6] special interest group. The district has a predominance of residents aged 30-59 (45 per cent compared with 42 per cent for Essex), with relatively few residents aged 20-29 (9 per cent compared with 12 per cent for Essex). Its younger (0-19) and older (60 plus) residents are on par with the county as a whole. Black and minority ethnic groups make up two per cent of the population. However, there are growing migrant worker communities based or working in the district.

The Council

17 The Council has 44 elected members as follows: 26 Conservative, 15 Liberal Democrat and three Independent. Elections are held every four years. The last election in May 2007 returned a Conservative administration in place of the previous Liberal Democrat one.

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[6] SPARSE is a grouping of the Most Rural Local Authorities in England.

18   Uttlesford is a 'fourth option' council with a streamlined committee system. The Council sets overall corporate policy, with three policy committees: operations, community and environment. There are two regulatory committees, licensing and development control. It has one scrutiny committee and an overview committee - *performance select*. There is also a standards committee. In January 2006, the Council set up three area panels covering the north, east and south-west of the district. The area panels offer an opportunity for the public and parish councillors to influence the work of the Council and take decisions locally.

19   The Council recently set up a new management structure. The Chief Executive is supported by five directors, an Assistant Chief Executive, and 12 Heads of Division. There are 341 full-time equivalent staff. The council tax level is low. The general funding forecast for 2007/08 is £9,688,000. Reserves are considerably lower than historically, nevertheless the Council remains debt free and will not need to borrow until 2008. The main reserve to accommodate budget variations, the Financial Management Reserve, has nearly been exhausted. 2008/09 sees a four-year savings target of £2.95 million to help replenish this reserve. The capital programme funding reduces from £7.8 million in 2006/07 to £2.8 million in 2009/10.

20   The Council's mission is to:

      'Improve the quality of life of the people who live, work or visit Uttlesford.'

21   The Council has identified five ways in which quality of life can be improved: these are the five goals of the Council's quality of life plan.

   •   Provide strong community leadership and openness.

   •   Protecting and enhancing the environment and character of the district.

   •   Improving access to value for money services.

   •   Improving community safety and the health of the population.

   •   Supporting lifelong learning and developing better opportunities for young people.

22   The Council identified four key priorities in its corporate plan for the period April 2006 to May 2007:

   •   implementing the Council's recycling strategy;

   •   dealing with the proposals for the expansion of Stansted Airport and other development;

   •   progressing the Council's integrated customer management (ICM) process; and

   •   user focus and community engagement.

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23   The Council has three customer service centres (CSC) at Saffron Walden, Dunmow and Thaxted, and a tourist information centre at Saffron Walden. The CSC deal with the majority of customer contacts. It has a new telephone and customer relationship management system (CRM), an increasingly used website and automated telephone payments. There is some co-location of services with partners and Council bills can be paid through post offices.

24   The Council undertook a best value review of access to services in 2004. Arising from this review was the integrated customer management (ICM) project, one of its corporate priorities for 2006/07. The overarching aim of ICM is to ensure that customers dealing with the Council have a common experience and service regardless of which service they are seeking or how they choose to access it. Achieving this required developing common processes, systems and standards across the Council. Uconnect is the customer interface for the ICM project and has been operating since November 2006.

25   The Council's plans to improve access to services are detailed in its Customer Service Strategy March 2006, Information and Communications Technology Strategy 2006-11 and Uttlesford in 2011 Transformation Programme.

26   The new Administration's priorities for 2007/08, in draft during our inspection, have a strong customer care and access to services focus. For example, a commitment to improving access to value for money (VfM) services, raise customer care standards, improve public engagement and provide access to sports leisure and cultural activities.

National Context

27   The government sees customer access as important and in its 'Strong Leadership – Quality Public Services' white paper it identified seven key tests for local government. These were joined up, accessible, delivered or supported electronically, delivered jointly, delivered seamlessly, open and accountable, and used by e-citizens. In 1999 the White Paper, 'Modernising Government', new reforms and targets required local authorities to move towards electronic delivery in their services to the local community. The intention was that 100 per cent of dealings with government, including local government and the NHS, should be capable of being conducted electronically by the public by December 2005. BVPI157 required local authorities to review all of their services over a five-year period and to challenge the existing methods of service delivery. Other national drivers include the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, Human Rights Act 1998; Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 and the white paper, 'Modern Local Government – In Touch With the People' which sought to put local government in touch with local communities by improving local democracy, increasing financial accountability and improving local services. Councils should have plans to meet the impending legislative requirements to actively promote disability, gender and age equality as well as meeting the current requirements to promote race equality.

28   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 suitable arrangements for electronic transactions, electronic communication and consultation.

29   Accessibility means that Council services, and access to those services, should be focused on the needs of the whole community. They should ensure equality of access and take proper account of equality and the diversity of all service users. There should be suitable arrangements for consulting, engaging and communicating with users and non-users of services. Councils should use partnership working with neighbouring councils, organisations and businesses to provide seamless and high quality access to services wherever this possible. Councils should also have an e-government programme informed by citizen and user needs and aspirations.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

30　The customer service strategy underpins the Council's approach to customer service and care. The strategy aims to improve customer service and choice by providing more customer access as well as encouraging the most suitable use of a range of channels. Customers are encouraged to use the easiest, most convenient cost-effective channel for the service they need. For example, self-service over the internet or by the customer service centre for a fast response to the most common requests or services. This keeps face-to-face and back office contact for more complicated issues or for those customers who have specific needs.

31　A thorough and stretching set of targets seek to improve customer satisfaction. They cover complaints handling, resolution of queries at the first point of contact, satisfaction with customer facing staff and responsiveness across all services. This is in line with the Council's ambition to become the pre-eminent small district council.

32　The Council uses e-government to support access to services. It met the government target of 100 per cent electronic service delivery by 31 December 2005. It is part of the Essex Online Partnership which aims to join up and make local government services easier to access online and reduce the cost of implementing e-government through collaboration. The website is a priority for improvement and a complete restructure and redesign is set for 2007.

33　A detailed set of customer care standards seeks to ensure an accessible, responsive, and quality experience for customers when dealing with the Council.

34　A comprehensive range of work is underway to improve user focus and community engagement, one of the priorities for 2006/07. This work addresses the weaknesses highlighted in our 2006 User Focus report. For example, weak race and equalities policies, inadequate identification of the needs of ethnic minority communities, and dissatisfaction with complaints handling.

35　Equality polices are now in place. Recent work has seen a consultation strategy almost completed and a series of focus groups with hard to reach groups undertaken. Work has also started on a communications strategy, and a new corporate complaints management system, relaunched to take account of the facilities offered by the CRM system is almost complete.

36　The Council has sought to improve its strategic partnership working and strengthen the local strategic partnership (LSP) - Uttlesford Futures. The LSP has actively involved itself in the debate on the Essex local area agreement. An access theme runs through partners' goals most notably those for health, and recycling but less specifically for addressing issues of rural isolation - an important issue for people living in Uttlesford.

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

Customer and community focus

37 The needs of users are increasingly being placed at the heart of service design and delivery, although there are gaps in information about need. Access to quality customer focused services is a key corporate priority and an everyday objective of front-line staff. The Council has some good community intelligence but this is not consistently or comprehensively used across services to shape service design and delivery, for example, to address rural isolation. However, some significant access improvements are occurring, some of which benefit from joined-up planning across services and partners.

38 The Council is developing its focus on the needs of its communities and has helped the LSP develop a new vision for Uttlesford. The vision is based on a well researched, high-level and consulted study of community needs. Priorities include improving access to doctors, health care and sports and leisure facilities. Work with partners has delivered many improvements such as a directory of services for older people, walking for health schemes, improved GP referral scheme and better support to teachers to encourage children to adopt a healthy and active lifestyle.

39 Customer management and user focus are key corporate priorities embedded in the corporate plan, the customer services strategy and the Uttlesford 2011 transformation programme. The customer service centres have operated since November 2006, which with the Council's re-engineering programme is beginning place the needs of citizens at the heart of the design and delivery of services.

40 Detailed analysis and design of service improvement across all services is underdeveloped. All services can show to varying degrees how they have tailored provision to make it more accessible. For example, Council bills can now be paid at post offices, easing payment by extending opening hours and having more convenient places to pay at. This helps address rural isolation. Some services, such as the museum, have a thorough and well researched understanding of its access needs. However, a detailed understanding, co-ordination and management of needs across all services within the Council is hindered by:

- inadequate sharing and co-ordinating of customer contact data, research, surveys and consultation results across services and partners is weak;

- limited use of ward profiling; and

- a lack of systematic capture, analysis and reporting of customer contact data.

Without this it is difficult to develop a strategic approach to improve access to targeted groups.

41 Customer needs are at the forefront of how the Council seeks to deliver its services. For example, a mystery shopping exercise helped shape Uconnect which was one outcome of a best value review on access to services. Organisational re-engineering is more effectively separating front and back office services. Staff members are being identified through this programme to move into the customer service centre, ensuring that it is resourced with the proper skills needed to deal with and resolve customer enquiries at the first point of contact.

42 The Council has made good use of procurement to extend and improve access to quality services. Through a Private Finance Initiative (PFI) the Council provides access to three leisure centres. A needs analysis informed the development of the PFI, and regular customer meetings are held and consultation undertaken on new programmes to improve access, such as the children's disability sports programme. Concessionary pricing policies support vulnerable and disadvantaged groups such as carers, those on low incomes and senior citizens. Consequently, overall usage has doubled and satisfaction with sports and leisure facilities has significantly improved.

43 Consultation, while improving, is not yet comprehensive or impacting sufficiently on service design and delivery. Some good practice exists such as in housing, recycling services and services to young people, but communication and consultation outcomes are not robustly corporately monitored. Satisfaction surveys provide a wealth of data but are not routinely used to highlight access issues or help target resources to where they are most needed. This means return on investment in understanding customers is not maximised. Recent work with hard to reach groups is beginning to ensure the needs of all groups and communities are well understood and acted on.

44 Corporate systems and services are improving the approach to needs based service design but the Council recognises it can do more to develop a more comprehensive understanding of community and customer need. For example, through use of ward profiles, use of existing data and further engagement with hard to reach groups.

45 The area panels seek to improve communication with local people but have not significantly enabled locally based decision making. Consequently, they are not well-supported by the public and have made little impact on shaping service design and delivery. Recent research[7] to assess the needs of hard to reach groups found low awareness of the panels. It also found a lack of feedback on consultation, few opportunities to get involved and a widely held view that you only contacted the Council if you had a problem. Most respondents of another recent survey (76 per cent) felt unable influence local decision-making affecting their local area.[8] The new Administration plans to review the panels as part of a wider review of how best it can consult an engage its communities.

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[7] Uttlesford District Council commissioned QA Research in April 2007 to conduct 'community consultation' with 'hard to reach' groups.
[8] Uttlesford General Satisfaction Survey BMG report 2006/07

Ease of access for all

46 It is easy for most people to access most services most of the time. Customers can easily contact the Council through accessible and mainly DDA compliant physical localities and through a range of other remote methods. Access to services is increasingly consistent and mostly meets the expectations of users. The Council has a clear understanding of customers' access preferences and an improving if not yet comprehensive understanding of needs. 'Rurality' remains an issue although effective outreach across various services is helping reduce the impact of rural isolation.

47 Physical access to public buildings is good and among the best performing 25 per cent of councils. Customer service centres are welcoming, DDA compliant and have lowered desks, induction loops, and access to interpreters to meet those whose first language is not English.

48 Physical access to services for some residents is limited. A lack of public transport, and relatively few one-stop-shop access points, makes it difficult for some, especially those in rural areas, to reach Council service access points. Parking also is limited at the service centres. The Council is seeking to mitigate this through extending outreach work such as in benefits and the museum, and by increasing its number of access points through libraries. But the existing Thaxted service centre is questionable as usage is low. On the other hand, larger settlements such as Stansted have no service centre.

49 Electronic access to services is satisfactory. For example, automated payments are available 24/7 and an 18001 number allows textphone contact by trained personnel from RNID[9]. The complaints form is web enabled. The website has some good features. It is speech enabled, has easy access buttons to 'report it, pay it or apply for it', and a viewing option in various font sizes and languages. However, there is room for improvement. it is only 'Content Plus' rather than fully transactional, and is inadequate for search, navigation, A-Z, links elsewhere and currency of information. Complaints forms are easily accessible but not web-enabled. A major redesign is in train with an IT disability expert helping to improve access.

50 Uconnect staff members improve access and customers' experience of services as part of their day job. Recent examples include improved signage, use of cameras to photograph documents and floor walking to ease queue congestion. Timely continuous improvement is crucial to a customer focus approach to meeting user needs.

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[9] RNID is the largest charity representing the 9 million deaf and hard of hearing people in the UK.

51 Services are making some effective access improvements to help mitigate rural isolation. For example, benefits testing of an e-benefits package allowing claim assessment and query resolution in customers' homes. Visiting officers now use digital cameras on home visits to save having to take documents away and posting them back. This reduces the stress of customers having to part with their documents and speeds up processing claims, which is now among the best performing 25 per cent of councils. A visiting officer specialises in supporting vulnerable groups. Benefits has tried outreach visits in day centres, mobile libraries and the mobile police station. Outreach work is developing in the museum, and leisure, both of which show improved use and user satisfaction.

52 Some good work with partners is helping improve access including to remote communities, such as follows.

- Work with Uttlesford Access Group has helped to deliver a footbridge and lift at Audley End station, air bridges and a shuttle service at Stansted, and a heritage trail that is accessible to wheelchair users and people with visual impairment. It has also helped shape local plan policies for lifetime homes, accessible play and wheelchair accessible housing.

- Z-Bikes, a ground breaking initiative to loan mopeds at low cost to allow access to training and employment, developed following consultation with young people. It is oversubscribed and helping break the no transport trap.

- Good work with the fire service is seeing extensive installation of fire alarms in Council properties and oversubscribed 'firebreak' courses that engaged disaffected youths and reduced anti-social behaviour.

- The Cold Heels project part of the Warm Front initiative, led by the Council's energy officer to access warm front grants, attracted a £100,000 grant and delivered a 600 per cent increase in take up.

- Work with community volunteers, benefits and the energy efficiency officer to help access Warm Trust funding for those on benefits.

- A new community cinema.

- Outreach sport and healthy living provision.

53 Community information is satisfactory and widely available if not always used by some hard to reach groups. For example, Uttlesford Life, the Council's magazine, is published quarterly and goes to all households free of charge. Recent research highlights the magazine is a useful source of regular information but younger people felt it was more geared to families and young children than them. Every edition includes information on how to access services, and incorporates an A-Z of services. It is available on request in alternative formats such as audiotapes. However, the hard to reach groups recently surveyed had a low awareness about the leaflets produced by the Council.

54 Opening hours are clearly publicised but inconsistent across service centres and considered by some of the public to be an inconvenience. They are limited to normal office opening hours with no Saturday or late night opening. The latest benefits satisfaction survey (2006/07) highlights that dissatisfaction with opening hours contributes to decreasing satisfaction with contact with the benefits office. An emergency out of hours' service is available to customers but the Council does not corporately track services' responsiveness to these requests. Thaxted CSC has limited opening hours and staff from other agencies have to field Council callers with little support or training, resulting in a disjointed service to the public.

Standards

55 The Council has clear, thorough and stretching customer care standards (CCS) but these are not well publicised or monitored and have not been shaped by public consultation. It is unclear how well the public are aware of the standards or how well they meet the citizens' needs.

56 The customer care standards are clear and comprehensive but are only partially tracked so the Council does not know how well it or its contractors is performing against them. A high-level corporate set of performance standards for customers (nine in total) is tracked to help keep focus on customer care at a senior level. However, many of the standards, such as resolution at first point of contact or full responses with three days or ten days, are not systematically or fully tracked or reported corporately. The danger is such standards may remain aspirations rather than the reality of every day delivery.

57 The Council has clear standards about how it will conduct consultations and what it will expect in return. The corporate consultation strategy contains a 'contract' with consultees setting out the expectations of both parties about standards of performance and behaviour which form the vision for engagement for both the Council and the community. Recent research into the needs of hard to reach groups is shaping the new consultation strategy.

58 Our reality checks confirmed friendly, responsive, courteous staff provide a customer focused first point of contact. Speed of first telephone pick up by the CSC is quick with 88 per cent of calls answered within 15 seconds (2006/07), but there is no tracking of responsiveness of calls direct to individual members of staff. Resolution of all queries at the first point of contact is not tracked. This makes it difficult to gauge a key measure of success of the CSC.

Engagement

59 The Council commits itself to engage with diverse communities through strategies and plans, but until recently formal consultation and engagement with hard to reach groups has made slow progress. There are some good examples of service consultation and engagement activities targeting vulnerable and specific groups of people to improve access to services. Structured engagement with migrant workers, young people, carers, older people and single or stay-at-home parents has started.

60   The Council is not engaging all sections of its community effectively. Consultation
      across services is not well co-ordinated or thought out. Corporate engagement
      with hard to reach groups is in its infancy. The Council does not yet have effective
      communication, consultation, complaints and engagement strategies in place,
      and recognises it needs to improve. Much work is coming to fruition but it is too
      early to gauge its likely impact. The effects of the Council failing to engage
      effectively are undesirable. For example, the extent to which services waste
      resources carrying out activities without considering the outcomes expected.

61   The Council does not have a recognised corporate 'brand' standard for its
      publications. Work is in progress to ensure printed materials can be seen clearly
      to reflect the Council's ambitions, including user focus and access to services. A
      standardised, corporate 'brand' strengthens the Council's image.

62   The Council can effectively use new technology to promote engagement but does
      not always do so. It has provided a separate website for the local community
      about the Stansted Airport Expansion, which includes online feedback. This
      innovative work is shortlisted for the Local Government Association 2007
      Community Involvement Award. Its main website seeks to engage the public on
      key issues, however, its web based consultation was in-operative during our
      inspection and past results and details of actions taken were unavailable.

63   The Council uses a wide and sometimes innovative range of engagement
      mechanisms, though these have met with mixed success. Initiatives have
      included live web casts, online debates, and focused action to engage black and
      minority ethnic communities (BME) tenants through the housing newsletter and
      forum. Engagement with young people, consultation with residents over the new
      Standsted runway application, and with BME housing tenants has been
      successful. Other initiatives such as area panels less so. The public feel as
      engaged and informed as most people in Essex but less able to influence
      decisions that affect them. The recent general best value survey still had
      51 per cent of respondees feeling the Council does not keep them well informed.

64   The public's preferred channels of communication are well researched and
      understood and built into the Council's customer services strategy. Despite its
      drive to move customers to the most efficient channels of communication, the
      Council is committed to preserving and improving the face-to-face contact
      channels much valued by groups such as older people and carers.

65   There are robust plans for engaging local people and stakeholders in the new
      local development framework. The statement of community involvement sets out
      clear arrangements for engaging stakeholders and local people. It lists methods
      suitable to the audience and recognises needs of different audiences. Plans are
      in place about whom needs to be consulted and why, and include involving
      diverse communities such as gypsies, travellers and minor ethnic communities.
      This ensures future consultation influences decision-making in line with
      community needs.

Diversity

66 Until recently, the Council has made slow progress towards its statutory duty to promote equality and diversity. It now has an equalities group in place with a director to provide a lead. An equalities and inclusion policy, race equality scheme and disability equality schemes are now in place. Performance indicators show a largely representative workforce but slow progress to meet the equalities standard and promote race equality. Equality impact assessments (EIA) and service delivery access audits are at a formative stage of development and a comprehensive strategy for roll out is incomplete. Internal awareness of equality issues is reasonable but not evenly spread. Internal expertise is not harnessed to best effect.

67 Staff members are representative of the community they serve but performance against the equality and diversity BVPI is mixed. The Council is performing in the top 25 per cent of councils for accessibility, e-government targets, the percentage of BME and disabled staff in the top five per cent of earners and racial incidents acted on. It is above median performance for its percentage of BME staff and number of racial incidents. It is just below median for the percentage of women in senior management, and in the worst 25 per cent of councils for its duty to promote race equality. In June 2007 it has only achieved level 1 of the Equalities Standard for Local Government, and only plans to reach level 2 by the end of 2008.

68 Equalities monitoring is not consistently or comprehensively used to inform service improvements. It informs some service improvements but this relies more on general awareness and direct customer feedback rather than a detailed examination of who is and who is not using a particular service. While divisional planning and operational risk registers incorporate sections on equality and diversity, most service plans do not overtly address service equality and access issues. Complaints and user satisfaction surveys lack rigorous analysis for equality issues. A revised service plan template is planned to address this in 2008. But until the Council makes best use of the data sets it has, for example, as part of rigorous equality impact assessments, it will not fully understand how well its services are meeting the needs of all sections of the community.

69 The Council does not robustly monitor equality considerations in its contracts. Equalities considerations are built into tender specifications and contracts but there is limited evidence this is carried out. Contract performance, such as with leisure services, is not robustly analysed for adherence to equalities and customer care practices or how far its performance is meeting the access and equality objectives of the Council.

70 Staff members show awareness of equality and diversity issues but best use is not made of internal equalities expertise and the application of diversity training is mixed. Equalities training is partially rolled out but some front-line workers have a low awareness of equality issues. Plans to ensure EIA improve access to and take up of services are underdeveloped. Expertise on equalities and access issues is not routinely shared across services to shape improvement strategies and methods.

71   Access to service centres for people with disabilities is good. For example, the customer service centres are DDA compliant. The centre at Saffron Walden includes adequate on-site parking for people with disabilities, automatic doors; disable toilet facilities, hearing loops and sight magnifiers, lowered desks, and accessible private interview rooms. But signage does not make it easy for customers to find planning services or the information area, and staff members have not been trained to identify and support people with learning disabilities.

72   The Council makes some good use of supplementary planning guidance and section 106 (planning gain) agreements to improve access to services. For example, guidance promotes wheelchair accessible housing and lifetime home standard designs. Section 106 agreements have realised many community benefits including provision of affordable housing, community halls, play areas and sports pitches, improvements to and promotion of bus and services.

73   Some good work is beginning to take place to address equality and diversity issues. Effective steps to address the needs of the growing migrant worker population are in train. These include a partnership with two councils to assess needs, provide a guide to services in relevant languages, and build community capacity for self-help; plus active involvement in developing national policy on migrant workers.

Service outcomes

74   The Council is making good progress to improve access to its services but a lack of robust analysis of management information to track progress and shape and target its improvement work constrains progress.

75   The Council made good progress carrying out its customer services strategy targets for 2006/07. Benefits for the customer include the following.

- Welcoming main reception areas which provide a comfortable, relaxed environment, use of private interview rooms and, at Saffron Walden, easy access to planners.

- New ways to pay and a move to cashless office made, including automated telephone payments, internet and use of post offices are changing the way customers pay their bills. For example, non counter and postal payments are up 405 per cent.

- Easier telephone access through a new telephone system and contact team.

- CSC staff are more customer aware and focused as a result of training.

- Benefits and revenues put on the CRM system, improving access and processing performance.

- Website improvements have helped website hits rise by 56 per cent and visitors by 28 per cent.

However, there was some slippage including developing a corporate framework for checking customer contacts and satisfaction across the Council.

76 The Council manages e-government targets effectively. Electronic access has improved in many ways including being able to apply for benefits and job applications and to obtain information on building control and planning. Reporting of environmental problems such as fly-tipping, missed bins, and abandoned vehicles, benefit fraud and breaches of planning control is now easy. The redesign underway will make the website fully transactional allowing customers to make all forms of payment online.

77 The Council works effectively with voluntary organisations and partners to share knowledge and improve access for specific groups. For example:

- the joint use of customer service centres, shared data and supported kiosks with the Citizen's Advice Bureau;

- sexual health working with West Essex PCT using Council funding for an outreach worker which helps with rural isolation;

- housing fit free fire alarms given by fire service in UDC housing and give referrals if fire safety visits are needed; and

- the HELP programme work with West Essex PCT to tackle obesity and enhance self-education, through an outreach programme of support and advice through its leisure centres.

Together these provide a broad means to address, fund and deliver consistent and improving information, referral and access to services. They also help the delivery of LAA objectives such as reducing emissions from homes; preventing older people getting ill in winter and helping people with mental health issues who are isolated. However, the Council recognises it needs to do more with its partners to address rural isolation and target resources more strategically to groups most in need.

78 Service access related national PI show an above median and responsive performance. For example, sports and leisure use doubled since 2003. User satisfaction subsequently improved by 16 per cent. This places it among the best performing 25 per cent of councils in 2006/07. Benefits and planning application processing is above median. Recycling rates have soared to 50 per cent of household waste collected because of easy access to kerbside collection. Residents have access to good quality council housing which benefits from speedy repairs and quick average re-let times. Although there is scope to improve is some areas such as timely communication over housing repairs and progress with planning applications.

79 Corporate capture, analysis and use of customer contact data are weak. For example, Uconnect performance reports are still in the process of development, alongside the transfer of services to the customer service centre. Dynamic issue awareness, long-term trends, and segmentation data, as well as compliments, comments and complaints, and access channel data, are not systematically tracked. Customer feedback, while encouraged, was scarce and is not used formally by Uconnect staff to improve services. However, the Council is a case study authority in an LGA project on customer led performance management which will help develop relevant skills and knowledge in this area.

User experience

80 User experience is mixed but improving, satisfaction with services remains mostly above the national median and comparable to other Essex councils.

81 Overall satisfaction with Uttlesford District Council services was among the best performing in 2003/04 and while falling slightly in line with the national trends remains on par with the district average in 2006/07. Satisfaction with complaints handling[10], sports and leisure facilities, cleanliness of the area, is now among the best performing 25 per cent of councils. Satisfaction with, the museum, housing, parks and open spaces remains above median. Notably satisfaction with landlord provided housing services for BME groups remains at 100 per cent. Satisfaction with planning services has improved but remains low compared to 2003/04 figures. Overall satisfaction with the benefits service has decreased by four per cent, although satisfaction with telephone service improved.

82 Comparison with other Essex councils puts it just above average for overall customer satisfaction, above average as a place to live, and as a safe place to live, people feeling informed and able to participate in local decision-making. However, it has below average satisfaction for bus services, waste collection, recycling and for people's ability to influence decisions.

83 User experience of their first point of contact with the Council is mixed. Our quality checks provided a timely, mostly satisfactory and customer focused response to our enquiries by post, mail, telephone and personal visits. Customer care through Uconnect is good. However, while supplementary advice is offered we found further advice limited. Leaflets advertised on the walls of the customer service centres were not always available. Partial, inconvenient opening times at Thaxted put unnecessary pressure on other agencies' voluntary staff to try to deal with Council queries. This made the support and information provided at some of our first points of contact inadequate. Not enough training makes it difficult for Uconnect staff to develop confidence to make full use of the CRM system. This could detrimentally affect users' experience as more services are connected.

84 Processes for handling and learning from complaints in services are adequate but performance is mixed and corporate analysis is weak. Complaints forms are written in plain English and easy to use. They are being changed to integrate with the CRM system. But access to forms using the intranet is not clear. Services track complaints and take timely corrective action. But no corporate analysis of complaints takes place, so learning opportunities are lost. Performance data is mixed, showing improving and good satisfaction with overall complaints handling and fewer complaints to the watchdog, but more service complaints are occurring and being upheld.

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[10] However, in the 2006/07 General Survey Report 54 per cent rated themselves dissatisfied with how complaints were handled (the figure was 70 per cent among 18-35 year old), suggesting much scope for improvement.

Is the service delivering value for money?

85   The Annual Audit and Inspection Letter 2006 highlighted the Council provides adequate VfM overall but has an underdeveloped approach to improving VfM. Inadequate data and insufficient benchmarking prevents a clear baseline assessment of the VfM provided through the Council's access points and some of its initiatives to improve access. But it is clear that recent access improvements are delivering improved VfM. New scrutiny arrangements are tasked to help drive continuous improvement.

86   Overall spending per head of population is below median, council tax is low and performance against national BVPI is good, with a comparably high percentage performing on par with the best 25 per cent of councils. Satisfaction results for 2006/07 are mixed but remain mostly above median. Residents have mixed views on the VfM the Council provides. VfM perceptions are in line with other Essex councils at 62 per cent in 2006 survey but the recent general BVPI survey had 52 per cent of respondents feeling the Council did not provide VfM.

87   Benchmarking data regarding the service provided by Uconnect is weak. Standard management information is available such as volume of calls and call handling times, and some targets are set in line with industry standards. However, comparative data is limited and average costs of transactions are not monitored. Data that profiles who is contacting the service, and why, is not tracked corporately. The Council recognises this and seeks to use its CRM system to address it. Until this happens a rich source of information will remain unavailable to help managers improve both access to and VfM of the services provided.

88   A full set of access to service related PIs is not in place. The current mix of PIs tracked and reported by the Council and its services does not provide a robust picture of how accessible its services are. Until a more challenging data set of PIs is in place the Council will find it difficult to track and gauge the VfM being delivered from its investments to improve access. Such as its work with the Citizen's Advice Bureau or shared service ambitions with the county council.

89   Despite being a below average spender per head of population and having a low council tax, several services are high cost and are not delivering the 'pre-eminent' performance the Council seeks. These include waste collection, sports and recreation, environmental health and development control. Processes are in place, through re-engineering and the new VfM scrutiny process, to review these areas.

90 The customer services strategy and Uttlesford 2011 transformation project reports show VfM is improving. For example, a £200,000 capital saving was made by moving to a new managed telephony system. While this has teething problems, it has improved the responsiveness of the Council's call handling. Re-engineering of the revenues and benefits service has realised £43,000 of cashable savings and £164,000 of non-cashable savings. However, benefit user satisfaction results for 2006/07 are mixed, and sometimes contrary to improvements in processing performance. A further £100,000 was taken out of service budgets for 2006/07 for efficiency gains from improved procurement. Budget reports suggest this will be delivered.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

91 The Council is delivering noticeable improvements in the range and ease with which customers can contact it and access quality key services. Equality and access related PI show a mostly favourable trend. Customers benefit from many improvements to physical, outreach and electronic access. Delivery of key access objectives are on track and a customer focus culture is being embedded. However, progresses against its equality objectives and plans to improve its consultation, communication and website have met with more mixed success.

92 Councillors, managers and front-line staff show a clear commitment and leadership in improving access to services. Councillors encourage the drive for better access and have clear ideas about how services can be improved. They support projects to improve access and engagement, including those aimed at young people. The Chief Executive is driving the vision forward and officer structures are in place to do this. Staff members are highly aware of what good user focus means in practice at the point of delivery of services. The Council can carry out its commitment to improve user focus with such support and understanding.

93 Good progress against its corporate priority to complete the integrated customer management project continues to be made. This is leading to improved accessibility for users. As at February 2007, many activities had been completed including customer staff training, changes to the premises both at Dunmow Community Information Centre and at the Saffron Walden offices. The new customer service centre opened in November 2006 represents a key step forward. Users now benefit from a single point of contact, answers that are more consistent, speedier processing times and greater resolution of enquiries at first point of contact.

94 Better information and communications technology (ICT) has delivered some significant access improvements. Notable examples include introducing automated telephone payments, an online booking system enabling citizens to book events, venues and facilities and the use of SMS to consult young people. But it is still early days for most of these improvements and full benefits for users are still emerging.

95 The Council is willing to experiment to improve access to services. During 2006, it launched a trial of 'All Pay'[11] through local post offices. Anecdotal feedback suggested that users received the system well, although some customers had difficulty adjusting to using the multi reference card, but the number was small. This good initiative displays its commitment to improve access to services.

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[11] 'All Pay' is a system by which residents can pay for a range of Council services by cash at local Post Offices rather than having to go to a Council office. The main benefit for users is that it provides greater convenience where and when they pay for services.

96   Restoring Bridge End Gardens[12] has resulted in better accessibility and community engagement. For example, Uttlesford Access brought visually impaired people and wheelchair users to advise on the restoration. CCTV coverage helps ensure frail and vulnerable people feel safe to use the garden. Local schoolchildren, volunteers, a mental health support group and friends of the garden regularly work on the restoration. The Guardian Community Service Awards in 2006 and the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors Community Involvement and Best Project Awards 2007 recognised the project as a good example of community engagement.

97   The Council and its partners have had some success in mitigating rural isolation. Although this remains an issue in Uttlesford, the Council and its partners have acted to improve access in rural areas. Achievements include the Buffy Bus, the Uttlesford community bus, increased frequency of buses on some routes, the use of youth buses for hire and 'Z Bikes'[13]. Although accessibility for remote communities is improving at a practical level, there is no strategic, targeted cross partner approach to reducing rural isolation. This means potential opportunities to address issues of rural isolation could be missed.

98   BVPI show a favourable improvement trend, with good and improving performance overall but with some pockets of poor or deteriorating performance. Between 2004/05 and 2005/06 the Council's performance indicators (PI) show the extent of improvement is better than the average for all district Councils. This is above the average for all district councils and on a par with councils rated by the Commission as 'good'. Effective outreach work by the museum and leisure has increased uptake of service by disadvantaged groups and helped improve user satisfaction. Better access to recycling collections and range of materials collected has helped recycling rates soar to above 50 per cent. Areas that were previously poorly performing, such as planning have improved processing performance, and user satisfaction. Benefits continues to improve its processing performance but has declining overall satisfaction with its service. There are some areas where performance is falling behind that of other councils, such the number of private sector homes left vacant for six months for more.

99   Trends in customer satisfaction show a mixed picture but remain above average. Satisfaction ratings since 2003/04 have significantly improved for sports and leisure, museums and handing of complaints. Satisfaction with parks and open spaces also improved slightly. Satisfaction with cleanliness has remained the same. However, satisfaction with services overall fell but remains above median. Satisfaction with waste collection dropped from 92 per cent to 76 per cent, and for recycling facilities it fell from 81 per cent to 71 per cent.

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[12] Bridge End Garden is a series of seven interlinked gardens laid out in the nineteenth century. These grade II listed gardens are now leased to the District Council and are open to the public each day free of charge.
[13] A scheme whereby mopeds are hired out to young people in rural areas to enable them to access work and training.

100 Performance indicators for diversity, disability and access show a largely favourable improvement trend. The Council has made good progress making authority buildings accessible to disabled people, improving the BME representation of the workforce and making services available electronically to the public. All PI improved from below median or poor comparative performance to match that of the best 25 per cent performing councils in 2005/06. The Council has upheld its good record in employing people with a disability. In 2005/06, the Council's workforce included 5.79 per cent of employees from this group, which is in the best 25 per cent of all district Councils. However, progress to meet the equalities standard has been slow and its performance to meet its duty to promote race equality has slipped significantly since 2003/04.

101 Performance on complaints is improving. The number of complaints made to the Local Government Ombudsman has reduced noticeably, from 18 in 2003/04, to a reported four complaints in 2005/06. The Council's own data for corporate complaints show a large fall in the number of complaints received between 2004/05 and 2005/06 and a decrease over the same period of the number of complaints upheld. Public satisfaction with complaints handling has improved significantly and now matches that of the best performing councils. However, over the same period, the percentage of upheld complaints rose.

102 The Council is starting to achieve better VfM as result of improvements in user access. Developments such as the CSC and organisational review of revenues and benefits are starting to show improved VfM. For example, the Council saved £50,000 from opening the CSC in late November 2006 until the end of March 2007. The 'All Pay' trial brought savings to the Council, as the transaction costs are significantly lower than for cash payments.

103 Some areas identified for improvement have not progressed as expected. The Council is aware of the flaws in its website and has plans to improve and relaunch it during late 2007. Although the e-benefits package was tried out successfully, the Council has not implemented it yet. The CAB kiosks (wheelchair accessible and funded by the CAB) have been delayed because of technical issues and are not yet in place. When completed, these developments should help to improve access to its services.

104 Outcomes from engagement with diverse communities are not yet fully apparent. During early 2007, the Council undertook research with consultants to identify the views and needs of diverse communities. The work so far has provided some early findings to help develop policies and approaches towards engagement. However, it is early days and working is continuing because of the poor level of response by some communities.

How well does the service manage performance?

105 The Council displays some strength in how it manages performance. This is clearly improving but there are some areas for improvement, including gaps in capturing, analysing and reporting user and non-user data to help gauge how accessible services are.

106 The Council shows a clear awareness of what it needs to do to improve. While it has secured improvements in access to services, the Council recognises there is still much to do to become the pre-eminent council it aspires to be. The 2006/07 corporate priorities identify necessary access and engagement improvements, as well as work to progress the integrated customer management project. This is helping to deliver improvements in customer access and focus such as the new customer service centres.

107 Better access to services remains a priority. The new Administration is reviewing the Council's corporate priorities for 2007/08. The draft priorities for improvement are clear. Although introducing a balanced budget is the main priority, the other priorities focus on improving access and customers' experience.

108 The Council has some well considered plans in place to improve access to services. The corporate plan contains priorities for developing access, user focus and community engagement. These fit in with the overall quality of life plan that sets out the Council's ambitions, ensuring there is a clear link between these activities and corporate priorities.

109 The Uttlesford in 2011 transformation programme contains a co-ordinated array of plans to meet the challenges of the future. It includes various projects to re-engineer services to improve processes, delivery and efficiency. The programme also contains projects to improve engagement and customer focus. This helps ensure that engagement and access are at the heart of the Council's modernisation plans.

110 The Uttlesford Futures Community Plan and Essex local area agreement make commitments to engage with communities, improve access to services and meet the diverse needs of communities, especially those neighbourhoods that have the worst quality of life. This is the case with health priorities where outcomes have a strong access focus for example, wait times for services, using audits and engagement with local communities and groups to shape services around need. Improved customer intelligence, use of customer segmentation to target diverse communities and a channel migration strategy seek to help customers find the most suitable access method for them and the most economic one for the Council.

111 The museum forward plan provides a well-researched and considered set of proposals to realise the potential of the collection and the museum site. It seeks to make best use of IT and improved facilities to reach out to its under-represented users, family learners, young adults and rural communities. However, the need for sizeable investment, a stable and sustainable financial future and staffing may require some hard decisions if the Council is to realise the full set of ambitions in this plan.

112 The customer services strategy charts a clear, robust way forward for improving access. The strategy aligns with other strategies such as the corporate plan, IEG statements and the customer services annual service plan. This ensures all plans provide a consistent direction to deliver the priorities of the Council.

113 Further improvements in electronic access to services are imminent. This includes introducing E-billing for Council tax from October 2007 and during summer 2007; E-GAZ is to be placed on the website[14] . Plans to deliver by November 2007 a website that is both transactional and more user-friendly to those with a visual impairment are well advanced. Future IT improvements will only not provide better services, but deliver better VfM.

114 Performance management is improving. Reporting methods are now in place for PIs, projects and risk with a variety of information available online. However, divisional plans, actions and risks are not yet being monitored. Firm plans to address this as part of the new service plan template being introduced from July 2007, are in place. The performance select committee is beginning to challenge performance but the challenge to policy by the scrutiny committee is less advanced. Effective performance management and scrutiny is essential if the Council is to meet its targets and improve performance.

115 Project management is now more effective. All major projects have sound arrangements for reporting to both Councillors and senior managers. A clear project plan and principles are in place to deliver the ICM system. Effective project management ensures projects meet objectives within deadlines.

116 The Council shows willingness to learn from others and to share its learning. It has effectively used learning to influence its own direction and strategy. For example, as part of the development of the ICM, members of staff visited Stevenage Borough Council and Mid-Suffolk District Council to see how they implemented changes to customer service delivery. More recently, it learnt from Braintree about its library service contact centre, and in return, shared its learning about its area panel engagement work. The Council is actively participating in the LGA satisfaction pilot. It is one of only four councils involved nationally. Although there are no outcomes yet, this will enable it to know more about its communities and their needs.

117 The Council has ambitions to deliver improved VfM through better customer access. The corporate plan envisages the ICM as having the potential for continuing annual revenue savings of £200,000. Setting up the CSC in late 2006 saved £50,000 until March 2007. In 2007/08, significant savings are forecast from the next stages of the organisational review.

118 Not all service plans contain focused action to improve access. Although equalities work is work in progress with services, the Council has not made progress as quick as it would have liked. While the museum service has an access policy, other services do not have one to help draw together a rounded view of service access barriers to build into their improvement planning.

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[14] E-GAZ is a system that provides community information linked to postcodes including information about Council services, local medical services and schools.

119   Information gained from complaints, satisfaction and other user contact and feedback is not yet providing robust information to drive improvement. For example, the Council does not currently report complete or corporately analysed performance data on complaints. Although it records details of complaints made and action taken, there is no evidence of wider learning from complaints or analysis of trends. It does not yet have comprehensive monitoring data about phone calls received to help it manage performance effectively. The Council recognises these problems and considers this is the next stage of development of its performance management system. Until this is complete, it could lose valuable lessons to improve services.

120   Full opportunities to share and make best use of learning from internal best practice are not being realised. For example, the leisure centres are not actively benchmarking with the 'best' or making full use of user data to challenge their performance and shape services. Services are not systematically sharing good practice or ideas on access among themselves. This is a missed opportunity as shared learning within the Council could help all services improve.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

121   There is sufficient capacity in place to continue delivering improvements. The Council has delivered many access improvements while improving overall performance and delivering on major initiatives such as it recycling scheme, the Stansted new runaway application and a major management re-structuring. The Council makes good and improving use of inward investment, IT and partnership working to increase its ability to meet community needs. Financial management is adequate and improving. However, the Council realises its capacity is stretched to deliver all of its ambitions to target. Additional capacity will need to come from strategic partnering, innovative new methods of delivering services, from greater efficiencies in-house, and from developing existing managers and their staff. This is exactly what the Council is planning to do.

122   The Council is investing considerable resources to improve access to services. For example, it has invested £700,000 in new IT and telephony facilities to deliver the ICM project. On a smaller scale, the Council is now investing £20,000 to improve its website. This will not only address known weaknesses, but also help make the website fully transactional.

123 The Council is taking action to ensure it has the right skills in the future. Managers and supervisors have been through a development centre to identify strengths and areas for development against a set of key competencies. Results from this are informing individual development plans. Through the collaboration with Northgate, the Council is developing skills for hands-on process re-engineering. This will provide the Council with its own dedicated capacity to introduce change. Key appointments such as an IT disability expert to achieve high levels of usability of its website, and the joint research and intelligence officer between the Council and West Essex CT will underpin continuing improvement. The human resources strategy is under review in light of the Uttlesford in 2011 programme. This will ensure among other things a rigorous employee development charter, effective succession planning, and a robust Council-wide training plan. The human resources team is part of a consortium set up by Essex County Council with a fixed rate to provide a cost effective service. The Council recognises however, that officer and Councillor development needs further work and that managerial capacity remains variable.

124 The Council has improved staff appraisal. This has not been strong in the past with a sizeable percentage of staff not receiving annual or interim appraisal or having a current training plan. But a new system is in place and Councillors are keen on ensuring that appraisals take place. Heads of service and Directors are now clearly accountable for delivery through appraisal and target setting.

125 The Council is addressing shortfalls in capacity. The senior management structure was reorganised in early 2007 to provide a more focused and strategic approach to deliver the Council's ambitions for the future. Now there are five strategic directors in post. This has increased capacity to drive performance improvement and address wider partnership issues.

126 The Council works well with partners to promote access to services among diverse and disadvantaged communities. On a practical level, there are good examples of joint working including sports and health activities at the leisure centre with Leisure Connect and the new skate park. With representatives of the voluntary sector and West Essex Primary Care Trust, Uttlesford has produced a directory of services for older people that is accessible through the Council's website. The Council has made a bid to Building Capacity East fund with East Hertfordshire and Braintree and the local Citizens Advice Bureaux to identify the needs of migrant communities. This will provide a model that can be used for any migrant group by the partners or other local authorities.

127 The Council works with parish councils to improve their corporate approaches to services and delivery. It ran a programme of workshops looking at issues such as improving quality. So far, three parish councils have achieved the 'Quality Council Award' from this programme. The Council is to restart the programme following these successes. Local citizens and the rural councils benefit from such an initiative through improved quality of local government. The use of Council grant monies enables better and more representative identification of need at area panels and delivery of projects to promote access to services locally.

128 The Council works well with partners to deliver improved access to services through a shared use of information technology. For example, there is good partnership working by the Essex On-Line Partnership mostly through shared information and shared access to websites. This is providing an integrated and joined up access to services for users across the county. Work is continuing to provide access to the CRM system through Citizens' Advice Bureau offices. This work will be completed soon.

129 The Council is actively working with Essex County Council to improve access. The two councils are to provide an access link to the CSC within the revamped Saffron Walden library. This is due to go live in September 2007 and will provide public access to advice and information on district council services in a town centre location with longer opening hours and more staff able to deal with enquiries. Essex County Council considers the joint relationship as positive and promising tangible benefits for local people.

130 Shared services and partnership based delivery is a priority of the Council. It has a positive and active approach to the possibilities of extending partnership working and shared services with other Councils. For example, there are several possible arrangements under consideration including a link with Braintree (parking enforcement) and with Brentwood (revenues and benefits). It recognises it has capacity issues in some areas and that it can deliver in partnership other benefits that it would not have been able to do on its own and to provide better VfM.

131 The Council makes good use of external funding to develop access to services with its partners. Examples include: the Healthwize (Partnership initiative with the Primary Care Trust and Secondary Schools - for girls 11 to 16 years old); funding of the Saffron Walden skate park; and Heritage Lottery Funding (£196,000) to help restore Bridge End Gardens. Further projects to improve access, for example, the proposed new museum resource and interpretation centre are in the pipeline. These will help improve access to cultural activities to benefit local residents and tourists.

132 The Council also makes some good use of external funding to increase its own capacity. For example, it maintained and improved its speed of determining planning applications despite the submission of a complex and controversial planning application for Stansted airport. The Council achieved this by securing funds from British Airports Authority to provide an extra technical support officer to deal with the increased administration the application created. It has also made use of Planning Delivery Grant[15] to boost capacity. For example, it received £534,000 in 2006/07 and some of this was used to help improve access to planning services including developing online planning applications.

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[15] Planning Delivery Grant was introduced by the government in 2003 as a means of providing councils' planning services with extra resources, and hence a further incentive, to improve the performance of key aspects of the service such as applications handling speed. This is a national priority for planning.

133 The Council has an adequate financial position. It is debt free but has a challenging financial position over the next three years. It has a new medium term financial plan, which matches resources to priorities. Although significant budget savings need to be made to balance the budget for 2008/09, investment in improvements to access to services is not threatened, as a significant percentage of savings are projected from the Council's re-engineering work to transform service delivery.

134 Organisational capacity is stretched in places and needs to be better matched to the delivery of corporate ambitions. Although the Council has a good record of successfully completing change, it still has some outstanding actions to be delivered, particularly through the organisational review team. This team is small and faces a challenging programme. There are two dedicated re-engineers but there is a degree of risk for the Council with such a limited resource. Capacity could be enhanced in collaboration with its re-engineering partner but this is at an early stage of discussion. Required budget savings are also putting a squeeze on appointments. This means the Council may not have enough capacity to deliver change at the speed it would like.

135 Despite improving, internal feedback mechanisms are not fully effective. Staff report limited opportunity to share their ideas with management. Some managers encourage staff to share their ideas but this practice is not widespread. Open, two-way communications are vital to the Council's success in securing commitment from staff to deliver objectives.

136 The procurement strategy is not improving access to services. Although progress is being made in delivering this strategy, the contribution in furthering diversity and access remains unclear. The strategy makes clear reference to diversity and accessibility, but the links between the goals of the strategy and procurement practice are not strong. As highlighted earlier the outcomes of activity in this area are not monitored. Therefore, the Council will find it difficult to display how successful the policy is in this area.