

WIRRAL COUNCIL

AUDIT AND RISK MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

26 JANUARY 2009

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF FINANCE

ACCESS TO SERVICES

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report presents the Audit Commission report on Access to Services, following the inspection undertaken in September 2008.
- 1.2 The inspection assessed Wirral Council (on a scale of zero to three stars) as providing 'good, two star access to services that has promising prospects for improvement ... because of its impact on improving and providing access to services to meet the needs of the borough's diverse communities – one of the Council's aims.'

2 BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Audit Commission undertook an inspection of Access to Services during September 2008. The inspection was led by the Finance Department which has responsibility for Customer Services. However, all departments and partners played key roles in the process.
- 2.2 The context of the inspection was that:
 - Legislation requires that Council services are:
 - Responsive to the needs of citizens
 - Of a high quality and cost effective; and
 - Fair and accessible to all who need them
 - Access to services is a cross-cutting theme applicable to all Council services. An accessible and user-focused organisation places customers at the heart of service delivery and designs joined up-services around the needs of users
 - The customer experience for both citizens and businesses when contacting their local council should be one which is responsive, timely and efficient.
- 2.3 Inspectors were on site within the Council for a week and interviewed a cross section of employees, partner representatives and user representatives from across a broad spectrum of Council services.

3 INSPECTION FINDINGS

3.1 The report, published on 8 January 2009, is appended, and is summarised below.

3.1.1 Wirral Council provides good access to services that are responsive and are based on an understanding of users' needs. It has an extensive network of one stop shops where users can receive face to face advice on public services. Partnership working with other agencies is strong and enables local people to access services at a single point of contact.

3.1.2. The inspectors found that the Council demonstrated strengths including:

- responsive services that address specific community needs
- a range of ways in which users can access services according to their individual preferences
- good engagement with local people to inform how services are delivered
- good use of partnerships to provide access to public services that are helping to improve the quality of life for local people.

3.1.3. However, the inspectors found weaknesses including:

- telephone contact with the Council is generally limited to office hours with no evening or weekend service, except for emergencies
- the number of abandoned enquiries to the Call Centre is high
- not all public buildings are accessible to, and suitable for, people with a disability.

3.1.4. To help the Council improve, inspectors recommended the Council should:

- review the means of access across all services
- strengthen the approach to accessibility and user-focus within its performance management arrangements.
- consolidate existing plans for improving access within an overall strategy.

3.2 The Council is keen to address the issues identified by the Audit Commission as follows:

1. *Telephone contact with the Council is generally limited to office hours with no evening or weekend service except for emergencies.*

The Council offers extended hours already in a number of key service areas such as Revenues and Benefits (8.00 – 6.30 and Saturday mornings) and it is planned during 2009 to extend opening hours across more services where this will be of value to service users.

2. *The number of abandoned enquiries to the Call Centre is high.*

General call abandonment levels at the Call Centre have been low and within the national parameters for local authority call centres. The Audit Commission highlighted a specific area, Streetscene, which since their visit has been addressed by improved systems and processes as well as increased staffing.

3. *Not all public buildings are accessible to, and suitable for, people with a disability.*

This was acknowledged by the Authority and is one of the issues to be addressed as part of the Strategic Asset Review.

- 3.3 The issue of access to services is an intrinsic part of the Council Change Programme approved by Cabinet on 10 December 2008. Officers are considering how best to manage the programme and ensure integration of individual projects through the Corporate Improvement Group.
- 3.4. The Audit Commission assessment of the provision of two star Access to Services with promising prospects for improvement has not been exceeded by any top tier local authority.

4. **FINANCIAL AND STAFFING IMPLICATIONS**

- 4.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

5. **LOCAL MEMBER SUPPORT IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

6. **LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

7. **PLANNING IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

8. **EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1. The Council, through its Customer Access Strategy, is committed to ensure that all customers can access services with ease.

9. **COMMUNITY SAFETY IMPLICATIONS**

- 9.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

10. **HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS**

10.1. There are none arising directly from this report.

11. **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

11.1. Access to Services Inspection – Audit Commission January 2009.

12. **RECOMMENDATION**

12.1. That the report be noted.

IAN COLEMAN
DIRECTOR OF FINANCE

FNCE/15/09