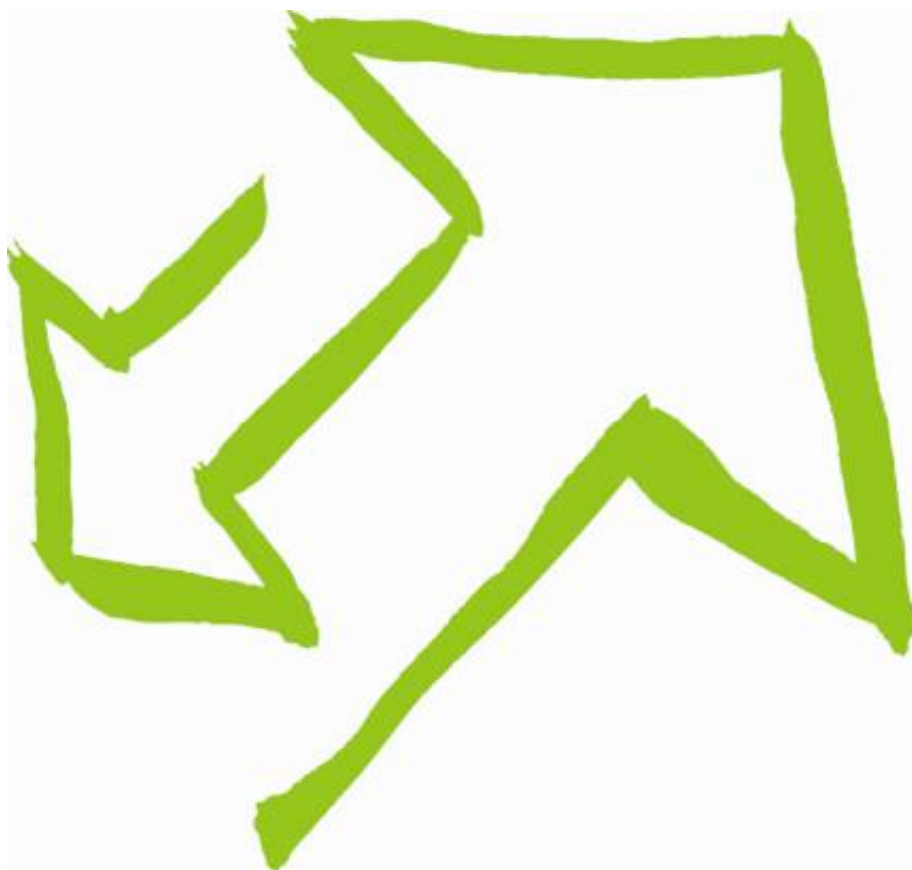


Access to Services Inspection

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council
January 2009

Embargoed until 00.01 hours on 8 January 2009



Contents

Service Inspections	3
Summary	4
Scoring the service	6
Recommendations	8
Report	10
How good is the service?	13
Prospects for improvement	25

Service Inspections

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

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

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

Summary

- 1 Wirral Council is good at managing access to many of its services. In particular it has a widespread network of face-to-face access points, through which it actively reaches out to its most vulnerable communities. It has brought other public services – particularly in health and employment - into them to enrich the offering.
- 2 The Council has a strategic approach that is based on a good understanding of the diverse needs of users and places them at the heart of access to services. This approach is based on a good understanding of the diverse needs of users. They are therefore able to access services that are responsive to their needs.
- 3 Good access to services takes place through a network of one stop shops, a call centre and the Council's website. Face-to-face access points are well located where they are most needed. However, telephone contact with the Council is generally limited to office hours. The Council's website provides electronic access to a good range of services but is not fully transactional.
- 4 Appropriate arrangements are in place for consulting and engaging with users. Feedback and complaints are encouraged and used to improve access to, and the quality of, services for all communities. Obtaining feedback from non-users is less developed. Generic service standards are clear and comprehensive. However, service specific standards – about speed of response, for example - are variable and local people are not routinely involved in defining them.
- 5 The Council is proactively addressing diversity and equalities in service delivery and employment policies. It works with local communities to ensure equity and fairness in service take-up. Performance in access, equalities and diversity best value performance indicators displays a positive trend but is comparatively mixed. The Council has not, for example, fully met its obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act for physical access to all public buildings.
- 6 Through a wide range of activities designed to increase contact with its most disadvantaged communities, the Council has achieved good outcomes for users. Many initiatives are cutting-edge with increased take-up of the Council's and its partners' services by people who could benefit from them but who are not reached by 'normal' channels. Access in one-stop shops to partners' services for vulnerable people, such as those with mental health or alcohol problems, is used successfully to support the Council's aim to reduce health inequalities.
- 7 The Council can demonstrate improved value for money in services that have migrated to its central customer services systems, for example, streetscene and recycling services. A major aim of the Customer Access Strategy is to encourage enquirers to use the lowest cost channel for contacting the Council and make more use of electronic access via the website.

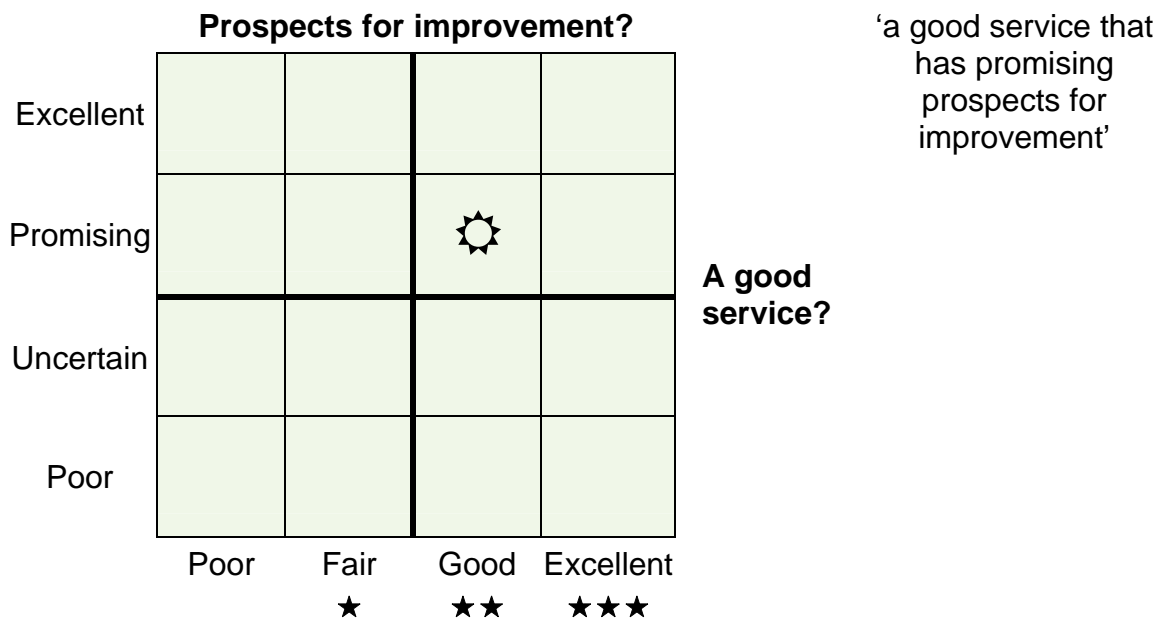
Summary

- 8 The Council has embarked on a programme of major changes in the way it works, which has a bearing on customer access. It is improving its management of diversity and equalities across services, and has unified its many brands into a single corporate identity. It is now beginning a review of its buildings, and it is exploring neighbourhood working. In addition, changes in services themselves, such as the move towards direct payments to people who need social care, are changing the nature of the relationship between the Council and its residents.
- 9 The range of plans and strategies collectively identify what the Council is seeking to achieve but they are not closely integrated with the Customer Access Strategy. An overarching strategy that consolidates all intended actions, including partners' for improving access to services is not in place. The lack of such a strategy creates a risk that collective resources are not used to best effect to achieve the intended outcomes and prioritise improvement projects.
- 10 Arrangements and an appropriate culture are in place to support continuous improvement in accessing services. Effective performance management arrangements are largely in place to drive and monitor progress and review the impact of intended actions to improve access to services. However, the Council does not routinely monitor the achievement of individual service standards. It learns from feedback and its own experiences but it is not systematic about sharing information across services to provide comprehensive profiles about users and non-users.
- 11 Overall the Council has access to the appropriate skills, finance and tools to deliver improvements. Human resource policies and practices support improving access to services and are embedding a customer-focused culture. The Council works well with community, private and voluntary sector partners to enhance its capacity and make good use of joint assets and resources. It is investing in ICT to further improve access. However, the lack of a council-wide customer relationship management system (CRM) to provide and support front-line services means that the Council is not making the best use of ICT to:
 - create detailed analyses of contacts and allow identification of trends and problem areas;
 - better understand users' needs and design and organise services to meet those needs;
 - track all service requests through to completion and contribute to further improvements in customer service;
 - maintain contact with users on a range of issues and raise their satisfaction;
 - improve consistency, efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery; and
 - communicate information about users and services internally throughout the Council.

Scoring the service

12 We have assessed Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council as providing good, two-star access to services that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

13 The Council provides good access to services because it has a number of strengths including:

- a planned and strategic approach to designing and providing access to services that are considered in service planning;
- a good understanding of the diverse needs of users;
- accessible and responsive services that address specific community needs;
- a wide range of methods to engage with local people and other stakeholders;
- a proactive focus on diversity and equalities in service delivery; and
- good use of partnerships to provide access to seamless services that are helping to improve the quality of life for local people.

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.

Scoring the service

14 Areas for further development include:

- 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;
- inconsistencies in service standards and the extent to which users are involved in defining them; and
- sharing of information is not systematic across all council services to provide comprehensive profiles about users and non-users.

15 Access to services has promising prospects for improvement because:

- the Council has improved access to a range of services for users to meet their diverse needs;
- progress on implementing diversity and equalities policies is positive;
- value for money has improved in terms of accessing a range of services;
- plans are in place and resourced to further improve access to services for users in accordance with their needs and preferences;
- effective arrangements and an appropriate culture are in place to support continuous improvement in accessing services;
- the Council learns from its own experiences and users' feedback; and
- overall the Council has the capacity to deliver service improvements, including working with community, private and voluntary sector partners.

16 Areas for further development include:

- integrating and consolidating action plans and other strategies to further improve access to services within the Customer Access Strategy;
- obtaining feedback from non-users and assessing satisfaction levels across communities to further inform service delivery;
- wider application of a customer relationship management system to support front-line services;
- monitoring and reporting performance against individual service standards; and
- evaluating the costs and benefits of each the Council's own access channels.

Recommendations

- 17 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 costs¹ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, we recommend that the Council does the following:

Recommendation

- R1** Consolidate existing plans for improving access to services within an overarching strategy that defines:
- users that are, and are not, accessing services;
 - how the Council intends to achieve its aims and targets for further improving access and reducing the gap between users and non-users;
 - the wider implementation of customer relationship management across services;
 - access channels that will be supported, including emerging technologies; and
 - timescales for implementing resourced improvements over the short-, medium- and long-term.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a more coherent, efficient and holistic approach to improving access to services and user-focus;
- improved data management and responsiveness to users to improve service quality and access;
- greater resolution of user enquiries at initial point of contact;
- improved user satisfaction; and
- greater clarity and transparency about what the Council aims to achieve.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by June 2009.

Recommendation

- R2** Review the means of access across all services to ensure that opening times, access channels and outreach facilities meet users' needs and preferences.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved responsiveness and access to services at times that are convenient for all users;

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

Recommendations

- reduction in abandoned calls; and
- improved value for money.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by June 2009.

Recommendation

- R3** Strengthen the approach to accessibility and user-focus by ensuring that performance management frameworks include:
- analysis of the access to, and standard of services experienced by, different groups and communities; and
 - indicators that measure the speed and quality of service responses against aims, objectives, service standards and targets that are publicised to users.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved information to service users and potential users about the standards of services that they can expect and if those standards are being achieved;
- increased user satisfaction and responsiveness;
- better management of users' expectations;
- a complete overview of performance against objectives and targets relating to access to services; and
- improved targeting of resources.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2009.

Report

Context

The locality

- 18** The Wirral peninsula is in northwest England, bordered by the River Dee, River Mersey, Irish Sea and Cheshire. The area is diverse and has a mix of agricultural, industrial, maritime and residential areas. The population is 314,000 living in 143,000 households; 1.7 per cent of the population is from ethnic minority communities. Following a period of decline the population has stabilised and is forecast to increase. Over 23 per cent are aged 60 and over which is above the national and regional averages.
- 19** Wirral is ranked 60 out of 354 in the indices of deprivation for local authority areas in England (with 1 being the most disadvantaged). Whilst 68 out of the borough's 207 super output areas are amongst the 20 per cent most disadvantaged (including 11 within the 1 per cent most disadvantaged), 26 are amongst the 20 per cent least disadvantaged. Many of Wirral's citizens enjoy a good quality of life, with good housing, schools, employment opportunities and living environment. For others, the quality of life is worse, with pockets of high unemployment, low skill levels and poorer quality housing.
- 20** The general health of the population is overall worse than the national and regional averages with a stark mortality gap of over ten years between people living in the most affluent and deprived areas. Over 30 per cent of households have no car - again higher than the averages – which affects how local people can access services and employment. Unemployment is also higher than the averages.
- 21** The Wirral Local Strategic Partnership, comprising community, private, public and voluntary agencies, has produced a community strategy 'Getting Better Together'. The strategy sets out a ten year vision to 'make Wirral a better place in which to live, work and invest'. It identifies eight themes for action that reflect local priorities and are intended to improve the economic, environmental and social well-being of local people.

The Council

- 22** Wirral Council has 66 councillors. The Conservative Group is the largest party with 24 seats; Labour have 21 and the Liberal Democrats have 20, with 1 Independent councillor. A Leader and Cabinet of Labour and Liberal Democrat Councillors govern the Council. One Cabinet portfolio holder is responsible for community and customer engagement. Ten Overview and Scrutiny Committees complement the governance arrangements. One committee is responsible for community and customer engagement.

Report

- 23** The Council's net revenue budget (2008/09) is £298.7 million. Services are delivered by seven departments: Adult Social Services; Children and Young People; Corporate Services; Finance; Law, Human Resources and Asset Management; Regeneration; and Technical Services. The Finance Department is responsible for the management of the Council's call centre and one stop shops.
- 24** The Council's vision is 'of a more prosperous and equal Wirral, enabling all communities and people to thrive and achieve their full potential'. In order to make and monitor progress the Council has set out five objectives to:
- create more jobs, achieve a prosperous economy and regenerate Wirral;
 - create a clean, pleasant, safe and sustainable environment;
 - improve health and well being for all, ensuring people who require support are full participants in mainstream society;
 - raise the aspirations of young people; and
 - create an excellent council.
- 25** Each objective is broken down further into aims for the next five years and immediate priorities for improvement. One aim - linked to the objective to create an excellent council - is to 'improve accountability, accessibility and openness and involve those who use our services in their design and delivery'.

Access to services

- 26** We inspected the Council's access to services.
- 27** Developing a user-focused approach is a legislative obligation, in terms of its links with diversity, equality and human rights. Part I of the Local Government Act 1999 requires that councils' services are:
- responsive to the needs of citizens;
 - of a high quality and cost-effective; and
 - fair and accessible to all who need them.
- 28** Access to services is a cross-cutting theme applicable to all councils and all council services. An accessible and user-focused organisation places customers at the heart of service delivery. It knows what local people want and has organised itself to deliver services to meet their needs. In 2005 a national reportⁱ considered how councils could conduct their business via new and more cost-effective access channels. A further reportⁱⁱ highlighted the opportunities to provide joined-up services that are designed around the needs of users.

ⁱ Transformational Government, Cabinet Office, 2005

ⁱⁱ Service Transformation: A better service for citizens and businesses, a better deal for the taxpayer, Sir David Varney, December 2006.

- 29 Councils are fundamental points of contact for the citizen when seeking access to public services. The customer experience for both citizens and businesses when contacting their local council should be one which is responsive, timely and efficient. By identifying customer contact that is 'avoidable', a council and its partners are better placed to redesign the way services are made more accessible for their customers so they do not have to make unnecessary, valueless contacts. The Government has introduced, from 2008/09, national indicator 14 (the average number, of customer contacts per received customer request) relating to avoidable contact.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 30** The Council's Corporate Plan 2008-2010 sets out the aim to 'improve accountability, accessibility and openness and involve those who use our services in their design and delivery'. The aim is supported by key actions and indicators. The Council will measure progress in achieving its aim by indicators relating to service complaints, level of equality standard achieved, public media standards, percentage of calls answered by call centre/abandonment rate, number of hits on website and avoidable contact.
- 31** A Customer Access Strategy supports the Corporate Plan. The strategy sets out the Council's commitment to ensure that all of its customers can access its services with ease. A pledge states that the Council wants to make it as easy as possible for customers to make contact and deal with customer enquiries as quickly as possible. It aims to resolve enquiries first time - wherever and however customers get in touch (although some issues need to be referred to specialist staff) - and to provide a consistent and high quality service. It seeks to develop services from the perspective of customers by understanding what they need.
- 32** The Council states that it shall make its services available at times and places and in ways which are convenient to the customer. It expects that customers may want to contact by a variety of means. It aims to make it easy for customers to:
- talk directly by providing one stop shops in places to which people can easily travel;
 - telephone the Council; and
 - deal electronically with the Council by providing as many of its services as possible via the internet.
- The Council will also encourage customers to use the cheapest, most efficient access channel appropriate to their enquiry.
- 33** A Local Public Service Agreement (LPSA) included a target for 95 per cent of residential properties to be within one mile of a one stop shop or an information point by 2006/07.
- 34** The aims for access to services link explicitly to all the Council's objectives by promoting and improving ease of contact. Improving services by making them more accessible and efficient makes Wirral a better place to live and work which leads to better prosperity. An accessible and responsive service helps to create a clean, pleasant, safe and sustainable environment. Access to, and assisting the delivery of health initiatives, helps to sustain an overall well-being. The Council seeks to engage with young people and encourage take-up of services through SMS text messaging.
- 35** The aims support the community strategy themes, for example, by helping local people to access opportunities that have the most impact on life-chances, such as learning, healthcare and work.

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

Customer and community focus

- 36** The needs of citizens and users are at the heart and design of access to services now and in the future. The Council is taking a strategic approach to designing and planning services, reflected in community, corporate and service planning and by working with partners. Improving accountability, accessibility and openness and involving those who use council services in their design and delivery links to the objective to create an excellent council. These strategies are a good foundation for improving access to services and ensuring that they meet the needs of users throughout Wirral.
- 37** Decisions about access to services are based on a good understanding of the needs of users. Intelligence is drawn from a wide range of sources, including a Citizens Panel, 11 area forums, user surveys and an Equality and Diversity Stakeholder Event. Liaison with a wide range of user groups helps to establish access preferences and ensure that services are responsive to the needs of local communities. Their views have influenced the location and provision of services. The Council has, for example, expanded opportunities for personal contact by extending face-to-face contact points. Greater diversity across the range of groups consulted means that the Council can gather more information to help influence its decisions and developments more appropriately.
- 38** The Council and specific services make good use of available information on the disability, ethnicity and vulnerability of users to plan, prioritise and deliver access to services but actions are limited by the lack of comprehensive user and non-user profiles. The Council recognises the importance of understanding its customers, their diverse needs and the specific needs of particular sectors of the community. Demographic and survey information is collected around the six equality strands and across a number of service areas, including Wirral Partnership Homes. However, as yet, user profiles are not comprehensive and consistent across all services. Without profiles of which members of the community are or are not using services, including those delivered by partners, the Council will not have a comprehensive understanding of the access needs of all elements of the community to ensure that all services are provided in a non-discriminatory way.
- 39** Access methods are reviewed and improved in direct response to consultation, engagement, and feedback from local people, particularly those from marginalised or minority communities. The Equality and Diversity Stakeholder Event invited comments on 'which services are working well in terms of access and availability', 'which services are difficult to access and do not meet your needs' and 'what steps can we take to improve access to services'. The Council has used feedback to improve access across a range of facilities and services, including increased staffing levels, improvements to reception areas in public buildings and more appropriate waste collection methods. Such engagement helps to ensure that access to services is appropriately designed.

How good is the service?

Ease of access for all

- 40 Services are accessible, responsive and based on a good understanding of local needs. The Council has a planned and strategic approach to providing a range of effective, modern and traditional access methods through one stop shops, information points, a call centre, the website and video links. It works effectively with partners to deliver services at a single location. This extensive network means that the Council achieved its LPSA target to provide an access channel within a mile of 95 per cent of homes in Wirral. These facilities ensure convenient access to services for users and make efficient use of resources.
- 41 The Council knows the access preferences of its customers and why some people do not use services. It knows how groups and individuals within the community wish to access specific services and uses this information in the design of access, particularly for vulnerable users. The emphasis is on giving users a choice on how they wish to access services, by understanding and anticipating their needs and offering the most appropriate method. As a result one stop shops provide a more in depth response for complex issues and for users who value the additional support of face to face contact.
- 42 Personal access to services is good but is generally limited to office hours with only 2 out of the Council's 13 one stop shops open on Saturday mornings. The one stop shops are based in central locations across the borough, close to main transport routes. The Council places the one stop shops in well-known buildings, including libraries and sports centres, reducing the perceived stigma that users may have, for example, in seeking benefits advice at a traditional service counter. Facilities for personal visitors are well designed to meet their needs with procedures in place to manage peaks and troughs in demand - 87.1 per cent of users wait for 15 minutes or less to see an advisor and 82 per cent are interviewed within 20 minutes. This approach helps to create a user-friendly environment but users who work during the day have greater difficulty in making personal contact.
- 43 The one stop shops provide a comprehensive service. Here users can access a wide range of advice and services, including surgeries with, for example, the Citizens Advice Bureau and welfare rights advice officers. They deal with - on a first contact basis - the majority of users' enquiries and refer, where appropriate, more complex issues to specialist staff or to other agencies. With generic staff the Council is able to respond to a range of queries as well as promote related services. For example a customer making a housing benefit claim is also advised of an entitlement to a leisure pass and free school meals and offered appointments with partner organisations such as the Jobcentre Plus. Over 76 per cent of enquiries and transactions are resolved at the first point of contact. As a result users can be confident that the initial contact with the Council is likely to resolve their enquiry and that they will receive not only the service required but additional, associated support.
- 44 A comprehensive range of information and advice is also available at the one stop shops, for example:
- promoting job vacancies from local employers within the community, including jobs with flexible working hours that are suitable for lone parents;
 - facilitating public consultation such as regeneration plans for West Kirby;

- initial advice on business start-ups;
 - consultation with partner agencies such as the Citizens' Advice Bureau and Department for Work and Pensions; and
 - collaboration with Powergen to distribute free energy saving products.
- 45 Users have further, easy access to services through seven information points based in libraries. The information points provide first stage advice on council services as well as signposting to other services where users can access a more comprehensive level of service. Customers can also access more in-depth advice at seven further libraries through a direct video link to the call centre. These facilities, which complement the one stop shop network, mean that the majority of residents live within one mile of an access point for council services.
- 46 Access points are well located in the areas of most need. The one stop shop at Rock Ferry is within one of the borough's more disadvantaged communities, providing easy access to advice and support. In particular the one stop shops are a contact point for vulnerable people, such as users who present themselves as homeless. Staff act as an advocate on their behalf, contacting and liaising with relevant organisations and providing support to help to manage stressful situations.
- 47 Users with a disability have appropriate physical access to the one stop shops but not to public areas in all council buildings. All one stop shops are accessible to wheelchair users and have lowered counters and hearing loop facilities. However, in only 67 per cent of council buildings are all public areas suitable for, and accessible to, people with a disability. Fair access to all of the Council's facilities and services is, therefore, not available for users with a disability as easily as for non-disabled users.
- 48 Telephone contact through the call centre is generally accessible but for most requests is limited to office hours, with no evening or weekend service except for emergencies. In addition a Central Advice and Duty Team is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week and offers advice or referral on Adult Social Services and Children's and Young People's Services. However, the Council did not achieve its target in 2007/08 to handle 95 per cent of calls. Although up to 94 per cent were answered on initial contact in one month, only 84 per cent of all callers received a response with 16 per cent of calls abandoned. Furthermore, only 62 per cent of calls were answered within 15 seconds, below the target of 80 per cent. Although demand has continued to increase recent improvements in call management and additional customer service officers have not reduced the rate of abandoned calls. Not all callers are therefore receiving the intended, prompt service.
- 49 The majority of users who do make contact by telephone also receive a comprehensive advice service. Call centre advisers are trained to deal with a wide range of enquiries and services covering, for example, benefits, council tax, waste collections and other general information. They resolve over 75 per cent of enquiries with one call and provide a flexible and responsive service to the public.

How good is the service?

- 50** The Council's website provides electronic access to a good range of services but is not fully transactional. It is easy to use and navigate with free access available at 24 libraries located across the borough. It provides access to an increasing range of council documents, information and services, for example, on-line benefit claim forms. The 'Do-it-online' and 'e-citizen' facilities offer a number of services that can be accessed electronically, such as making a service request, calculating benefits entitlements, making payments for council services and making a complaint against the Council. Electronic access to services is growing, demonstrated by an increase in on-line requests. All these developments provide further opportunities for users to access services more conveniently and efficiently.
- 51** Provision of information about council and partners' services is good. Individual services produce good quality advice and guidance, for example, a Bereavement Guide, a Care Services Directory, information for landlords, information to support revised waste collections and recycling facilities and the Wirral Fair Trader Scheme. All such publications provide information to make users aware about the range of council services provided and how to access them.
- 52** The Council does not have a comprehensive understanding about how well it responds to all service requests. Response times - other than for waiting times at the one stop shops, for telephone contacts, responding to complaints and national performance indicators – are not routinely monitored and reported. In 2007/08 the Council responded to 84.8 per cent of complaints within 15 working days compared with the target of 92 per cent. It has reported, for example, that fly tipping was removed on average within 2.05 days but this figure is based on a crude form of sampling. The absence of accurate systems to monitor response times in dealing with all service requests means that the Council cannot be assured that it is providing an efficient and prompt response across all of its services.
- 53** Comparative performances on national performance indicators that measure responsiveness are variable, ranging from the best to worst 25 per cent of councils. In 2007/08 the Council was, for example, amongst the best 25 per cent for the investigation of abandoned vehicles with all service requests actioned within 24 hours but below the median for their removal. Such inconsistencies in dealing with service requests mean that users do not always receive a similar, prompt service.
- 54** Information sharing is not systematic across all council services on specific customer needs. The overall effectiveness of the Council's customer relationship management system (CRM) is limited as not all services use this system. Until the Council puts in place appropriate systems it will not have a comprehensive understanding of which users within its communities are accessing all of its services.

Standards

- 55** Generic service standards are clear and comprehensive but service-specific standards are inconsistent. A Customer Charter and customer care standards are displayed in public areas. The standards include customer guarantees and response times for face to face, letter writing, telephone and e-mail and internet contact. Users therefore know that if their enquiry is not resolved at point of contact they will be told within 15 days what action is being taken.

- 56 Service-specific standards are not published for all activities and for certain enquiries, such as homelessness, the corporate standard is not appropriate. A Housing Benefits Customer Charter and Landlords Charter (which have more stringent timescales for responding to enquiries) and a Policy Statement on Equality in Service Provision are visible in one stop shops. A Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services Statement shows performance against national performance indicator targets and waiting times. Other standards, for example, response times to other types of service requests, are not clearly communicated. Whilst users may be told on contact the length of time to attend to a service request the lack of systematic monitoring and reporting means that they have difficulty in judging the overall responsiveness and quality of services.
- 57 Users who choose to report service requests via the Council's website are generally not informed about specific standards other than the customer care guarantees. For example, when reporting offensive graffiti users know of a 24 hour response time. But they are not informed within what time other littering service requests will be actioned and as a result cannot judge the quality and responsiveness in dealing with such incidents.
- 58 Local people are not routinely involved in defining service standards. Without their active involvement the Council cannot be assured that its intended response times and generic and service-specific standards match the aspirations of local people.

Diversity

- 59 Access to services embraces diversity and equality well through a thorough and comprehensive approach. The Council understands its communities and where it needs to target inequalities such as by working with partners to improve access to health services. Good arrangements are in place to engage with groups representing the diversity of the local community in terms of age, gender, disability, ethnicity, faith and sexual orientation. The groups provide an input in planning accessible and responsive services to meet their specific needs.
- 60 Work with local communities to ensure equity, fairness and representation in service take-up is effective. The Council is proactive in engaging with marginalised or otherwise vulnerable groups. Staff actively participate in groups such as a Race Hate Task Group, Ethnic Health Advisory Group and the Black Racial Minority Partnership. They work with these groups to address issues through, for example, multi-agency approaches to tackle and eradicate race hate, improve the health of people from ethnic minority backgrounds by promoting smoking cessation services and encourage the take-up of services that are under-utilised by certain communities. As such users from marginalised groups can be more confident that their voices are heard and have an increased awareness about accessing services.
- 61 The Council works well with children and young people and older people to design and shape services that meet their needs, for example, by producing a DVD 'what I look for in a social worker and foster parents'. A Youth Forum, a Youth Parliament and an Older People's Parliament are effective mechanisms for engaging with these users. The Council has received a Beacon award for Positive Youth Engagement in the Community and Democratic Process. The Council allocates a budget to each of these Parliaments to purchase services to meet their own specific needs. They provide a useful mechanism from which views of the wider community can be sought.

How good is the service?

- 62 Performance in access, equalities and diversity best value performance indicators displays a positive trend but is comparatively mixed. The Council scores 68.4 per cent for the duty to promote race equality (below the median) and is at level 2 of the Equality Standard for Local Government. It is working towards level 3 but did not achieve its target to achieve this level by September 2008. It has engaged in an impact and needs assessment, a consultation process and an equality action planning process for employment and service delivery. This performance is consistent with the majority of councils although 100 out of 403 authorities are at level 3 or above.
- 63 An integrated approach to equality, diversity and human rights is reflected in decision making, policies and practices for both service delivery and employment. The Council is developing a new Single Equality Scheme and action plan, which incorporates all six equality strands and access themes, supported by a comprehensive training programme. It uses its statutory duties well to promote equality with action plans, developed through consultation, to provide fair access to services. A Corporate Equality and Inclusion Group - representative of the whole council, including staff diversity forums and trade union members - provides an input in planning accessible and responsive services that reflect diverse communities. Such processes and mechanisms help the Council to develop services that better meet people's cultural, personal and religious needs.
- 64 The workforce profile is mixed. The percentages of employees with a disability (2.9 per cent) and from an ethnic minority community (1.3 per cent) are below the respective medians. The Council has exceeded its target to increase the proportion of its workforce from ethnic minority communities but did not achieve its target to increase to 3 per cent the proportion of its workforce who have a disability. The percentages of top earners who are women or who have a disability are amongst the highest 25 per cent but the Council is amongst the lowest 25 per cent for top earners from an ethnic minority community. Overall the workforce is not representative of the local population.
- 65 Users have good access to information in alternative formats, through Language Line, the National Leaflets Service and Braille and minicom for users who have visual or hearing impairments. The call centre and one stop shops provide a mediated interpretation service for people whose first language is not English and this is signposted clearly for customers. These facilities ensure equal and fair access for a wide range of users and minimise barriers to effective communication.
- 66 Councillors, managers and staff across all service areas have a good awareness of diversity and equality issues. They have had training (for example, on equality impact assessments and cultural awareness on traveller communities) to ensure that policies and procedures in service delivery actively promote equality. The training has led to services taking action that is based on a better understanding of diversity and sensitive issues, such as confidential procedures for reporting hate crime that are incorporated into council activities.

- 67 The Council is making good progress with equality impact assessments on its services and policies - including the call centre and one stop shops - to identify and mitigate any adverse impacts on services-users. It assesses the impact of new services in terms of age, disability, faith, gender, race and sexual orientation. Senior officers are accountable for the implementation of equality action plans and ensuring that equality impact assessments are undertaken. As a result the Council has greater confidence that its services are being provided equally and fairly.
- 68 The Council's Procurement Strategy and Sustainable Procurement Strategy recognise the contribution to its equality objectives but they are not specific about how, for example, disability and race equality will be promoted. A procurement objective is 'demonstrating improvement in the equality of opportunity and the promotion of good relationships between people within a diverse community in all procurement activity'. The strategies do not indicate how procurement policies will provide equality of opportunity and the appointment of contractors who share that commitment, including the monitoring of performance against the objectives. As a result the Council cannot widely demonstrate how procurement is promoting diversity.
- 69 Members of the community generally can gain electronic access to services with free use of the internet available at the borough's libraries. The Council's website is being designed to follow the accessibility guidelines issued by the World Wide Web Consortium and the Royal National Institute of the Blind. However, it does not have Browsealoud (an on-line screen reader), alternative text and viewing options. Nor is it available in alternative languages. As a result whilst a wider range of citizens can access the Council's website it is not appropriately designed for visually impaired people and all users.

Service outcomes

- 70 The Council is delivering what it promised to and is effective in meeting local and national objectives. Access to services is used to address specific community needs where appropriate, such as a fair debt policy to support low income groups. An accessible range of council and partners' services provide benefits in terms of convenience, health promotion and learning opportunities, independent living and responsiveness. The impact of activities is demonstrated by, for example, a 4.5 per cent increase in users accessing the one stop shop services in 2007/08.
- 71 Outcomes from the holistic, one stop shops and call centre approach include:
- improving the free bulky waste collection service and diverting such waste from landfill to charitable organisations for reuse, which has helped to reduce flytipping and significantly increase the Council's recycling/composting performance;
 - 'added value' by addressing users' diverse needs by co-ordinating the provision of specialist services; and
 - working with the Department of Adult Social Services to improve the response rate for clients' assessments.

How good is the service?

- 72** The Council is proactive in using a wide range of innovative partnerships with the private, public and voluntary sectors to provide access to services. It works across traditional service boundary areas to deliver more accessible and customer-focused services. Recognising that customers often do not know who delivers the services they wish to access, the Council works closely with partners to deliver a seamless service to Wirral residents. These arrangements provide benefits for the local community and improved access to a wider range of council and partner services at a single location.
- 73** The Council can demonstrate examples of good practices that have improved access to services through partnership working, including:
- providing access to surgeries and advice with the Wirral Alcohol Services Harm Reduction Team to help to reduce health inequalities – numbers accessing these services have increased by 54 per cent in three years;
 - working with the NHS to increase access to a smoking cessation service for people from black and ethnic minority communities;
 - ‘Pathways to Employment’, which aims to reduce barriers for people with mental health issues in accessing work via support worker surgeries at one stop shops;
 - debt management and legal advice for residents in partnership with the Citizen’s Advice Bureau, providing preventative and early intervention advice; and
 - working in partnership with a registered charity to give vocational work experience to local people who have been long-term unemployed.
- 74** The Council has, through such partnerships widened access to services in a confidential and sensitive manner. One stop shop staff are, for example, trained to identify users who have an alcohol problem and refer them for specialist support. This joint working initiative, which has been nationally recognised, provides added value by linking any problems around debt and housing need that the user might have if excessive alcohol consumption is a problem that exacerbates other factors. As well as improving efficiency and accessibility these complementary facilities help to make a real difference to people’s lives.
- 75** The Council has clear aspirations to tackle health inequalities in the borough. It is undertaking a wide range of interventions and activities to improve health outcomes. Staff have a good understanding of how services provided by the one stop shops and call centre can help to improve the quality of life and well-being. A range of advice, information and support is available. Close working arrangements between the Council and NHS and PCT services are providing benefits for mutual users and patients through improved access to specialist services which has resulted in an increased number of kept appointments.
- 76** The Council makes good use of joint assets for access to services. Partners such as Age Concern, the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Pensions Service host surgeries in the one stop shops. Four one stop shops are located within DWP premises. Housing benefits staff have access to DWP’s information system to efficiently handle users’ claims. These arrangements use combined resources more efficiently, allow knowledge and skills to be shared more easily and provide seamless services for users.

- 77** The Council is effective at bringing other agencies together to provide good access for vulnerable users. The borough's largest registered social landlord, Homelessness team and DWP are all located at the Birkenhead one stop shop premises. As they serve the same users they can complement the work of the others more effectively. Through this joint working initiative users gain access to much wider and comprehensive services which is helping to limit the numbers of households in temporary accommodation and rough sleepers.
- 78** The Council works well with partners to improve community safety. The Police hold advice surgeries at one stop shops and, at West Kirby, this is enhanced by locating a 'Cop Shop' within the premises. Further work with the Police and local community is done via the Neighbourhood Action Groups and Key Individual Networks which bring together ward councillors and Homewatch groups. These activities provide a forum to discuss concerns that affect respective areas and inform the allocation of Police resources to proactively tackle issues such as under age drinking and anti-social behaviour, resulting in improved community safety.

User experience

- 79** The Council can demonstrate that users experience quality services, recognised by external awards, such as Chartermark accreditation and Institute of Revenues Rating and Valuation Excellence in Customer Service. Reception and front-line staff deliver good customer-focused service in an appropriate and friendly way. The innovative developments in partnership working are making a real difference to Wirral's residents in their contacts with the Council. All these factors enhance the quality of the service experience for users.
- 80** Users of the one stop shops have high levels of satisfaction with most aspects of the service provided but they are less positive about the resolution of their enquiries. Surveys in April and June 2008 showed that over 99 per cent are satisfied with the overall service provided. Satisfaction with ease of access, opening hours, waiting times and facilities range from 94 per cent to 99 per cent. Mystery shopping exercises have confirmed that staff have empathy and interact courteously and efficiently with users. Comparative data confirms high satisfaction amongst users of the one stop shops. However, a third of respondents had to make contact with the Council a second time regarding their enquiry, although two thirds stated that they would make contact about a similar issue in the future.
- 81** The Council cannot demonstrate satisfaction levels for all sections of the community. Survey data shows that 78.5 per cent of users are satisfied with the Council's overall service. The data is analysed for age, disability, ethnicity, gender and length of residence but users' satisfaction is not determined across the borough's individual neighbourhoods. Consequently the Council does not know to what extent satisfaction is consistent and how users judge the quality of services across the borough's communities.

How good is the service?

Is access to services value for money?

- 82** The Council delivers value for money in access to services. It has brought services – including partners' services - together within the one stop shop and call centre. It promotes a choice of access channels and encourages the use of less expensive channels. The result is that the Council has reduced costs in this area whilst improving access arrangements.
- 83** Transaction costs for accessing services and dealing with users at one stop shops indicate that the Council is providing value for money. Although face to face contact is the most expensive access channel, added value is achieved by linking services dealing with more complex enquiries and anticipating users' needs whilst taking the pressure from the back office services. In 2006/07, based on comparative information provided by the National One Stop Shop Benchmarking Club, the Council's costs were lower than average and, as such, demonstrate the competitiveness of these services.
- 84** The Council has some information on how higher cost services compare with others. It has used Audit Commission profiles to analyse for example, the costs of benefits administration and certain adult and children's services. Chief officers have reported to Cabinet with an explanation of the level of expenditure and what action has been taken, and is planned, to reduce costs where possible. The Council now understands the reasons for some differences in costs, for example, a fair debt policy that increases the cost of council tax collection and discretionary rate relief on small clubs and voluntary organisations. It has used this information to review cost-effectiveness in the context of wider community benefits such as the impact of a club having to meet a rates liability against the potential loss of some clubs to the local community.
- 85** The Council has made effective use of cost data on transaction methods for council tax and housing benefits; for example, direct debits cost 60p per annum compared with £1.70 by debit card, £10 for cash, £17.50 by credit card and £50 by cheque, excluding the cost of reminders. With this information it is maximising the financial incentives and encouraging take-up of direct debit and internet access.
- 86** Costs are overall commensurate with outcomes. The overall costs of benefits administration, for example, are amongst the highest 25 per cent. Processing new claims is above the median and processing change of circumstances is below the median with 83 per cent overall satisfaction amongst users. Satisfaction with most services is above the median and reflects the cost of individual services.
- 87** Resources are allocated in accordance with policy decisions to meet the Council's priorities and to provide for users' preferred access channels. Targeted investment, responding to an analysis of users needs, has resulted in improved access for users. The majority of users prefer to contact the Council by telephone - this has been reflected by investment in the call centre to manage increased demand and minimise the number of lost calls. However, other users prefer face to face contact, particularly for more complex enquiries and the Council has extended this facility. The Council recognises that the website is the cheapest method to access services and is widely promoting its use to encourage greater take up. The outcome is that the Council is promoting better value for money through more cost-efficient access channels whilst recognising the preferences of individual users.

- 88** Capital spending decisions are taken with full information on the revenue implications and financial forecast of their longer term impact. The savings on annual support and maintenance over the contract period for a new, integrated revenues and benefits IT system is £1,080,548 (excluding inflation). In addition the new system has enabled changes to be made in the delivery of these services producing staff savings of £70,000 from 2007/08 and a further £260,000 from 2008/09.
- 89** The Council has effectively improved value for money in accessing services by encouraging enquirers to use the more cost-effective channels (based on comparative cost analyses by the Cabinet Office and another council), service re-engineering and partnership working. All potential services which could migrate are fully scoped with a business case to identify costs and savings. The Customer Access Strategy is subject to continual review with an annual work programme that sets out which services are being absorbed into the front office. The Council therefore sustains focus on the change agenda whilst identifying where the greatest efficiencies can be made.
- 90** Consideration is given to the likely impact on service users of changes in spending levels. The Council is committed to improving its priority areas as well as keeping council tax at affordable levels. Spending plans are subject to continuous review to ensure that they are aligned with need as the aim is to deliver high quality, well-performing services within the finite resources available. Where appropriate resources are increased to improve efficiency, effectiveness and service delivery to handle, for example, Streetscene enquiries. In this way the Council is making good use of available resources that are targeted towards important front-line services.
- 91** The Council makes good use of partnerships to improve value for money in access to services. Options for joint procurement and working with partners are identified and acted upon. These include joint commissioning of adult social services with the health sector and front of house service with Wirral Partnership Homes following the transfer of the Council's housing stock. By working in partnership the Council is better placed to improve outcomes and value for money through the provision of seamless services for users.

Prospects for improvement

What is the track record in delivering improvement?

- 92** The Council can evidence a record of effectively implementing change that has improved access to services and has delivered clear benefits for users, focusing on the most disadvantaged and those in priority need. Over the past few years it has successfully targeted resources which have resulted in more users accessing services.
- 93** Users have benefited from improved outcomes that have been delivered directly by the Council or in partnership, including the choice of wider access to seamless services with longer opening hours, offering multiple services in one stop shops close to the community and resolving more queries at the first point of contact. Improved electronic access is demonstrated by increased usage of automated telephone payments and on-line services providing greater convenience for users. E-citizen has extended access to a high volume service area. In addition the call centre has made access easier for users wanting to report changes in personal circumstances that impact on their receipt of a range of public services.
- 94** Trends with equalities and diversity performance indicators are positive. Buildings with public areas that are accessible to, and suitable for, people with disabilities have increased from 46 per cent (2003/04) to 67 per cent (2007/08). The Council is now at level 2 of the Equality Standard for Local Government and the score for the duty to promote race equality has increased from 58 per cent to 68 per cent in the last year. The percentages of BME employees, employees with a disability and top earners who are women or who have a disability have increased but not top earners from BME communities. The positive trends demonstrate the progress with the Council's diversity and equality policies.
- 95** Other performance indicators demonstrate improved access and responsiveness. They include the quicker processing of benefits claims, issuing of statements of special educational needs, delivering equipment and making adaptations within seven working days and the removal of abandoned vehicles. Improved responsiveness has not, however, been sustained across all service areas such as the time to repair street lights - better lit areas are important for more vulnerable groups travelling at night.
- 96** Trends in user satisfaction are mixed. Compared with surveys in 2003/04 resident satisfaction in 2006/07 increased with the cleanliness of the local environment, planning and libraries. Satisfaction with complaint handling, sports and recreation, museums and galleries and parks and open spaces was comparatively the same. However, satisfaction reduced with services such as waste collection and planning. More recent surveys have shown satisfaction with the Council to be 78.5 per cent. The variable trends and levels of satisfaction show that users' expectations are not being sustained across all services.

- 97 The Council has improved value for money in accessing services. Resources have been targeted towards key front-line services through a programme of service re-engineering. The continuing development of the call centre and web-based access channels have enabled greater generic working resulting in reduced staffing costs and other efficiency savings. Migration of services such as bulk waste collection to the contact centre has contributed to a saving of £30,000 on the cost of this service. Improved access to kerbside collections of recyclables resulted in over 34,500 fewer tonnes of household waste sent to landfill in 2007/08 compared with 2006/07. This achievement reduced landfill tax by £0.5 million despite an increase from £21 to £24 per tonne.

How well does the Council manage performance in access to services?

How good is the improvement planning?

- 98 Planning to improve access to services is good. The Council's aims for improvement include the achievement of outcomes that matter most to users and communities. The Customer Access Strategy, which is integrated within a change programme that includes ICT developments, is supported by a work programme that is reviewed and updated annually. It contains milestones for the completion of actions within a financial year and also details the next phase of work to be undertaken. The strategy sets out priorities and enables councillors and managers to assess and monitor progress.
- 99 Corporate Plan aims link to departmental plans, one stop shop and call centre action plans and individual work plans. The plans and strategies set out a range of actions and targets that are intended to improve access to services, including:
- further migration of services to be delivered and resolved at initial point of contact through service re-engineering;
 - progressing actions relating to diversity and equalities to achieve level 3 of the Equality Standard for Local Government;
 - ICT and web strategies to further improve electronic access to services and realise efficiency savings;
 - improved access to public buildings accessible to, and suitable for, people with a disability, following audits to assess compliance with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act;
 - publicising revised customer care standards, introducing a consistent set of service standards in consultation with users, developed in line with National E-Services Delivery Standards (NESDS) to ensure a consistent approach to service delivery and performance;
 - partnership working with post offices through the Community Canvas and Validate projects to widen the scope for user feedback and extend opportunities to users to ensure that their housing and council tax benefits are correct; and

Prospects for improvement

- identifying carers and enable them to access good quality and appropriate information, advice and support services to assist them in their caring role and to promote social inclusion – a Local Area Agreement target which is linked to the new national indicator 135.

Achievement of these aims enhances the choice of users for accessing services and allows them, for example, to remain independent for as long as possible through direct payments.

- 100** Aims for improving access to services are challenging, clear and robust. They address corporate and national priorities, link to the Local Area Agreement and seek to make a real and measurable difference for service users, particularly the most vulnerable, and reduce inequalities. Users can therefore assess how the Council is developing its services to better meet their collective needs.
- 101** Self-awareness about the opportunities to further improve access to services is good. The Council has conducted an investigation into the feasibility of introducing an outreach service through one stop shop mobile working by targeting, for example, users with a disability who are not able to attend one stop shops. Other proposals include text messaging and piloting self-access to the website based around life events. Such projects provide further opportunities for improving access to services by not only making them more responsive but also minimising avoidable contact.
- 102** The range of plans and strategies collectively identify what the Council is seeking to achieve but they are not closely integrated with the Customer Access Strategy. An overarching strategy that consolidates actions, including partners' for improving access to services is not in place. The lack of such a strategy creates a risk that collective resources are not used to best effect to achieve the intended outcomes and prioritise improvement projects.
- 103** The Council works well with residents and partners to structure its services in the way that people want to access them. It has recently launched the 'You Decide' initiative to give more choice for local people on what services should be provided within individual areas. Community engagement means the Council's aims closely link to their expressed aspirations, concerns, needs and priorities.
- 104** Good progress is being made towards embedding a culture of equality and diversity. One project is working with the Terence Higgins Trust to offer personal appointments for people living with AIDS/HIV through the network of one stop shops. The commitment to diversity is further demonstrated by profiles for monitoring pupil progress in learning English as an additional language at foundation stage, stages 1 and 2 and stages 3 and 4, with supporting information to help staff meet the pupils' needs. Such activities demonstrate positive attempts to engage with vulnerable users and help to reduce perceived stigmas in accessing services.

105 The Council has clear and robust proposals for improving value for money in accessing services. The Customer Access Strategy is linked to the Council's three year efficiency plan. It sets out the need for resolution at first point of contact, wherever possible, to minimise repeat or avoidable contact. It has a focus on developing and utilising the web as a low cost self-access and transactional contact channel. All potential services which could migrate to access channels are scoped with a business case to identify costs and savings. This process provides reassurance that the intended outcomes will be achieved as well as maximising the most efficient and cheapest access channel appropriate to the enquiry.

Are there arrangements and a culture in place to support continuous improvement?

106 Arrangements and an appropriate culture are in place to support continuous improvement in accessing services. The Council has active, effective and visible management and leadership, recognised by staff, partners and other stakeholders. Councillors and managers demonstrate their commitment to improving access to services by facilitating and engaging in a wide range of activities, including partnership working to promote equality. These approaches are helping to reinforce the importance of this issue within the Council and amongst its partners.

107 The Council further demonstrates community leadership by seeking to ensure fair access to services, working to eliminate discrimination and promoting sustainable communities. It is, for example, improving the quality of neighbourhoods and access to health improvement opportunities and, in relation to older and younger people, their engagement in council activities. These outcomes set a good example to users.

108 The Council has strengthened its arrangements for implementing the Customer Access Strategy. A Corporate Improvement Group is responsible for the management and co-ordination of activities. Individual programmes have been evaluated so that the required resources, timescales, ICT implications, ownership and outcomes have been established for each project. A range of internal groups inform policies and drive and monitor progress on customer services, ICT and website development and diversity and equalities. The increased focus on project management is more likely to result in the delivery of intended improvements.

109 Good arrangements are in place to manage and monitor the change process. A Customer Service Development Team – supported by a Transformational Change Team - works with departments to re-engineer the services for maximum delivery at initial point of contact and expand the CRM system. The arrangements ensure that liaison between front and back office staff is effective and corporate processes for change are employed to maximum benefit to improve services and value for money.

110 Priorities are linked to service improvement plans and performance targets. Departmental plans identify projects and 'significant routine activities' which contribute to improving access to services and link to the corporate objective 'to be an excellent council.' The plans set out the practical and realistic tasks necessary to achieve the Council's aims, such as holiday, outreach and diversionary activities to help raise the aspirations of young people. The actions provide a good focus to improve access and outcomes and to promote community cohesion, diversity and equalities.

Prospects for improvement

- 111** Medium-term financial and service planning are integrated. The Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) identifies how resources will be diverted to deliver the Customer Access Strategy and into front-line services. Corporate planning is based upon a hierarchical framework that seeks to integrate national and local priorities into a series of clear objectives. The alignment of service and financial planning ensures resources are being allocated to address users' needs.
- 112** Effective performance management arrangements are largely in place to drive and monitor progress and review the impact of intended actions to improve access to services. Councillors and managers are clear about their roles in performance management. They have a strategic focus on delivery against established plans, standards and targets, especially where these are not being met, taking corrective action in response to variations in performance and reviewing progress systematically. A portfolio holder and an Overview and Scrutiny Committee are responsible for customer and community engagement. These arrangements mean that the Council is more likely to achieve its aims and reflect its commitment to accessible services in decision-making, implementing policy and ensuring that objectives are met.
- 113** Performance management arrangements are in place to monitor responsiveness at initial point on contact by monitoring call activity and making sure that advisors meet their work requirements relating to scheduled time on-line, off-line work and outbound calls. One stop shops monitor individual and site performance via an interview logging system and compare achievements against set targets. Customer numbers, waiting/interview times, resolution rates and staffing resource information are routinely monitored. A call recording system tracks the quality of responses to users to review staff performance. These arrangements provide a framework for continuous improvement with performance openly discussed with staff at a 'Key Issues Exchange'.
- 114** However, performance is not routinely reported or publicised against response times to individual service requests, linked to the pledge to provide a consistent and high quality service. The lack of such measures and benchmarking performance against other providers means that users find it difficult to know the actual quality of access and responsiveness for all service requests. The Council cannot determine progress and whether actions are having the intended impact.
- 115** Furthermore, the Council has not yet introduced, as intended, the following metrics to monitor outcomes and performance: the cost of providing each service; levels of customer satisfaction with each service; numbers of repeat contacts (avoidable contact); and local performance indicators in every service as well as for each customer access channel. Until these monitoring arrangements are in place the Council will be not able to assess the overall effectiveness of the Customer Access Strategy and to what extent more users – rather than repeat callers - are actually accessing services.
- 116** Good use is made of the available performance information. A recent initiative is using profiles on two of the borough's most disadvantaged areas to identify high levels of worklessness and target action to maximise benefits take-up. Monitoring of the waste contractor using CRM is a good example of how these systems can improve performance. The use of such intelligence means that the Council and its partners are better placed to improve responsiveness and focus resources to increase impact.

- 117** The Council is exploring and implementing other systems to strengthen performance management, including a:
- further expansion of CRM, and where appropriate alignment with contractors' systems (for example, waste collection);
 - profiling questionnaire and a policy for monitoring equalities in procurement and service delivery;
 - focus group of users to act as a critical friend in terms of accessible services;
 - telephone survey undertaken automatically at the end of a call to obtain feedback from users; and
 - framework of service level agreements with individual services to improve quality assurance.
- 118** A range of complementary mechanisms help the Council to sustain its focus on its priority areas. It makes good use of the Overview and Scrutiny function to identify improvements in accessing services and for example, the effectiveness of a youth outreach project. Councillors therefore not only monitor the progress of actions and policies but also contribute to future developments.
- 119** Effective performance management arrangements are generally in place to drive and deliver improved value for money in accessing services. The Council uses comparative data and value for money profiles to identify areas for review. However, the Council has not assessed the precise costs of dealing with enquiries through each of its own access channels. Assessing and comparing the efficiency, level of use and quality of access channels with their respective costs provides stronger assurance that value for money is being achieved.
- 120** The Council learns from other providers, user feedback and its own experience. It has effective arrangements to consult with a range of stakeholders to inform service delivery. Quarterly user satisfaction surveys, complemented by a residents postal survey three times a year and bi-annual surveys by an independent organisation provide regular feedback on the perceived quality of services and their accessibility. But the views of citizens who have not contacted the Council are not routinely obtained. As a result whilst the Council is better informed about users' needs - and can plan access channels accordingly - it is not maximising opportunities to gauge the views of non-users.
- 121** Staff feedback is used effectively to improve services. They are clear about the culture and values that are necessary for service delivery and to promote user-focus. They are able to contribute suggestions through a variety of methods such as suggestion schemes, surveys, Key Issues Exchange, team briefs and the Chief Executive roadshows. Their knowledge and experience is used to identify how services can be further improved and joined-up to benefit users. A 'can do' culture and commitment ensures that the Council can continue to provide and expand accessible services in a user-friendly way.

Prospects for improvement

- 122** A well publicised, user-friendly and supportive system invites compliments, complaints, grievances, representations and suggestions about council services. Customer complaints data is recorded via the CRM system. Complaints are co-ordinated by nominated staff, monitored and reviewed to ensure that issues are addressed and arrangements put in place to mitigate the risk of reoccurrence. These procedures, including analysis by complaint type, service area and council ward provide a consistent, transparent and comparable process to ensure customer service standards are being uniformly applied.
- 123** The Council learns from other service providers, including for example, call centres operated by other councils and the private sector. Staff are actively involved in national and regional improvement networks and benchmarking groups to identify further opportunities for accessing services and improving responsiveness. Activities include mystery shopping exercises that provide an independent assessment of the quality of access and services.

Does the Council have the capacity to improve access to services?

- 124** The Council has access to the appropriate skills, tools and finances to improve access to services. It has the people, skills and capability that it needs to deliver its service priorities. Well trained, generic front-line staff, who have an impressive breadth of knowledge on a range of council and other public services, are able to respond to a range of enquiries at initial point of contact, supported where necessary by specialist officers. They offer both efficiency and flexibility by delivering a wide range of both council and partnership services and extend the ability to respond to peak volumes in user calls.
- 125** The Council has invested effectively in staff capacity to improve access to services. A Customer Service Group provides a consistent and co-ordinated approach to improving access to services. A Customer Service Development Team is progressing the action plan to deliver the Customer Access Strategy. Key appointments include an Employee and Elected Member Development Officer, a Press and Public Relations Officer, a Resource and Performance Officer, an Equality and Diversity Officer and a Web Services Manager. The Council has also invested in capacity to review and strategically manage its assets. These appointments mean that the Council is in stronger position to manage demands on services, communicate with users more effectively, achieve its diversity and equality objectives and make best use of all its assets.
- 126** Staff provide added value in service delivery, for example, an advocacy role to improve users' quality of life and anticipating and identifying needs. An employee satisfaction survey has provided feedback in terms of advisors' commitment, motivation and desire to deliver the high standard of service that customers expect. Users have complimented staff on their pro-active approach in offering services that they had not previously considered.
- 127** Human resource planning - to improve access to services - is effective and operates within a strategic framework. Job descriptions and specifications are reviewed and updated to ensure that the skills required remain relevant. Staffing levels have been evaluated and increased to maintain service levels in line with increased user demand.

- 128** Staff development fully supports improving access to services. It is relevant and well planned from induction to training in customer service skills, service area knowledge and diversity and equalities. It is complemented by specialist training, to support for example, the alcohol reduction programme. A weekly training hour for front-line staff helps to ensure consistency in service delivery, share information, and provide opportunities for staff feedback. Staff appraisals are linked to corporate objectives and result in a 'key issues exchange action plan' which can result in a recognised qualification in customer service. All these activities provide a good framework for further improving the quality of service and outcomes for users and ensuring the right skills mix.
- 129** Capacity is further enhanced by extensive, effective partnership working, such as the Wirral Advice Network which unites solicitors, statutory and voluntary agencies across the borough to provide quality, community-based advice services. Budgets are pooled and joint commissioning of services is in place where appropriate, for example, with the health sector. Delivering services on behalf of other organisations is also more convenient to users and improves wider, community outcomes for them in accessing services.
- 130** Overall the Council is making good use of ICT to improve access to services (for example, video conferencing) but not effectively as it could to provide management information about service users and non-users. Improvements include:
- document scanning which has improved processing times for housing benefit claims;
 - enhancing telephony systems so that users can select an option according to the nature of their enquiry and virtual telephone handsets for 'overflow' calls;
 - developing a geographical information system (GIS) for advisors and for self access to provide further enhancements to service delivery;
 - investing in a workforce management software solution to respond more effectively to peaks in call volumes and balance the demands of multiple service delivery; and
 - electronic mapping tools to support the re-engineering of new services.

These developments all contribute to more cost-effective and efficient services.

- 131** The Council is now making good progress in developing a more transactional website – with a dedicated staff resource - to widen access and maximise self- resolution of enquiries. It is investigating other methods - such as text messaging - and facilities to improve service quality through a voice recording system to evaluate the quality of staff responses and identify any training needs. As a result electronic access to services has increased significantly.

Prospects for improvement

- 132** ICT is part of an integrated approach to improving access to services for users and potential users. The strategic development of ICT links to the Council's improvement priorities. It aims to improve services by integrating CRM, content management and financial systems. It is also piloting home and mobile working but does not have a strategy for agile working in order to maximise the use of current technology by staff working away from the office environment or 'hot-desking'. Consequently the Council has yet to exploit the potential efficiencies to be gained, for example, by visiting users in their homes to calculate benefits entitlements.
- 133** The Council has adequate financial capacity to deliver its access objectives. It has allocated resources to deliver the Customer Access Strategy. It has invested in staff capacity and ICT to enhance the skills base and access channels to deliver the intended improvements. The strategic asset management review is intended to identifying further opportunities for the Council to make the most effective and efficient use of its public access points.

The Audit Commission

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

Our work across local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services means that we have a unique perspective. We promote value for money for taxpayers, auditing the £200 billion spent by 11,000 local public bodies.

As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.

Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0844 798 7070.

© Audit Commission 2008

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 0844 798 1212 Fax: 0844 798 2945 Textphone (minicom): 0844 798 2946

www.audit-commission.gov.uk
