

Inspection report

March 2005

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Cultural Service Inspection

Three Rivers District Council

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Summary

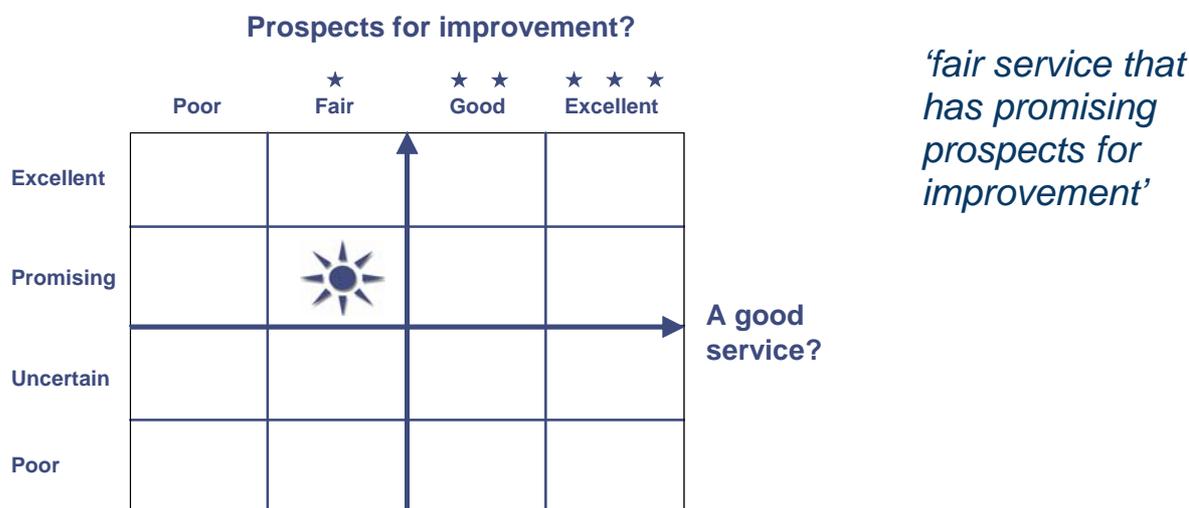
- 1 Three Rivers District Council provides **fair** cultural services which have **promising** prospects for improvement.
- 2 The cultural services provided by the council are fair. A traditional range of services is provided which includes swimming, indoor and outdoor sports, sports and arts development activities and modest contributions to theatre and a museum. There is a range of community activities based on sports and arts development courses and play schemes. Innovative services are evident in the provisions to reduce crime and improve the health of local people.
- 3 The cultural services have lacked direction. The cultural strategy, adopted in 2002 and reviewed in 2004, does not give direction to the service. It is, and remains, a position statement. The council has been poor at setting priorities. Priorities change annually. Leisure and cultural services were only included as council priorities in 2004/05. This is surprising, given the close link between cultural services and local priorities.
- 4 Satisfaction with cultural services is below the national average. There is a surprising lack of meaningful dialogue with clubs using the facilities. Grant aid is reactive and not driven by policy. So, for example, the provision of cultural services in South Oxhey falls short of a holistic approach to providing for that community.
- 5 The council's cultural services make a good, and substantial contribution to two (of the four) local area priorities. There are cultural services targeted to improve community safety in the area, and reduce anti social behaviour. Healthy living activities have been targeted not just in the leisure centres but also in innovative arrangements with partners in the NHS.
- 6 The council's new corporate strategy, adopted in December 2004, has provided a unified approach to policy making within the council. It is based on the same themes as the local strategic partnership's community strategy (healthy, prosperous, safer and sustainable communities). Cultural services are integrated into both strategies with clear targets.
- 7 There is clarity in management. The leisure review is to be implemented with identified savings of almost £250,000 linked to greatly improving provision. The council has held firm about passing the Watersmeet theatre to a local trust to operate, despite adverse public criticism. Key priorities are being tackled including the replacement of worn out sport pavilions with DDA compliant buildings, extensive provision of play equipment, youth shelters and skateboard facilities, and a pilot programme of free swimming in the school summer holidays.
- 8 Systematic corporate management systems are being introduced. Following the comprehensive performance assessment in 2004 the council is developing SMART targets (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound) in conjunction with the local strategic partnership. Councillors value the new monitoring reports which help them assess performance better. The council is open about procurement options and chooses the best alternative to provide a balance between quality and cost. Partners speak well of working with the council.

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Scoring the service

9 We have assessed the 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.

Scoring chart¹: Three Rivers District Council - Cultural Services Inspection



10 The service is fair because:

- ◆ there are low satisfaction levels with a range of traditional services;
- ◆ surveys are not always analysed to determine improvements;
- ◆ there is a lack of regular dialogue with clubs and users;
- ◆ grant aid is reactive and not policy driven; and
- ◆ the cultural strategy does not drive improvement.

11 But strengths include:

- ◆ the positive contribution made to local area priorities especially communities that are healthy and safer;
- ◆ the provision of specialist cultural activities to vulnerable groups that helps to build their confidence and self esteem; and
- ◆ the enthusiasm and commitment shown by the staff to the customers that they come into contact with.

12 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- ◆ there are realistic plans for improvements for many sections of the community including young people, disabled people, and groups who would be otherwise excluded from mainstream cultural activities;
- ◆ the service is integrated into the council's corporate strategy and the local strategic partnership's community strategy;

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.

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- ◆ the clarity of management ensures that the best option to deliver services is achieved even if this is unpopular;
- ◆ the clear intent to reinvest up to £250,000 annually into the service when the leisure review is finalised;
- ◆ the review of the voluntary sector which is set to form the foundations for new working with partners in this area; and
- ◆ the continued close working with statutory partners to deliver an increasing scope of cultural activities for the community.

13 But weaknesses include:

- ◆ communications and consultation, including the website;
- ◆ a lack of knowledge of the diverse micro communities that exist within the district; and
- ◆ the developing approach to performance management is not yet robust and relies on throughputs and quantity and not on outcomes and quality.

Recommendations

14 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. In this context, the inspection team makes the following recommendations:

- ◆ In order to plan and deliver cultural services more effectively, we recommend that the council:
 - ◆ Develops a systematic approach to consultation with customers and local people, including minorities.
 - ◆ Analyses the results of all consultations, decide appropriate actions and feedback to those consulted.
 - ◆ Develop the newly forming corporate management systems to critically and continually assess how specific community and council priorities (healthy, prosperous, safer and sustainable communities) are being achieved by cultural services.
 - ◆ Change grant aid practices into a proactive force to deliver community improvements that meet priority needs.

15 We would like to thank Three Rivers District Council, particularly Chris Hope, Patrick Martin and all the staff, who made us welcome and met our many requests so efficiently and courteously.

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Report

Context

- 16 This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission ('the Commission') following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

The locality

- 17 Three Rivers District Council is situated in South West Hertfordshire, bordering the outer London Boroughs of Hillingdon and Harrow to the south and east, Buckinghamshire to the west. The town of Watford, although outside the district, is the main commercial and retail centre of the area. The district covers an area of 89 square kilometres with a population of 82,900 distributed throughout a series of distinct and contrasting communities, ranging from outer suburban fringe development to small towns, commuter settlements, villages and, in South Oxhey, a large community based around a former Greater London Council estate.
- 18 The population of the district live in 34,200 households. White British account for 87.12 per cent of the population. All other ethnic groups account for 12.88 per cent of the population with White Irish, and white other accounting for 5.23% of the population. The next most significant ethnic group is Asian/Asian British/ Indian at 3.51% of the population. All other groups are less than 1 per cent. The proportion of young people, people of pensionable age, and working age, are about normal for the region and for the rest of England.
- 19 Unemployment stands at 1 per cent which compares favourably with the regional rate of 1.6 per cent and 2.2. per cent nationally. The district is comparatively affluent (ranking 308 out of 354 areas within England where 1 is the most deprived) but there are areas of relative deprivation. Two wards (Hayling and Northwick in South Oxhey) are within the worst quartile for deprivation. Due to its relative deprivation South Oxhey was successful in attracting single regeneration budget funding. Recorded crime is low, although fear of crime and anti-social behaviour are issues for residents.

The council

- 20 Political control of Three Rivers lies with the Liberal Democrats, who have had an overall majority since 1999. The current composition of the council is 29 Liberal Democrat councillors, 12 Conservative and 7 Labour. The next election is on the 1 May 2007.
- 21 The district is governed by a leader and executive system, with the leader chairing the executive committee which is the decision-making forum. The executive committee is supported by policy panels chaired by councillors from the ruling party and a scrutiny committee chaired by the largest opposition party. Labour and Conservatives have positions on the executive but the Conservatives have chosen not to take up the option.
- 22 The council employs 381 staff (full time equivalents). The chief executive leads a management board which consists of four corporate directors, responsible for corporate resources; housing and health; leisure and environment; and strategic services. Total net revenue expenditure on services for 2003/04 is £11.99 million and capital expenditure is almost £8 million.
- 23 The Audit Commission carried out a comprehensive performance assessment of the council in 2004. This assessment judged the council's overall performance as 'good'.

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24 In 2003 the local strategic partnership (of which the council is a key partner) developed a comprehensive community strategy. The partnership includes the district and county council, the county police authority and constabulary, primary care trust and council for voluntary services. Following consultation the priorities for five years (2003 to 2008) have been brought together under four common themes. These are:

- ◆ healthy communities;
- ◆ prosperous communities;
- ◆ safer communities; and
- ◆ sustainable communities.

These four themes are the basis from which to prioritise the work of the partners.

25 The council's policy priorities agreed for 2004/05 (BVPP 2004/05) are:

- ◆ tackling antisocial behaviour;
- ◆ supporting the vulnerable;
- ◆ protecting the green belt;
- ◆ green and clean open spaces; and
- ◆ a mix of leisure for all ages.

26 In December 2004 the council adopted its own corporate plan using the same themes as the community plan (healthy, prosperous, safer and sustainable communities) as the basis for the plan.

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The service inspection

27 The service we have inspected consists of:

- ◆ sport and active recreation;
- ◆ arts and entertainment;
- ◆ informal recreation, including children's play, activities in parks and open spaces;
- ◆ social community activities.

These services are delivered in the community often in conjunction with the police, health authority, schools, parish councils and also directly in village halls and other venues.

28 The main council venues provided include:

- ◆ William Penn Leisure Centre; opened in July 1996 and built around a former school pool providing for indoor sports, swimming and health and fitness;
- ◆ Rickmansworth public golf course; providing golf for all ages and extensively redeveloped with lottery support in 2000;
- ◆ The Centre; a multi-use leisure facility opened in 2002 (with regeneration funding) providing for fitness, dance and aerobics, arts, crafts and music with a crèche and youth club;
- ◆ Sir James Altham pool; a small community swimming pool (25m x 8m) with specialised facilities for people with disabilities, and external floodlit multi-use games areas.
- ◆ The Aquadrome; a water park, with green open space and two large lakes linked to the canal and river which attracts many people from outside the district.

29 The council has enabled the provision of a fully equipped gymnasium and dance studio by the YMCA. This offers fitness classes including provision for disabled people, and an extensive OFSTED-registered daycare centre. It opened in 1998.

30 Cultural services employ 15.5 (full time equivalent) staff at the two directly managed facilities (The Centre and Sir James Altham pool). There are five staff to deliver community based activities (sports, play and community arts) across the district and five administration and management staff. The budget for cultural services for 2004/05 is £3.2 million, a rise from the £2.8 million outturn from the previous year.

31 Our inspection focused on how the cultural services impact on the local quality of life with specific reference to achieving corporate and community priorities.

How good is the service?

Do ambitions for cultural services match those of the area?

32 Inspectors look to see how ambitions for cultural services support ambitions for the local area and evidence that the ambitions are focused on improving quality of life for all sections of the community by balancing national, regional and local priorities.

33 Inspectors also look for evidence that the council's cultural services support and contribute to shared priorities.²

² Shared priorities have been agreed between local and central government and are set out in Appendix 2 to this report.

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- 34 The council has been poor at setting priorities. The comprehensive performance assessment in 2004 indicated that the council has no continuity to priority setting and no clear rationale for the 2004/05 priorities. The best value performance plans between 2003 and 2005 indicate totally different priorities. They have moved from specific service priorities to broad themes. Only in the 2004/05 plan have cultural services had a part to play in delivering on the council's priorities which is surprising given the cross cutting nature of many cultural services. The implication is that limited resources will not be targeted at what is important to local people.
- 35 The cultural strategy does not give a clear focus for achieving ambitions. It is not clear how consultations influenced the strategy. The strategy was not developed to provide a new direction for the delivery and planning of cultural services in the district. Instead it encompassed and recognised successes and current good work. Whilst it was a bridge between the previous leisure strategy and the emerging community strategy, the cultural strategy in 2002 was a position statement. The revised cultural strategy in December 2004 is similarly a further position statement. The impact is that the cultural strategy does not drive development and improvement.
- 36 The departmental service plan (2004/05) lacks detail to be an effective tool. It lacks SMART targets (targets that are: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound). The first target stated is to 'expend the approved capital programme'. This is not smart. It notes that two contracts are both in their final contract year and yet no mention is made of future arrangements. The implication is that the departmental service plan does not provide the firm foundation from which to deliver local ambitions effectively.
- 37 The community strategy (and now the council's corporate plan) does provide an effective link to cultural services through the themes of; healthy, prosperous, safer and sustainable communities. These themes link to national and local priorities. The venues are used for community safety diversionary activity as well as sport and healthy activities. There is regular monitoring with exception reports generated where there is a variation of more or less than five per cent. Cultural services are increasingly seen to be contributing to local area ambitions.
- 38 Good partnership working is central to the success of the cultural services. Close working relations at a local level are based on joint strategies at a county level on community safety, sustainability and health. All are aimed at increasing the quality of life in the district. On community safety, it is clear that this concerted approach is bringing results in the form of reduced levels of anti-social behaviour in hot spots in the district.
- 39 There is a strong commitment by the political leadership to cultural services. The impact is to give clarity and determine relative priorities. For example the Watersmeet theatre is a declared non priority of the council. The needs of young people are an increasing priority of the council. This reflects local opinion. The council is striving to achieve a balance between service and financial objectives.
- 40 Local ambition is well supported. The Watersmeet theatre was transferred to a Board of Trustees in April 2004. Whilst this was a large financial responsibility for the trustees, it was not the least cost outcome for the council. Grant aid was provided to help nurture the continuation of live theatre in the district. Whilst museum services are a low priority, the council does provide accommodation for the Three Rivers museum in the historic Basing House - once the home of William Penn, the founder of Philadelphia. A voluntary trust operates this local history museum and it is open six days a week. The contribution made by the council sustains the ambitions of local people. Together, a wider range of cultural services is provided.

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How effectively do cultural services contribute to service and local area priorities?

41 Having considered the ambitions that the council has set for the service, inspectors make an assessment of how well the council is meeting these ambitions. This includes an assessment of performance against specific service standards and targets and the council's approach to measuring whether it is actually delivering what it set out to do. Inspectors look for evidence of outcomes and impacts for various sections of the community and consider the council's track record of delivering continuous service improvement.

In general

42 The council's cultural services have effectively contributed to two local area priorities for many years. These are; healthy and safe communities. This commitment of the cultural services predates the community and corporate plans.

Healthy communities

43 The council has a long track record of effectively increasing physical activity, to promote better health and improve the quality of life for local people. There is a strong link between the council's local cultural services and the 'healthy communities' agenda. This includes the provision of traditional pools and a leisure centre, outdoor activities and partnerships with the voluntary and statutory sectors.

44 The tight link with the health authority benefits the community. The most significant development dedicated to improving health has been the provision of The Centre at South Oxhey. The health trust operates an extensive cardiac rehabilitation programme in The Centre. Patients transfer from health authority care to a tailored fitness programme provided by the district council staff. Groups of patients, from the same intake, continue to use the facilities as members of The Centre. They combine regular fitness sessions with social activities. Together they support each other and retain regular attendance. Patients are referred from all over the district.

45 The Centre also provides a wide range of activities for all local people. Examples include a thriving dance school, a range of martial arts activities, supervised fitness sessions for 11 to 16 year olds and boxercise for 15 to 19 year olds. The county council operate an indoor youth club. The impact is a range of activities that attracts a wide variety of local people to sustain healthy living.

46 A successful partnership with the YMCA is providing a range of healthy activities in the north of the district. Three Rivers District Council acquired a modern physiotherapy unit at the Leavesden hospital when it was closed in the 1990s. The partnership with the health authority, and the Watford YMCA allowed the building to be refurbished and opened as a community leisure facility. There is a fully equipped gymnasium and dance studio, offering a variety of fitness classes including specific provision for disabled people. There is an extensive OFSTED-approved childcare centre. The impact is a popular provision that provides for both local people and people with special needs.

47 There is a good programme for swimming activities at the two swimming pools. Whilst both pools are limited in scope and capacity, they both provide a full programme. This is in conjunction with local schools in the day time and community use in the evenings and weekends. Also the William Penn Leisure Centre provides for a full range of indoor sports and health and fitness programmes. The Sir James Altham site provides for outdoor activities on the adjacent multi sports facilities. The impact is that there is substantial use of these facilities which directly helps to sustain healthy communities.

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- 48 Outside these main centres, there is good provision for sports development in schools, and play activities in school holidays. In addition to the sports programmes delivered in schools, there is mass participation by young people in physical activities leading to the county wide sports event for youth, 'Herts Youth Games'. The impact is that cultural services are helping to deliver healthier communities.

Prosperous communities

- 49 There is effective targeting of cultural services to contribute to the prosperous communities priority. Learning 4 Leisure is a training and education programme targeting young people aged 15 - 19 years old throughout the Three Rivers district. This programme enables students to access employment with Three Rivers leisure services to deliver sports courses and play schemes. It also provides training for people to become volunteers in local clubs or after school activities. The annual programme of sports coaching and vocational qualifications has attracted 441 participants since 2002. The programme equips young people with the skills required to enter the leisure industry in a voluntary or paid capacity.
- 50 Together with others, the council effectively addresses inequalities. Examples include the Gardens Drama Project for those with a learning impairment which concentrates on 'what I can do'. Holiday play schemes provide for a referral scheme with the county council and others to provide holiday activities for vulnerable children.

Safer communities

- 51 Together with partners in the community safety partnership, the council is providing a wide range of cultural activities to help reduce crime and disorder. Although Three Rivers is a low crime area, fear of crime remains an issue with local people. Specific attention is given by the council in using cultural services to address this fear.
- 52 There is effective use of diversionary activities to tackle anti-social behaviour across the district. The Mill End youth project was set up to address problems caused by young people around the William Penn Leisure Centre. In partnership with the county council youth service and the leisure management contractor this project was targeted at 11 to 19 year olds with poor school attendance and poor academic skills. The project currently attracts up to 35 young people attending every Friday evening. In South Oxhey the provision of swimming pool disco equipment funded by the Police has proved popular for young people. Informal skate park facilities at a safe location in Scotsbridge playing field Rickmansworth, has encouraged young people to use it rather than car parks in the town centre. Young people are now engaged on interesting and worthwhile activities. A reduction in anti-social behaviour has been reported in these areas.
- 53 Cultural services are effective at involving some particularly hard to reach groups in worthwhile activities. This is in conjunction with the community safety partnership. The SHADE project offers free recreational activities to young people during the school summer holidays to encourage more constructive use of their free time. 'Streetwise' was a drug awareness project using dance, drama and music to explore the issue of drug misuse and street violence. Good attendance has been achieved, an indication of ongoing success.

Sustainable communities

- 54 Cultural services successfully contribute to achieving more sustainable communities. The Ebury walkway and new cycling routes encourage a more sustainable approach to life as well as encouraging a more healthy lifestyle. 600 primary school children per year participate in the Waterways Education Programme. In association with the Waterways Trust a training and education

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programme has been initiated for young people age 14 to 19 years, to take part in vocational courses based on recycling, tourism, design and technology. It is centred on the operation of the Trust's boat which was purchased with council financial help. One of the tasks for the students is to work on the boat to collect waste paper at various points on the Grand Union Canal for recycling in a plant at Apsley, on the side of the canal. Education is provided, whilst improving the environment.

- 55 The council is keen to sustain and support local people in improving their locality. Training provided by the council is valued by partners. 120 organisations are listed in the active retired leaflet. Attendance has increased by 30 per cent. Although some residents, clubs and voluntary organisations, find it hard work to activate the interest of the council, once engaged, the council does offer help. The provision of new play equipment in Rickmansworth (costing £73,000) followed a voluntary fund raising initiative. The impact is a greater provision of sustainable cultural services provided by the community itself.
- 56 Links between the provision of grant aid and key priorities is haphazard. Funding to local play schemes, the disabled (MENCAP and special sailors) target needs, and help local communities sustain themselves. With grant aid they make their own cultural contribution to the community. But much else is not explicitly linked to either themes or targets. There is no policy to drive grants to sustain community interest and enthusiasm. There is an absence of community activity in South Oxhey assisted by grant aid for example. Provision of grant aid favours those groups who have the ability to apply.

Are users satisfied with the quality of cultural services?

- 57 In order to judge the quality of cultural services it is important to find out the views of people who use those services as well as the views of those who don't. Inspectors look at levels of user satisfaction and consider the views of stakeholders such as voluntary sector groups and community organisations. Inspectors are particularly looking for evidence that services are developed in line with the identified needs and aspirations of users and non-users, and that services are accessible to all sections of the community.

Levels of user and stakeholder satisfaction

- 58 Satisfaction with cultural services is below average. There are poor levels of satisfaction evident in some basic services including sport and leisure provisions. Satisfaction is higher for some specific service users, at the Aquadrome for example.
- 59 The leisure QUEST award indicates that the quality of the pools and leisure centres are less than average. The customer experience as set out in the QUEST mystery visitor report of leisure centres indicates that initial favourable impressions (foyer, programming) were tainted by maintenance problems. Mention was made of broken lockers for example, and poor cleanliness especially in the showers. In our inspection we sought the views of customers and residents. Their views indicated a similar level of dissatisfaction, often over fairly minor issues which are easy to resolve.
- 60 There is poor general satisfaction with cultural services when compared to other councils. The nationally comparable (BVPI) satisfaction survey in 2003 shows below average satisfaction being expressed by local residents with their parks and open spaces and theatres / concert halls. Sports and leisure are in the worst quartile.
- 61 Details of Three Rivers District Council's overall performance compared to all other district councils (in the ODPM report) shows that:

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Service	Satisfaction expressed at Three Rivers	Satisfaction expressed from all district councils
Parks & open spaces	70%	72% average 66% worst
Theatres & concert halls	43%	47% average 36% worst
Sports & leisure facilities	46%	55% average 48% worst

- 62 But customers' views of staff are good. The staff are seen to be professional and helpful, and provide an efficient service. User experience, to judge from the council's customer surveys, is positive. The council as a whole has achieved Investors in People status.
- 63 Customers and users of the Aquadrome and adjacent waterways, express real satisfaction with the council. With appropriate council support, the impact is an ever increasing range of activities for a wide range of users from disabled sailors to regional festival goers.

Access

- 64 The quality of the website for cultural services is poor. Elementary information only is provided on the website, essentially phone numbers and an e-mail contact point. Swimming pools are not listed as such in the A - Z section, swimming pool programmes are not listed, nor is the theatre (Watersmeet) or the pantomime. The impact is that customers cannot access information directly from the web pages. The council is currently updating the website.
- 65 There are no systematic arrangements to regularly seek the views of customers at all leisure venues and then provide feedback. For example, there are no systematic arrangements to discuss issues of concern with users of sports pitches, and customers at The Centre. This means that irritating problems, of real consequence to users, are left to fester. Examples include a lack of storage, wheel chair access to the gym in The Centre, and poor heating and ventilation. Annual user meetings are not even held. This practice contrasts sharply with arrangements for the Aquadrome and nature sites where meetings are regularly held. The impact is dissatisfaction amongst customers and users of leisure venues.
- 66 Satisfaction levels with the grants scheme are not measured. But the low levels of interest and the near monopoly of successful applications from well organised volunteer groups suggest that knowledge of the schemes, let alone satisfaction rates, are limited to only a limited number of groups in the district.

Developing services in line with identified needs

- 67 A clear strength is the development of cultural services to improve the quality of life. The top five things that are most important to residents (in making somewhere a good place to live) are; low level of crime, health services, clean streets, education provision and parks and open spaces. As has been mentioned, cultural services have been used in initiatives to reduce crime, improve health care and play some part in education provision. These services have been developed to meet identified community needs.

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- 68 Facilities are improved to meet some customer needs. At Sir James Altham pool, refurbishments are being undertaken to the changing rooms. The pool has achieved QUEST quality registration. Also at this pool, there is a very open attitude to responding to customer requests with replies posted on a notice board.
- 69 There is a lack of research, and where there is research, a lack of action. The over-arching concern from the QUEST Assessment (2004) related to the absence of research (including surveys). Furthermore, the survey carried out by Sheffield University and the survey of health and fitness facilities at The Centre led to no demonstrable improvements. This means that services lack a user focus.

The views and aspirations of all sections of the community

- 70 Much of the community based activities result in good quality user experiences. The feedback from play schemes and outreach activities (Gardens Drama for example) was extremely positive. These activities reach out to some of the more marginalised members of the community. The demand for improvement was couched in terms of 'even more of the same please'. Art classes and courses are provided around the district in village centres to provide for people who are otherwise isolated, including those with young children, are bereaved, or between jobs. Customers speak highly of the courses. With all these activities the outcome is increasing personal confidence for people who would be otherwise isolated. The leisure development service has achieved a service charter mark for quality.
- 71 Programmes are updated to take account of new demand. Examples include Muslim women swimming sessions and junior golf. A wide swathe of the community is included with specific programmes for low income groups, disabled and those with learning difficulties.
- 72 There is a vibrancy in the organisations linked to the Aquadrome and nature reserves. These environmental organisations meet regularly together with the council, they are relatively in charge of their own affairs, and provide increasing opportunities for their respective users. Examples include increasing provision for sailors needing special provision, increasing attendances at nature reserve working parties and an annual waterways and canal festival attracting up to 35,000 people. Increasing the number of volunteers is made possible by ensuring that the interests of the volunteers are accommodated as well as the customer. The impact is people enjoying a range of cultural activities that would not otherwise be available.
- 73 Rigorous attention is given to ensuring that attendances (and income) meet targets. Exception reports are generated where there are variations and corrective actions detailed. The council has an open mind on procurement and seeks to achieve the best balance of quality and price. The leisure review is a radical reappraisal of future procurement options.

Summary

- 74 Overall, the council is providing fair cultural services.
- 75 There is a good contribution from the council's cultural services to meeting local area ambitions. This includes contributions to meeting issues of real concern to local people including initiatives to help reduce crime and improve healthy lifestyles. The two leisure centres and the leisure development services, have achieved nationally recognised quality awards. Customers rate staff highly.
- 76 But there has been weak direction given to the services. Council priority setting has been poor and the cultural strategy does not give a lead to service direction. A nationally comparable survey shows below average satisfaction with all cultural services measured. Communication and consultation with some regular users is lacking and therefore the service is not changed to accommodate their needs.

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What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

Does the Council have the capacity and systems to deliver its cultural ambitions and drive improvements in cultural services for all sections of the community?

77 In assessing the council's capacity, inspectors will look at the following areas;

- ◆ service leadership;
- ◆ financial management;
- ◆ performance management;
- ◆ addressing equality and diversity; and
- ◆ successful partnerships.

78 In high performing councils, senior managers and councillors know what matters to local people and use this information to set clear and consistent priorities. They focus on achieving impact in priority areas and concentrate effort and resources in proportion to priority.

79 Successful councils have sound performance management systems and effective financial management including flexibility to move money and people to tackle the most important problems. They have clear lines of accountability for action and have the skills to build effective partnerships to help bring about improvements.

Service Leadership

80 Corporate Planning processes are improving. They have been historically weak. Overlapping medium term strategies ran concurrently with changing annual priorities, which made long term service planning difficult. Measures to sharpen the focus of the council's aims and objectives have been introduced piecemeal since the summer of 2003, culminating in the adoption of a new council corporate strategy in December 2004. This new unified policy document is part of a wider and more robust system of planning and review, with the explicit aim of driving continuous improvement.

81 This increasingly sharpened focus is reflected in a more dynamic leadership of the council. This has led to a renewed corporate and political commitment to culture. Senior officers and councillors demonstrate high levels of awareness of the contribution culture can make to the achievement of shared objectives at local, regional and national level. The Centre at South Oxhey is the most obvious manifestation of this, with a national and regional coalition providing a new framework for sustained use of cultural services to address the needs of the most socially-deprived areas in the district. The leisure review, instigated in 2002 and due for completion in 2005, is another good example, being an initiative specifically designed to secure significant savings for reinvestment in, and enhancement of, cultural services. That review process saw the identification by the council of the Watersmeet Theatre as a non-priority. That decision attracted public criticism. But the council held firm, arguing that difficult decisions are required if scarce resources are to be shifted to themes of pressing local need, such as health, social deprivation and community safety.

82 Within the cultural service, the lack of a clear corporate planning cycle has made it difficult to plan long term. As a result, data capture, sharing and analysis, as well as the reprioritisation of day to day activities have, up to now, been unsystematic. Nevertheless there is a close fit between the aims and activities of the service and the council's four community themes. These links between the service and the corporate goals are understood and owned by staff at all levels. So too is the need

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for a more rigorous approach to the design of the cultural service plan for 2005/06. The service is well-placed to capitalise on these planned improvements. Staff at all levels are highly enthusiastic, and are well respected in the community for their sympathetic and knowledgeable approach to service delivery.

- 83 Service integration and joint working is already well-established, and improving. Work across departments on community safety, planning (section 106 improvements) and the sustainability of the many local open spaces has already benefited the entire district, as well as specific communities such as Mill End and Leavesden. The integration of leisure and the environment at director level formalises joint working on many aspects of health and sustainability and the cross-cutting nature of all of the council's four themes reinforces that process. The work now being done on PPG 17 will drive further integration, given that the comprehensive databases and needs analyses will provide a common platform for future policies.
- 84 Other financial pressures have precluded increases in the overall spend on culture since the mid 1990s. Nonetheless increased partnership working at a local and regional level and more joint working with the voluntary sector (which, for example, has seen a sudden surge in the number of older people's groups) have enabled the council to offer an extended range of services. In general, this improvement in customer choice has not been at the expense of quality. But the department is, however, conscious of the need for a more concerted effort on traditional sports, with new investment in swimming and at the very least, better communication on football.
- 85 The service is open to challenge and learning from experience, and from others. The leisure review has been informed by comparative analyses by both service provider type and district. The 2004 CPA recommendations have been followed up vigorously at corporate and service level. Partnerships at a thematic level work well, with joint working across health and safety having been mutually beneficial to the service and its external partners. The same can be said of initiatives at a county level. But there are gaps in local knowledge which could be filled by closer liaison with parishes. More can be also done on a sub-regional level, to learn from and work with neighbouring districts in South West Herts.

Financial Management

- 86 Systems are in place to manage spending within budget, both corporately and within the service. The tradition of prudent financial management, which has seen the council become and then remain debt-free, is maintained by an interlocking system of capital strategies, asset management plans, open procurement processes, and strategic service and financial strategies. Such weaknesses as were identified in the 2004 CPA are now being addressed, with ongoing improvements in internal controls and the members' scrutiny process. The main outstanding challenge in corporate management, the integration of strategic and financial planning in a way that demonstrates that priorities drive spending, is now being addressed through the new corporate planning cycle.
- 87 With no increase in cultural revenue spending since the 1990s, reprioritisation was the key to improving local impact. In most cases this did not happen. All too often, every activity was seen as (equally) important, with no effort to shift resources to areas of greater impact. With management of venues consuming up most of the cultural budget on an annual basis, this meant that any new activity was simply added to the old. Only in the past three years has there been a concerted attempt to break out of that cycle. The leisure review that began in 2002 was designed to reduce the financial burden to the council of venue management, with resultant savings for reinvestment in culture. The new corporate planning cycle, meanwhile, will only work as it is intended to, if the levels of spending on each service activities

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are annually reviewed, and adjusted where necessary, to match corporate priorities.

- 88 Static budgets and failure to reprioritise have not stopped the service from improving the range and quality of services on offer. Such improvements have come about through increased partnership working, and by the securing of external capital and revenue funding, including from locally-based companies and the lottery. The facilities at William Penn and the Centre at South Oxhey are the most obvious examples of this. But so too are the new gym and nursery facilities at Leavesden, and the current programme of improvements to sporting pavilions across the district.
- 89 The council recognises the need for continued capital investment in culture. The outcome of the leisure review should help, not least in improving the service quality at venues, where minor maintenance problems have persisted despite regular condition surveys and asset management plans. The main priority is a major overhaul of the William Penn Leisure Centre, on both the wet and dry sides, and the capital for this is now being considered to ensure that that this will happen soon.

Performance Management

- 90 Performance management is another area of historic weakness. Measures to address this were first introduced in 2003, with the introduction of a performance management plan. Following CPA 2004, the council has developed a set of smart targets for each of its four themes in conjunction with its local strategic partnership. The new corporate strategy has been approved, and this sets out annual targets and priorities that will be cascaded down into service planning including cultural services. Bottom and third quartile BVPIs have been specifically targeted for improvement and the management board commissioned senior staff to come up with action plans to raise all of these by at least a quartile. This action plan was first presented to the management board back in September, and since then the second quarter returns and the direction of travel have been further reviewed.
- 91 Customer feedback systems were weak, and in need of overhaul. This has now happened, with designated complaints officers assigned to each directorate. New procedures for logging and responding to complaints have been implemented across the council. The new computer software for tracking the progress of complaints will be introduced into the service shortly. New procedures for pre-and post-project appraisal have been introduced post-CPA. A Project Initiation Document (PID) template is now being used to set and then monitor outcomes for each new council project. As with all services, the full impact has yet to be seen in cultural services.
- 92 Within the service, the systems to maximise use of the facilities were weak. Quest inspections noted that bookings weren't properly monitored, to ensure that venues were used to the full. A new venue booking system (FLEX) has been introduced. The aim is to improve access to customers while maximising use of facilities.
- 93 Processes for handling other data are weak. There is no standardised means of collecting, analysing or sharing information coming in from a wide range of internal and external sources. These weaknesses in management information need to improve quickly if the service is to take full advantage of, and subsequently update, the comprehensive database on the district's facilities and residents that will emerge from the PPG17 process later this year.
- 94 Staff management systems have been generally sound. The links between corporate, service and individual staff objectives have all been established. But each link in that chain needs to be strengthened further. Local performance indicators for culture have been produced, for incorporation into corporate and

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service plans. But these need to be made qualitative as well as quantitative, and more closely tied to outcomes. Similarly the work being done to establish ranked priorities within the service plan needs to be accelerated, and should be shared in draft with partners. Communication with staff is generally effective, with all staff contributing actively in both day-to-day activity and future work planning (for example through away days). The obvious staff enthusiasm for each of their activities does need to be informed by a shared understanding of what is most important, and what is not.

- 95 The new panel system for decision-making by councillors is working well. The Leisure Policy Panel assists councillors in tracking and challenging performance, with detailed progress reporting on all issues, large and small. The knowledge, experience and drive of senior councillors is an obvious asset. But the challenge of making the best use of that asset in a new era of more rigorous corporate planning, while giving due weight to the views of opposition members, will soon have to be met.
- 96 The procurement process are open and geared to seeking the best value options. Contractual relationships are historically based on traditional CCT models and opportunities to update these contracts, when they were recently extended, have not been taken. This means that improvements in quality are not driven by the contracts. Learning from these local contractors with nationwide experience has not been a priority for the service, and comparative studies outside the district have largely been limited to major projects. But the Council generally, and the cultural service in particular, are clear on the need to improve on all this. There is clear intent to use the new cultural contracts that will emerge from the leisure review, to guarantee the required levels of service provision by all external contractors.

Addressing equality and diversity

- 97 Members have a deep understanding of the mosaic of distinctive communities they serve. But it is not easy to translate such knowledge into effective policy in a District that has no hub, and with areas of high social deprivation that have a weak sense of community. Corporate policy weaknesses are an additional complication. In spite of an expansion in the size of the local Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities from 4.5 per cent to 7.5 per cent in the ten years to 2001, the council's information based on, and linked to, these communities is incomplete. Efforts are now being made to improve understanding (eg through the housing department) but the council remains short of useable data.
- 98 The cultural service has achieved much in meeting the diverse needs of the local population. The network of programmes and venues aimed at addressing the challenges of social deprivation across the district is impressive. So too is the engagement with disabled groups both locally and regionally, through grants, capital programmes and support for voluntary groups. In conjunction with the YMCA, innovative work is being done with the local Balmoral Centre on exercise programmes for people with learning disabilities. Service staff have also invested much time, care and attention in a similar ground-breaking drama project (which saw young people from the district with learning difficulties performing in the South of France last year). Measures to address persistent bottom quartile performance on disability access are now also being implemented. Venues and sports pavilions are now being upgraded to make them DDA-compliant in a £1.6 million capital investment project that has been part-funded externally.
- 99 But like the council more generally, the cultural service has been slow to respond to the growth in local BME communities. Only now are they beginning to recognise the need to address this, with women-only swimming sessions at Sir James Altham Pool and specific sessions for Muslim women at William Penn. But these have been set up in response to requests from the community. Cultural services have

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not yet used the more systematic approach to consultation with hard to reach groups, that has been produced post-CPA, to deepen its knowledge and extend its contacts with its growing BME community. Feedback from surveys suggests that BME communities are generally more satisfied with service provision than the community at large. But this result has been accidental, not designed.

Successful partnerships

- 100 Partnership working has been good, and is still improving. The Council recognises that the success of future service delivery will depend on the strength and extent of its partnerships. This is embodied in the approach to cultural services, where an increasing amount of work is done in conjunction with others.
- 101 Health and community safety, two of the four council themes, are the immediate priorities. Examples of achievement through partnership include:
- ◆ the construction of the Centre at South Oxhey;
 - ◆ the Active Communities Development Project (ACDF); the promotion of physical activity in areas of social deprivation, in conjunction with Sport England, Herts Youth Service and local schools;
 - ◆ the SHADE and Mill End Youth Projects, which aim to provide facility-based evening activities for teenagers, in conjunction with the Hertfordshire Constabulary;
 - ◆ cardiac rehabilitation and coronary heart disease projects run in conjunction with Watford and Three Rivers PCT, providing structured exercise programmes for post-operative patients;
 - ◆ the Play Plan, whereby existing play areas have been upgraded, and new ones (especially skateboarding facilities) have been added, in partnership with the private sector and developers and Parish Councils (which thanks to use of section 106 agreements, has continued to expand at the disused Leavesden airfield);
 - ◆ Learning for Leisure, a programme run in conjunction with the Careers Service and local secondary schools aimed at training local young people for employment in the leisure industry; and
 - ◆ the Playscheme Referral Programme, run in conjunction with the PCT and county council, which enables parents on low incomes to access holiday playschemes at discounted rates.
- 102 The council is committed to building community capacity through partnership initiatives. Councillors are prominent in the promotion of the local youth council, pensioners forums and local area forums, and there has been a considerable expansion in local self-supporting retired groups (which now number 120). Grants to small community-based organisations have underpinned these efforts, with capital being made available in the form of interest-free loans and top ups to lottery grants in order to multiply the effect of these limited resources. The service works closely with the local CVS to match local organisations to alternative sources of funding using IT programmes such as 'Grantfinder' and 'FundingFinder'.
- 103 Opportunities for further community-building with parish councils are under-explored, with some mistrust and only limited consultation between the two. Existing partners are looking for greater transparency and consistent communication from the cultural service. They are also looking for more and earlier input into service design.

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How effectively do the council's future plans sustain a clear focus on achieving its ambitions for cultural services?

- 104 Successful councils have effectively integrated cultural priorities into corporate plans and focus is maintained through regular reporting. Plans are reviewed and revised to reflect changing circumstances and partners and stakeholders are effectively engaged in developing and monitoring cultural plans.
- 105 The council's cultural service priorities are an integral and important part of the new corporate strategy. The corporate strategy sets out a number of specific medium and short term objectives and targets which are now in the process of being converted into new cultural service plans. The entire process from design through to delivery is unified for the first time, and with new review mechanisms having been built into the updated planning cycle, the system should be much more responsive to both political control but also changes in local need or demand.
- 106 Current plans are already delivering quantifiable achievements in health and community safety. The tackling of isolated weaknesses in service provision will be enabled by the outcome of the leisure review. Whilst leisure centres have achieved QUEST accreditation, they still do not fully meet user expectations. They consume 76 per cent of leisure service resources, which is a reduction from the previous high of 85 per cent. Out-sourcing will drive costs down further, freeing up savings for reinvestment in the service. At the same time, external contractors will be expected to drive up service quality, particularly at William Penn, where decisions in principle on refurbishment of both the wet and dry sides have been taken. Reinvestment more generally of the leisure review savings will increase capacity and responsiveness. Opportunities for local learning, a previous concern, have already increased as a result of the leisure review. This was always going to be an object lesson in the costs and benefits of reprioritisation, and the difficult experience of contracting out the Watersmeet Theatre to a new Trust, and then seeing it fold, has reinforced that learning experience. Those lessons also apply to the future of Watersmeet itself, where the door remains open to a future re-opening.
- 107 Progress in partnership is also being planned for. The best value review of the voluntary sector, which is now taking place, will be used as the foundation for future partnerships in this area. Already it is envisaged that the outcome of this review will drive a shift in grants policy towards a more pro-active approach, in which key priorities and themes will be given precedence. This more hierarchical approach is being applied to cultural service activity more generally, thereby giving both service plans and individual staff objectives a sense of priority they have hitherto lacked.
- 108 The council firmly intends to improve cultural services in the immediate future. Some key future improvements include:
- ◆ the current replacement of almost all sports pavilions at a cost of £1.6 million to meet DDA and refurbish the worn out buildings that there were there before (healthy/sustainable priorities);
 - ◆ installation of new play areas including youth shelters and skate facilities with developers and parish councils, £100,000 annually for four years (safe/healthy priorities);
 - ◆ the leisure review which will let a contract / outsource the four leisure venues with savings identified of £248,000 annually (healthy priority);

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- ◆ the William Penn Leisure Centre refurbishment at a cost of £3.5 million in conjunction with the new contractor for the leisure venues (healthy priority);
 - ◆ provide free swimming during the school summer holidays as a pilot in summer 2005 (safe / healthy priorities);
 - ◆ developing the open space, sports and recreation strategy for the whole district, linked to PPG 17, and joined with Watford Borough Council and Dacorum Borough Council (sustainable/healthy communities);
 - ◆ best value review of the voluntary sector linked to the council's grants scheme together with CVS and the CAB (prosperous); and
 - ◆ extend the active communities development fund to promote physical activity together with Sport England and the county council (safe / healthy priorities).
- 109 Whilst these improvements are all scheduled, they have not yet been drawn together into an improvement plan which is SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timebound). However, the new corporate strategy adopted by the council in December 2004 now provides a framework for improvement planning. A coherent and ranked improvement plan, tightly linked to the council's corporate plan and the local strategic partnership's community plan, is now seen as the next priority.
- 110 Consultation and communication are still unsystematic. More formal opportunities for partners and stakeholders to review existing corporate and service plans and shape future ones must be created. A different kind of dialogue with residents also has to be established, to give them a better understanding of the direction the council is heading in. Culture has to be redefined more in terms of community impact, rather than a traditional 'arts for arts sake' approach.
- 111 Implementation of IT improvements is currently weak. The elementary new website has taken the council's IT-based communications back a couple of steps. But there are signs of improvement, and in time, the web-site should play its part in improving customer service. The FLEX computer programme is intended to address the venue side.
- 112 The closer integration of planning, environmental and leisure services will be sustained. All are combined under a single director, and cross-departmental working is now the norm. The council has a clear intention to use the outcome of PPG17 to inform and improve future service design and delivery across these services. Lessons learnt from the section 106 planning agreements, such as at Leavesden, will be applied in realising future plans. The innovative Green Herts environmental programme, in which the council has played a leading role in both leisure and environment since it began late last year, will see a considerable growth in joint working across the third council theme of sustainable community.

Summary

- 113 The council and its staff are giving good leadership and commitment to improving cultural services in Three Rivers. The services are already tied to the targets and priorities set out in the new corporate strategy and achievements are already being delivered in key areas such as community safety and health. Capital investment is already underway, or has been approved in principle. And with each link in the chain between corporate aims through to service delivery having been, or about to be strengthened, prospects for improvement are promising.

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Appendices

The purpose of a best value inspection is to make two judgements. The first is how good is the service being inspected? The second is what are the prospects for improvement? We carried out a range of activities to enable us to reach our judgements.

Documents reviewed

Before going on site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that the council provided for us. These included:

- ◆ Active Communities Development Fund Annual Report
- ◆ Adult Art Classes - Evaluation Summary
- ◆ Aquadrome Draft Management Plan
- ◆ Aquadrome Licensees Meeting
- ◆ Audit Letter 2003-04
- ◆ Best Value Performance Plan 2004/05
- ◆ Best Value Through Sport, Sport England
- ◆ Budget Monitoring Reports
- ◆ Canal Festival Partnership & Waterways Partnership report
- ◆ Capital strategy and budget reports
- ◆ Communications Plan
- ◆ Community Safety reports and action plans
- ◆ Consultation Guide
- ◆ Corporate Plan (draft)
- ◆ Council reports and minutes
- ◆ Cultural Strategy (draft) Review December 2004
- ◆ Cultural Strategy 2002-2007
- ◆ Customer Service Quality Surveys
- ◆ District Guide & Map
- ◆ Draft Greenspace Strategy consultations
- ◆ Economic Profiles
- ◆ Enjoy! Herts CC Cultural Strategy
- ◆ Gardens Drama documents
- ◆ Grants Lists and reports
- ◆ Green Heart Business Plan
- ◆ Greenspace (draft) Strategy
- ◆ Herts CC- Children, Schools & Families Service Plan
- ◆ High - Audio CD produced by Youth Drugs Education project
- ◆ Internal Audit reports
- ◆ Learning 4 Leisure Needs Analysis
- ◆ Local Nature Reserve funding and grant letters

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- ◆ Medium Financial Plan 2002-2005 and 2003-2006
- ◆ Mill End Community Profile
- ◆ Mill End Youth Project Description Bid
- ◆ MORI General Survey Reports
- ◆ OFSTED reports
- ◆ ONS Area Profile - Three Rivers
- ◆ Open Space, Sport & Recreation Strategies submission
- ◆ Peer Review Improvement Plan
- ◆ Performance Indicators reports
- ◆ Performance Management Framework
- ◆ Play Plan
- ◆ Playscheme Referral documents
- ◆ Previous inspection and assessment reports
- ◆ Procurement Strategy
- ◆ QUEST reports
- ◆ Race Equality Scheme
- ◆ Residents Guide
- ◆ Rickmansworth Ladies Circle - Ebury Rd Play offer
- ◆ Rickmansworth Waterways Trust Business Plan
- ◆ ROSPA reports
- ◆ Self assessment of the service by the council
- ◆ SHADE - Survey and quarterly report
- ◆ Sir James Altham Improvement Plan
- ◆ South Oxhey Community Strategy
- ◆ The Centre - Fitness - Survey
- ◆ The Centre Improvement Plan
- ◆ Voluntary Sector BVR Terms of Reference
- ◆ Ward Deprivation 2000
- ◆ Watersmeet reports
- ◆ Watersmeet Trust Business Plan
- ◆ Web pages of Three Rivers District Council
- ◆ Woodlands Management Committee reports and minutes
- ◆ Young in Herts - Three Rivers Action Plan
- ◆ Young People's Leisure Survey
- ◆ Youth Council Minutes

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Reality checks undertaken

When we went on site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. We also followed up on issues relating to the management of the review and the improvements flowing from it. Our reality checks included:

- ◆ A tour visiting the following facilities and speaking to customers and staff:
 - ◆ Sir James Altham pool and out door facilities;
 - ◆ The Centre;
 - ◆ Oxhey (outdoor sports) pavilion;
 - ◆ Leavesden country park :
 - ◆ Woodlands YMCA healthy living centre
 - ◆ Croxley skatepark
 - ◆ Scotsbridge Mill informal skate facility
 - ◆ William Penn Leisure Centre
 - ◆ Ebury Road play area
 - ◆ Rickmansworth public golf course
- ◆ Mystery shopping, including:
 - ◆ The Centre
 - ◆ Sir James Altham pool
 - ◆ Three Rivers Museum
 - ◆ William Penn swimming pool
 - ◆ Contact by e-mail
- ◆ Observation of the leisure and community policy panel

List of people interviewed

- ◆ Senior Manager Sir James Altham pool
- ◆ Leisure Development Manager
- ◆ Founder and initial trustee - Watersmeet Trust
- ◆ Performance Improvement Manager
- ◆ Leisure Development Assistant
- ◆ Head of Leisure
- ◆ VAT Specialist
- ◆ Conservative Spokesperson, Leisure
- ◆ Chair, Leisure & Community Policy Panel
- ◆ Leader of the Conservative Party
- ◆ Labour Spokesperson, Leisure
- ◆ Chair of Scrutiny Committee

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- ◆ Leader of the Council
- ◆ Leader of the Council
- ◆ Chair of Resources Policy Panel
- ◆ Portfolio Holder, Leisure & Community
- ◆ Carpenders Park ward
- ◆ Croxley Green PC
- ◆ Director of Corporate Resources
- ◆ Head of Corporate Development
- ◆ Sarrat PC
- ◆ Leisure Projects Officer
- ◆ Abbots Langley PC
- ◆ Grants & Leisure Contracts Manager
- ◆ Communications Manager
- ◆ Leisure Admin Officer
- ◆ Community Arts Development Officer
- ◆ Project Manager
- ◆ Director of Leisure & Environment
- ◆ Watford Rural PC
- ◆ South Oxhey Community Campus Manager
- ◆ Sports Development Officer
- ◆ Senior Manager (The Centre)
- ◆ Chief Executive
- ◆ PKF accountants and business advisers
- ◆ Play Development Officer
- ◆ PMP (Consultants)
- ◆ Chorleywood PC

Focus groups:

- ◆ Art classes customers
- ◆ Community safety partnership representatives
- ◆ Community users including skateboard, Gardens Drama
- ◆ Open spaces and recreation organisations
- ◆ Partners 1 - contractors and agents
- ◆ Partners 2 - public and voluntary sector organisations
- ◆ Sir James Altham pool (and outdoor sports) users
- ◆ The Centre users and customers

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Appendix 2

Shared Priorities

A set of shared public service delivery priorities were agreed by the LGA's General Assembly and the Central Local Partnership in 2002. Central and local government agreed seven areas in which it was most important to deliver tangible improvements over the following three years.

Raising standards across our schools

- ◆ matching excellence of the best
- ◆ transforming secondary schools
- ◆ workforce capacity

Improving the quality of life

- ◆ of children
- ◆ of young people and families at risk
- ◆ of older people

Promoting healthier communities through key local services - such as health, education, housing, crime and accident prevention

Creating safer and stronger communities, by working with the police and other local agencies

Transforming our local environment

Meeting local transport needs

Promoting the economic vitality of localities.

Further information from www.lga.gov.uk

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Improving public services

The government has placed a duty upon local councils to deliver services to clear standards - of cost and quality - by the most economic, efficient and effective means available.³ Best value is a challenging framework that is designed to improve local services. Councils are required to assess their own performance and put in place measures to ensure continuous improvement in all of their services.

Councils must show that they have applied the 4Cs of best value:

- ◆ **challenging** why and how a service is being provided;
- ◆ **comparing** their performance with others' (including organisations in the private and voluntary sectors);
- ◆ embracing fair **competition** as a means of securing efficient and effective services; and
- ◆ **consulting** local **taxpayers**, customers and the wider business community.

The government has decided that each council should be scrutinised by an independent inspectorate. The Audit Commission performs this role.

The purpose of the inspection, and of this report, is to:

- ◆ enable the public to see whether best value is being delivered;
- ◆ enable the council to see how well it is doing;
- ◆ enable the Government to see how well its policies are working in practice;
- ◆ identify failing services where remedial action may be necessary; and
- ◆ identify and disseminate best practice.

³ This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission ('the Commission') following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.