

Inspection report

August 2005



# Customer Access

**East Devon District Council**

# Contents

Summary	3
Scoring the service	4
Recommendations	6
Report	7
Context	7
The locality	7
The council	7
Customer Access - context	8
How good is the service?	9
How easy is it to access services?	9
Is the Council using e-government to support access to services?	12
How is the Council using customers' feedback and complaints to improve service quality?	14
How is the Council improving customer access through Partnership working?	15
Summary	16
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	18
Ownership of problems and willingness to change	18
Proven capacity	19
The capacity and systems to deliver performance and improvement	21
The integration of Best Value principles into day-to-day management	22
Summary	23
Appendices	24
Documents reviewed	24
Reality checks undertaken	24
List of people interviewed	25

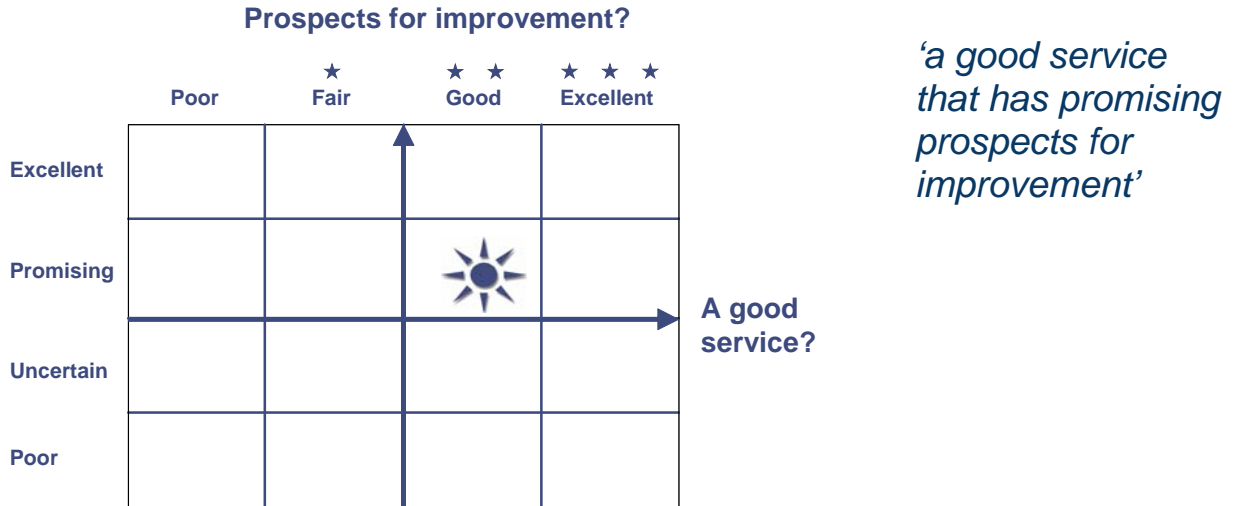
## Summary

- 1 East Devon District Council is in the south west of England. The population is 126,703 of which only 0.7 per cent is from minority ethnic communities. However, 30.5 per cent of the population is above retirement age, which is the third highest for districts in the country and this is forecast to rise steadily in the next 15 years.
- 2 The Council is Conservative led with 34 of the 59 seats.
- 3 The Council employs 594 full time equivalent staff across all services.
- 4 Customer access is a cross-cutting theme affecting and integral to all council services. East Devon DC completed a self assessment of its customer access in April 2005 to help inform and guide this inspection.

## Scoring the service

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

### Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>: East Devon District Council – Customer Access



- 6 The service is good because:

- ◆ the Council makes it easy for customers to access services;
- ◆ there is a wide range of mechanisms which customers can use to access services including outreach surgeries, 24 hour and out of hours’ service and where appropriate home visits. Users are positive about contact with the council;
- ◆ the Council has a highly externally accredited website;
- ◆ the Council has good service satisfaction levels and performance in national performance indicators related to customer access is amongst the best in the country including buildings which are DDA compliant and percentage of electronic transactions undertaken by the council;
- ◆ the council effectively uses complaints and customer feedback to monitor services and drive improvement;
- ◆ the Council makes good use of partnership to improve customer access working across traditional boundaries;
- ◆ the Council is effectively managing and utilising consultation to improve services and engage stakeholders;
- ◆ the Council is investing and balancing national and local priorities for e-government; and
- ◆ the Council is embedding diversity and customer focus training within the organisation through policy development and staff and member training.

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

However, some weaknesses remain.

- ◆ There are still some pockets of weaker performing services where customers recognise poor service and customer support.
- ◆ The Council's main offices are not easily accessible.
- ◆ There are no formal methods for the Council to internally share feedback from customers between services at an operational level.
- ◆ In the 2003 General User Satisfaction Survey customer satisfaction with the Council, as a whole, is in the bottom 25 per cent nationally.
- ◆ The Council is not fully integrating service delivery to ensure a collaborative approach to serving the needs of the community.

7 The prospects of the council improving access to its services is promising because:

- ◆ the Council is committed to continuous improvement and demonstrates clear ownership and willingness to adapt services to meet customer needs;
- ◆ the LSP, Council's corporate plans and service plans show a clear understanding and commitment to access and diversity issues;
- ◆ the Council is developing a customer access strategy which is underpinned by clear priorities supported by individual projects to develop and re launch customer standards, improve e-government, improve access to all and develop a customer contact centre;
- ◆ customers recognise improvements made by the Council and partners in accessing services;
- ◆ the Council is focusing investment to improve customer access through better IT support and interaction and through its access strategy which is supported by a track record of making service improvements;
- ◆ there are clear plans in place to meet the Government's target of being 100 per cent transactional by December 2005; and
- ◆ the Council is open and actively seeks out external challenge and has improved performance management systems to monitor progress against its priorities.

However, some areas of improvement still remain to be addressed.

- ◆ Scrutiny is not yet fully effective.
- ◆ Not all councillors are fully aware of the Council's strategic approach to accessing services.
- ◆ Some customer access targets have not been achieved for example response to correspondence and reviewing the consultation strategy.
- ◆ Local performance indicators relating to accessing services have yet to be fully developed.
- ◆ The Council does not have the systems in place to demonstrate value for money.

## Recommendations

- 8 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.
- ◆ Improve customer access to services, by:
    - ◆ continuing to develop and then implement the customer access strategy and four work projects supporting the strategy;
    - ◆ increasing knowledge of customer access across all service areas to improve customer access where current experiences are inconsistent;
    - ◆ developing effective mechanisms to ensure operational staff can share good practice and experience internally; and
    - ◆ gaining accreditation and focus on improving compliance with national equalities standard.
  - ◆ Deliver future improvements to customer access, by:
    - ◆ ensuring all councillors are aware of the councils approach and strategy regarding customer access;
    - ◆ developing a consistent set of performance indicators and standards to monitor the effectiveness of the Council's approach to customer access;
    - ◆ improving councillors ability to scrutinise the Councils performance in improving customer access;
    - ◆ developing systems to measure value for money within customer access; and
    - ◆ reviewing the location of the council's main offices and other buildings to ensure appropriate access and compliance with DDA requirements.
- 9 We would like to thank the staff of East Devon District Council, particularly Denise Lyon and Bob Darbourne, who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

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# Report

## Context

- 10 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

- 11 East Devon District Council is in the south west of England covering an area of 81,477 hectares. The population of the area is 126,703 which is the eighth largest population covered by a district council in the country. The rural nature of the district is emphasised by the low population density which is only 155 per square kilometre (England and Wales average is 380). The main settlements are the coastal resorts of Exmouth, Budleigh Salterton, Sidmouth and Seaton together with Honiton, Ottery St Mary and Axminster. Devon has the fastest growing population in the country and East Devon has the third largest population of people over retirement age, at 30.5 per cent, which is forecast to rise further over the next 15 years. Only 0.7 per cent of the population are from minority ethnic communities.
- 12 The Joseph Rowntree Foundation indicated that East Devon is the eighth least affordable district in England based on low household incomes and high house prices. Affordable housing is a major concern and there are plans to develop a new community within the district.
- 13 East Devon has a dispersed and principally rural population and transport is a key issue for the community. Although the area is predominantly affluent there are areas of deprivation in the resort town of Exmouth.

## The council

- 14 The Council comprises 59 councillors. The Conservative party has overall control with 34 councillors, Liberal Democrat 18 and Independent 7. The Council has adopted the leader and executive model to govern the business of the council.
- 15 The Council's overall budget for the year 2005/06 is £13.4 million; current projections indicate a balanced budget with no over or under spend predicted. Current staffing levels are 594 full time equivalents.
- 16 The Council in partnership with the local strategic partnership has developed a community vision and priorities which are:
- ◆ everyone has adequate affordable housing or other housing appropriate to their needs;
  - ◆ everyone is given the opportunity to help shape the decisions which affect their lives;
  - ◆ everyone feels included, valued and safe within our communities;
  - ◆ everyone is able to live healthy, independent and fulfilled lives;
  - ◆ there are appropriate transport and other connections within and between our many and widespread communities;
  - ◆ everyone has easy access to key information and services when and where they need them;
  - ◆ there is a vibrant working environment where community and economic activity improve and sustain our distinctive environment and cultural heritage;

- ◆ everyone has lifelong access to opportunities to learn and to develop the skills that they and the community need;
- ◆ everyone is able to find work (paid and voluntary) which suits their needs;
- ◆ everyone receives an adequate income to meet their basic needs;
- ◆ our visitors are encouraged to recognise and value East Devon as a distinctive destination where they are welcomed and will return; and
- ◆ our actions do not compromise the economy, communities or environment of future generations.

17 The Council's priorities as identified in its corporate strategy are:

- ◆ safe and healthy communities;
- ◆ protecting the environment;
- ◆ securing the long term future of the local economy; and
- ◆ becoming an excellent council.

## **Customer Access - context**

- 18 All councils have a duty to provide services to customers, stakeholders, partners and clients - and these services should be easy to access and supported by technology where this is appropriate to meeting customer's needs. In assuring good access to services, councils should be using customer feedback and complaints to improve service quality and customer access. Councils should also be using partnership working with other councils, organisations and businesses to continually improve customer access.
- 19 Council services should be focused on the needs of users, ensure equality of access and take proper account of equality and the diversity of all service users. Customer access is a cross-cutting theme applicable to all council services.
- 20 East Devon District Council completed a self assessment of its customer access in April 2005 to help inform and guide this inspection.

## How good is the service?

- 21 We have assessed the extent to which the Council delivers good customer access using four key questions.
- ◆ How easy is it to access services?
  - ◆ Is the Council using e-government to support access to services?
  - ◆ How is the Council using customers' feedback and complaints to improve service quality?
  - ◆ How is the Council improving customer access through partnership working?

## How easy is it to access services?

- 22 The Council makes it easy for customers to access its services.
- 23 The Council has clear aims in place to improve customer access. As outlined above, one of the Council's priorities is to ensure that customers have easy access to key information and services, when and where they need them. Service plans include details of how services are setting out to deliver this aim, highlight any areas that need to improve in relation to access and the actions planned to address them. In this way, the Council is ensuring that services are tailored and refined in order to promote equality of access.
- 24 There are a wide range of means by which customers can access Council services. Customers can access the Council through telephone, e-mail, letter and its website. More remote and rural areas of the district are being supported by the Council widening the means by which customers can receive and request services. For example some services, including benefits and council tax, provide outreach services together with surgeries in rural villages while some services offer customers home visits if they are needed. The Council also provides 24 hour access by telephone to all council services through its community alarm out of hours' contact centre. Leaflets developed by the Council are easy to read and well presented and are available in offices, from officers and councillors and in local Devon County Council libraries. As a consequence the Council has developed a wide and varied means by which customers can access services which support the community's diversity and the rural nature of the district.
- 25 The Council has enhanced the customer experience through targeted investment. The main office reception area has been redesigned and redecorated with clearer signs and improved facilities including a low level counter and interview rooms. In addition, the Council has secured a high level of compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 at 83 per cent, which means that physical access arrangements are in place for people with disabilities in all but four, less than 20 per cent, of the Council's buildings. Two of the buildings are no longer in use and one other is owned by a partner. These buildings are either under review as part of a wider asset management assessment of the effective use of buildings or are the subject of an ongoing investment programme. The website has also been subject to significant investment, with the content reviewed and more tailored information provided. The impact of these targeted investments has been a significant improvement in the experience for customers, which is supported by positive feedback.

- 26 The council delivers accessible services. Partners and residents recognise the improvements that the Council has made to make Council services more accessible. There is positive feedback on the way the Council responds promptly and effectively to e mail contact, and the improvements to the layout and content of the website. Although partners and residents still report problems with contacting some services by telephone they say that arrangements have improved significantly in the last two years. This demonstrates that improvements made by the Council are having an impact and are recognised and welcomed by residents ensuring the Council's reputation within the community is enhanced.
- 27 The Council ensures that its services are able to reach all parts of the community. All staff and councillors have recently received training on customer care, diversity and equalities. As a demonstrable commitment to addressing issues of diversity the Council has delivered training to the majority of councillors to raise awareness of the issues and begin to ensure that such matters are considered in policy decisions. As a consequence councillors and staff are more aware of the diverse nature of its customers and the need to ensure that services are flexible to meet the needs of the whole community.
- 28 The Council is responding effectively to the Freedom of Information Act. It is working in partnership with other councils to share understanding of the kind of information being requested. It is also ensuring that any such information, once collated, is made available on its website to reduce the duplication of requests. Requests are centrally co-ordinated and staff and councillors have received training on how requests should be processed. In this way, the Council is ensuring that both the spirit and the letter of the law are applied in a way that promotes openness with the public.
- 29 On an individual project basis, the Council ensures that services meet community need. For example, it identified, through customer complaints, the need to move to a wheeled bin collection in one specific part of Exmouth to prevent seagulls ripping open rubbish bags. The Council has also relocated services to provide a more local presence in Exmouth and now has a depot with reception facilities in the town, as well as providing access to its services in partnership with the local town council at their offices. In other areas, the Council has varied service delivery according to demand. The council proactively offers home visits for many aspects of service to enable those with mobility or transport difficulties to access services. In addition it operates regular surgeries and when, in one rural area, the demand for this type of service was low it now offers home visits which are publicised locally. The Council operates concession pricing schemes for target groups within sports and recreation and also runs sports sessions, including tennis coaching, in various locations within the district. The Council has also responded to extra demands placed on reception staff on a Monday morning by providing additional resources. This shows that the Council is responding to customer demands in the delivery of its services.
- 30 The Council has developed standards which are publicised to the community. These include corporate targets for answering telephone calls and response to correspondence. At a service level, there are specific standards in place, for example the website contains information on the process for dealing with abandoned cars, the removal of dead animals from roads and verges and for refuse bin collection. The Council supplements the website with information on service standards in its council newsletter, 'East Devon Talk', which is published in partnership with Devon County Council three times a year. The publication of the newsletter is to be increased this year to quarterly and is delivered to all residents in the district.

The Council has developed a range of corporate standards including telephone answering and response to letters which has been publicised through the website and in leaflets. In this way, the Council ensures that customers are aware of the standard of service they can expect.

- 31 Satisfaction levels with access arrangements for services are high. The Council has secured a level of performance comparable to the best 25 per cent of councils nationally in relation to electronic access and compliance with the DDA. Satisfaction with the way complaints are handled is also high as are satisfaction levels for many different services including leisure and recreation, street cleaning and recycling. This shows that the Council is delivering high quality services which meet the needs of the community and in terms of customer satisfaction is amongst the best when compared with other district councils.
- 32 Overall satisfaction with the Council is low. In common with many other council's, satisfaction levels fell between the surveys in 2000 and 2003 and is in the bottom 25 per cent compared with other district councils. While individual service satisfaction remains high the fall in overall satisfaction is attributed to large council tax rises imposed by Devon County Council and the Police Authority prior to the survey taking place, and the effect this had on the elderly population.
- 33 Although in individual areas the Council adapts its services to meet needs and promote equality of access, it still lacks a consistent and strategic approach to focusing services on need. As a consequence customers still recognise 'pockets' of weaker customer service which do not match their needs and the Council cannot be sure that it is developing services which complement each other. The Council recognises this as an area for improvement and is developing a customer access strategy and project plans to ensure a consistent customer focus.
- 34 Some barriers to accessing council services remain. Some residents are confused as to whom they should contact and feel that access arrangements rely on a high level of understanding on their part of which department, or indeed council, does what. The Council currently publishes 48 different telephone numbers, in the telephone directory, through which its services can be accessed but has recognised this issue and is investigating alternative arrangements. Some facilities which widen access to information are inconsistently available. For example some services publicise the availability of leaflets in Braille or in other formats, whilst others do not. Also there is some degree of confusion amongst staff as to what facilities are provided – the provision of minicom text telephone access to people with hearing impairments is one area where staff are unsure whether such a facility exists or not. Similarly the provision of hearing loops in reception areas is not widely publicised or understood. This restricts the extent to which people across the community can easily contact the services they require.
- 35 The geographical location of the main council offices presents a particular barrier to access. The council offices in Sidmouth are located up a steep hill with restricted parking at the same level as the reception area. In addition, it is a significant walking distance (all uphill) from the town centre and is not served by public transport. Whilst the Council has made investments to ensure that the building is fully accessible with lift access to different floors and parking for people with disabilities, the location presents difficulties for people particularly those with mobility problems, non car drivers and parents with small children.
- 36 The Council has missed an opportunity to provide an additional means of accessing services through the use of front line staff. Operational staff are not trained to provide information, working as 'ambassadors', to provide contact details and be able to respond to simple enquires from the general public on the delivery of council services.

## Is the Council using e-government to support access to services?

- 37 The Council is using e-government to support access.
- 38 The Council has balanced customer needs with national priorities to determine where investments should be made to support the development of e-government. The Council has based its priorities on community intelligence on local needs by using information collected by the local strategic partnership. The Council has then mapped this information against the government's national priority outcomes to develop its own e-government priorities. To implement its priorities the Council engaged an external consultancy to develop a strategy, 'roadmap', to take these priorities forward, identifying the investment needed and projects to be undertaken and this forms the basis of the Council's IT strategy. As a result the Council is using e-government to tackle identified local need whilst still delivering against government objectives.
- 39 The Council has made significant investment in IT in recent years. Since 2001 it has invested around £1.4 million in capital expenditure supported by a further £1 million in government grants over the same period. The Council did not have integrated IT systems and this investment has been used to introduce systems which are capable of being accessed through many different channels and can be integrated into wider council systems. This is increasing capability, including the development of e consultation via the Council's website. This investment is providing the infrastructure to support delivery of the e-government agenda and to provide the means to widen e-consultation arrangements.
- 40 The Council is increasingly using the internet and information technology to improve consultation on specific projects and compliment more traditional means of consultation. The Council is taking a measured approach to introducing such mechanisms by testing different means of engaging with the local community. Recent examples include discussion board type exercises on the Unlocking Exmouth project and in Seaton, where people were able to ask questions and discuss the implications of the plans for the regeneration of the local area. The level of take up and quality of information received through this format was monitored and results showed a small but encouraging use of the facility. There are plans for future similar exercises, for example in relation to the new community being planned within the district. Customers can also make enquiries and comments about council services through the website and their feedback has been used to change the way information is presented, for example the benefits service information has been tailored according to customer feedback. As a consequence the Council is developing better use of technology to improve consultation and provide another avenue to receive customer feedback.
- 41 The website is of a high quality. It has already achieved the AA level of the Web Accessibility Initiative which is a national standard relating to how easy websites are to access for people with disabilities. This is a high standard of achievement with few other council websites currently at this level. The website was also recognised as the most improved council website by the Society of IT Managers in 2004. The quality of the website is recognised by both partners and residents and the Council is actively working to further improve accessibility, with plans to achieve the highest possible AAA standard.

- 42 The Council actively promotes the website to residents and partners. The website address is included on all corporate stationary and is a part of the livery of council vehicles and offices. Press releases, council newspapers and council information further promote the website and its content. The Council also uses signposting to other websites which provide useful information, for example in relation to community transport, other district councils and the county council. Effective promotion of the website is increasing awareness and usage and as a result had a significant impact on accessibility of the Council in recent years.
- 43 The website information is regularly updated and reviewed to ensure that content is relevant and useful both at a service and corporate level. The Council has devolved content management for the website information to service managers and this has ensured that there is clear ownership of the information presented and that changing customer needs can be reflected in the content provided. In addition, at a corporate level IT managers carry out their own reviews to ensure consistency and to assist managers in ensuring information is presented in an accessible format. As a result the website has current, relevant information which is user friendly. The Council's intranet is also being developed in order to support staff in answering queries from the public and providing cross service information.
- 44 The Council is currently achieving a high level of performance against e-government targets but its website is not yet fully transactional. It had e-enabled 80 per cent of transactions in 2003/04 (BVPI 157) which is a level of performance amongst the top 25 per cent of councils nationally. The Council's progress in this area means that residents can pay bills on line, use an on line benefits calculator, print off benefit claim forms for completion and view planning applications on line. Public transport serving local facilities can be checked through links to external sites promoting a sustainable way of widening access. Plans for the future include more transactional capability for example in booking leisure facilities and making planning applications. In this way the Council is, and continues to seek electronic means of providing easier access to services.
- 45 The Council has yet to implement a consistent approach to e-consultation. While, as outlined above, individual projects use technology to enhance consultation arrangements there is not a clear and consistent strategy, underpinned by knowledge of where this approach is particularly helpful. However, the Council is developing plans that will address this.
- 46 Risks of social exclusion arising from the approach to e-government are not yet being fully addressed by the Council. The Council, in partnership with other organisations, through the local strategic partnership, has developed a social exclusion checklist which is to be applied across all services to ensure that these issues are considered as a standard part of service planning. It is also working with community groups and partners to try and develop community websites with local access points. These initiatives will seek to minimise social exclusion but are yet to be implemented.

## How is the Council using customers' feedback and complaints to improve service quality?

- 47 The Council is using customer's feedback and complaints effectively to improve service quality and access to services.
- 48 The Council is targeting sections of the community to enhance understanding of specific needs. For example, it has consulted with young people in a number of areas including Budleigh Salterton, where there is a predominantly elderly population, to determine their needs and as a result involved them in the design of a skate park. Local residents on a council estate in Exmouth have also been consulted regarding the use of a park and this has resulted in the development of a children's playground and space that can be used for community outdoor activities. These examples show the Council is taking a positive stance in seeking and responding to resident's feedback.
- 49 There is an active and publicised complaints framework in place within the Council to monitor the experience of people who access council services. The Council provides information on how complaints can be made, the timescales in which they will be investigated and by whom, and details of how complaints can be taken further if they are not satisfactorily resolved. Services have a nominated customer services officer whose role is to log and monitor complaints and ensure that the deadlines for resolution are met. Senior service managers receive information on trends in complaints or matters of policy and they bring these areas to the corporate management team for discussion. In addition, the Executive Committee and Overview and Scrutiny Committees receive quarterly monitoring reports which highlight levels of complaint, trends and the speed with which they are resolved. As a consequence, the Council is able to effectively monitor complaints identifying corporate issues impacting on service delivery.
- 50 The high level of satisfaction with complaint handling demonstrates the effectiveness of the system in place. In 2000, satisfaction with complaint handling was 39 per cent, but by 2003 this had increased and the Council is now one of the top 25 per cent performing councils in the country. This increase in satisfaction coincided with the introduction of a new complaints system developed in conjunction with service managers and reflecting the feedback received from customers. This new system, which as a first stage relies on service managers to try and resolve issues, has made a significant difference to customers' perception of how well the Council deals with complaints.
- 51 The Council receives a low level of complaints. The Council received a total of 109 in 2004/05 with the majority (65 per cent) resolved by service managers at the first stage of the process. Only approximately 13 per cent were taken to stage 3 where the Monitoring Officer needs to investigate the complaint. The number of complaints about the Council received by the Local Government Ombudsman in 2004/05 was relatively low for the district served, at 38 with no findings of maladministration. Councillors and senior managers set targets and monitor complaints resolution ensuring that when the Council does receive a complaint it is dealt with effectively. The low number of complaints indicates that customers do not feel that services need to be improved significantly.
- 52 Consultation is effectively co-ordinated within the Council. At a corporate level there is a consultation calendar which maps the consultation currently being undertaken and that which is planned for the year. Services can therefore avoid duplicating effort, the Council can use it to minimise 'consultation fatigue' amongst the public and where possible, consultation initiatives can be joined up to save money.

All consultation is arranged through a central team so that advice and support can be given on the most effective methods of consultation and advice is also obtained using the Devon consultation group. The Council now has the ability to coordinate and more effectively consult with the local community.

- 53 The Council is working in partnership to ensure that gypsies and travellers can access services. A multi-agency group across Devon have developed a protocol which, regardless of council policies in relation to these groups, ensures that such communities can access the services they require. This protocol includes questions and prompts to ensure that there is a common approach from all agencies that may provide such services.
- 54 There are a variety of methods in place to collect feedback from residents but this is not consistently applied across the Council. Some services conduct satisfaction surveys to try to improve service delivery. For example the street scene service has sought views on planned improvements to public gardens and as a result has changed those plans to reflect the feedback received. The leisure service has carried out some satisfaction surveys within their centres and some parts of the Council hold focus groups on particular issues, for example within building control. However, other areas of service delivery do not use these methods to inform what they do. This inconsistency restricts the Council's ability to ensure all services are tailored to meet user's needs for all service areas.
- 55 It is unclear how far learning from feedback and complaints is shared within the Council. Middle managers meet infrequently as a team to share experiences and good practice although there is a more informal sharing of information. There are no mechanisms in place for staff from across the Council to meet and share learning and there is no cross council consultative group of staff which could enhance two way communication. As a result the Council is not systematically sharing learning from customer comments and feedback to improve access to services and service delivery.
- 56 The Council does not take every opportunity to learn from customer experience. The Council policy is not to accept anonymous complaints and as a result valuable feedback may be lost. In addition, the complaints process requires people who make a complaint in person to sign a form which indicates that their complaint will be shared with all officers and councillors involved. This may result in customers being unwilling to make complaints about individuals or services for fear of reprisals. The Council is missing opportunities to collect all information on the delivery of its services and practices.

## **How is the Council improving customer access through Partnership working?**

- 57 The Council is working effectively in partnership to deliver improvements in accessing its and partners services
- 58 The Council is working in partnership to improve customer access to both its and other organisations services. Examples where the Council is working effectively in partnership include the use of sports and leisure centres where there is broad community usage. This includes dedicated use of these facilities, during off peak times, for local schools. Sports coaches also visit schools to provide on site coaching in sports activities. Leisure and sports centre staff also work with local primary care trusts to provide programmed physical activity for patients, particularly those with cardiac problems and to raise health issues and in particular a campaign to stop smoking. The Council works in partnership with town and parish councils to provide facilities in smaller communities within the district including joint use of Exmouth town hall and surgeries using town halls in Honiton and Seaton to allow residents to contact the Council at these locations.

The Council is working in partnership with other agencies including social services, in supplying adaptations in council owned properties. The out of hours 'Home Safeguard' scheme is run in partnership with private organisations and the Council is working effectively with environmental and nature organisations to protect and promote areas of outstanding natural beauty. Overall there is effective partnership working which is increasing the Council's capacity to deliver services and provide greater access to its and other organisations services.

- 59 The Council is effectively managing its partnerships. The Council has introduced a partnership strategy to provide a framework and guide to managing its partnerships. A review of all the Council's partnerships has been undertaken and regular evaluation of the success of individual partnerships has enabled the Council to assess its contribution and role. As a result the Council has been able to remove itself from several partnerships where evaluation highlighted that the Council was not adding value. This has enabled the Council to make best use of its capacity in working in partnership.
- 60 The Council is effectively sharing information through partnership working. Examples include the Local Strategic Partnership which has commissioned a project to collate all consultation results by partners to give a comprehensive overview of the district and identify gaps in local information. The Council is sharing information through the Devon consultation group on issues relating to the county and is also working with the Citizens Advice Bureau to ensure awareness of its services and avoid duplication in service delivery. Other areas include joint working on e-government to share learning and resources and avoid duplication in the development of systems. The Council is effectively sharing learning with partners which is helping reduce duplication of service delivery and provide a better understanding of the local community.
- 61 The Council has not fully integrated a corporate approach to service delivery. Progress is being made to ensure services are internally delivered in partnership working across traditional service boundaries with affordable housing a notable success. However, this collaborative approach is not systematic across the Council. Feedback from staff and customers indicate that there are still services which are operating within service boundaries and access and customer focus could be enhanced through a more corporate approach. The Council continues to make progress in this area and there a plans to introduce a contact centre providing an accessible and more comprehensive enquiry service for customers while the introduction of the customer access strategy is facilitating a more collaborative approach to service delivery by focusing service delivery on customer needs.

## Summary

- 62 The Council is making it easier for customers to access services through a wide range of methods. Customers recognise a high level of effectiveness in the way the Council responds to enquiries in person, on the phone and by email. A notable achievement has been the Council's website which has been externally accredited for its content and layout and access for disabled users. The majority of the Council's buildings are accessible to disabled users but the Council's main offices at Sidmouth, due to their geographical location, are not easily accessed by non car users or those with mobility problems. Access is further improved by outreach activity in other towns. Customer satisfaction with services is high, although overall customer satisfaction with the Council is in the bottom 25 per cent nationally.

- 63 The Council is effectively investing in IT to provide an integrated and comprehensive framework to enhance access. The Council is successfully balancing national and local demands in the development of IT and aims for its website to be fully transactional by December 2005. The Council is learning from feedback and complaints and is improving service delivery as a result. Partnership working is strong and is well managed but internally further improvements are required to ensure a collaborative approach to service delivery which crosses traditional service boundaries.

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

- 64 We have assessed the prospects of the council improving customer access to services in four key areas:
- ◆ ownership of problems and willingness to change;
  - ◆ proven capacity to improve;
  - ◆ the capacity and systems to deliver performance and improvement; and
  - ◆ the integration of Best Value into day-to-day management.

### Ownership of problems and willingness to change

- 65 The Council has a clear commitment and willingness to change.
- 66 There is clear and strong commitment from leading councillors and senior managers to improve customer access. This is demonstrated by the consistent commitment from all staff and councillors to the principles outlined in the customer access strategy. The Council's significant investment in IT, outlined previously, is driven by the desire to improve the means by which customers can access the Council and its services. Other areas which demonstrate the Council's commitment to improving the customer experience include the progress made on providing a high quality website, the redesign and redecoration of the reception area and the number of customer focused strategies recently developed and implemented. This strong commitment has enabled the Council to focus its resources to deliver more accessible and customer focused services.
- 67 Council aims reflect the importance placed on customer access. The corporate objectives include an objective aiming for greater public involvement in setting and prioritising objectives in order to deliver services how, when and where customers would like them. This objective closely reflects one of the priorities outlined in the community plan, which in turn represents the needs of the district. Service plans are written to these aims and activities are planned to tailor services to ensure greater access. As a result the Council has effectively prioritised the needs of local people to access services in the way they would wish to.
- 68 Specific strategies developed by the Council support delivery of this objective. The Council has developed several customer focused strategies with clear outcomes including those relating to communications, consultation, diversity and equalities. There are clear links between these strategies and the overall corporate objectives and they are supported by the development of delivery plans. In this way the Council has sought to ensure that its objectives are delivered.
- 69 Stakeholders recognise the commitment of the Council to improving access arrangements. They point to a change in approach in the last two years, with better telephone access available, e-mail communication being effective and a more open and inclusive approach to most communications. This indicates that the Council's focus and commitment is having a direct impact in improving access.

- 70 There is clear evidence that the Council has made difficult decisions in order to support improvement. The investment in IT has largely centred on improving and replacing existing systems, which in turn will support customer improvements by supporting new customer record management systems and the transactional ability of the Council. This necessary investment could have been seen as unimportant in relation to more immediate customer facing demands but councillors supported the investment as they could see that in the medium to longer term it will provide great improvements to customer access. The Council has also authorised work to develop a comprehensive customer access strategy. These decisions support improvement at a strategic level.
- 71 The Council uses internal and external challenge to refine service delivery. The communications best value review was clearly used to develop a more customer focused approach to council business, and as a result reception facilities were reviewed, more strategic consultation arrangements were introduced and a more proactive approach taken with media relations resulting in more favourable and informative press coverage of council issues. External challenge is becoming part of the culture of the organisation, demonstrated by the request for an additional peer review, the use of representatives from external organisations on review teams, external review of the Council's performance management systems by IDeA and the approach adopted to learning from other councils. The Council is also effectively learning from benchmarking with particular examples being the Devon e-government group and Devon consultation group. As a result of these challenges, improvements have been made to delivery mechanisms which are recognised by customers.
- 72 The future strategic direction for customer access has yet to be effectively communicated to councillors. Although the Council is developing a clearer strategic approach to customer access, at the moment this has yet to be effectively communicated to all councillors. Some non executive councillors are unclear what exactly the Council is setting out to achieve in relation to this strategy. Without clear communication on how the implementation of the strategy will improve access, the Council risks lessening the level of commitment to the work being undertaken.

## Proven capacity

- 73 The Council has a proven capacity to improve access to services.
- 74 Corporate plans, customer access related strategies and service plans are all highly integrated. All reflect the desire to provide services in the way that customers would like them. Service plans consider access issues and diversity and outline how they will address them in a clear concise way. These plans support overall corporate council objectives and community strategy objectives on improving customer access. Partners recognise and understand improvements made by the Council in accessing services and they are involved in planning for the future through consultation and working with the Council on projects including 'access to all'. As a consequence access and diversity issues are mainstreamed in the Council through its service planning and partners support and understand the contribution made by the Council in improving the quality of life in East Devon.
- 75 Corporate priorities are based on sound intelligence on local needs. The Council has used the research from the local strategic partnership to inform its priorities and then cross checked that with a citizen's panel survey. In addition, the Council is seeking feedback from residents and community groups on access related issues. As a result the council is able to align its own priorities with the needs of the community.

- 76 The council is effectively remaining focused on its priorities. The council uses a number of tools to maintain focus on its priorities. These include a robust planning framework which clearly identifies issues relating to customer access and diversity and is linked to the Council's medium term financial planning. The council is using performance information to maintain focus and identify areas of poor performance and is developing a customer access strategy underpinned by project management to maintain a strategic focus.
- 77 The Council has recognised the need to implement a consistent approach to customer issues and has developed principles that will underpin a customer access strategy. The strategy will be developed around four themes, contact centre, access to all, e-government and customer charter. Project initiation documents have been written for two, with the other two in development. There is agreement within the Council that the strategy will be wider than just looking at the e-government agenda, and as such, issues such as asset management and location of offices are being considered together with a comprehensive 'access to all' project looking at all aspects of accessing Council and partner services. This will provide the Council with a clear means of sustained improvement across its and partners services.
- 78 The Council has demonstrated its capacity to deliver improvement in relation to IT and compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and continues to invest in these areas. In relation to IT the Council is working in partnership with other councils within Devon to deliver other elements of the Implementing e-government programme. There is an ongoing programme of works in relation to physical access to buildings, and for the four remaining offices where access is limited, consideration is being given as to whether disposal of the asset is a more appropriate way forward. The Council is also in the early stages of reviewing the location of its main offices in Sidmouth with consideration being given to relocating to the new community to provide better access and increase the infrastructure of the new community. The Council is using its capacity not only to improve current access to services but is planning well for the future.
- 79 The Council has a good track record of investment in relation to customer care and access. As outlined above, it has invested heavily in relation to IT, it has secured a high level of physical access to buildings and in addition it has made capital investment in relation to improving the environment for customers of the service, both at the main customer offices and by providing additional contact points in partnership and through providing a new depot reception. The Council's secure financial status facilitates investment in customer access.
- 80 Despite the commitment and track record outlined, the Council still has to deliver on some customer access related targets. The corporate improvement plan included targets for a training plan for customer care, a review of the consultation strategy and the use of complaints. The Council did not meet the targets set out in these areas and has set delayed targets for delivery. As a result, there is a small degree of inconsistency as to how much customer access improvements are prioritised and acted upon.

## The capacity and systems to deliver performance and improvement

- 81 The Council has developed systems to monitor improvement which are continuing to improve.
- 82 The Council has a corporate performance management framework in place. This now includes regular monitoring, by councillors and officers, of performance against BVPI's and the Council has developed a number of local indicators to widen the information available on performance. Although, there has not been a deliberate focus on developing customer access indicators some service specific indicators do allow the Council to monitor performance in this area. For example monitoring the speed at which calls are responded to by reception staff. This framework can be adapted to monitor other aspects of performance such as customer access and care. Further improvements are planned through the Devon Improvement Group to the Council's performance management framework which is to be externally assessed by IDeA.
- 83 Service standards exist and are publicised but the Council is working to develop further standards and re-launch them to the public to ensure consistency, identify any gaps in the provision of standards and ensure they are set at the appropriate level. The standards currently in development are based on customer feedback and are the subject of ongoing consultation with staff within the Council. Once consultation is complete, the standards will be reviewed and refined. The Council will then launch them formally and highlight their existence in the media, on their website and in council communications. Customers will therefore be clear on what they can expect from the services the Council provides.
- 84 The Council uses project management principles to ensure that objectives are delivered. The customer access strategy is being developed as individual projects, with clear scoping documents and reporting/monitoring arrangements. This approach, adopted in other aspects of council business as well, has provided clarity on roles and responsibilities as well as a clear means of overseeing progress. This will help to ensure that risks are managed and that delays in implementation are picked up early and performance corrected.
- 85 The Council has actively sought to address social exclusion in service planning. The checklist, developed through an LSP working group, is now being used to develop service planning and ensure that services strive to be inclusive in provision. So far, one service – housing – has successfully adopted the checklist and as a result potential impacts of policy decisions on the whole community are identified. As this checklist becomes more embedded in council practice, council services should become more inclusive. The Council also has a clear strategy for dealing with gypsies and travellers ensuring that this group is not excluded from accessing services.
- 86 Scrutiny within the Council is not yet fully effective. Whilst task and finish groups have provided an effective basis for future decision making, notably through work on transport and affordable housing, the wider scrutiny role has been used inconsistently. As a result, the Council is currently re-structuring the committees and have agreed to a move to scrutiny being led by the opposition party. A more effective post decision scrutiny function could ensure that the Council's customer focus remains strong.

- 87 The Council has yet to develop a specific set of access related indicators and targets, although many of the service indicators and standards relate directly and indirectly to customer access and focus. Currently, individual services have developed indicators which provide a partial view of the extent to which services are accessible, but there has not been a consistent set developed across the Council which would ensure that corporate objectives are being delivered. The absence of such indicators and targets make it difficult to establish if progress is being made or not.
- 88 Individual performance targets do not reflect council objectives to improve access and customer focus. The Council has a comprehensive appraisal system which has been effectively implemented with most staff receiving an up to date appraisal. However, it is acknowledged that target setting needs to be refined to ensure it is customer focused and supports the corporate objectives of the Council. The absence of clear customer focused target setting inhibits staffs ability to understand their contribution to improving service delivery reflecting customer needs and the organisations ability to monitor individual performance in this area.

## **The integration of Best Value principles into day-to-day management**

- 89 The Council has successfully integrated best value into its day to day management.
- 90 The Council has shown a strong and sustained improvement in customer accessible services and performance management systems are being developed to consistently drive improvement. Service users recognise these improvements with improved service customer satisfaction and a clear understanding of improvements made in accessing services.
- 91 The Council has used best value principles effectively to challenge current practices. Around 80 per cent of services have undertaken a best value review and this has created a culture where challenge is accepted as the norm. The reviews were also carried out in order of priority, therefore avoiding wasting resources on relatively unimportant areas. These priorities were reviewed and as a result the review of IT was brought forward and a cross-cutting review of communications was undertaken. The review of communications highlighted deficiencies in the Council's approach to accessing services and as a consequence the access to services strategy was developed. Staff and councillors state that the reviews have been useful in determining the future direction of individual services and functions.
- 92 Best value reviews have delivered improvements in service delivery. Many service reviews have delivered changes to the way the public receives services but in particular the communications best value review has fundamentally refocused the Council as a whole on the importance of good customer care. It has been one of the primary reasons for the current work in developing a customer access strategy as well as delivering more immediate improvements as outlined above.
- 93 The Council routinely involves staff in service planning. There are annual service planning days where services meet to determine the future direction of the service or changes to the way in which the service should be delivered. This also includes using examples from front line staff of the feedback they receive from customers. This is a powerful way of ensuring that staff are empowered, committed and also can shape the services they deliver.

- 94 One area of weakness is in relation to the systematic assessment of value for money. The Council has yet to establish a means by which it can formally assess the value for money provided by its services except on a project by project basis. As a result, the Council may miss opportunities to deliver services more efficiently.

## Summary

- 95 The Council is committed to continuous improvement and demonstrates a clear ownership of problems and a willingness to adapt service delivery to improve customer access. The Council shows commitment to ensuring its plans and strategies are integrated and support corporate and community objectives to improving access and customer focus.
- 96 The Council has proven capacity to implement improvements which is reflected in good service KPI performance and achievement of targets. The Council has invested significantly in its IT and performance management framework. The Council is financially sound and is developing an access to services strategy underpinned by clear project planning to further enhance its ability to strategically improve customer access. This is supported by service planning which clearly identify access and diversity issues.
- 97 Significant improvements have been made to the Council's performance management systems where regular reporting of KPI's and some local indicators is routinely undertaken by councillors and officers. However, the Council recognise that further improvements need to take place to ensure local indicators can effectively monitor customer access issues, individual performance management ensure target setting reflects more clearly a customer focus and scrutiny is more effective. The Council is open and receptive to external challenge and with over 80 per cent of best value reviews complete has successfully integrated best value into part of the day job. However, further development is required to ensure the Council can effectively demonstrate value for money.
- 98 The prospects for improving access to services in East Devon are promising.

## 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:

- ◆ East Devon DC Customer Access self assessment;
- ◆ six self assessment service based case studies;
- ◆ executive, scrutiny and task and finish committee minutes;
- ◆ PI indicators;
- ◆ Best Value review of communications;
- ◆ communications policy;
- ◆ community plan 2004;
- ◆ complaints procedure;
- ◆ consultation strategy and calendar;
- ◆ various council newsletters and leaflets;
- ◆ customer access strategy;
- ◆ draft project plans for contact centre and access to all;
- ◆ various service plans;
- ◆ IEG3 and IEG4 statements;
- ◆ e-government strategy;
- ◆ website statistics;
- ◆ Equality and Diversity Policy;
- ◆ appraisal scheme;
- ◆ home working policy; and
- ◆ residents' consultation results.

### 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 of the District and including visits to Exmouth town hall, Exmouth depot, Budleigh Salterton Skate park, and 24 hour call centre;
- ◆ visit to main council offices reception area;
- ◆ website review; and
- ◆ limited number of enquiries made to the Council via telephone and e-mail.

## List of people interviewed

James Corrigan	ICT Projects and Information Manager
Bob Darbourne	Policy Manager
Jill Elson	Portfolio Holder - Communities
Karime Hassan	Corporate Director - Environment
Stuart Hughes	Portfolio Holder - Communications
Peter Jeffs	Corporate Director - Communities
Karen Jenkins	Head of Organisational Development
Brian Kohl	Property Services Manager
Ann Liverton	Chair of Standards Committee
Denise Lyon	Corporate Director – Central Services
Debbie Meakin	FOI Officer
Diccon Pearse	Corporate Director - Economy
Rachel Pocock	Head of Legal and Member Services
Chris Powell	Head of ICT
Sara Randall Johnson	Leader of Council
Nick Stephen	Communications Officer
Tony Wilkinson	Portfolio Holder - Resources
Mark Williams	Chief Executive
Team Leaders Focus Group	
Frontline Staff Focus Group	
Councillors Focus Group	
Community Partnerships Focus Group	
Residents Focus Group	

## 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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.