

Select Committee Culture and Recreation – 15 September 2005

Report of the Director of the Urban Environment

CPA – Cultural Services

Purpose of Report

- 1 To inform Committee of the outcome of the Audit Commission Inspection of the Council's Cultural Service undertaken in March of this year.

Background

2. Following the Regular Performance Inspection (RPA) of Cultural Services undertaken in 2004 it was considered that further inspection work, by means of a Comprehensive Performance Inspection (CPA) of the service should be undertaken in early 2005.
3. The inspection required the Council to undertake a self-assessment of the service (Appendix1) against the key lines of enquiry produced by the Audit Commission. The inspection model is designed in such a way as to come to two judgements about the service.
 - Judgement 1 – How good is the service?
 - Judgement 2 – What are the services prospects for improvement?
4. In determining how good the service is the key questions that inspectors look to answer are:-
 - What is the Council trying to achieve through its Cultural Service? ie what are the links to Council, regional and national priorities.
 - Have these priorities been achieved? ie where is the evidence of the services contribution and how good is the user experience.
5. So far as the service's prospects for improvement inspectors look at the Council's capacity and systems to deliver its ambitions and drive improvement through service leadership, financial and performance management, equality and diversity and partnership, and also whether the Council's plans for the service area sustain a clear focus on achieving its ambitions for Cultural Services.
6. As part of the inspection, the inspectors were provided with the self-assessment and supporting documentation, they obtained the views of external stakeholders such as the Regional Agencies for Sport, Arts and Heritage; they visited the Council for a week conducting interviews with staff, elected members and other stakeholders.

7. The full report detailing the inspectors 'in depth' judgement of the quality of the service and its prospects for improvement can be found in the Members room or can be accessed via the Audit Commission's website (www.audit-commission.gov.uk) .
8. In summary the service is 'Fair' and that there has been significant progress made in a number of areas since the RPA in 2004. Furthermore the inspectors noted that there have been important developments in both the profile of the service and in the services themselves.
9. In the inspectors view:

Culture has an increasing profile within the Council and is no longer considered 'bottom of the Council's priorities for investment'

 - In the revised community plan one of the proposed five key challenges addresses the cross-cutting theme of culture. This is being developed in consultation with the community where it is emerging that local people recognise and value culture; and
 - The contribution that culture can make to the six new themes within the Council plan is beginning to be recognised; for example, the liveability project has been included in the top 15 priorities.
10. In terms of service delivery the inspectors found that:
 - Services are generally well-run on a day-to-day basis by cultural services staff who are motivated, enthusiastic and committed;
 - Satisfaction rates for libraries are amongst the best performing Councils, performance against library standards is improving and new technology is enhancing the range of services they deliver such as new computers for public use; and
 - Built facilities are improving with the maintenance backlog in leisure facilities and DDA access being addressed.
11. However, there are some key areas for further improvement, including, as set out below under prospects for improvement, the lack of a strategic framework and vision for culture in Dudley. Also:
 - Satisfaction rates for sport and leisure facilities, arts and parks are below average when compared to similar councils;
 - Quality user information is not routinely used or available to inform service provision and improvements; and
 - The Council is not clear whether the low cost of the services constitutes value for money.
12. This final point is somewhat contentious as it is the Council's view, as detailed in the Value For Money appraisal that has been undertaken, that in each of the service areas given that levels of usage and satisfaction are higher than the equivalent spend level for the Council's family group, it is logical to assume that value for money is being achieved.

13. With regard to the services prospects for improvement the inspectors have judged that at this stage these are 'uncertain'. This is in spite of the inspectors themselves acknowledging that there has been:-

"a demonstrable improvement in key areas of the service since the RPA 2004, which described the service then as low priority characterised by under investment".

Of these changes the report highlights the following:

- The profile of cultural services within the Council is increasing and councillors are demonstrating their support for the service by investing in it and by being willing to take difficult decisions, such as the closure of a leisure facility, to ensure improvement across the service is achieved;
- The Council's community leadership role and strategic role in partnership working is developing and being recognised; and
- Recent significant investment by the Council and its success in attracting external funding are resulting in increased cultural opportunities for local people and improvements that the public will notice. These include improved built facilities, which are becoming better maintained and more accessible and a developing range of activities in parks and libraries.

14. Despite these acknowledged improvements the inspection judgement of 'uncertain prospects' is given primarily due to the fact that the Council has yet to fully develop and put in place a strategic framework and shared vision for the service, which defines the Council's priorities for cultural services and the role it, and its partners, will take in delivering them. This is a key missing element highlighted by the RPA 2004 that has yet to be fully addressed. Without it, it is unclear whether the improvements already being made are achieving the most impact for local people and can be sustained.

15. In addition the inspectors identified other areas of the service need to develop further to support continued improvement as follows:-

- Performance management is not yet fully effective or outcome-focused;
- Information is not being used effectively to support service delivery or drive improvement; and
- There is no systematic approach at service level to identify customer needs or user satisfaction to improve delivery particularly to the diverse community.

16. In addition to the general review of Cultural Services the inspection also focussed onto two specific areas:

- Health
- Equality and Diversity

to establish what the impact of Cultural Services was to these areas.

17. Both evaluations identified that a significant amount of work was taking place, in particular the health and the physical activity agenda with some innovative and leading partnership working taking place.

However as with other aspects of the inspection the measurement of outcomes and evaluation of impact are not as developed as they should be which could result in the Council not being clear whether they are achieving what they have set out to achieve.

18. In order to address these issues the report concludes with the following recommendations to the Council that it:-

- i) Work with the LSP and other partners to develop a clear vision for culture in the Borough;
- ii) Communicate a coherent and sustainable strategy as to how cultural services in Dudley will contribute to that vision which:
 - Identifies priorities for improvement and clarifies and communicates clearly the Council's contribution;
 - Establishes an outcome-based approach to performance management that measure impact and value for money;
 - Ensures that resources are aligned accordingly and there is an accountability for delivery; and
 - Ensures data is collected, evaluated and used to identify areas for improvement and inform target setting and critically to understand what impact its investment is having on the quality of life for the diverse range of local people.

19. Members will be aware of the Dudley Borough Challenge 20;20 exercise through which a future vision of the Borough is being developed. Within this, as has been advised by both ODPM and DCMS, the role of culture in achieving the wider vision is acknowledged and discussions are on-going with the Chief Executive of the Local Strategic Partnership as to what format and structure this should be progressed through the LSP.

20. Furthermore work on a Cultural Strategy, principally for the Council, but to include partners is progressing well and is the subject of a separate report on the Committee's agenda.

Finance

21. There are no immediate financial implications arising from this report.

Law

22. Section 19 of the Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1976 empowers the Council to provide recreational facilities in its area.

23. Section 111 of the Local Government Act, 1972 enables the Council to do anything which is calculated to facilitate or is conducive or incidental to the discharge of its functions under the 1976 Act.

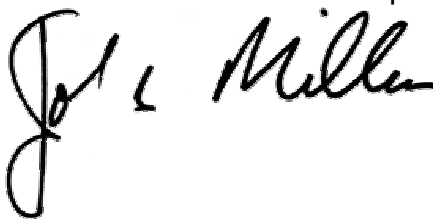
Equality Impact

24. The Cultural Services CPA inspection included an analysis of the services impact on equality and diversity. The findings of the inspection will be used to assist in the development of further policies and programmes.

Recommendation

25. It is recommended that:-

- The Committee considers the content of this report and comments accordingly.



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Background Papers:

- Inspection report – Cultural Services : Dudley MBC (Audit Commission July 2005)
- RPA Cultural Services – Dudley MBC (Audit Commission March 2004)