



meeting **Community Services Select Committee**

date **8th November 2004**

agenda item number

Report of the Director of Culture and Community

Cultural Services Inspection

Purpose of the Report

1. This report summarises the findings of the recent Audit Commission inspection of the council's cultural services. It also presents the proposed improvement plan.
2. The Audit Commission report is available on the Audit Commission's website. Hard copies have been circulated separately to members of the committee.

Summary

3. Overall, the Audit Commission concludes that the cultural services in Nottinghamshire are **good with excellent prospects for improvement**.

Background

4. The Council agreed to be inspected by the Audit Commission as part of a programme of whole service inspections of cultural services. The inspection involved:
 - a. A process of self assessment leading to the submission of a report by the council with associated evidence. This process was supported by a reference group of members from this select committee.
 - b. An inspection by the Audit Commission which involved them reviewing the evidence submitted and undertaking a series of reality checks in Nottinghamshire. The reality checks included
 - Observing the community services select committee
 - Visiting: Mansfield County Contact; Ladybrook library; Bestwood Country Park; and Rufford Country Park and ceramics gallery/centre

- Holding focus groups with: middle managers, frontline staff, stakeholders and partners, and members of the public
 - Individual interviews with a range of councillors and officers.
5. The inspection covers cultural services as defined by the DCMS including arts, sports, libraries, archives, country parks, play, and the natural and built heritage. Consequently, although much of the focus was on the Culture and Community Department's services, other services involved are in the Education and Environment departments.
 6. The Audit Commission has recently published reports on cultural services provided and supported by several local authorities, including Nottinghamshire. The overall picture shows that of the 15 cultural services inspections published over the last year relating to comparable local authorities:
 - a. Only Nottinghamshire rates as good with excellent prospects for improvement
 - b. 10 are considered to be good with promising prospects for improvement
 - c. 1 is good with uncertain prospects for improvement
 - d. 3 are judged to provide fair cultural services.

All these reports are also on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/subject.asp?CategoryID=ENGLISH^576^SUBJECT^115

7. The judgement that cultural services in Nottinghamshire are good is a very pleasing outcome in that it reflects positively on services which have been built up over a period of time. This is based on the longstanding cross-party support for culture, investment from the Council in cultural services, as well as hard work and commitment from staff at all levels. The judgement that there are excellent prospects for improvement also reflects more recent changes within the department with the increased capacity to strengthen its performance, and shows the Commission's confidence in the Council's ability to deliver its ambitions.

A good service

8. In forming the view that the cultural services provided or supported by the County Council are **good** the inspectors made the following judgements.
9. The council is clear about the value and importance of culture and the impact it can have on people's lives. To achieve its ambitions the council supports a wide range of cultural activities and achieves significant outcomes which contribute to improving the quality of life and sense of well-being. Through its cultural services the council provides a vibrant cultural environment.
10. Within the council, culture is an all encompassing tool which can change people's lives for the better. It is used to bring together all the things people

enjoy about life, and to give people and communities a chance to realise their potential and allow them to develop new skills and motivation.

11. The council is clear about what it wants to achieve through cultural services. Councillors and officers are clear about regional, national and local priorities and these are embedded into the delivery of services. Strategic documents, including the community strategy, cultural strategy, and the strategic plan link together well.
12. Culture underpins the council's priorities. It is understood to make a vital contribution to the local economy, and is used as a key enabler, for example for promoting independence, helping young people at risk of exclusion into education and training, and raising community aspirations.
13. The all-party commitment to the value and importance of culture, and the history of investing in cultural services has translated into a wide range and depth of services and activities.
14. Cultural services and activities are developed in line with the identified needs and aspirations of local people. An extensive programme of consultation and evaluation ensures that local people, staff, and councillors are involved in service review and development. Consultation is used in determining the pattern of service delivery.

Excellent Prospects for Improvement

15. The Audit Commission judges that the council has '**excellent**' prospects for improvement in its cultural services. This is demonstrated by the following.
16. Cultural services are well positioned and are a key player within the council. The leadership of the council and the department is dynamic and effective. Business and improvement planning is based on up to date needs analysis and a clear and informed understanding of the profile of the community that the council serves. There is widespread understanding of the impact of cultural services on people's lives.
17. Culture is seen to underpin the successful achievement of strategic aims. There is a keen drive to improve the range of cultural opportunities for local people and a long term commitment to investing for the future.
18. The council is showing progress and improvement in its service delivery. Significant improvements have been achieved in usage and levels of satisfaction. Increasing external accreditations, awards and external funding add to the picture of an innovative and unique package of services. Local people and communities are involved effectively in the development of services, especially young people.
19. The council has the capacity and systems to deliver its cultural ambitions and drive improvements in cultural services for all sections of the community. There is clear and effective shared ownership and understanding of the value of cultural services to achieving strategic priorities. Service priorities and

ambitions are understood and owned by staff at all levels who are empowered to respond innovatively to local needs

20. Performance management is developing into a strong and effective tool across the whole department. Targets are set and performance monitored. The impact of the council's cultural activities are evaluated at several different levels, i.e.
 - a. Wider outcome measures, such as the Condition of Nottinghamshire and Quality of Life indicators, are used to assess how far cultural services contribute to well-being.
 - b. Increasingly, the impact of projects and activities is assessed in a structured fashion, including feedback through structured anecdotes.
 - c. User and resident satisfaction levels are regularly measured.
 - d. However, there is further work to be done on pulling this together to assess the overall impact of cultural services.
21. The council ensures that cultural services are delivered in a cost effective way by using external providers and other agencies and partners where efficiency and effectiveness can be improved and resources used to their full capacity.

Improvement Plan

22. While it is highly satisfying to have such a positive endorsement from the Audit Commission on our performance on cultural services this should not be seen as grounds for complacency. The process of self assessment as well as the inspection itself identified several areas for improvement.
23. **Measuring Impact** Measuring the impact of culture is always problematic, although the inspection report recognises work progress that the council has made in ensuring that cultural services support the council's objectives.
24. There is good practice within the department in measuring impact and revising what we do – for instance
 - for many events and activities we are explicit beforehand about what we are trying to achieve and subsequently measure how well we achieve our objectives
 - the youth service is implementing a system which will allow it to track the achievements of young people involved with the service
 - the suite of Quality of Life indicators is designed to measure how well the partners are affecting the life in the county through the community strategy
25. But there is a need to link outcome measures so that we know how well we are doing across all our services and what difference we make across the board. Further work is in hand to develop qualitative outcome measures into

an effective and useful tool as part of strengthening our performance planning.

26. **Improving our performance** The inspection report confirmed that the council provides good services which are appreciated by the people of Nottinghamshire. Evidence on levels of satisfaction and the quality of services were confirmed by reality checks. However, there is no room for complacency – we are good but can and will get better.
27. Specifically, there is a need to:
 - a. Continue improving the performance of the library service – including increasing the number of library users
 - b. Deliver the improvements at Rufford and Sherwood country parks
 - c. Work to improve the levels of satisfaction
 - d. Look to invest in our buildings when they are no longer fit for purpose
28. The expectations people have of how they access services are changing. Many services provided by the public and private sectors in can be accessed in different ways and at different times. It is important that our services keep pace with these expectations. This means:
 - Delivering services electronically where appropriate
 - Improving access through the telephone
 - Looking for opportunities to integrate service delivery
29. Nottinghamshire has always been an ambitious council. Although as a department we have stopped doing things as needs and priorities have changed, the inspectors felt that we need to be more explicit about what are our priorities and, perhaps more especially, what are lower priorities.
30. **Releasing our people's potential** The inspectors were particularly impressed with the enthusiasm, commitment, and quality of our staff. It remains an imperative for the department to find more ways of tapping this to provide innovative and imaginative solutions to problems and creative ways of improving our services.
31. **Developing a coherent marketing strategy** Although they recognise that the council provides and supports lots of good services the inspectors picked up that there is no brand of “culture” in Nottinghamshire. There is work needed to pull together our marketing activity to strengthen our relationship with our customers and add value to our services. This will include:
 - Looking for opportunities for “cross-selling” and for synergies between different services
 - Ensuring that we communicate effectively with “hard to reach” groups

- Examining the ways in which we communicate with our customers.
32. **Structure of cultural services** The range of services covered by the inspection straddled several departments and a number of divisions. The current organisational structure was arrived at as a result of demands and pressures over time. As with all structures it was the best fit at the time. As circumstances change the structure may need to change. Some of these changes will be relatively minor others may be more significant. We need to keep the structure under review and handle any changes through the council's established procedures.
33. **Community Strategy and Strategic Plans** The council's overall objectives are determined by the community strategy and the strategic plan. Work is in hand to achieve better alignment between these different strategic processes.

Recommendation

34. It is recommended that:
- I. The proposed improvement plan for cultural services be endorsed
 - II. Further reports on progress on implementing the plan be brought to the select committee as appropriate

Mick Burrows
Director of Culture and Community

Background Papers Available for Inspection

Nil