

Customer focus: focusing on service users and diverse communities

Accessibility and user focus is about refocusing services around the needs of all sections of the community. An accessible and user focused organisation places the customer at the heart of the service delivery, it knows what local people want and has organised itself to deliver this. Developing a more user-focussed approach is not just a regulatory obligation. It is also part of good management and providing high-quality services. However, comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) identified the linked themes of user focus and citizen engagement remains a major issue for local government.

Access to local information and services remains a major issue for local government. Local people often find access to council services difficult and confusing. Local people are not clear about how to access the right service in councils particularly in areas where there are two tiers of local government. Local people are demanding easier access and more access outside traditional core hours. The government also see customer access as important and have identified 7 key tests of the success of the local government of the future in service delivery.¹ Other national drivers include the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 and the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995, the national e-government strategy and the recently published ODPM priority outcomes that local authorities are expected to achieve by December 2005.

Improved user focus is also one of the Audit Commission's six strategic priorities identified in our strategic plan 2004-07. We have made a commitment to ensure that:

'Equality, diversity and a focus on those who need and use services will be core to audit, inspection and improvement. We will strive to reduce the barriers that may inhibit fair access to services, information, treatment and employment. We will encourage working across organisational boundaries. We will assess the extent to which the views of service users are sought and listened to by public service providers, especially views from those communities whose voices are often not heard, and we will exemplify this approach in its own work.'

Our work in North Dorset, East Dorset and Christchurch Districts covers three of the six councils. It arises out of improvement planning following comprehensive performance assessments of the councils. This process identified a number of issues which were common to the councils to varying degrees and each of the councils has identified customer

¹ Strong Leadership – Quality Public Services; White Paper – joined up, accessible, delivered or supported electronically, delivered jointly, delivered seamlessly, open and accountable, and used by e-citizens.

focus as one of its priorities for improvement. Fundamental to these is how councils are implementing a user-focused approach to service delivery and improvement.

This paper sets out the **key lines of enquiry** (KLOE). These reflect the proposals set out in the recent consultation paper '*A modern approach to inspecting services*' which will be applied to our inspection work from 1 April 2005. As part of the new methodology all councils will be asked to complete a self-assessment against the KLOE. We will also be asking each council to write a short service description which sets out how the council approaches customer focus. This should include details of how the service is delivered by the council, where responsibilities lie both corporately and in service departments, overall budget and staffing levels.

This new methodology retains the two scored judgements used in previous service inspections. We will apply this approach to all the district councils in Dorset.

The term '**service**' used throughout the KLOE shall for the purposes of customer focus inspections and performance work be taken to mean all aspects of the council's work which influences its strategic approach to customers and impact upon their experience of services.

For the purposes of inspection and performance work '**customer**' includes the direct users of council services, whether they are the designated recipient of particular services, such as social care clients, or customers of choice, for example users of cultural services. It also includes the citizens and diverse communities within its area whose well-being the council has a duty to promote.

How Good is the Service?		
Question:	Key Lines of Enquiry	Self- Assessment
1: What has the service aimed to achieve?	1.1 How well do the aims of the service fit with wider corporate ambitions, strategies and priorities for improvement? 1.2 How well do the aims of the service balance local and national priorities? 1.3 How have users been involved in setting standards?	

<p>2: Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?</p>	<p>2.1 Is the organisation delivering what it promised to do?</p> <p>2.2 Is the organisation delivering a high quality service from the point of view of users?</p> <p>2.3 Do relevant performance indicators “indicate” that the service is a good one?</p> <p>2.4 Does the delivery of the service embrace equality, diversity and human rights?</p> <p>2.5 Does the service meet the needs of all sections of the community, paying particular attention to the needs of minority and disadvantaged groups?</p> <p>2.6 Is the service accessible, responsive and based on a robust understanding of local need?</p> <p>2.7 Are arrangements for consulting with and engaging users and the local community well developed and effective?</p> <p>2.8 Are communications to users and non users easily available, clear and transparent?</p> <p>2.9 Are the needs of citizens and users at the heart of decision making about the design and delivery of services?</p>	
<p>3: Is the service delivering value for money?</p>	<p>3.1 How do the organisation’s costs compare to others, allowing for local context, performance and legitimate policy choices?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do the service costs compare with others? 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What external local factors affect costs and how do adjusted costs compare?• Are costs commensurate with service delivery, performance and the outcomes achieved?• Do costs reflect policy decisions? <p>3.2 What evidence is there about whether value for money is improving and efficiency gains are being made?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Are efficiency savings being achieved? <p>3.3 How is value for money managed, including through partnership and procurement and taking a long term view?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ How is value for money monitored and is performance benchmarked?▪ What has been done to improve value for money, especially through partnerships and procurement?▪ Do procurement and other spending decisions take account of full long term costs?▪ Does external investment support agreed service priorities?	
--	---	--

What are the Prospects for Service Improvement?

Question:	Key Lines of Enquiry	Self-Assessment
4: What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	4.1 How effectively has the service successfully and consistently delivered benefits to users and the community through implementing:- <ul style="list-style-type: none">• their own corporate and service improvement plans, whether following a best value review or equivalent or as a result of legislative requirements;• the recommendations from previous inspection reports from regulators or other regulatory or improvement work relevant to the services inspected, such as external audit or peer review;• service improvements as a result of learning from its own experience and from others, for example complaints systems, customer surveys, staff and customer suggestions and best practice?	
5: How well does the service manage performance?	5.1 Does the organisation have the right mechanisms and information to measure and manage performance effectively?	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are plans for further improvement ambitious, robust and addressing the right issues? • Are the intended outcomes and timescales for achieving them clear? • Is there regular monitoring of progress against plans including the delivery of outcomes? <p>5.2 Does the organisation have a performance management culture and take effective action to drive improvement?</p>	
<p>6: Does the service have the capacity to improve?</p>	<p>6.1 Do managers and councillors exercise effective leadership to the service?</p> <p>6.2 Are officers and councillors clear about what they are responsible and accountable for, and are they supported by robust decision-making processes?</p> <p>6.3 Is the service maximising internal capacity to deliver service improvement?</p> <p>6.4 Does the service utilise the capacity from other sources for example through competitive procurement, external investment, the community and partners to deliver improvement?</p>	

