

# Isle of Wight Council

Wight Leisure

*October 2002*

## Improving public services

The Government has placed a duty of local councils to deliver services to clear standards – of cost and quality – by the most economic, efficient and effective means available.<sup>1</sup> Best value is a challenging framework 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's Inspection Service 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 on the ground;
- ◆ identify failing services where remedial action may be necessary; and
- ◆ identify and disseminate best practice.

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<sup>1</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.

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# Summary and recommendations

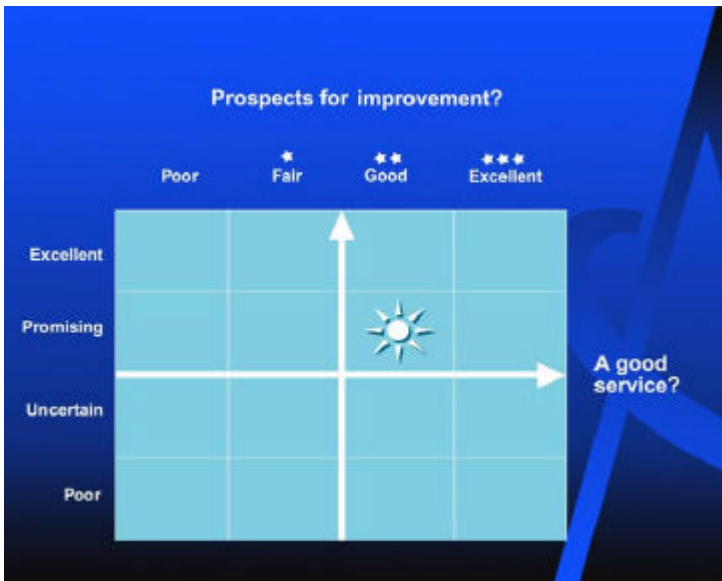
## Summary

- 1 The Isle of Wight Council is a unitary authority in the south east of England and is unique in that it is the only island in that region. The population of the island is 130,000 of which 0.7 per cent are from ethnic minority communities.
- 2 The 'Island First' group, a coalition of Liberal Democrats and Independents with 30 (19 Liberal Democrat and 11 Independents) of the 48 seats, leads the Council. The opposition consists of 12 Conservative, 4 Labour and 2 other parties.
- 3 The Council employs 5,714 staff. This figure includes teachers – and lunchtime supervisors – and casual staff across all services.
- 4 The leisure service manages five indoor leisure sites, eight all-year and eight seasonal outdoor facilities, four outreach services, and a programme of 42 events each year. The Service costs around £1.8 million in subsidy. Wight Leisure won the contract to manage the Service and began in April 1997. Wight Leisure is a department of the Council, but it operates at 'arms length'.
- 5 The Service has 1.7 million recorded users each year and employs 384 staff at peak times – including up to 100 in summer – plus 40 volunteers. It has a £7 million property portfolio.

## Scoring the Service

- 6 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>2</sup>: Isle of Wight Council – Wight Leisure



*‘a good service that has promising prospects for improvement’*

- 7 We judge the Service to be good because we found the following strengths:
- ◆ User satisfaction is high.
  - ◆ The Council and Wight Leisure carried out widespread consultation about leisure services, using methods specific to the review, and to the local cultural strategy. MORI surveys used as part of the review consultation identified and included the views of non-users of leisure services.
  - ◆ The leisure centres provide and support a wide range of programmes and activities for all age ranges and abilities, and the events programme balances the needs of residents and visitors while contributing to the economic prosperity of the island.
  - ◆ Wight Leisure works to ISO 9002, a quality management system that follows prescribed standards. The standards work well, have a clear audit trail, and make a real difference to the standards of service delivery and customer care.
  - ◆ The Service makes an important contribution to the Council’s corporate objectives, and in particular to the priorities it has set for social inclusion and improving transport links. For example, ‘One Card’ the leisure access scheme, provides concessions for several target groups.

<sup>2</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.

- 8 However, our inspection found that several features needed further attention, including:
- ◆ We found the links to other Council departments to be inconsistent, with some good examples of joint working, but others where it did not appear so. It is important that Wight Leisure and some Council departments improve links to ensure a co-ordinated approach to service delivery.
  - ◆ Leisure facilities vary in quality, and some of the buildings are in need of refurbishment. Condition surveys of all the buildings that Wight Leisure manages show there is a backlog in maintenance issues of about £300,000. Although the business plan for Wight Leisure does allocate some additional funds to building maintenance, it is not clear how or if the Service will deal with this backlog.
  - ◆ The Council has completed an audit of access for people with disabilities, to meet its duties under the Disability Discrimination Act, but again, it is not clear if or when the Service will deal with the issues.
- 9 We believe the prospects for improvement are 'promising' because:
- ◆ The Council has carried out extensive consultation with the residents of the Isle of Wight, and it used the information to develop the improvement plan for Wight Leisure.
  - ◆ The best value review thoroughly examined the need for the service and for improvements, and the best way of delivering those improvements.
  - ◆ The Council believes that a good leisure service is important to the health and fitness of island residents, and to the economic well-being of the island as a whole through its contribution to tourism.
  - ◆ The Council has decided that the establishment of the Not for Profit Distributing Organisation (NPDO) is the right way to improve the service, and it is now acting on this intention after considerable delay.
  - ◆ Wight Leisure has a track record of service improvements.
  - ◆ The Council is progressing with political and organisation changes to better equip it to deliver strong local government.
- 10 However, our inspection found that several matters need further attention, including:
- ◆ The changes to the Council's organisation are not yet complete, and continuing staff turnover at senior officer level has the potential to hinder further development.
  - ◆ The Council has agreed that the transfer of Wight Leisure to NPDO status should take place on 1 January 2003. However, the contractual arrangement between the Council and Wight Leisure, which will form the basis for the NPDO, is still subject to final negotiation.
  - ◆ Financing the improvement plan is dependent on reinvesting funds which will only be available should Wight Leisure achieve NPDO status. There is no contingency plan to deliver the improvements, should this not happen.

## Recommendations

- 11 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. The inspection team feels the Council should now take action to resolve some general, political, managerial and partnership issues.
- 12 We recommend that the Council should:
- ◆ develop a programme of planned and preventive maintenance for all the leisure facilities to improve their condition. This will lead to a better quality of experience for users of the service, and to meeting the needs of the Disability Discrimination Act by the 2004 deadline;
  - ◆ ensure the good levels of joint working, which are obvious between leisure services and some Council services, operate across all services;
  - ◆ set up formal staff appraisal within Wight Leisure, incorporating personal training and development plans;
  - ◆ conclude the negotiation of the contractual agreement for the establishing of the NPDO by the anticipated date of the end of October, so that the current uncertainty among staff is resolved and the proposed transfer date of 1 January 2003 is achieved; and
  - ◆ develop a programme to keep the momentum for change within the Council, with good communications so staff and councillors preserve their enthusiasm and vision.
- 13 We would like to thank the staff of Isle of Wight Council, particularly the staff of the Best Value Unit, the Education and Community Development Directorate, and Wight Leisure, who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

**Brian Degruchy**

**Neil Taggart**

**Inspectors**

**Dates of inspection: 12 – 16 August 2002**

**Email: [b-degruchy@audit-commission.gov.uk](mailto:b-degruchy@audit-commission.gov.uk)**

**[n-taggart@audit-commission.gov.uk](mailto:n-taggart@audit-commission.gov.uk)**

**For more information please contact:  
Audit Commission Inspection Service  
Southern Region  
Dominions House  
Lime Kiln Close  
Stoke Gifford  
Bristol,  
BS34 8SU  
[www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk)  
0117 988 7700**



# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 14 The Isle of Wight is in the south east of England and is unique in that it is the only island in the region. The island's population is 130,000 but there are also over 2.6 million visitors each year. Some 0.7 per cent of the population are from ethnic minority communities.
- 15 The Council is a county in its own right and is responsible for all local government services, including the Fire and Rescue Service. The Council was set up in 1995, merging the former Isle of Wight County Council with Medina and South Wight Borough Councils.
- 16 Predominately a rural area, the island covers 147 square miles, 23 miles east to west and 13 miles north to south. Nearly half (44 per cent) of the island's population live in the three main towns of Cowes, Ryde and Newport. UK or European landscape standards protect 70 per cent of the island, with almost 50 per cent defined as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. There are 44 Sites of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSI) and 27 miles of Heritage Coast.
- 17 The 2.6 million visitors to the island give over £300 million to the local economy, which results in almost 7,000 extra jobs – 15 per cent of all jobs. However, many of these are seasonal and therefore temporary and low paid. There are 4,670 companies on the island – 82 per cent of them employing fewer than ten people.
- 18 Of the island's working population:
  - ◆ 17 per cent work in manufacturing;
  - ◆ 15 per cent in tourism;
  - ◆ 12 per cent retail; and
  - ◆ 30 per cent in public administration.
- 19 Unemployment stands at 4.3 per cent (May 2001) compared with the regional and national averages of 1.8 and 3.2 per cent respectively. Of the Council's 48 wards, 15 are in the top 20 per cent of the most deprived areas nationally. The island also has a disproportionate number of elderly people, with 26 per cent of adults being of pensionable age. This compares with the national average of 18 per cent. There are a high number of single person households – 28 per cent against 10.6 per cent nationally. The island has the lowest earnings in the South East, and 25 per cent of the population receive state benefits.

## The Council

- 20 The Council comprises 48 councillors. The Island First group – a coalition of Liberal Democrat and independent councillors – has control. Currently a Cabinet and Leader model governs the business of the Council. The Council has an Executive of ten councillors, and there are six select committees responsible for policy development and for examining the Council's work. There are also three Regulatory Committees and a Standards Committee.
- 21 After a recent restructuring of Council departments, there are now four directorates:
- ◆ Education and Community Development;
  - ◆ Corporate and Environment Services;
  - ◆ Social Services and Housing; and
  - ◆ Finance and Information.
- In addition, the Council has responsibility for its own Fire and Rescue Service.
- 22 The Council's gross revenue budget for the year 2002/03 is £213 million – £133 million net.
- 23 The *Best Value Performance Plan 2001-02* sets out the Council's priorities. Five key values support the vision of 'Improving Island Life':
- ◆ listening to people;
  - ◆ working in partnership;
  - ◆ giving good service;
  - ◆ being open and fair; and
  - ◆ caring for our unique environment.
- 24 The Council has been slow to develop a corporate plan. However, it has now produced a draft corporate plan that is currently undergoing a two-month public consultation, and which the Council will consider in October 2002.
- 25 The corporate plan will feed into the community strategy, developed with the community, through the Local Strategic Partnership, *Island Futures*.

26 The vision of the corporate plan remains unchanged – to ‘Improve Island Life’. The Council intends to achieve this through seven revised key goals:

- ◆ providing high quality Council services;
- ◆ improving health, housing and the quality of life for all;
- ◆ encouraging job creation and economic prosperity;
- ◆ raising education standards and promoting lifelong learning;
- ◆ creating safe and crime-free communities;
- ◆ improving public transport and the highways infrastructure; and
- ◆ protecting the island’s natural, built and historic environment.

27 The Council will deliver these through:

- ◆ strong political and managerial leadership;
- ◆ strategically driven excellence in service delivery;
- ◆ improving community focus; and
- ◆ continuous organisational improvement and staff development.

## The Council’s best value review

28 The Council’s leisure service is managed by Wight Leisure within the Education and Community Development Directorate. The service consists of five indoor leisure facilities, eight all-year and eight seasonal outdoor facilities, four outreach services, and a programme of 42 events each year. The Service has 1.71 million recorded users each year and employs 384 staff at peak times. It has a property portfolio valued at £7 million.

29 The overall expenditure for the Service 2001/02 was over £5 million. This was offset by income of £3.2 million, leaving a subsidy of £1.8 million. This shows a rise of 26.75 per cent from the previous year 2000/01. This high increase resulted from a comprehensive review of the terms and conditions of Wight Leisure staff, which led to salary increases of between 3 and 18 per cent. Overall staff costs increased by £250,000. Staff costs amounted to 48 per cent of Wight Leisure’s budget in 2001/02.

30 The Council carried out a best value review of the Service in 2001/02. The review decided that:

‘the best way of maintaining the levels of continuous improvement as demonstrated by the service to date and of achieving the targets set out in the improvement plan, is to externalise the delivery of the Council’s leisure services currently provided through Wight Leisure to a Not for Profit Distributing Organisation (NPDO).’

- 31 Councillors accepted this alternative and the resulting seven improvement plan actions:
- ◆ make services more accessible by removing the transport barriers;
  - ◆ improve access to the services in general, supported by appropriate promotional material;
  - ◆ increase the range of existing leisure services and facilities provided or available to support tourism and the economy;
  - ◆ create a climate which allows greater financial flexibility;
  - ◆ provide more for young people;
  - ◆ improve the fabric of the existing facilities, thereby extending their life; and
  - ◆ provide education about health and fitness activities, such as doctors' referral schemes.

## How good is the Service?

### Are the aims clear and challenging?

- 32 Inspectors look to see how a council has agreed the key aims for the Service being inspected, how clear these aims are to the people that receive the service, and whether these reflect the corporate aims of the organisation as a whole.
- 33 Challenge is the key to achieving significant improvements in performance and targets set by the Council and Government. Without challenge, best value will be ineffective. It requires the Council to consider and demonstrate how a service contributes to its wider corporate aims and community plans.
- 34 The mission of the Service as set out in the *Wight Leisure Business Plan* is:
- ‘To provide a comprehensive range of high quality leisure services accessible to all which enhance the quality of life and strive to exceed the expectations of our customers.’
- 35 The business plan sets out the following aims:
- ◆ deliver a high quality leisure service accessible to all;
  - ◆ promote health, fitness and well-being;
  - ◆ encourage increased levels of access and participation;
  - ◆ support community regeneration and social inclusion;
  - ◆ improve community safety;
  - ◆ promote tourism, economic leisure and cultural development; and
  - ◆ provide opportunity for individuals in pursuit of sporting excellence.

- 36 Nine objectives support these aims.
- 37 The Wight Leisure service plan is part of the *Directorate of Education and Community Development Service Plan 2002-03*. The directorate service plan has clear links to corporate objectives through its mission, values, objectives and standards.
- 38 The objectives within the directorate service plan also link to the Council's key themes, such as social inclusion, improving transport and highways infrastructure, crime and disorder, and promoting economic prosperity.
- 39 The service plan lists improvement targets that link to the strategic aims and objectives of the Service, incorporating tasks, target dates, responsible officers, and the objectives to which each task contributes.
- 40 There are also clear links between the Service and the developing local cultural strategy. The Managing Director of Wight Leisure sits on the cultural strategy working group, and Wight Leisure sees and comments on all draft documents to ensure the wider cultural agenda deals with sport and leisure issues.
- 41 However, there is no direct link between staff development and corporate priorities, since the individual work plans of the staff within Wight Leisure do not have specific links to corporate objectives. There is also currently no formal appraisal system in place for staff at Wight Leisure.
- 42 In conclusion, the main operational objectives of the Service are clear and challenging, and there are specific service links to the directorate service plan, the developing local cultural strategy, and to corporate objectives. However, there are no direct links between the individual work plans of Wight Leisure staff and either the directorate service plan or the corporate objectives.

## Does the Service meet these aims?

- 43 Having considered the aims the Council has set for the Service, inspectors make an assessment of how well the Council is performing in meeting these aims. This includes an assessment of performance against specific service standards and targets and the Council's approach to measuring whether it is actually delivering what it sets out to do.
- 44 We assessed how well the Service is performing against the Council's aims and the Service's own aims. In this section, we will also assess the Service against the following four criteria:
- ◆ opportunities;
  - ◆ access;
  - ◆ quality of experience; and
  - ◆ reaching people.

## Opportunities

- 45 The range and quality of the facilities and services that the Council provides is an important influence on people's opportunity to undertake sports and leisure. We considered the range of services and facilities on offer to customers, whether the needs of all sections of the community are served, and how people are informed or consulted about the services on offer.
- 46 The Council has five indoor sites; The Heights, Waterside Pool and Café, squash at the Westridge Centre, Northwood House, used for functions, and the Medina Leisure Centre and Theatre, which is on the school site at the Medina High School. The theatre can seat over 400 people.
- 47 The Council also provides outdoor – all-year and seasonal – sites, including:
- ◆ Browns Golf Course and Café, used for family golf on the island since the 1930s;
  - ◆ the amenities in parks, gardens and grounds, including tennis, putting and bowls;
  - ◆ Ryde Harbour;
  - ◆ the Shanklin lift – providing access to the seafront; and
  - ◆ road trains at Ryde, Shanklin and Sandown.

### Some examples of the range of leisure services operated by Wight Leisure



- 48 The Service is also responsible for the hire and letting of sports pitches.
- 49 An annual events programme provides a wide range of community-based activity. We found that this programme of events is designed to attract interest from island residents and visitors alike. Events include:
- ◆ sports-related activities – such as the junior rugby festival, track and field championships, and the ‘ White Air ’ extreme sports – which attract competitors and spectators from across the island and the UK;
  - ◆ spectator-based attractions – such as the Seaside Summer Shows, Festival of Music, and the Classic Car Rally; and
  - ◆ major international yachting events – such as the renowned Cowes Week and Little Britain Challenge Cup.
- 50 Wight Leisure operates all these services under contract as part of the Education and Community Development Directorate.
- 51 Other services complement Wight Leisure. One of these is West Wight Sports Centre, managed by the West Wight Swimming Pools Trust which serves the western side of the island. There is also community-based dual use<sup>3</sup> provision on school sites at the Fairways Sports centre in Sandown and at the Ryde High School. The Council grant funds both the Swimming Pools Trust and the dual use sites. The school sites make their sports halls and other facilities available for community use in return. This arrangement complements and improves the services that the Council can offer to the general public.
- 52 The leisure centres and swimming pools provide and support a wide range of programmes and activities for all age ranges and abilities. Activities for the individual include exercise classes, fitness suites, swimming, squash, children’s activities, and 50-plus sessions, and there are swimming lessons and extensive club use for those taking part in team sports.
- 53 Specific activities are planned for people with disabilities, elderly and young people. For example, there is a Saturday Night Club for disabled youngsters at The Heights. The Isle of Wight autistic group also uses the sites, and regular 50-plus groups use each of the leisure centres.
- 54 The Council has proved successful at attracting external funding for areas of deprivation, such as the funding of a new fitness centre at the Westridge Centre. The Council’s capital programme, Single Regeneration Budget money and a loan and investment from Leisure Partners<sup>4</sup> will fund this £650,000 project. The project will include an 80-station fitness suite specifically designed to meet the needs of people with disabilities, a dance studio, and a crèche.

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<sup>3</sup> Dual use – agreement for shared use of leisure facilities between the Council and the school.

<sup>4</sup> Leisure Partners – a specialist leisure trust consultancy.

- 55 The opportunity to bid for funding for this project arose through discussions with the Council's Sports Development Manager, who passed information on to staff at Wight Leisure, who then put in a bid. This example shows the good working links between Wight Leisure and the sports development team.
- 56 The Council provides the sports development role through the Education and Community Development Directorate, with three main areas of work:
- ◆ general sports development, including the active programmes – active sports, active communities and active schools;
  - ◆ community development – concentrating initiatives on the 15 priority wards on the island; and
  - ◆ schools and education links.
- 57 We found that Wight Leisure also provides time for sports development at the leisure sites to run courses or training sessions to support sports development programmes.
- 58 There are also clear links between the service and the developing local cultural strategy. The Council has a clear timetable that will allow it to produce a local cultural strategy by the end of 2002. It is also consulting local people about the strategy. Over 100 people have attended six meetings for sports, leisure and cultural organisations held around the island. A later questionnaire asked groups what they wanted to see covered in the local cultural strategy, and 133 clubs and organisations responded to this.
- 59 However, the Service also has a number of weaknesses. We found the Council website difficult and confusing as a means of getting information on Wight Leisure. The pages we did find on the Council website had a limited content and were not easy to use. We did learn that Wight Leisure has its own dedicated website, but that there is no hyperlink to the Council site. We pointed this out to the Council early in the inspection week, and by the Friday it had solved the problem. The web pages of Wight Leisure are now accessible on the Council's website.
- 60 Although the Council has corporate targets for energy efficiency, there are none specifically set for the leisure centres. The Council's policy is to replace with the most energy-efficient units, but this is dependant on the finance available. Also, the Council has not addressed wider environmental efficiencies. However, we found that Wight Leisure has recently commissioned consultants to carry out an audit of environmental efficiencies at all of its leisure sites.
- 61 We found the links between Wight Leisure and some departments of the Council to be 'sporadic', with certain links working well, some that 'are improving', and the others 'not that good'. Examples relate to any contact for large events, such as Cowes Week and Wight in Bloom, 'where everyone works well and pulls together'. However, for the smaller events where the priority is not so high, co-operation is not so forthcoming and 'you have to start all over again'. It is important that Wight Leisure and other Council departments improve links to ensure a co-ordinated approach to service delivery.



- 62 There is also little competition to Wight Leisure in providing indoor leisure facilities, except for private gyms, or hotels with either small gyms, swimming pools, or both. Wight Leisure should ensure that it does not become complacent and should check any new competition that may develop or come onto the island in the future.
- 63 Based on this evidence, we consider that the Council provides a good range of leisure services and facilities on the island which meet the needs of local residents. However, because it has not specifically consulted with visitors to the island, it is uncertain if the Service meets their needs.

### Access

- 64 Access to facilities depends on a number of factors, including the location and geographical spread of facilities, prices charged, physical access, and the extent to which facilities are welcoming to everyone. Access is important because it directs existing and potential customers to what facilities exist, where and how they can find and get to them.
- 65 We checked signs to and from the facilities, and we found that in the main, they were clear and well located. The road signs lead users to the sites, and both exterior signs and the internal directional and information signs were of a high standard.
- 66 In general, the leisure centres and swimming pools are welcoming, with open plan reception areas. We found the reception areas are well laid out and have good public information. The exception to this is squash at the Westridge Centre, where the reception was a desk in the open space between the squash courts. This is of concern as the member of staff at this site is a lone worker, and because of the lack of security – both cash and computers are out in the open for all to see.
- 67 We telephoned the leisure centres and found staff to be helpful, knowledgeable and efficient. However, although Wight Leisure does have a standard procedure for answering telephone calls, this did not appear to be consistently used.
- 68 Improving transport links on the island is considered a corporate priority, given that 30 per cent of the island's population do not have access to a car. A scheme that is currently funded by the Council is Youth Mover, a bus/train ticket scheme offering a range of concessions to young people.

### Youth Mover – Travel concession pilot scheme

The Council has set aside a fund of £250,000 to initiate prime improvements that arise out of best value reviews. Wight Leisure has been successful in a bid for £50,000 to fund improvements to transport for youth. It intends to link this work to the existing scheme, 'Youth Mover'. The scheme is a concessionary fares ticket for students and is available to any full-time island resident student attending High School, Private School or College, who is between the ages of 14 and up to their 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. The Youth Mover scheme is accepted on scheduled services by Southern Vectis, Wightbus, Westbrook Travel and on the Island Line Railway, and it is available for purchase per term at £5 per person, or for the full academic year at £15. There is no charge if an individual qualifies for home-to-school transport, and a contribution is made towards the Isle of Wight scholars' term ticket holders.

- 69 We found that some young people view the Youth Mover scheme as overcomplicated and not responsive to their needs, and we understand that the Council does not have the means to monitor its usage beyond initial take-up of the scheme. In order to revise the scheme and bring it closer to the needs of young people, the main commercial bus operator is liaising with the youth organisation, Wight 2B Heard, and with Wight Leisure. It is hoped to link the scheme with Wight Leisure's 'One Card', which would expand its flexibility and also give the opportunity for gathering useful management information.
- 70 The Council has completed an audit of access for people with disabilities, in order to meet its obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act. The Council will concentrate first on immediate access to buildings, and then on movement within the buildings themselves. There is a budget allocation of £150,000 for the current financial year, which will start this work.
- 71 We found ramped access at most facilities for disabled users. However, the doors to the facilities are not automated, and there are no hearing loops or Braille/large print for visually impaired people. We therefore feel that it is uncertain that the Council will meet the 2004 deadline for DDA compliance.
- 72 Pricing policy is a key factor in helping the Council's social inclusion agenda and in reaching target groups. The responsibility for setting prices lies with the Council. In March 2002, the Council's executive also agreed a revision to the fees and charges made for leisure activities, allowing differential pricing providing concessions for several target groups, thereby meeting the social inclusion objectives of the Council.
- 73 The leisure access scheme that was devised as a result was One Card, which is described below.

#### Leisure Access Scheme – One Card

One Card is the Council's leisure access scheme and includes a discount card scheme for access to the facilities. There are three options with the One Card; option one covers swimming and water fitness classes, option two is racquet sports and swimming/water fitness, and option three is option two plus Tone Zone fitness activities. Also available are junior and student One Cards, Visitor One Card, and concessionary One Card. People in receipt of Income Support, Jobseekers Allowance, Severe Disablement Allowance, Housing Benefit, Council Tax Benefit or Disabled Persons Tax Credit are entitled to concessionary One Card.

- 74 Although the scheme is relatively new, it has been well supported. Almost 11,000 customers have joined the scheme since its introduction, and nearly 10,000 are still using the scheme. In order to advise changes to the scheme, monitoring of the uptake of the different categories takes place at regular intervals. It is also used as a promotional tool to reward regular users. We understand that Wight Leisure intends to add two more categories for eligibility to concessionary One Card in the coming year.

### Quality of experience

- 75 Inspectors assess the quality of services by such means as checking levels of customer satisfaction, consultation with users and potential users, mystery shopper visits, checking complaints procedures, and reviewing the results of previous consultation exercises. Attainment of quality standards and comments from partners are also indicators of service quality.
- 76 The quality of the experience is important in order to encourage people to use the services more and to attract new users.
- 77 The promotional literature available was of a high standard, and the sites were all clean and tidy. The staff at the leisure centres and in the parks were friendly, knowledgeable and helpful.

*‘The staff make you feel welcome and part of the centre, I have made many friends since I started coming here.’ (Regular user)*

- 78 A MORI residents' survey completed in 2000 showed that 59 per cent of all residents were satisfied with the services provided by Wight Leisure. Wight Leisure's customer satisfaction survey showed that 97 per cent were satisfied with the service. We found that this discrepancy was the result of all residents being included in the MORI survey, whereas only leisure centre users were involved in the Wight Leisure customer satisfaction survey.
- 79 Wight Leisure is accredited to ISO 9002, a quality management system it has had in place since July 2002, and which we examined while on site. The standards were well administered and had a clear audit trail. Staff at a focus group told us how the systems had made it easier to work at different sites, now that the systems and practices were consistent and were being recorded. We believe that the quality management system has made a real difference to the standards of service delivery and customer care.
- 80 Wight Leisure intends to further develop the quality standards with a view to obtaining 'Quest' registration for the main leisure facilities in 2003. Quest is a UK quality scheme specifically designed to meet the needs of the sport and leisure industry. It defines specific industry standards and good practice, with an emphasis placed firmly on customer needs. We understand that in 2003, Wight Leisure intends to replace ISO 9002 with Quest, and not to run both standards together. We believe this is the right approach.
- 81 The Leisure facilities we visited all had the complaints procedure – Talkback – displayed in prominent places, and the scheme was well promoted, including in the lift entrance at Shanklin and at kiosks within the parks and gardens.
- 82 All Talkback cards are analysed monthly in order to monitor complaints and react to recurring problems or issues. A good example of the effectiveness of the procedure was relating to a recurring cleanliness complaint at the Medina Leisure Centre. The system showed up excessive mud in the changing rooms on certain days, which was found to be caused by school children clambering up the grass bank as a short cut between the school and the leisure centre. The result was that Wight Leisure installed steps into the bank, and the problem was resolved.

- 83 Condition surveys have been carried out by property services for all of the buildings Wight Leisure operates, with all requirements identified and then prioritised on the basis of risk, for submission as budget bids. This survey shows a backlog in maintenance issues of approximately £300,000.
- 84 The buildings themselves were generally looking tired and in need of some refurbishment/investment. However, given their age, the buildings were very clean and well maintained. It was also pleasing to see that the leisure centres at The Heights and at the Medina Leisure Centre and Theatre had their own dedicated maintenance staff, which obviously contributes to this.

### Reaching people

- 85 We assessed how well the services provided meet the needs of all residents, and whether equality and diversity are reflected in the marketing and promotion of these, including the quality and use of the website. How the service reaches people is important if it is to widen the opportunity for participation. The service can play a vital role in targeting groups that are hard to reach or under-represented.
- 86 We found the Council website difficult and confusing as a means of accessing information on Wight Leisure, and the pages that we did find on the Council website were limited in content and functionality. The Council has made some positive changes to its website as a result of feedback from our inspection, but more recent checks showed that further development is still needed.
- 87 The Service has links with the health agenda – for example, through GP referral schemes at The Heights, where six doctors' surgeries are part of the scheme and where four practices are signed up for the Medina Leisure Centre scheme. There have been over 1,800 referrals in the past year, with a good retention rate that includes direct referrals from physiotherapists' and autistic people's groups. A member of staff is currently being trained to co-ordinate Wight Leisure's approach to GP referrals.
- 88 We found that the link between leisure services and tourism was well recognised by Council officers and councillors alike, but we were surprised that this is not explicitly reflected in the Council's tourism mission statement. However, the Managing Director of Wight Leisure does sit on the tourism development plan working group.
- 89 Although the tourism service takes the view that Wight Leisure's core services do not represent a specific reason for people visiting the Isle of Wight, they do recognise and appreciate the part they have to play for tourists as an additional activity, once they are there. We found that the range of activities provided by Wight Leisure does specifically take into account the needs and wishes of visitors, particularly the seasonal facilities and the events programme.
- 90 Wight Leisure has a marketing strategy that develops new services and activities in order to attract new audiences and retain existing customers. It also carries out regular customer surveys entailing over 1,100 one-to-one interviews with users.
- 91 In order to encourage customer feedback, it also holds two user focus groups each year, consisting of six users at the three major leisure sites that are independently facilitated by Business Link.

- 92 The Council installed a computerised bookings system as part of One Card. The system provides a wide range of management information, and it allows for better service planning and development of the service Wight Leisure provides.
- 93 However, the Council has not yet adequately embraced the race equalities agenda. It missed the 31 May 2002 deadline for producing a Race Equality Scheme. Failure to embrace race equalities restricts the Council's capacity to realise the potential of individuals within the community.

### Conclusion

- 94 We consider that the Service does meet its objectives. There are high levels of customer satisfaction, and it provides a good range of leisure services and facilities on the island. The staff are helpful, friendly and knowledgeable, and the facilities are welcoming to everyone.
- 95 The customer talkback procedure encourages complaints, comments or compliments, and it is well used and regarded by customers. The leisure access scheme offers concessionary use of facilities and targets hard-to-reach groups in line with the Council's corporate objectives.
- 96 However, some of the leisure centres were looking tired and in need of some refurbishment. The Council has carried out a condition survey which shows a backlog in maintenance issues. We are uncertain as to how this backlog will be addressed and funded. It is also unclear if the actions and target dates for DDA compliance will be met.

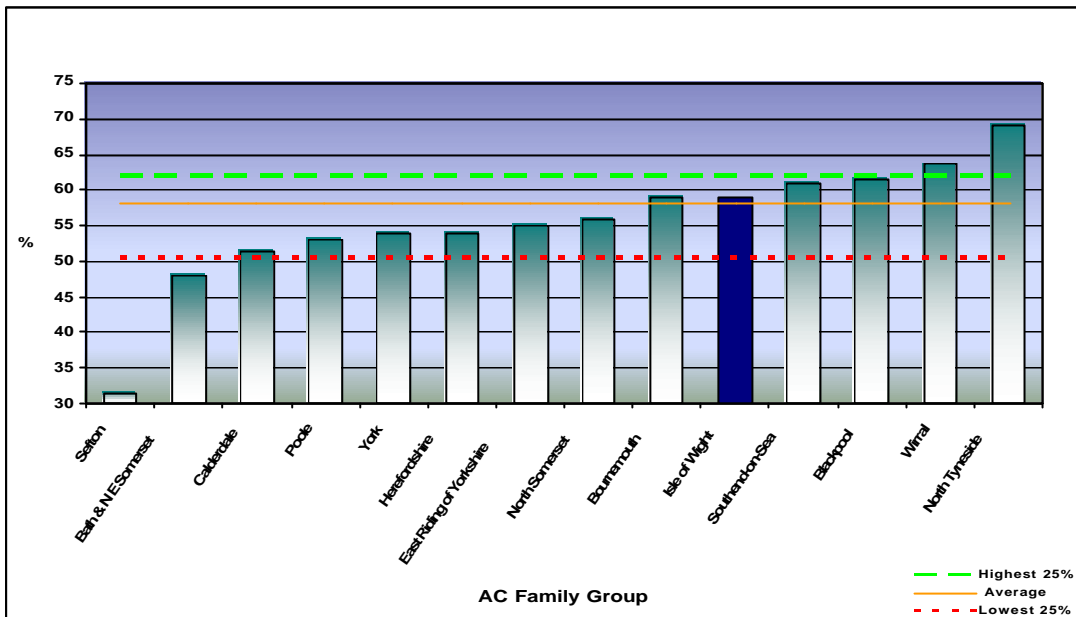
### How does the performance compare?

- 97 In order to judge the quality of a service, it is important to compare the performance of that service against other suppliers across a range of sectors. The aim is not exact comparison, but an exploration of how similar services (or elements of services) perform in order to identify significant differences, the reasons for them, and the extent to which improvements are required.
- 98 There are few national performance indicators for sports and leisure services. The two most widely used are the satisfaction with sport and leisure facilities (all users), and the number of swims and other visits per 1,000 population.
- 99 The national Best Value Performance Indicator (BVPI) 119as1 reports the satisfaction with sport and leisure facilities in 2000/01 for all residents in its family group<sup>5</sup>. This shows Wight Leisure to be performing just above average, with a satisfaction level of 59 per cent. This compares with the satisfaction for best performing councils at 62 per cent, the average of 58 per cent and the worst performing at 51 per cent.

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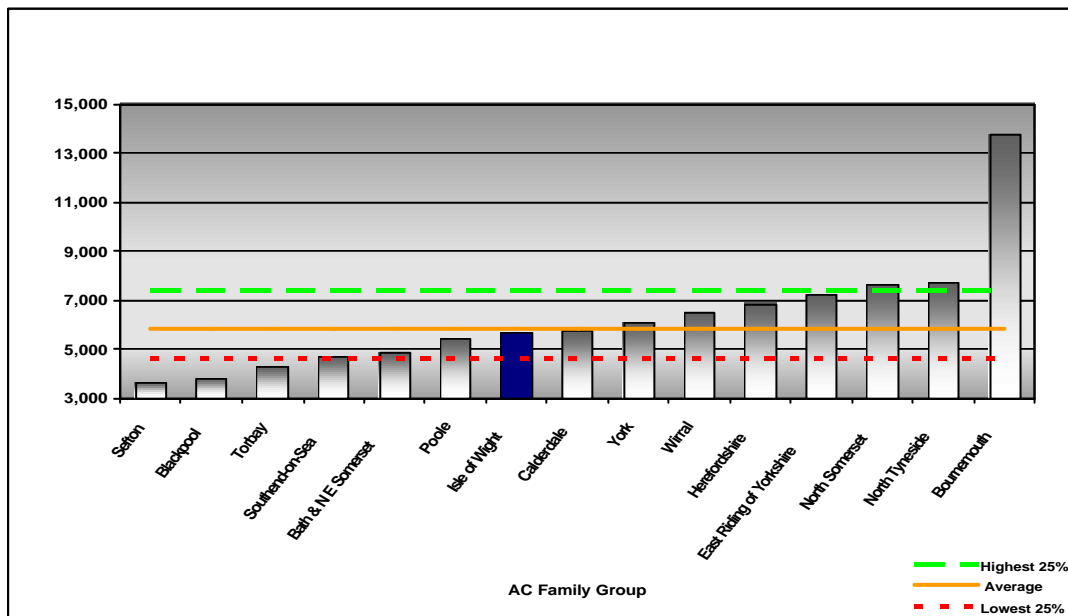
<sup>5</sup> Family group – comparator group of councils with similar characteristics.

Satisfaction with sports and leisure facilities (BVPI 119as1) – 2000/01



100 The Audit Commission Performance Indicator (ACPI) I1a reports the number of swims and other visits to facilities. This shows that Wight Leisure is just below the national average with 5,761 visits compared with 7,406 visits for the best performing, 5,797 for average performing councils and 4,595 for the worst performing councils.

Number of swims and other visits (ACPI I1a) – 2000/01



101 Wight Leisure also joined the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE), which benchmarks performance using 28 key indicators. Nine of these were chosen to be of particular relevance to the island by the review team. Wight Leisure provided information for the three major leisure centres and was benchmarked against 110 participating councils, and the overall service provision was benchmarked against 145 councils.

- 102 The indicators that Wight Leisure used included: total usage per 1,000 of population, subsidy per head, customer spend per head, subsidy per opening hour, quality assurance and customer consultation process, and results of customer satisfaction surveys.
- 103 The results of this exercise show the Service to be in the best 25 per cent of councils in five out of the six indicators. It was not in the best 25 per cent for the total usage per 1,000 of population, but it was above average for this indicator. Wight Leisure is now using the data in order to set improvement targets for future years.
- 104 In conclusion, we can say that Wight Leisure performs well in terms of customer satisfaction, and other comparisons show good levels of performance.

## Summary

- 105 There is a clear vision for the Service and good links to corporate objectives, in particular the leisure access scheme. The Service has a quality management system in place and consults well with its users. Satisfaction with sports and leisure is above average.
- 106 Having considered the evidence in relation to the aims of the Service and the ways in which the Service performs against the key factors, we therefore judge the quality of the service to be good.

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

### Does the best value review drive improvements?

- 107 The best value review is the mechanism for ensuring councils deliver continuous improvement to the services they provide.
- 108 The Council had scheduled their review of Leisure Services for 2004/05. However, the Council brought this forward in its review programme following observations from the District Auditor and the Council's own consultants, which indicated that the proposed transfer of Wight Leisure to an NPDO needed to be tested for best value. The Council had first considered the NPDO option in 1996, but it delayed decisions for various reasons until commissioning further consultants' reports on the issue in 2001.
- 109 In order to best facilitate this, the scope of the review was restricted to Wight Leisure, rather than a scope that would have included consideration of a much wider range of leisure or cultural services and activities, such as sports development and other private and voluntary sector leisure provision.
- 110 We acknowledge that the Council liaised with the Audit Commission Inspection Service on this issue, and we understand the Council's reasoning behind their decision to restrict the scope of the review. However, we feel that a review taking into account the wider aspects of sports and leisure on the island might have provided the opportunity to set the work of Wight Leisure into context.

- 111 The Council has an established procedure for conducting its best value reviews, which has recently been revised and refined. The review of Wight Leisure broadly followed the guidance in place at the time of the review.
- 112 The best value review team consisted of officers and staff from within the Council itself, including Wight Leisure. There was no representation from external agencies or bodies. In order to provide a degree of independence on the review team, the team was led by a senior Council officer with no experience of the service area.
- 113 We feel that the failure to include external agencies on the review team, such as representatives of user groups, the business community or the Isle of Wight Sports Council, was a weakness in the Council's review process. We are glad to find that the latest version of the Council's best value guidance recommends external representation in all reviews.
- 114 In addition to the core review team, the review included the Member Appraisal Group, comprising councillors from all political groups and chaired by the Chairman of the Leisure Services Select Committee. Council officers and trade union representatives were also part of the appraisal group. The group met six times during the review, with a smaller sub-group remaining more closely involved in the review process on a regular basis. The key stages of the group's involvement were the initial challenging of the service and the options appraisal exercise, which considered the best way forward to deliver service improvements.
- 115 We were concerned that the results of this review may have been predetermined by the Council's prior decision to transfer Wight Leisure to NPDO status. We were worried that the review may have been used to ratify that decision rather than being a thorough examination of the Service.

*'Most people felt we'd already done it all three times before. We knew that the trust was the way forward then.'* (Councillor)

- 116 However, we found this was not the case. Councillors on the appraisal group had a range of opinions as to the most effective way forward for Wight Leisure, and they strenuously brought these views into the review.
- 117 We found that the review process itself was structured in way that reduced the danger of the outcome being a forgone conclusion. The first three months of the review concentrated on examining what services – if any – should be provided, and what improvements were necessary. All discussion of how the services should be provided was prohibited in this phase of the review. The second half of the review then addressed the best way of achieving the service improvements that had been identified.

### Challenge

- 118 A number of 'challenge events' were held so that the views of the public, and in particular stakeholders, could be ascertained. Two specific events were held, to which 160 groups and businesses associated with the provision of leisure on the Isle of Wight were invited. These events were attended by 63 such groups.



- 119 The challenge events specifically posed four questions:
- ◆ Are the right services being provided?
  - ◆ What should these services be for island people and visitors?
  - ◆ Should the Council be providing all or any of them?
  - ◆ Should the Council be subsidising all or any of these services?
- 120 These events showed that there was strong support for the Council to financially support the provision of leisure services now and in the future, but they identified a number of issues that impact on people's ability or opportunity to use these services. Significant among these was the cost and frequency of transport on the island. Public transport was felt to be too expensive and too infrequent to support people using the leisure facilities, particularly for young people or those in rural communities. Customer studies had shown that only 5 per cent of the users of the main leisure facilities had used public transport to get there. Additionally, some 30 per cent of island residents do not have access to a car.
- 121 We found evidence that these issues were specifically addressed by the review and by the resulting improvement plan. In fact, we found that action was already being taken as a result of issues arising from consultation. An example is the discussions taking place with commercial bus operators to revise the existing young persons' concessionary travel scheme – Youth Mover – and link it to Wight Leisure's One Card scheme.
- 122 In addition to these events, the Council also took the step of initiating a live radio 'phone-in', which posed similar questions to the formal challenge events. The results of this radio programme broadly mirrored those of the formal meetings. Use of radio to reach a wide audience is an innovative method of seeking to gather public views, and we commend the Council for taking this approach.
- 123 However, we feel that the question of how services should be provided, or what Wight Leisure itself should or should not be responsible for providing, was not subject to a rigorous, open and public challenge. We understand the Council's need to progress the review swiftly, given the need for a final decision on the future of Wight Leisure, but nevertheless, we feel that this is a potential weakness in its process.
- 124 However, we are pleased to note that consideration of the scope of Wight Leisure's services once operating as an NPDO is being discussed in detail as part of the contract negotiations currently underway between the Council and Wight Leisure managers.

## Consultation

- 125 We were pleased to see that the Council has good systems for public consultation, such as the Citizens' Panel and consultation with the Youth Trust. Wight Leisure also carries out regular consultations in terms of user studies, independently run for it by Business Link.

- 126 The Council carried out widespread consultation regarding the provision of leisure services, using consultation exercises specific to the review and surveys and consultancy work previously undertaken, as well as consultation being conducted regarding the draft community plan and on the development of the local cultural strategy. We were pleased to note that the MORI surveys used as part of the review consultation identified and included feedback from non-users of leisure services. The results from this consultation provided a background for the challenge exercises discussed above.
- 127 Consultation showed that providing leisure services was not seen as a high priority for the Council. Only 10 per cent of people surveyed in the 2000 MORI consultation with members of the Citizens' Panel felt that it was important for the Council to provide leisure facilities, while consultation on the community plan showed leisure to be the least important of nine priorities. Consultation with the Citizens' Panel placed leisure as 22nd in importance out of 26 services.
- 128 However, the MORI 5 consultation also indicated that 80 per cent of people surveyed felt that the Council should be involved in the provision of leisure services, primarily to help people stay healthy, fit and well.
- 129 We questioned the apparent discrepancy between these two results. We found that this was the result of the public being asked two different questions related to the same issue. We understand that while the public does not place a high priority on leisure services against other Council services, they do believe it is important that the Council promotes health and fitness, and they see leisure as having a part to play in this.
- 130 A number of broad themes emerged from the consultation work carried out by the Council:
- ◆ the link between leisure and health and fitness;
  - ◆ the effect of transport conditions on access to leisure opportunities; and
  - ◆ the quality and condition of the leisure facilities themselves.
- 131 We found that the review addressed these themes, which had emerged from the consultation carried out with island residents. However, no specific consultation was carried out with visitors to the island. The Council told us that such consultation was not feasible due to the timescale and timing of the review, which was conducted outside of the main tourist season. However, we found that of the 2.6 million visits that take place to the Isle of Wight, only one million of these are in peak season. We therefore feel that consultation with visitors would have been possible.
- 132 The Council also told us that it gathered information on visitor views from the visitor questionnaires conducted by Isle of Wight Tourism. However, officers from Tourism told us that their surveys did not include specific questions regarding leisure facilities or the services of Wight Leisure. We therefore feel that this information would be of limited use to the review.

133 We understand that visitors are included in the regular user surveys carried out by Wight Leisure. However, we do feel that the lack of specific visitor consultation was a weakness in the Council's consultation, particularly as there are 27 visitors for each island resident. This reinforces our view that challenge was very weak regarding what services should be provided for visitors, and whether the Council should be providing them.

### Comparison

- 134 As part of the review, the Council's has carried out a considerable amount of work to compare itself to other councils.
- 135 In order to observe and compare recognised good practice, the Council has carried out a number of visits to other leisure providers – including Telford and Wrekin Council, which attained a 'good, two-star service which will improve' score from a best value inspection in November 2000.
- 136 We are pleased to note that Wight Leisure also uses year-on-year figures and trends to help plan future activities. In particular, we noted that Wight Leisure is increasingly using the management information available to it, through its computerised bookings system and the One Card system, to identify and compare patterns of activity across each of its facilities and its operation as a whole.
- 137 In contrast to this widespread use of internal comparative information, we found less evidence that the Council is using the comparisons with other councils to inform its planning and activities. As one councillor put it, the Council needs to 'take in practice from elsewhere and not just look within the island'. This element was of particular importance in the Council's review of Wight Leisure, as one of the main objectives of the review was to determine the best way forward for Wight Leisure, so that it could continue to deliver continuous improvement.
- 138 As mentioned above, the Council carried out an options appraisal to consider the three main options available for Wight Leisure's future. These were identified as
- ◆ to continue with Wight Leisure as a direct part of the Council's services;
  - ◆ to invite a private sector contractor to take over and provide the leisure services on the island; or
  - ◆ to establish an NPDO as the future status for Wight Leisure.
- 139 Members of the appraisals group and core review team carried out a number of visits, to both private sector leisure operators, and to a Leisure Trust on the mainland.
- 140 Additionally, private sector providers were invited to give presentations to the review team and appraisals group on the advantages of selecting that route for leisure provision on the Isle of Wight. Two such providers accepted the invitation.
- 141 Finally, the appraisal group and review team held a workshop that considered the information gathered about the options. Outline financial information on the implications of each of the three options was made available.

- 142 A formal system of appraising the merits of each option was devised, applying criteria which included:
- ◆ the best way of ensuring delivery of service improvements identified in the first phase of the review;
  - ◆ the control the Council would have, in order to ensure that the Service works to the Council's objectives and priorities;
  - ◆ the long-term viability of the leisure provision;
  - ◆ the quality of the service; and
  - ◆ the ability to attract additional funding in order to support continuous improvement in services.
- 143 The options appraisal concluded that transfer of Wight Leisure to NPDO represents the best option.
- 144 We found that the proposed budget appears to have been prepared on the assumption that the NPDO's sport, leisure and trading income will remain relatively stable in the period 2002/03 to 2006/07, with only very limited growth. Income from new developments that are still subject to final agreement is not included in these figures. On this basis, the NPDO is budgeted to continue to break even during this period, with increases for inflation in staff and other costs largely offset by increases in the council grant.
- 145 We have not undertaken a detailed financial review as part of this inspection. However, we are satisfied that the financial assumptions used for the options appraisal were sound, and we are further assured by the fact that both Wight Leisure and the Council have engaged consultants who will thoroughly examine the budgetary situation regarding the proposed transfer to NPDO status.
- 146 We feel this process represents a thorough examination of the options.

## Conclusion

- 147 There are some weaknesses in the way the review was conducted, notably the absence of visitor consultation, external perspective on the review team itself, and a failure to take a wider perspective on leisure services. Nevertheless, overall we feel that the Council has carried out a thorough review of what improvements are required to leisure services on the Isle of Wight, and how those services might best be delivered in order to secure those improvements. In particular, we feel that the best value review of Wight Leisure avoided the danger of merely validating decisions already made by the Council.

## How good is the improvement plan?

- 148 A best value review should produce an improvement plan that sets out what needs to improve, why, and how that improvement will be delivered. It should contain targets which are not only challenging but also designed to demonstrate and ensure the continuous improvement necessary to put the Service among the best 25 per cent of councils within five years.

- 149 The best value review of Wight Leisure sets out six conclusions. These are
- 'The service has demonstrated continuous improvement;
  - There are key barriers to further improvement;
  - The Council should provide the leisure services considered;
  - The range of service provision is appropriate;
  - The Council should externalise the provision of services; and
  - An NPDO would be the most effective route to externalisation.'
- 150 The recommendation from these conclusions is to 'externalise the delivery of the Council's leisure services currently provided through Wight Leisure to an NPDO.'
- 151 The NPDO option would remove a significant amount of leisure services capital expenditure requirements from the Council. An NPDO would be eligible for VAT exemptions and would attract relief on National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR), and such savings could be used to re-invest in the services themselves.
- 152 We found that councillors are confident in the way Wight Leisure manages the service and would like to continue the arrangements with the same personnel. The NPDO option would allow this to happen.

*'Wight Leisure do a good job. As well as providing their direct services they are involved in Island life in other ways.'* (Councillor)

- 153 The review's improvement plan sets out seven areas of improvement and necessary actions. These relate to the main themes arising in the challenge events and the more general consultation. The areas for improvement are:
- ◆ to make the services more accessible by removing transport barriers;
  - ◆ to improve access to the services in general, supported by appropriate promotion material;
  - ◆ to increase the range of existing leisure services/facilities provided to support tourism and the economy;
  - ◆ to create a climate which allows greater financial flexibility;
  - ◆ to provide more for young people;
  - ◆ to improve the fabric of existing facilities, thereby extending their life; and
  - ◆ to provide education about health and fitness.
- 154 These areas of improvement are directly cross-referenced to the Council's corporate priorities as set out in the best value performance plan, and they are consistent with the key goals set out in the draft corporate plan.
- 155 The improvement plan does set out target dates, shows links to corporate objectives, and has defined outcomes and responsibilities; but financial implications and measurable targets are not consistently identified.

- 156 We are clear about the relationship between the review conclusions and the improvement plan, namely that the conclusions refer to the best way of delivering the improvement plan. We are also clear that the achievement of the improvement plan is to some degree dependent on achieving the transfer of Wight Leisure to NPDO status.
- 157 We were concerned that the lack of a firm time scale for achieving this transfer may have implications for the feasibility of the timetable set out in the improvement plan. The Council initially told us that its intention was to achieve the transfer by October 2002. The Council has subsequently agreed (on 27 August 2002) a transfer date of 1 January 2003 for the NPDO, and this considerably reduces our concern. However, negotiations between the Council and Wight Leisure were continuing at the time of inspection and were not scheduled to conclude until the end of October 2002. Until these negotiations are successfully concluded, the transfer cannot be confirmed.
- 158 However, we are pleased to see that the Council is committed to ensuring the arrangements for transfer to NPDO are correct, rather than achieving a nominal timescale. The Council has engaged consultants to advise on the negotiations, and to examine the financial implications in depth. As one Council officer told us:

*'This is an issue that we need to get right.'*

- 159 We are also concerned that the improvement plan relies heavily on the financial advantages that would result from achieving NPDO status to fund the improvements listed. The Council acknowledges that it itself does not have the resources to take the improvement plan forward. No contingency plan has been drawn up should the transfer not go ahead, beyond making a bid for funding within the Council's normal budgetary process. As one councillor put it:

*'If the NPDO doesn't happen, then the improvement plan is impossible.'*

This was echoed by Council officers:

*'If it doesn't go ahead, it's back to the drawing board.'*

- 160 There are a number of unresolved issues which could potentially block the successful transfer of Wight Leisure to NPDO status. These include confirming that the nature of the proposed NPDO maximises the available NNDR relief, the loss of income to the Council from current central charges to Wight Leisure, and the implications of the latest national pay award for local government employees.
- 161 While we feel confident that these issues will be successfully resolved and that the transfer will go ahead within the agreed timescale, we are concerned that the feasibility of the improvement plan is reliant on this being the case.
- 162 In conclusion, the improvement plan reflects the service improvements identified in consultation with users and stakeholders and is consistent with the Council's own objectives. It is supported by the main recommendation – externalisation of the service to an NPDO – which itself is the result of the review's examination of the best way of securing necessary improvements.

- 163 However, achievement of the improvement plan is largely dependent on Wight Leisure becoming an NPDO, securing the financial advantages of that status, and reinvesting those advantages into delivering the improvement plan objectives. Should that not happen, there is no contingency plan, and the Council is unlikely to be able to meet the costs of delivering the improvements, if the transfer fails.

## Will the Council deliver the improvements?

- 164 Inspectors look for evidence that a council will deliver what it has set out in the improvement plan. We look for a track record of managing change within the Council and, ideally, within the Service itself. The plan should also have sufficient support from councillors, management, staff, service users and other stakeholders, particularly those responsible for delivering it.
- 165 The Council has undergone significant change over the past 12 months, both in terms of its political structure and administration, and the restructuring of its organisational management arrangements. This management restructuring will not be completed until 2003.
- 166 Changes in the political structures appear to be bringing benefits to the decision-making capacity of the Council. An example of this is the decision to transfer Wight Leisure to an NPDO, which had previously been discussed and debated for some six years without final decision or action.
- 167 We found that councillors are now determined to move forward on this issue. Some councillors still have reservations about the transfer of leisure services to NPDO status, feeling that one or another of the options was better. However, we found a strong feeling that, having conducted a thorough review and come to an informed decision, the action to complete the transfer would now be carried out. As one councillor put it:

*‘... everyone, from all sides, is behind it.’*

- 168 We found that the Council has a clear and shared vision for the island, and although the detail of this is not always clearly and consistently expressed –

*‘...some (councillors) have the general idea, but can’t yet specify the objectives or priorities.’ (Council officer)*

– both councillors and officers told us that this represented an improvement for the governance of the island.

- 169 We found that councillor scrutiny of decisions and activity is developing, with an increasing willingness to ask hard questions of both officers and Executive councillors, and to maintain a strategic perspective. This is not consistent across the Council’s scrutiny function however, and there is still a tendency to concentrate too much on detail matters:

*‘...some Select Committee Agendas still look too much like old fashioned Service Committee Papers.’ (Councillor)*

- 170 There have been significant changes at senior officer level. These have not yet been completed and include the imminent retirement of the current Head of Paid Service, who has carried responsibility for achieving the management restructuring. A number of people we interviewed – both councillors and officers – described this change among senior Council officers as ‘unsettling’:

*‘I don’t know if the changes will ever all come to an end.’ (Councillor)*

- 171 We were concerned that this continued uncertainty at senior level might hinder the process of change and improvement that the Council is following. We asked a number of councillors, officers and staff whether they felt that the developments in the Council had built a sufficient momentum to survive further changes and turnover at senior level. Most felt that this was the case:

*‘...the political drive and energy is sufficient to maintain our progress ...officers are enthusiastic about the new arrangements.’ (Councillor)*

*‘...there’s real enthusiasm at head of service level.’ (Council officer)*

- 172 However, some people were less certain:

*‘We’re on a cusp – we will either fly or fail. I’m not sure that all councillors understand their part in whichever it is.’ (Council officer)*

- 173 There was general confidence in the appointment of the successor to the Head of Paid Service, but also a recognition that success does not depend on one person alone:

*‘He needs to surround himself with the right people. We need people of vision, flair and skill at the strategic level.’ (Council officer)*

- 174 We feel that the Council is at a critical stage, and that maintaining the momentum of change is crucial. Councillors need to recognise their part in this, and to develop the confidence of the Council’s employees that the planned changes are still firmly on course.

- 175 The implementation of a service planning and performance management system within the Council is a positive sign, with the Deputy Leader of the Council taking responsibility for this area of development. But there is still a considerable way to go in creating a culture where this system is consistently used across all services.

- 176 We were pleased to note that the Directorate of Education and Community Development (which is responsible for leisure services) is using the new corporate service planning process, and that the role and plans of Wight Leisure are clearly integrated within this.



- 177 The Council does have a good record of attracting external funding. The Isle of Wight has been awarded the second highest amount of grants for 'Awards for All'<sup>6</sup> – which gives grant aid to sports clubs and schools from the national lottery in the South East. Since the programme began, it has attracted over £500,000 of this grant money.
- 178 We found that the Council has been successful in attracting grant funding from a range of different funding bodies – the National Lottery, New Opportunities Fund, and the Single Regeneration Budget – for 23 community development schemes. These schemes mirror identified areas of deprivation on the island. We are particularly positive about this achievement, as we feel this demonstrates that the Council is maintaining a view of the wider aspects of sports and leisure beyond those delivered by Wight Leisure.
- 179 We feel that the Council has a clear view of the importance of leisure services in supporting the corporate goals and priorities, making the links between leisure and the health and fitness of island residents, and between leisure and the economic life of the island through tourism. The Council acknowledges that these links are not fully recognised by the general public, and that they need to find ways of making this link clearer.
- 180 The Council also has a track record of delivering improvement. An example is in Social Services, where the standard of service has improved significantly since a critical inspection report in 1999.
- 181 However, the Council is lacking in a number of areas. Its corporate plan, which should set out clearly the Council's priorities and goals, was not in place at the time of inspection (although it is scheduled to be adopted in October 2002). The lack of such a plan has meant that the Council has not been able to explicitly set budgets in line with its own priorities. Currently the Council is working to the objectives set out in its *Best Value Performance Plan 2001-02* and will need to carefully manage the transition to the operational priorities set out in the draft corporate plan.
- 182 The Council has missed the June 2002 national deadline for producing a Race Equality Scheme – although it has recently adopted an Equality and Diversity Policy – and Council officers told us that this is not seen as a priority by many councillors.
- 183 As discussed in the previous section, the improvement plan is dependent on successfully achieving NPDO status for Wight Leisure, together with the financial benefits that this brings, and it is up to the Council to put arrangements in place to ensure this happens.

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<sup>6</sup> 'Awards for All' is a national programme operating through nine regional offices in England.

- 184 Negotiations between the Council and Wight Leisure management are continuing, with both parties using specialist consultants in this field to advise them. We are confident that the basis for Wight Leisure transferring to NPDO status is sound, and that the will of both parties to do so is strong. We are pleased that both parties recognise the need to ensure the resulting agreement is right, and they share the determination that Council objectives and priorities must be well served by the contractual obligations of the final agreement.
- 185 The Council has agreed a proposed date of 1 January 2003 for the transfer of Wight Leisure to NPDO status. However, as referred to earlier in the report, there are issues that remain unresolved at the time of the inspection which may still hinder progress.
- 186 Notable among these is the impact of the latest local government pay settlement on the funding arrangement for the future NPDO. Costs of this – estimated at some £100,000 for Wight Leisure staff – are currently not included in the financial projections or business plan under negotiation with the Council. Council officers also told us that the Council has not yet assessed the impact of this pay settlement across all its activities, so it is not yet clear of its effect on budgets.
- 187 There are many examples nationally of how NPDO status has allowed for reinvestment of funds into delivering service improvements in leisure services, and Wight Leisure is sensibly seeking to retain business advice from a consultancy specialising in this area, so as to ensure it learns lessons from these examples. However, Wight Leisure clearly does not have direct experience of operating in this role and, as such, its performance as an NPDO is untested.
- 188 Nevertheless, in its current form, Wight Leisure does have a track record and culture of delivering improvements. An indication of this is the increase in customer satisfaction since 1999 from 95 per cent to 97 per cent, and specific examples would include the introduction of the One Card scheme with its concessionary elements, and the use of the management information system – FLEX – to aid forward planning of service delivery.
- 189 We also found that Wight Leisure has demonstrated it is committed to delivering services that contribute to the Council's objectives, and it has been successful in attracting funding to support this. Examples include successful bids for New Opportunities Fund monies to extend the 'Exercise on Prescription' scheme in Sandown and Newport, and developing the Youth Access Scheme extension of the One Card initiative, linked with the Youth Mover scheme as detailed earlier in this report.
- 190 Overall, we conclude that the Council is making progress in developing its capacity and strengthening its management. However, the new culture and systems are not yet fully in place, and further changes at the senior officer level add a degree of uncertainty about whether the Council will be able to maintain the momentum of change.
- 191 The planned transfer of Wight Leisure to NPDO status is the key to the delivery of the improvements in this service. Although there are significant hurdles to be overcome before the transfer can take place, the determination from both parties is a strong indication that all these difficulties will be successfully worked through.

## Summary

- 192 This review was brought forward in the Council's review programme, as its decision to transfer the provision of leisure services to an NPDO needed to be tested for delivering best value. The Council has conducted a thorough best value review of Wight Leisure that has identified service improvements that reflect both public wishes and corporate objectives. It has also re-examined its earlier decision on the future of Wight Leisure by way of a balanced options appraisal.
- 193 The Council is engaged in a process of change and modernisation that is showing indications of improving its management capacity. But turnover of senior Council officers is continuing, and the resulting uncertainty remains a possible barrier to the Council successfully completing its changes.
- 194 The Council recognises the importance of leisure services to the island in terms of its economic life and the health and fitness of its residents. Similarly, Wight Leisure is committed to the delivery of services which contribute to the Council's goals and objectives.
- 195 The accomplishment of the improvement plan is to some degree dependent on the successful transfer of Wight Leisure to NPDO status, and it is of concern that the Council has no contingency plans to ensure service improvements, should this not happen. A number of hurdles to achieving this transfer remain, but both the Council and Wight Leisure are determined to successfully establish the NPDO, and to see improvements in leisure services as a result. We are confident that they will be successful in achieving the transfer of Wight Leisure to NPDO status.
- 196 We therefore judge, on balance, that the prospects of improvement are promising.

# Appendices

## What the inspectors did

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:

- ◆ Best Value Performance Plan 2001-02;
- ◆ Island Future – Draft Community Strategy;
- ◆ Achieving Excellence Through Teamwork – Draft Corporate Plan 2002-05;
- ◆ Best Value Review of Wight Leisure – Final Report;
- ◆ Wight Leisure Business Plan;
- ◆ Directorate of Education and Community Development Service Plan 2002-03, and Strategic Plan 2001-04;
- ◆ Best Value Review of Tourism Final Report;
- ◆ Island Plan for Health and Well-being;
- ◆ Agenda 21 Strategy;
- ◆ Local Cultural Strategy;
- ◆ Equality and Diversity Policy;
- ◆ Draft Procurement Strategy;
- ◆ Isle of Wight Tourism Activity Monitoring Report 1999/2000;
- ◆ Finance and Business Services Service Plan;
- ◆ Wight Leisure Lone Working Policy;
- ◆ Isle of Wight Budget 2000-01;
- ◆ Comprehensive Performance Assessment – Self Assessment Report;
- ◆ District Audit Annual Audit Letter, November 2001;
- ◆ range of Select Committee and Executive Minutes; and
- ◆ range of brochures and information leaflets.

## Reality checks undertaken

While on site, inspectors carried out a number of different reality checks 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 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:

- ◆ visits to a range of Wight Leisure facilities;
- ◆ making telephone enquiries to Wight Leisure centres;
- ◆ visit to West Wight Leisure Centre;
- ◆ visit to Fairways Sports Centre and Athletics Track;
- ◆ using the Council website;
- ◆ using the Wight Leisure and One Card websites; and
- ◆ using the Council's public access website terminal in Council offices.

## List of people interviewed

We met a range of people involved with the Service and also conducted a number of telephone interviews with external organisations and agencies:

Henry Adams	Councillor, IOW Council
Max Burton	Head of Personnel and Training, IOW Council
Mark Chiverton	Unison Branch Secretary
Alistair Drain	Head of Select Committee Support, IOW Council
Mike Fisher	Director of Corporate and Environment Services
John Fleming	Councillor, IOW Council, Chair of Leisure Select Committee
Annie Horne	Managing Director, Wight Leisure
Heather Humby	Councillor, Chair of IOW Council
Peggy Jarman	Councillor, Executive Member, IOW Council.
Alan Kaye	Head of Paid Service and Director of Education and Community Development IOW Council
Lee Matthews	Sports Development Manager, IOW Council

Roger Mazillius	Councillor, IOW Council
John Metcalfe	Assistant Director Education and Community Development
Andy Newman	Marketing Manager, Wight Leisure
Sean Newton	Business Development Manager, Wight Leisure
David Price	Head of ICT Services, IOW Council
Neil Roberts	Wight 2B Heard
Don Roe	Best Value Review Unit Manager, IOW Council
Dick Sedgeley	Property Services Manager, IOW Council
Paul Wilkinson	Head of Finance and Business Services, IOW Council