

Hampshire County
Council

Library Service

October 2001

Best Value Inspection



Best Value

The Government has placed a duty of best value on local authorities to deliver services to clear standards – of cost and quality – by the most economic, efficient and effective means available. Best value is a challenging new performance framework that requires authorities to publish annual best value performance plans and review all their services every five years.

Authorities must show that they have applied the 4Cs of best value to every review:

- ♦ **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** with local taxpayers, customers and the wider business community.

Authorities must demonstrate to local people that they are achieving continuous improvement in all of their services. The Government has decided that each authority should be scrutinised by an independent inspectorate, so that the public will know whether best value is being achieved. The purpose of the inspection and of this report is to:

- ♦ enable the public to see whether best value is being delivered;
- ♦ enable the inspected body 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.

The Local Government Act 1999 requires all best value authorities to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement in the way their functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness. From April 2000, best value authorities must prepare best value performance plans for each financial year and conduct best value reviews for all their functions over a five-year cycle. 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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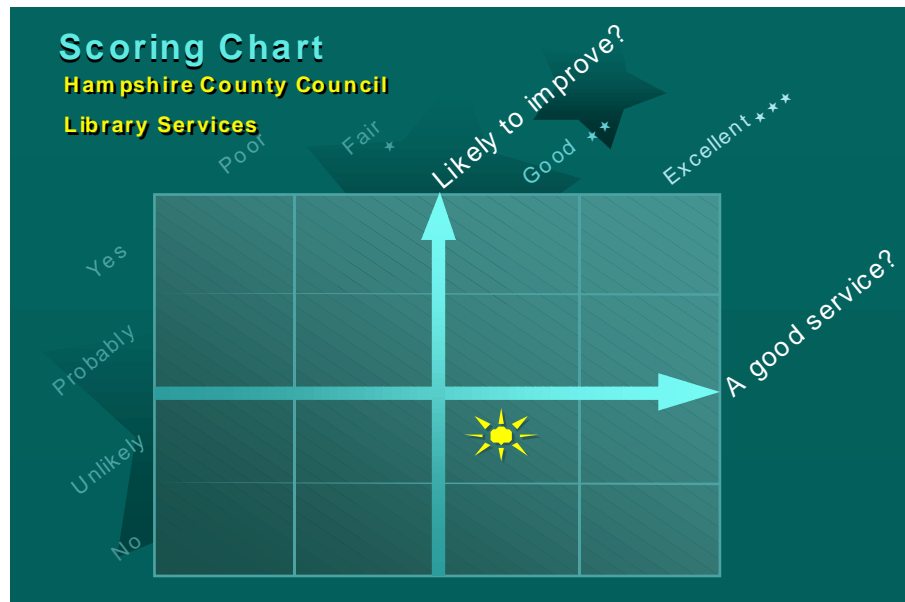
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1 Summary

- 1 The county of Hampshire is situated on the south coast of England and contains 12 district/city/borough councils. The county has a population of approximately 1.25 million and covers an area of approximately 375,000 hectares. The county is a mainly rural area with urban centres situated adjacent to the A303/M3 corridor in the north and the M27 corridor in the south. The county town and centre of administration for the County Council is Winchester and the largest town is Basingstoke. Unemployment is currently 1.5 per cent, compared to a national average of 3.9 per cent and a regional average of 2.1 per cent.
- 2 The County Council, which is Conservative controlled, consists of 74 councillors. The council structure formerly consisted of a leader with 5 main committees. Hampshire County Council will be implementing the leader and cabinet model of local governance in September 2001. Hampshire County Council's total budget for 2001/02 is £1,067 million. The Council employs approximately 31,000 staff.
- 3 This service fulfils the Council's statutory obligation to provide a library service to the public under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964. Services are provided through a network of 54 static libraries, 19 mobile libraries, deliveries to housebound customers, a schools library service and special arrangements in 2 prisons and a hospital.
- 4 The library service employs 778 staff (514.8 FTE) and had a net expenditure of £15.9 million in 2000/01.

Scoring

- 5 We have assessed the Council as providing a 'good' 2 star service that is unlikely to improve. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.



- 6 The library service has a clear set of aims and there are good links to the corporate aims. The current aims do not fully match user expectations and are not challenging in terms of future development of the service. Senior managers recognise the need to review the aims.
- 7 We believe that the motivated staff and comprehensive, quality book stock provide a core, traditional library service that partly meets the current aims. There are weaknesses, for example in the provision of public access ICT facilities and in identifying and addressing the needs of non-users and lapsed users. ICT provision should improve significantly in the near future as a result of NOF (New Opportunities Fund) funding for the People's Network.
- 8 Although Hampshire only comply with four of the eighteen standards for libraries, these standards were only published in February 2001, and came into force April 2001. Library services have three years to comply. Hampshire Library Service compares favourably on a number of established Audit Commission performance indicators.

- 9 We believe that Hampshire Library Service is unlikely to improve. Although we recognise that there are a number of national drivers for change in this area, we do not believe that the best value review was a key driver for improvement in this service. The four Cs have not been well addressed and an opportunity to think imaginatively and strategically about the service has been missed.
- 10 The Council has produced an improvement plan that identifies targets and dates for completion, a lead officer with responsibility for each action, potential barriers to achieving targets, and the financial resources implications. There are too many which involve gathering further information and too few which will deliver immediate improvements for service users.
- 11 We believe that there is senior corporate recognition that change and innovation is required to significantly improve and modernise the library service and enable it to move from being a good, traditional service to becoming an innovative and forward looking service.
- 12 In order to deliver key service improvements to customers, we recommend that the Council carry out the following actions:

Recommendations

- 13 To ensure that the service aims are revisited and that the revised aims deliver a more innovative and 'excellent' '3 star' service to users, the service should:
 - ◆ Engage in dialogue with all interested parties better to identify their needs.
 - ◆ Develop a set of challenging aims that bring together the aspirations of all stakeholders.
 - ◆ Determine targets and implementation plans to deliver those aims.
- 14 To improve standards of service to all Hampshire library users, the service should:
 - ◆ Learn the lessons from innovative projects that have been piloted in individual locations, and roll out this learning where appropriate, to improve services across the whole county.
 - ◆ Identify good practice in other library services and engage in open dialogue to learn possible lessons and implement this learning in Hampshire.
- 15 To attract new users, the service should:
 - ◆ Find out who non-users are and why they choose not to use the library service.
 - ◆ Identify if non-users have unmet needs which could be satisfied by the library service.
 - ◆ Implement plans to develop services to meet these needs.
- 16 To make a wider range of services available to more users, the service should:
 - ◆ Further develop internal strategic partnerships with other council departments to combine resources in order to reach more people and improve services.
 - ◆ Pro-actively seek and engage in external partnerships with other service providers in the private and not for profit sectors.
 - ◆ Explore alternative ways of delivering services including the use of other service providers.

- 17 To ensure that the views of all stakeholders inform future service development, the service should develop and implement a consultation strategy to engage in dialogue on an ongoing basis.
- 18 To ensure that a specific aspect of the service reflects the wishes of users, the service should respond to the high levels of user dissatisfaction with the three week loan period by:
 - ♦ Determining whether or not the three week loan period is achieving the stated objective of increasing stock turnover and as a result increasing the range of material available to users.
 - ♦ If the objective is not being met the loan period should be returned to four weeks.
 - ♦ If the objective is being met, then users should be asked whether they would prefer the four week loan period or the increased range of stock.

We would like to thank the staff of Hampshire County Council who made us welcome and met our requests efficiently and courteously.

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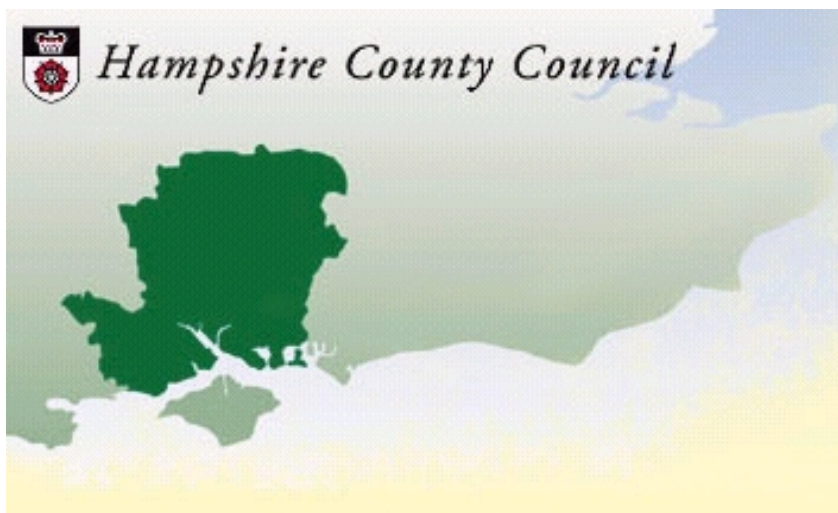
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2 Report

2.1 Context

The locality

- 19 Hampshire is a large shire county covering 375,000 hectares. It is situated on the south coast of England, overlooking the Solent, the stretch of water separating the Isle of Wight from the mainland. Until local government reorganisation in 1997, Hampshire included the cities of Portsmouth and Southampton. Hampshire has strong connections with the armed forces.
- 20 The county contains 2 unitary and 11 district councils.
- 21 It includes a mixture of rural areas of outstanding natural beauty like the New Forest, the North Hampshire Downs, Test Valley and Hamble River; and contrasting urban centres like Basingstoke (the largest town) and Winchester (the county town).
- 22 The population of Hampshire is estimated to be 1,253,100 with an age profile broadly similar to the national average. 37.5 per cent of the population are estimated to be under 30, and 15.7 per cent over 65. This average masks significant differences from one district to another, for example in the New Forest 21.9 per cent of the population are over 65, while in Rushmoor District, 44 per cent are under 30.
- 23 The unemployment level for the county is currently 1.5 per cent, which is significantly below the national average of 3.9 per cent and the regional average of 2.1 per cent.
- 24 Hampshire has a relatively low proportion of ethnic minorities (1.3 per cent against a GB average of 5.5 per cent). Persons of Indic origin comprise the largest ethnic minority groups within Hampshire.
- 25 The population of Hampshire is projected to grow by at least 2.3 per cent between 1996 and 2011. This includes increases in the over 45s, especially those over 85, and decreases in the in those aged under 45.



The Council

- 26 The County Council consists of 74 councillors. The Council is Conservative controlled (Conservative – 46; Liberal Democrat – 19; Labour – 9).
- 27 Following a review of local government in Hampshire, Southampton City Council and Portsmouth City Council became unitary authorities. Since April 1997 these councils have gained responsibility for all local services in their area, including education, social services, libraries and all other services which Hampshire County Council formerly provided.
- 28 Services in the rest of the county continue to be provided by the County Council and the remaining borough, district and city councils.
- 29 The Council structure is in the process of changing to the leader and cabinet model, which came into force in September 2001. A Policy Review Committee of 24 members, who will take on the roles of policy development, scrutiny and member involvement in best value, will support each cabinet portfolio.
- 30 Hampshire County Council's total budget for 2001/2 is £1,067 million. The Council employs approximately 31,000 staff.
- 31 The Council's vision is set out in their 'Corporate Strategy'. Its mission statement is, 'We want Hampshire to be a prosperous and attractive county where social and economic needs are met in the most sustainable way, improving the quality of life and sense of community for present and future generations.'

- 32 The mission is supported by five corporate aims:
- ◆ Developing the quality of life in Hampshire.
 - ◆ Stewardship of the environment.
 - ◆ Achieving economic prosperity.
 - ◆ Partnership for strong communities in Hampshire.
 - ◆ Providing high quality accessible services.

The Council's best value review

- 33 The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 states that county and unitary authorities must '*provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons desiring to make use thereof.*'
- 34 In 1997 the Audit Commission published 'Due for Renewal: A Report on the Library service' and this was followed by a local review of Hampshire Library Service by District Audit in 1998.
- 35 With effect from 1998 all library authorities have been required to publish an annual library plan which is submitted to the DCMS for approval.
- 36 In February 2001 the DCMS published 'Comprehensive, Efficient and Modern Public Libraries – Standards and Assessment' which documented standards for public libraries which came into force April 2001. Councils have three years to comply with these standards.
- 37 Hampshire Library Service employs 778 staff (514.8 full time equivalents) and its net expenditure for 2000/1 was £15.9 million. Services are supplied through a network of 54 static branches, 19 mobile libraries, deliveries to housebound readers and special arrangements in schools, two prisons, and one hospital.

- 38 The scope of this best value review covered the public library service as a whole, but excluded:
- ◆ schools library service;
 - ◆ prison library service;
 - ◆ hospital library service;
 - ◆ personnel functions;
 - ◆ ICT support; and
 - ◆ financial support.
- 39 The improvement plan identified the following areas for improvement:
- ◆ to improve equality of access to services, especially by those who are disabled or isolated;
 - ◆ to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of services to the public;
 - ◆ to provide better IT access and support for the public; and
 - ◆ to evaluate the range of resources and speed of supply.

2.2 How good is the service?

Are the Council's aims clear and challenging?

- 40 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.
- 41 Hampshire Library Service has developed and published six service aims:
- ◆ to provide access to the widest possible range of books, journals, discs, tapes, and IT for reading, studying and enjoyment;
 - ◆ to support lifelong learning;
 - ◆ to encourage literacy and promote literature;
 - ◆ to promote the use of ICT;
 - ◆ to provide information for education, leisure, business and daily life; and
 - ◆ to provide high quality services through knowledgeable, helpful and efficient staff.
- 42 The Recreation Committee translated these aims into nine long-term objectives on 13th June 1991:
- ◆ to provide and promote loan collections of books and related materials to meet the educational, informational, cultural and recreational needs of the community;
 - ◆ to provide reference and information services to meet the needs of the community;
 - ◆ to provide commercial and specialist information services for the academic, industrial and public sector communities;
 - ◆ to provide library services to assist children to the means of self-development offered by books and to encourage the use of the library services to further this end;
 - ◆ to provide a schools library service to encourage the development and use of school library resources as a key element in the educational process;

- ♦ to provide a library service to the housebound and residential homes which offer the disabled and elderly a library service comparable, as far as is possible, in both range and quality to that available to the general public;
 - ♦ to provide a service to ethnic minorities which recognises the particular library needs of those sections of the community whose language and culture is not that of the majority population;
 - ♦ To provide music and drama services to promote an interest in and activities connected with the enjoyment, understanding and performance of music and drama; and
 - ♦ To provide services to people in custody.
- 43 One of the outcomes from the best value review was agreement that the service aims and objectives need to be revisited. The minutes of the Best Value Review Panel (Recreation and Heritage) dated 24th May 2001, state that, *'The aims and objectives of the Library Service must be revisited to take account of issues, which have emerged from the review concerning access to services and the range and extent of books and other resources provided as part of the service.'*
- 44 We agree that the aims and objectives need revisiting because we believe that they are no longer sufficiently challenging and because they do not take account of the views of users and non-users about the kinds of services libraries should be delivering.
- 45 The period since 1991 has seen massive change in the role of the public library service, not least its emerging role of providing access to ICT services for that percentage of the population who do not have access at home.
- 46 In recent years the Government has clearly expressed its vision for public libraries:
- ♦ *'The Government wants libraries to be at the very heart of the communities they serve, allowing everyone, irrespective of age or social background, to have access to the widest possible range of information, knowledge and services. We want libraries to play a major role in supporting formal education and life-long learning for everyone. We want the facilities and services they provide to be accessible at the times when people most want to use them; and we want the local community to be involved in developing the range of services that they provide.'* (Libraries for All: Social Inclusion in Public Libraries, 1999)

- ♦ *‘Public libraries are a vital element in public services in this country. They are welcoming spaces held in great affection by their communities. They provide a focus for individual learning for people of all ages and access to vital information and community networks for the socially excluded; they are gateways to local arts and cultural activities; and they are leading the drive to increase the use of Information and Communication Technology among all sectors of society.’* (Comprehensive, Efficient and Modern Public Libraries – Standards and Assessment, 2001)
- 47 We heard from users that they see additional roles for the library service, which are not expressed in the current aims. Some examples are listed below:
- ♦ ‘more morning/weekend activities’ and ‘out-of-hours activities’;
 - ♦ ‘word processing for free’;
 - ♦ ‘open all hours’;
 - ♦ ‘local advisory panels’; and
 - ♦ ‘access from home via the internet’.
- 48 The Council undertook a Mori residents survey in 1999 which identified that two of the three areas which were considered most important but with which residents were least satisfied were dealing with young offenders and facilities for young people. There is experience outside Hampshire of library service projects that are helping to address youth crime levels by providing alternative activity and helping to promote inclusion for young people.
- 49 In conclusion, our view is that the library has clear service aims that support Hampshire County Council’s corporate aims. We feel that these service aims deliver a quality, traditional library service. However, we believe that they need to be updated to reflect emerging roles for public libraries.

Does the service meet these aims?

- 50 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 standards and targets and the Council’s approach to measuring whether it is actually delivering what it sets out to do.

- 51 Users appear very satisfied with the current service. In visits to libraries, and telephone calls to users, the overwhelming majority reported being satisfied with services.
- 52 In the Mori residents survey carried out in 1999, 89 per cent of respondents said they were satisfied with library services in Hampshire. This was one of the highest satisfaction ratings for any council service.
- 53 In the Public Library User Satisfaction (PLUS) survey carried out in 21 libraries in 2000:
- ◆ 97.4 per cent of respondents rated staff helpfulness as good or very good.
 - ◆ 95 per cent of respondents rated staff knowledge and expertise as good or very good.
- 54 During reality checks the following comments were made:
- ◆ ‘ladies who come really put themselves out’ and ‘can’t speak highly enough’ (housebound library users);
 - ◆ ‘enthusiastic individuals do make a difference’ (head teacher); and
 - ◆ ‘staff have more time to spend with you than at school library’ (young library user).
- 55 The user focus group cited quality of staff and willingness of staff to find information as major strengths of the service.
- 56 When we phoned a number of libraries to make enquiries, we found staff knew about the services requested and dealt with the enquiries courteously. The approach of most seemed rather formal and could have been daunting to the reluctant caller. Two of the 13 libraries approached however, offered to find out more and phone us back. One library was quite curt, suggesting we phone a larger library but did not offer a phone number.

- 57 The library service provides a high quality book lending service, through its comprehensive book stock. The service prides itself on its breadth and depth of stock. The users we spoke to also reflected this. Comments from young library users telephoned included: 'good resources to look things up' and 'lots of books for research'. When we visited libraries and spoke to customers, quality of book stock was one of the most often cited comments about the service. Availability/quality of stock was given by the public focus group as one of the strengths of the service. Staff also identified this as a significant strength of the service, both in interviews and in focus groups.
- 58 Hampshire has a good track record of building new libraries and refurbishing old ones. A number of the libraries we visited were in modern and attractive buildings, eg. Hythe, Leigh Park, Petersfield and Stubbington. The service is in the process of building a new library at Lymington, and has plans and capital identified to replace Alton Library (pictured below). They are also working on plans to unite the existing Winchester Reference and Lending Libraries on a single site.



- 59 Many of the older libraries have bright and well maintained exteriors, eg Lee on Solent pictured overleaf.



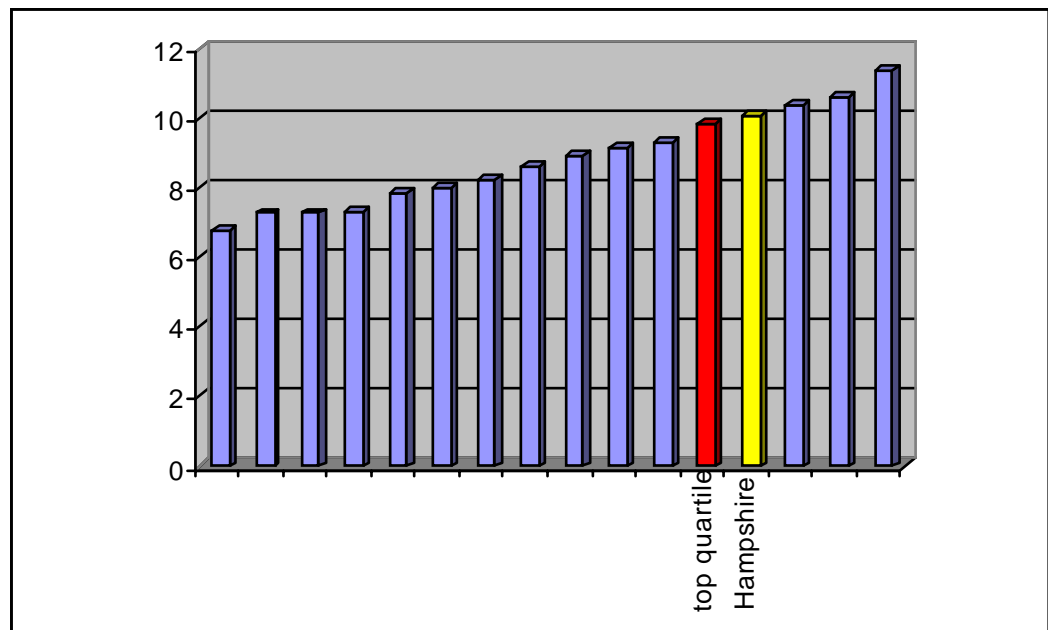
- 60 There are many examples of local innovative practice within the library service. A small sample is listed below:
- ◆ Book mates – a project just launched, funded by Southern Arts, to organise reading activities in three libraries, to encourage young people and their parents to read together.
 - ◆ Hatrics – a cross-sectoral network of commercial and industrial companies, public libraries, health service libraries, further and higher education institutions, government organisations and research establishments in Dorset, Hampshire, West Sussex and surrounding areas. Established in 1964, the network provides information services to its members.
 - ◆ Wessex Children's Book Fair – organised in partnership with booksellers and publishers.
 - ◆ Homework Clubs – at Hythe and Yately libraries.
 - ◆ Asian language service – based at Gosport Library but providing Asian language library services to the whole county.
- 61 Hampshire library service currently provides poor public access to ICT.

- 62 This is acknowledged in the best value review, by all staff we spoke to in interviews and focus groups, by colleagues in the Council and outside, and by members of the public:
- ◆ ‘One significant measure is our current poor standard of IT provision for public use.’ (BVR progress report, 29th September 2000);
 - ◆ ‘Not as many PCs with internet access as my college library’ (young library user); and
 - ◆ ‘Internet access/café’ (public focus group improvement request).
- 63 In 1998, Hampshire Library Service decided to reduce the loan period for books from four to three weeks. This was done for two reasons:
- ◆ to allow more effective comparison of performance with Hampshire’s own identified benchmarking group, most of whom operate a three week loan period; and
 - ◆ to increase stock turnover, and make a wider range of material available on the shelves.
- 64 In talking to users in the libraries and at the public focus group, it became apparent that this was a very unpopular change. When users were asked to identify which of the improvements they had identified, they thought were most important, returning to a four week loan cycle scored joint second, after longer opening hours.
- 65 Some staff also told us:
- ◆ the public ‘all hate it’;
 - ◆ ‘staff feel we should revert to four weeks, the public tell them, I think there’s a good case for going back to four weeks’;
 - ◆ ‘should have consulted more before changing to three week loan period’;
 - ◆ ‘three week loan – we get more letters about that than anything, it was done to get our issues up, it ought to be considered more seriously because of volume of complaints’; and
 - ◆ ‘we’ve had letters of complaint, more than we expected, and they keep coming’.

- 66 In conclusion, we believe that staff are predominantly highly motivated, helpful and efficient, and that the quality book stock delivers a good, traditional library service. User satisfaction is generally high, and access to services is provided through a wide network of buildings and services. Hampshire acknowledges weaknesses in public access to ICT and plans are underway to address this.

How does the performance compare?

- 67 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.
- 68 Two main areas of comparison are available for this service, Audit Commission performance indicators, and performance against the recently published DCMS standards for public libraries. A number of the Audit Commission PIs are incorporated into the new standards (see below), but issue figures are not included.
- 69 In issues of all items per head of population, Hampshire performs well, and inside the class upper quartile. The following graph shows Hampshire's performance against the Audit Commission family group.



- 70 The DCMS standards were published February 2001, and came into force April 2001, although library services have three years to comply. Using DCMS analysis published in May 2001, Hampshire currently comply with four of the eighteen standards. This is the lowest compliance rate within their own identified family group of Hertfordshire, Essex, Kent, Surrey and Lancashire. The highest rate is achieved by Essex with 11 standards met. Caution is needed in interpreting these results as the DCMS analysis is against 1999/2000 actuals, and progress is so fast in some of these areas (particularly in the availability of ICT) that performance will have dramatically improved.
- 71 Hampshire's performance against the standards and the class upper quartiles are as follows. Areas where most significant improvement is needed to reach the class upper quartile figure and/or the standard, have been shaded.

Standard	Standard figure	Hampshire figure	Class upper quartile figure
Proportion of households within 2 miles of static branch	85%	86%	86%
Aggregate opening hours per 1,000 population for all libraries	128	83	127.7
Percentage of larger libraries open at least 45 hours per week	100%	47%	100%
Percentage of libraries open more than 10 hours per week that have access to on-line catalogues	100%	51%	100%
Total number of electronic workstations per 1,000 population	0.6	0.086	0.263
Percentage of static service points providing public internet access	100%	27%	99.5%
Normal book issue period	3	3	N/A
Number of books that library users are allowed to borrow at one time	8	8	N/A
Percentage of requests for books met within 7 days	50%	35%	58%
Percentage of requests for books met within 15 days	70%	69%	75%
Percentage of requests for books met within 30 days	85%	84%	87%
Number of library visits per 1,000 population	6,600	6,269	6,458
Percentage of adult library users reporting success in obtaining a specific book	65%	59%	N/A
Percentage of adult library users reporting success in gaining information as a result of a search or enquiry	75%	74%	N/A
Percentage of adult library users rating the knowledge of staff as 'good' or 'very good'	95%	94%	N/A
Percentage of adult library users rating the helpfulness of staff as 'good' or 'very good'	95%	97%	N/A
Annual items added per 1,000 population	216	164	187
Time taken to replenish the lending stock on open access or available for loan	8.5 years	11.4 years	11.6 years

- 72 We recognise that it is not possible to make straight value judgements about the amount of money spent on services like libraries. For example, whilst it might be argued that high spending councils are inefficient it is also possible to argue that high spending councils are more likely to be providing a good range of materials for people to borrow. The key issue is not the level of spending on its own, but the effectiveness of that spending in terms of user outcomes.
- 73 The net expenditure per head of population for Hampshire libraries in 1999/2000 was £10.81, against an average £10.67 for English counties. The class upper quartile (the 25 per cent lowest spending authorities) figure is £9.80, and the class lower quartile (25 per cent highest spending authorities) figure is £11.57. In 1999/2000 Hampshire spent 17.4 per cent of its gross service expenditure on the 'book fund', against an average for English counties of 15.6 per cent. Therefore, although Hampshire County Council spends more per head of population than average on the library service, it also spends a higher than average percentage of that money on materials for people to borrow.
- 74 In conclusion, although Hampshire only comply with four of the eighteen standards for libraries, these standards were only published in February 2001, and came into force April 2001. Library services have three years to comply. Hampshire Library Service compares favourably on a number of established Audit Commission performance indicators.

2.3 How likely is the service to improve?

Does the best value review drive improvement?

- 75 The best value review is the mechanism for ensuring authorities deliver continuous improvement in the services they provide.
- 76 The scope of this review explicitly excluded:
- ◆ The Schools Library Service, which was considered to have different stakeholders (e.g. head teachers, school librarians and governors, reflecting the links with the Council's Management Partnership with School). This will be included under a review in education starting 2001.
 - ◆ Finance, which has been included in the review of corporate finance.
 - ◆ IT, because apart from the stand-alone circulation system (Galaxy) libraries are dependent on corporate IT, and a review was already planned in this area.
 - ◆ Personnel, which will be included in the review of corporate personnel.
- 77 At the initial scoping stage all other services were included. However, the identification of three 'issues', and the subsequent establishment of three working groups to explore these issues, effectively excluded other areas of the service at an early stage.
- 78 The three 'issues' identified by officers were:
- ◆ Access – initially to include opening hours and costs of providing mobile library services, but this remit was expanded by members to include in addition, access to buildings and equipment, charges, housebound services, mobiles generally and stock.
 - ◆ Efficiency – to include branch service planning and use of performance information.
 - ◆ New developments – to include IT developments and service content (material selection).

- 79 A working party was set up to investigate and make proposals for each area. These working parties included members. The working parties each conducted independent consultation and comparison. We believe that little challenge was undertaken at any stage, although one group did hold a 'stakeholder meeting' mentioned later, which included representatives from other organisations and introduced some elements of challenge. The following quotes are from interviews and telephone calls with staff and other stakeholders who were involved in the review in some way:
- ◆ 'they couldn't ask big questions';
 - ◆ 'not really fundamentally challenged the whole service but had gone down to specifics too soon'; and
 - ◆ 'issues got set in stone before real challenge'.
- 80 At the project brief stage it was stated that, 'there is no existing evidence that there is a commercial market to run library services' and 'there is deemed to be no competition from the private sector to provide a book lending service' (service specification and project brief, May 2000). No further attempt was made to consider competition as part of the review.
- 81 The level of consultation conducted by each working group varied considerably:
- ◆ The access group held two focus groups, did a telephone survey of 50 users and non-users and invited staff to comment in a newsletter and Hantsnet message (30 staff took up this opportunity).
 - ◆ The efficiency group used data from the most recent PLUS survey of nine libraries and held a staff focus group which included a contact from West Sussex County Council's Treasurers Department.
 - ◆ The new developments group held a stakeholders' meeting which included library and other council department staff, representatives from district councils and voluntary groups, a library supplier, and librarians from Southampton and Portsmouth Universities.
- 82 The only significant ongoing user consultation being undertaken is the PLUS survey, which was undertaken at 10 libraries in 1999 (3,400 users responded), 22 more in 2000 (8,100 users responded) and all 54 libraries in 2001 (7,000 users responded). In total this means that 18,500 users have been surveyed over the last 3 years as part of the PLUS survey.

- 83 There are some examples of actions in the improvement plan which have resulted from consultation e.g. the provision of free reservations to Bee Aware Scheme members. However, there did not appear to be a systematic approach to learning from consultation or from expressed user views e.g. lack of response to complaints about the three week loan period.
- 84 The level of comparison also varied. Senior staff make frequent visits to libraries in other authorities and some use has been made of comparisons e.g. information about bidding for European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) funding for training and the introduction and expansion of the video service. But we feel that more significant use could be made of process benchmarking.
- 85 We believe that best value has not been used in this service to 'think outside the box'. The following comments made to us summarise this point:
- ◆ 'not looking far enough ahead'; and
 - ◆ 'need changes in hearts and minds'.
- 86 In conclusion, we do not believe that this best value review has been a significant driver for change. We recognise that there are other major national drivers (referred to earlier in paragraphs 33 to 36) but feel that the opportunity to conduct a fundamental and strategic review of the service and think imaginatively about the future has been missed.

How good is the improvement plan?

- 87 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 that are not only challenging but also designed to demonstrate and ensure the continuous improvement necessary to put the service amongst the top 25 per cent of councils within 5 years.
- 88 The improvement plan includes:
- ◆ targets and dates;
 - ◆ the name of the officer responsible for ensuring the actions are carried out;
 - ◆ details of any perceived barriers to the targets being achieved; and
 - ◆ details of any financial resource implications.

- 89 A very high percentage of actions in the improvement plan are investigative in nature. Six specific recommendations were put to the Best Value Review Panel (Recreation and Heritage) in the outcome report for this review on 24th May 2001:
- ◆ Introduction of free reservation charges for Bee Aware Scheme members.
 - ◆ Extension of (expenses) payment to all volunteers supporting the housebound reader service.
 - ◆ Consistent approach to public toilet provision implemented in all libraries.
 - ◆ Continuation of the 3 week loan period.
 - ◆ Retention of centrally held budgets.
 - ◆ Implementation of a pilot self-issuing system.
- 90 Only four of these items have direct impact on services to customers:
- ◆ Hampshire's own estimate of savings to Bee Aware Scheme members (a scheme for the visually impaired) is a total of £1,440 per year.
 - ◆ The consistent approach to public toilet provision mentioned involves shutting existing public toilets within libraries.
 - ◆ The continuation of the three week loan period involves no change to existing services and was unpopular with a significant number of users interviewed during inspection.
 - ◆ The implementation of the pilot self-issuing system has the potential to free up more staff time for other work.
- 91 We understand that this early review initially had significant time constraints placed upon it. However, by the time the final version of the improvement plan was accepted by committee (May 2001) we would have expected many of the investigative actions to have been completed and proposals developed which, if implemented, would achieve significant service improvement.

- 92 Specifically we feel that the improvement plan lacks actions which will:
- ♦ address the needs of non-users; and
 - ♦ pro-actively seek and exploit opportunities for partnership within the Council and externally.
- 93 Some staff interviewed agreed:
- ♦ ‘improvements are a bit marginal’; and
 - ♦ ‘not terribly optimistic that it’s going to help the service improve’.
- 94 In conclusion, we believe that the improvement plan will not deliver the changes, which would convert a good traditional library service into an innovative contemporary public service.

Will the authority deliver the improvements?

- 95 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.
- 96 We have mentioned earlier the service’s track record for improving and rebuilding library buildings (paragraphs 58 and 59) and for ‘piloting’ innovative ideas (paragraph 60). But we believe that failure to learn from the pockets of innovative practice and roll out this learning across the county has hindered improvements to services across all the divisions. For example, out of 54 libraries, two currently hold homework help clubs, both with assistance from other organisations, and neither using mainstream funded library staff other than for security. While we recognise that such projects are not appropriate at every branch, it is clear that there are other suitable venues for homework support within the library service.
- 97 We have noted the outstanding bid to NOF to upgrade public access to ICT through the People’s Network funding stream, which is likely to be approved shortly. Effective implementation of this plan will deliver significant improvements in this area. We also recognise that further funding may become available from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, as announced by Resource (the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries) on Friday 20th July 2001.

- 98 But despite some examples of seeking external funding e.g. the purchase of a PC and CD-ROMs by ESSO in Hythe Library and the extension of the publications budget by selling leaflet designs to other councils, there was generally an unwillingness to pro-actively seek external partners as a way of attracting resources to support library services. We heard that local attempts are made but are often unsuccessful and that this may dishearten staff from trying again. We believe that senior involvement in co-ordinating these attempts at partnership working would benefit the service and support local initiatives.
- 99 In interviews with senior staff, we found a view that service improvement can only be achieved through additional funding. Asked to identify a main weakness of the service, many staff raised funding:
- ◆ ‘resources are a weakness, I’m always having to prioritise’;
 - ◆ ‘too lean on staff now, not enough heads’;
 - ◆ ‘a little under resourced, especially book fund’;
 - ◆ ‘budget, in terms of spending on staff’; and
 - ◆ ‘lack of financial support from County Council to support infrastructure’.
- 100 This view was also reflected in focus groups. In one of the two staff focus groups ‘more money!’ was voted the highest priority for improvement for the library service, in the second focus group ‘more book fund’ was voted third after ‘ICT’ and ‘non-users’ which were joint first. In total, 17 per cent of votes cast across the two focus groups, when asked ‘what improvements should be made to library services in Hampshire?’ were for additional funding. This focus on inputs rather than service delivery improvements was a feature of many interviews with library staff.

- 101 We recognise that the future management of the library service will inevitably change, for reasons external to the review itself, and that this raises the level of uncertainty about the future. The most significant reasons are given below
- ◆ The adoption of the leader and cabinet model of local governance from September 2001, and the need for the member of the executive with responsibility for libraries to familiarise themselves with their new portfolio.
 - ◆ Plans to establish a directorate structure in the Council, and the resulting changes to the reporting lines of the most senior library manager.
 - ◆ The planned retirement of the current County Librarian and Deputy County Librarian in the coming months.
- 102 We believe that there is a clear senior corporate vision and commitment to innovation within the service: ‘a good, high performing, traditional service, on the cusp of major change’ and ‘we want a more forward looking approach’.
- 103 In conclusion, opportunities were missed to look at the big picture as part of the best value review and the improvement plan does not contain the actions needed to convert this good traditional library service into a contemporary one. But we believe there is corporate recognition of the need for fundamental change and innovation to significantly improve the library service.

3 Appendix – What did the inspectors do?

- 104 The purpose of best value inspection is to make two judgements. The first is, how good is the service being inspected? The second is, how likely is it to improve? We carried out a range of different activities to enable us to reach our judgements.

Documents examined

- 105 Before going on site we reviewed a range of documents which had been provided in advance by the Council for us. These included:
- ◆ best value review report;
 - ◆ DCMS public libraries planning profiles;
 - ◆ annual library plan;
 - ◆ budget reports;
 - ◆ council plans and strategies, e.g. corporate plan, adult learning plan, early years development and childcare plan;
 - ◆ related committee reports;
 - ◆ best value performance plan;
 - ◆ external auditor's report and management letter e.g. District Audit review of Hampshire Libraries; and
 - ◆ best value toolkit.

Reality checks undertaken

- 106 When we went on site we carried out a number of 'reality checks' designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and see how well it works on the ground. Our reality checks included three focus groups (two with staff and one with library users), 'mystery shopping' phone enquiries to 13 libraries and visits to 18 libraries.
- 107 We also spoke on the phone to:
- ◆ 5 housebound library users and one housebound library volunteer worker;
 - ◆ a worker for visually impaired people who refers clients to the housebound library service;

- ◆ representatives of 2 local access/disability groups;
- ◆ 2 school teachers;
- ◆ 7 members of the local Youth Council who are also library users;
- ◆ Peter Amies – Head of Leisure Services, Rushmoor District Council; and
- ◆ Simon Bowes – Learning and Skills Council member.

108 We met with a range of different people detailed below:

Peter Robertson	Chief Executive
Paul Turner	County Librarian
Mary Watkins	Deputy County Librarian
John Dunne	Assistant County Librarian – Children's, Schools and Community Services, and departmental lead for the best value review
Barrie Kempthorne	Assistant County Librarian – Bibliographic and Adult Lending Services
Nick Fox	Assistant County Librarian – Information Services
John Haylock	Assistant County Librarian – Resource Planning
Mary Franklin	Divisional Librarian, West
Sue Greenfield	Divisional Librarian, North
Paul Dix	Divisional Librarian, Central
Nick Coe	County Community Services Librarian
Mary Pearson	Assistant Supervisor, Winchester Library and staff representative
Duncan Savage	Best Value Officer
Jenny Heath	Best Value Officer
Bevis Ingram	Assistant County Treasurer
Rose Stenner	Assistant Adult Learning Officer

Richard Gibson	Principal IT Consultant
Sarah Stone	Head of Personnel – Central & Recreation Department
Ray Barnard	Youth Services Manager
Jane Goodwin	Equalities Officer
John Wilkinson	Early Years & Childcare Unit Manager
Mike Fitch	Head of Property Services
Marcos Frangos	Access Officer
Mary Murphy	Finance Manager
Cllr Ken Thomber	Leader of the Council
Cllr Maurice Sheehan	Chair of Library Panel
Cllr Mike Geddes	Vice chair of Best Value Review Panel – Recreation & Heritage