

Salford City Council

Evaluation of Phase One Review of Support Services

March 2002

*Internal report to the Council –
not for publication on the Audit Commission
website*

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.¹ Best value is a challenging new performance framework that requires authorities to publish annual best value performance plans and review all of their services every five years.

Authorities must show that they have applied the four Cs 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 council 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 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.

¹ 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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Report

Context

The locality

- 1 Salford is situated on the western side of the Greater Manchester conurbation. It has a population of 224,800, which is declining by about 1,000 per year. Two point two per cent of the population are from black and ethnic minority communities. The authority covers an area of 9,690 hectares.
- 2 Fifteen years ago unemployment rates were over twice the national average. This trend has been reversed and now rates are near the regional average – ILO unemployment rates (aged 16+) are now 7.2 per cent compared with 6.7 per cent for Greater Manchester and 6.4 per cent for the North West.
- 3 The last 20 to 30 years has seen a changing employment picture, with the loss of traditional industry, including the docks and manufacturing industry. It contains areas of significant social deprivation and is the 28th most deprived council area in England. There are, however, major redevelopment/regeneration activities including, Salford Quays, The Lowry and Metrolink.

The Council

- 4 The Council comprises elected members from 20 wards, three members for each. There is a large Labour majority – 52 Labour, three Conservative and five Liberal Democrats. A Cabinet and five Scrutiny Committees support the work of the Council.
- 5 The Council's overall revenue budget for 2001/2002 is £240.3 million. With the falling population and reducing RSG settlements, expenditure has reduced by £8 million in 2000/2001 and £13 million in 2001/2002. The capital programme is approximately £60 million for 2001/ 2002. The overall financial position of the Council has been difficult. There were no usable or uncommitted reserves (District Audit management letter December 2000), however a three year budget strategy has been established that will provide reserves of £2 million by April 2001 and is on target for achieving over £4 million reserves by April 2002.

- 6 The Council's priorities set out in the Strategic Plan, 1997-2007 and 1999, identified 10 corporate objectives and the vision statement: *'to create the best possible quality of life for the people of Salford'*. This has now been updated and superseded by the following six pledges:
- ◆ better education for all;
 - ◆ quality homes for all;
 - ◆ a clean and healthy city;
 - ◆ a safer Salford;
 - ◆ stronger communities; and
 - ◆ supporting young people.
- 7 These pledges link with the wider community plan developed with Salford Partnership which has seven themes as set out below:
- ◆ a healthy city;
 - ◆ a safe city;
 - ◆ a learning and creative city;
 - ◆ a city where children and young people are valued;
 - ◆ an inclusive city with stronger communities;
 - ◆ an economically prosperous city; and
 - ◆ a city that's good to live in.

The review

- 8 We have carried out an interim inspection of the phase one, strategic, best value review of Support Services. The Council reviewed these services during years one and two of its best value programme as a consequence of the Council's decision (in October 2000) to seek expressions of interest from external organisations for the provision of Support Services to the Council. Subsequent to this, and as the initial working group began to develop the actions to implement this decision, it was recognised that considerable work was required to establish the scale, scope and specification for these services. The strategic review is the first part of this process.

- 9 This inspection was primarily focused on how the Council has carried out the strategic review rather than an evaluation of current service costs and quality. However, during the inspection some information was gathered and this is included in the section of this report headed ‘how good is the service?’
- 10 The review covered the Corporate Services directorate and the Personnel function. This included the following:
- ◆ Corporate Services:
 - ◆ law and administration – including printing, elections, reception, legal services, land charges, registrars, out of hours emergency service and licensing;
 - ◆ finance – including audit, accountancy, revenue services, creditors, debtors, payroll;
 - ◆ information technology – including research and development, business process re-engineering, computer services, IT support, training, helpdesk; and
 - ◆ customer services – including frontline call handling for council tax, benefits, environmental services and private sector housing benefits.

The overall budget for Corporate Services is £22 million. The directorate employs over 650 staff.

- ◆ Personnel function:
 - ◆ consultancy;
 - ◆ occupational health and safety unit;
 - ◆ organisational development;
 - ◆ equalities; and
 - ◆ outstationed staff in the six directorates.

The budget for Personnel is £3.4 million. The function employs approximately 100 staff plus 59 peripatetic trainees who work across the Council.

How good is the service?

Are the aims clear and challenging?

- 11 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.
- 12 The individual functions within the Corporate Services directorate have several different customers or clients. These include:
 - ◆ direct services to the public, eg, revenues, benefits, registrars, land charges, call centre;
 - ◆ services to other council departments, eg, IT, financial services;
 - ◆ services to individual staff members, eg, payroll;
 - ◆ services to other organisations, eg, finance services for GMP; and
 - ◆ democratic services supporting the Councillors and the political infrastructure.
- 13 The services inspected do not each have clear aims articulated in the review documentation. It is therefore unclear how these services will deliver benefits to the customers and the community of Salford and contribute to the achievement of the Council's six pledges. There needs to be clear links between the six pledges and the aims and objectives of the services.
- 14 Questions that will therefore need to be answered for the services as part of any future BVRs, or prior to outsourcing/partnership options are as follows:
 - ◆ who are the customers;
 - ◆ what do the customers want;
 - ◆ what is the Council's overall strategy for customer service and customer contact;
 - ◆ what can the organisation afford;
 - ◆ what changes in the organisation other services/directorates will affect future plans;
 - ◆ should the aims be about direct delivery or more about an enabling role; and
 - ◆ how challenging are the aims and will they drive service improvement?

Does the service meet these aims?

- 15 The best value review was carried out at a strategic level. We therefore did not look at individual services in detail, however internal customers told us that the majority of services delivered are to a reasonable standard. Exceptions to this are:
- ◆ payroll, where major problems have occurred including staff not being paid or paid incorrectly; and
 - ◆ payment of invoices to contractors, where delays have led to contractors not wishing to do further work for the Council.
- 16 The above occurred following the introduction of new systems and we think that the Council needs to review these areas as a matter of priority.
- 17 The outstationed approach to Personnel and Financial Services is well regarded and the rationale for the new structure for Personnel is understood. However, the mechanism for managing and delivering services has not been clearly defined in recent years. For example, service level agreements have not been used effectively in that the services are generally considered to be providing what they think the customer requires, rather than a service truly based on customer need. There is a need for greater engagement of customers both internal and external in order to understand their current and future needs.
- 18 The review proposes a revised approach to SLAs, this is helping to clarify the services which directorates receive but, as yet, is not truly based on the specific needs of individual directorates and their customers. In general, the approach is still, currently, based on allocated time for existing staff and does not enable any flexibility in the use of resources. As such, current methods of delivery are not being fundamentally challenged. The Council as a matter of priority should address this issue.

- 19 Questions that need to be addressed include the following:
- ◆ what standards are you working to and are you meeting them;
 - ◆ do staff understand the aims and service standards;
 - ◆ are staff actively involved in improving service quality;
 - ◆ do customers understand the level and quality of service they should be receiving;
 - ◆ what sources of information on performance are there – hard and soft data; and
 - ◆ is data collected regularly and consistently or only for reviews and project work?

How does the performance compare?

- 20 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.
- 21 There is little comparison information available with the exception of the call centre, legal services and financial services who are using comparative data on performance to assess standards of service. Using information from public and private sector sources. There is, however, no consistent approach to comparing service performance across the different service areas within the Council or an agreed corporate approach to benchmarking or comparison. We believe this is a priority area to be addressed by the Council.
- 22 Questions that need to be addressed include the following:
- ◆ how are you going to establish meaningful comparisons and use them:
 - ◆ to compare current performance;
 - ◆ for the future BVRs and option appraisals;
 - ◆ to monitor future service provision, whether internally delivered or outsourced; and
 - ◆ to improve service quality and performance?

- ◆ what national PIs are the key ones to use;
- ◆ what local PIs can be used to supplement these; and
- ◆ can your indicators be developed to reflect both service quality and service cost-efficiency, effectiveness and economy?

Summary

- 23 This strategic review has not focused on how well individual services are performing. It has not identified clear and challenging aims, linked to the six pledges, for all services (since we were on site, links to the pledges have been incorporated in service plans). It has not examined in detail how well each service is performing and, for most services, has not been able to establish meaningful comparative data. For a comprehensive best value approach these aspects will need to be addressed in subsequent reviews.

How likely is the service to improve?

Does the review drive improvements?

- 24 A full best value review is a mechanism for ensuring authorities deliver continuous improvement in the services they provide. In this case the Council chose to undertake a best value review of strategic options in order to determine City Council direction on Support Services and inform the appropriateness of more detailed service reviews which would follow.
- 25 This is a strategic review, which is considering the options for alternative delivery of services. Using the Council's best value methodology, service profiles were developed for each service area. The summary profiles seen by the Inspectors describe the service provided and identify issues facing the service now and in the future. However, while some services identify performance indicators and benchmarking data, many have not yet identified a clear focus on outcomes for service users.
- 26 The majority of the work carried out in this review has concentrated on the internal provision of services to other council directorates; little work has been done, as part of the review, on the services which directly interface with the public and the community; other work, for example, on the call centre, has progressed outside of the review.

- 27 The Council is beginning to use its vision and six pledges to drive the organisation and to help identify key strategic indicators of performance. This emphasis has increased in recent months and was not as visible during the period when the review was taking place. Therefore, the service profile information contained in the appendices to the report does not, at the present time, reflect how the services will contribute to and support the six pledges.
- 28 The original outsourcing proposal and decision to place an OJEC advert for expressions of interest in delivering corporate and personnel services appears to have been primarily driven by the need to save money. Subsequently, a decision not to proceed with the advert and to concentrate on a phase one strategic best value review was taken. This decision recognised that the Council did not have enough information on which to proceed. At this stage the Council wished to gather further information and developed a three year financial plan to address the immediate funding issues.

Challenge

- 29 The review has not fundamentally challenged either the need for each service or the method of provision. Alternative providers were identified from the KPMG report and an external overview provided from membership of the Challenge Panel. However, the final report states *'we want to give the internal service opportunity to prove its effectiveness'*. We think it is positive that the initial outsourcing proposal was delayed once the Council recognised it needed more information in order to carry out the process effectively, but the rigour and depth of challenge in the subsequent review was limited.

Consultation

- 30 Consultation within the review was limited to staff at all levels within the Council and trades unions; there was no direct consultation with members of the community or the public. We think that further public consultation needs to take place to inform the future development of those services directly provided to the public and on the overall customer contact strategy for the Council. Consultation also needs to inform the nature, style, timing and prioritisation of future best value reviews, particularly if a varied approach is to be applied to different services.

Competition

- 31 KPMG were engaged to consider the external market place and options. This work did not examine public/public partnerships, public/private partnerships or the transfer of services to other local authorities. In addition, the Council's previous partnership experience (Internal Audit and Ernst and Young) was not used within this strategic best value review as a source of expertise and information as part of this review. We think that the overall approach to competition was limited and any future consideration needs to be wider and more rigorous.

Comparison

- 32 Some services within the review are planning to carry out rigorous comparative work, for example, Legal Services, who are benchmarking with the private sector. However, at the time of the inspection, many services have recognised there is a lack of performance indicators, benchmarking and exploration of good practice, all of which could drive service improvement. We think the Council does not have clearly defined protocols for benchmarking and comparison. This leads to individual services developing their own processes in isolation from each other. Where good practices exist, they are not shared with other services or departments.
- 33 We did, however, find the amount of work done and the volume of information collected was impressive – for example, in assembling service profile information. However, due to gaps in data collection and information available, particularly on comparison and competitive performance, the Council is not yet able to make fully informed decisions on delivery options for most services. Where decisions on the timing of future BVRs or changes in service delivery are being made these appear to be as a result of other issues or initiatives. For example, democratic services being affected by change in political structures and role and the continued examination of payroll service due to current failings.
- 34 We think the Council needs to build on this phase one review and ensure that the findings are being used effectively and consistently across the Council.
- 35 Questions that need to be addressed include the following:
- ◆ does the scope of the next stages of the strategic review enable significant service improvement;
 - ◆ is there challenge at each stage of the process;
 - ◆ are all stakeholders involved in consultation;
 - ◆ are all delivery options being examined – how does this fit in with the procurement policy;
 - ◆ is comparison being made with both public and private organisations; and
 - ◆ Is comparison establishing relationships that will lead to significant improvements in service delivery?

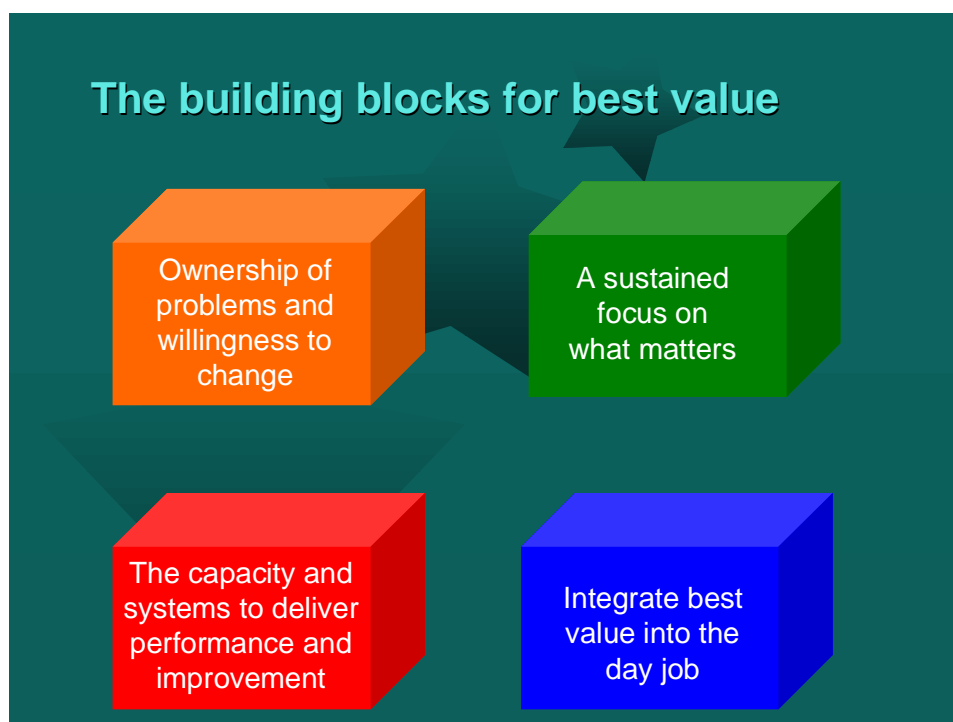
How good are the improvement plans?

- 36 The review has led to strategic and operational improvement plans being produced. For a full BVR these plans should set out what needs to improve, why, and how that improvement will be delivered. They should contain targets which 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 five years.
- 37 For this phase one review the strategic improvement plans are mainly about processes and frameworks. For example, they cover SLAs and service standards, performance management and benchmarking, consultation and communication, innovation and partnership, staff development and management and change management. We identified that some of these, for example, staff development and performance management, have clear links with and are based on the corporate approach. Others, such as SLAs consultation and change management, are being driven by departmental priorities.
- 38 The operational improvement plans focus more on service standards and quality for each function. The operational plans address areas for service improvement and where comparative information is available this has been taken into account in setting PIPs. However, we found such benchmarking data and information on comparative performance with other councils is somewhat limited.
- 39 In general the plans contain clear time-scales, identify responsible persons, have performance measurement/outcomes listed and identify which staff will support the actions. However, no financial resources are allocated and the performance management and monitoring arrangements are part of the improvement plans and are not already established. We think the organisation needs to clarify where key strategic plans fit in with corporate policies, for example, change management.
- 40 Questions that need to be addressed include the following:
- ◆ how do the strategic PIPs fit in with the corporate strategy and vision of the Council;
 - ◆ how will the operational plans integrate with service plans;
 - ◆ how do the actions in the plans lead to specific benefits for example:
 - ◆ improved customer service;
 - ◆ savings in costs of service delivery; and
 - ◆ improved consultation and communication with customers?

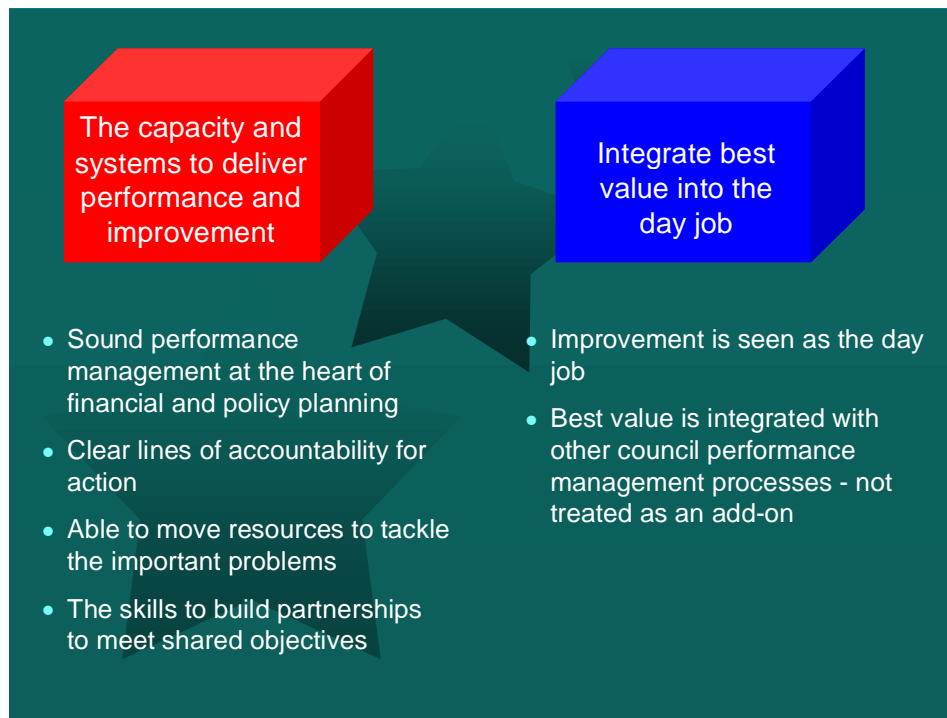
- ◆ how will the revised performance management arrangements be used to monitor progress and outcomes from the improvement plans; and
- ◆ how long do these services have to prove their competitiveness before being considered for alternative delivery/outsourcing?

Will the Council deliver the improvements?

- 41 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.
- 42 A useful framework for analysis is the building blocks for best value identified in the Audit Commission's Best Value Annual Statement 2001, 'Changing Gear' (see below).



- 43 For each building block Changing Gear identifies a number of key issues which need to be in place to enable the Council to deliver improvements. These are set out below.





- 44 The Council could successfully use the building blocks and the issues identified to assist it with establishing new arrangements to fully exploit competition. We are of the view that the background to preparing the OJEC advert is an example of the Council not fully thinking through its actions in terms of seeking other providers for its services, although we acknowledge that once the initial decision was made, the Council stepped back pending a more thorough evaluation of its existing services. However, this step back has delayed the Council from thoroughly challenging its services and using it to clearly identify what really matters to customers, although it has provided more time to gather base line data.
- 45 Performance management is being developed across the Council. We welcome this development, however, it is early days and we think that a key ingredient for its successful implementation across the Council will be demonstrable senior management commitment.
- 46 Departments in the Council use a variety of techniques and tools to assist with the processes of change management and project management, however, there appears to be no consistent approach to using them.

- 47 The Council has limited reserves and resources. This is being managed through a three year financial planning process and we acknowledge the work undertaken by the Council to control its budgets.
- 48 The interim best value review of Corporate and Personnel Services has been completed on time and has resulted in improvement plans. However, in other areas the Council has struggled to deliver the first two years of BVR programme. Only a limited number of reviews have been completed. We think the Council needs to concentrate its efforts on the areas that would benefit the most from a best value review.
- 49 During our inspection we found a number of positive aspects to the way the Council is working, particularly in relation to customer contact. Its pathfinder status in this area is evidence of the good work being undertaken by the Council to improve communications and the quality of services to its customers. We think that this work could be built on by having a customer contact strategy that applies to all council departments and not just those whose first point of contact is through the call centre.
- 50 We also found good partnership working between the Council and other agencies and the Salford Local Strategic Partnership is working together to concentrate on improving the communities of Salford around its agreed seven themes. We also found a willingness amongst members and Officers to work together to improve services.
- 51 The Council is very good at getting projects started and bidding for funding. However, there are weaknesses in its ability to implement initiatives across the Council in a consistent and co-ordinated way. The Council needs to concentrate on the overall outcomes for customers when implementing service improvements.
- 52 Questions that need to be addressed include the following:
- ◆ how can members be included in the whole process of best value reviews;
 - ◆ how will the Council ensure improved outcomes and real customer benefits from reviews;
 - ◆ is there the capacity and willingness (member and Officer) to change the service delivery model; and
 - ◆ does the organisation have the management capacity to deal with different delivery models?

In relation to continuous improvement and future reviews:

- ◆ how will the Council ensure learning from experience and good practice is transferred across the Council; and
- ◆ how will the Council ensure that realistic and manageable proposals for change are developed even when significant financial pressures are on the organisation, for example, avoiding the ‘knee jerk’ proposal for the OJEC advert?

Summary

- 53 In carrying out the review the Council has identified some areas of good practice, some areas of concern and gaps in information about current service standards and delivery. The improvement plans being developed have helped to move the organisation forward, but are based on this incomplete information. These plans do not, as yet, reflect the Council’s six pledges and are not sufficiently integrated with service plans. The overall approach to continuous improvement and performance management is moving in the right direction. However, it does not appear to be consistent across the Council.

Recommendations

- 54 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. In this context, the inspection team feels that the Council should now take action to resolve a number of general, political, managerial and partnership issues.
- 55 We recommend the Council to do the following:
- ◆ Clarify its approach to change management and project management and set out how it will integrate the variety of management tools it currently uses in order to establish a more co-ordinated, efficient and effective approach. In particular the Council needs to:
 - ◆ use project management techniques to clearly set out milestones and monitoring arrangements to ensure projects and reviews are completed within agreed timescales; and
 - ◆ implement the performance management framework across the whole Council and put in place systems to ensure that Officers at all levels are set objectives that are linked to the Council’s six pledges.

- ◆ Develop and implement a corporate customer contact strategy, which sets standards for access to services across the Council. This should ensure that the communities of Salford are treated consistently and appropriately whenever they come into contact with the Council. Make use of internal briefing methods for staff to ensure they are well-informed about council activities and future strategies.
- ◆ Establish a co-ordinated and strategic approach to staff development to equip key staff with the skills and competencies needed to drive forward and make the necessary changes to meet the Council's six pledges, including putting in place sustainable arrangements to ensure there is a transfer of learning from reviews and good practice across the Council.
- ◆ Clarify the vision and long term strategy for Support Services across the Council and ensure that the vision and strategy is communicated effectively to all its stakeholders. This should include having clear mechanisms for linking Support Services issues from other best value reviews to the Support Services' improvement plans.

The Corporate Services directorate and Personnel function should do the following.

- ◆ Fundamentally challenge existing service level agreements and fully engage with both internal and external customers in order to provide services that meet their current and future needs. Services provided at present are not truly based on customer need and tend to reflect what Corporate Services and Personnel think customers need, rather than what they actually need to support their businesses.
- ◆ Undertake a risk analysis to establish those areas of activity in Corporate Services that would benefit from a best value review in year three and those that would benefit from being undertaken in years four and five. In every case, the options appraisal for providing those areas of activity should include a rigorous evaluation of all options, including outsourcing, partnerships with other public bodies, private companies and the voluntary sector and retaining the service in house.

- 56 We would like to thank the staff of Salford City Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

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Inspectors**

Dates of inspection: 13 – 20 November 2001

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Appendices

What the inspectors did

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 reviewed

Before going on site, we reviewed a range of documents which had been provided in advance by the Council for us. These included the following:

- ◆ Best Value Performance Plan
- ◆ Best Value Reviews
- ◆ Strategic performance improvement plans
- ◆ Salford Community Plan 2001-2006
- ◆ Implementing e-government statement
- ◆ Service plans
- ◆ Market testing report
- ◆ Report to the Quality and Performance Scrutiny Committee – 24 September 2001
- ◆ Procurement policy
- ◆ Salford Social, Economic and Environmental Audit – Salford City Unison Branch
- ◆ Development/roll out of Customer Services – discussion paper
- ◆ Performance Management Report

Reality checks undertaken

When we went on site, we carried out a number of different checks building on the work described above 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 on the ground. We also followed up on issues relating to the management of the review and the improvements flowing from it. Our reality checks included:

- ◆ Focus Groups with frontline staff and middle managers
- ◆ Observed customer contact at the Call Centre

List of those interviewed

We also met with a range of different people involved with Councillors and Officers from across the Council.

| | |
|-----------------|-------------------------------------|
| Martin Smith | Director Personnel and Performance |
| Maura Brooks | Head of Customer Services |
| John Spink | Head of Finance |
| Roger Bell | Finance |
| Mike Willets | Assistant Director IT |
| Eric Halton | Assistant Director IT |
| Alan Eastwood | Head of Law and Administration |
| Lorraine Norris | Law and Administration |
| Graham Chin | Law and Administration |
| Adrian Moores | Implementation Officer |
| John Tanna | Contact Centre Manager |
| John Lewis | Assistant Branch Secretary (UNISON) |
| Ann Hallam | Branch Secretary (UNISON) |

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Councillor Lea | Lead member Personnel |
| Councillor Antrobus | Lead member Corporate Services |
| Councillor Dawson | Lead member Quality and Performance Scrutiny Committee |
| Pam Lowe | Director Best Value and Performance |
| Harry Seaton | Director of Housing |
| John Willis | Chief Executive |
| Alan Westwood | Director Corporate Services |
| Mark Reeves | Assistant Director Environmental Services |
| Eve Murphy | Deputy Director Social Services |
| Lynn Wright | Assistant Director Education and Leisure |
| Bill Taylor | Deputy Director Property Services |
| Mike Bleese | Head of Personnel Services |
| Don Simpson | Internal Audit Manager |
| Diane Rowlands | District Audit |