

September 2006

Case Study - Preparing for a cultural services inspection

In April 2006 Basildon District Council was advised that the Audit Commission wished to undertake an inspection of their cultural services provision. The Council was obliged to provide the Audit Commission with a set of background information and working documents, and to undertake a self assessment of the service, against the key lines of enquiry. The Council also had to engage an outside party to undertake a "Critical friend" analysis of this self assessment, and to provide the Inspectors with a report from this.

At the very early stages, in preparation for the inspection the Council decided to critically examine the way that they provided services, including sports services, and how this fitted in with the way other sectors engaged in the provision of sport. This was undertaken by the Council's central performance management team working closely with Cultural Services staff. A six month project plan was prepared for the inspection process, and a core group was established to oversee the work required in preparation for the inspection.

The key documents examined were the Cultural strategy, in its final stages of completion, and the Cultural services service plan. All sports centres and pools, outdoor leisure facilities and major parks and country parks were visited and the staff interviewed. In addition a series of formal interviews took place with senior staff and elected members.

One of the issues arising from this work was the need to link the work of Cultural Services staff with the Council's strategic objectives. It was clear that the Council had invested to a significant degree in sports provision, and had ambitious plans to develop a new "Sporting Village, to replace aging facilities. This commitment was not, however, reflected in the Council's strategic priorities. The timing of this coincided with the Council's annual review of strategic priorities and the Council agreed to replace an existing priority with one which reflected the Council's commitment to the provision of sporting facilities.

It was also apparent that, whilst the staff were clear about their service objectives, their contribution to the wider community and strategic aims of the council had not always been considered. In response the Council brought all the managers of the service together and, using flip charts, identified all the Council's strategic aims and posted these around the room. The managers were asked to list their day to day activities against the wider objectives and these were recorded and fed back to them.

Each manager then repeated this exercise with their own staff, bringing an awareness of the contribution made by each centre to the wider aims of the Council. This exercise enabled the department to demonstrate more strongly the strategic importance of sport to elected members, and to the inspectors. It also helped to show how investment in sport contributes to meeting wider aspirations.

The need to communicate more effectively with the public was also identified through interviews with staff and elected members and work of a marketing plan for the service was accelerated. The Cultural strategy, whilst comprehensive, was not an accessible document and in preparation for the inspectors, a summary was produced for wider consultation, together with a CD rom which delivered the main messages of the strategy through a storyline centred around a family's access to sports opportunities.

Completing the self assessment document within the strict limits on length imposed by the Audit Commission proved a challenge. The Project Plan had allowed plenty of time for this, and for the gathering of supporting evidence, but meeting the deadline for submission still required considerable effort by many individuals. By starting early on this process gaps were identified in time to allow work to be completed and evidence gathered to meet, as far as was possible, the requirements of the key lines of enquiry. On completion of the self assessment the Council engaged the services of an external organisation to undertake a challenge of its contents and to interview key officers and elected members on their understanding of the Council's position against the requirements of the forthcoming inspection. This exercise proved valuable in focussing the minds of officers and members and. In particular, helping them to clarify the rationale for the service and to identify the real strengths and weaknesses in the way the service was delivered.

The Council prepared a site visit for the inspectors which took them to the best and worst of the facilities, and to allow them to speak to front line staff and partners in delivery. The route was designed to take the inspectors to see typical new town issues, but then to show unexpected innovations and examples of community engagement. (Basildon works with a neighbouring unitary Local Authority on a "Positive Futures" initiative, using sport as a means of engaging challenging youngsters).

Rather than treat the inspection process as an exercise in self justification, Basildon has used this process to help them to identify opportunities for improvement, to engage staff more effectively in delivering community outcomes and to make elected members more aware of the value of the service to the community. Providing the evidence needed for the self assessment helped the council identify gaps in their own performance and to become more innovative in communicating the good work which they do within the Council and to the community.