

Strategic Housing Services

City of Lincoln Council

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Local Authority Housing Inspections

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively and delivers high-quality local services for the public.

Within the Audit Commission, the Housing Inspectorate inspects and monitors the performance of a number of bodies and services. These include local authority housing departments, local authorities administering Supporting People programmes, arms length management organisations and housing associations. Our key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) set out the main issues which we consider when forming our judgements on the quality of services. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing.

This inspection has been carried out by the Housing Inspectorate using powers under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. In broad terms these principles look to minimise the burden of regulation while maximising its impact. To meet these principles this inspection:

- is proportionate to risk and the performance of the Council;
- judges the quality of the service for service users and the value for money of the service;
- promotes further improvements in the service; and
- has cost no more than is necessary to safeguard the public interest.

Summary

- 1 The City of Lincoln is one of seven districts in Lincolnshire in the East Midlands. It is the administrative centre of the county and differs from neighbouring districts in that it is a small and mostly densely populated urban area within a large rural and sparsely populated county. There is a population of 86,000 with black and minority ethnic communities making up 2.1 per cent (2001 census).
- 2 The Council comprises 33 councillors with the Labour Party in overall control. The Council set up the leader and executive cabinet model in April 2002. The Council employs 855 staff and has a General Fund budget of £13.7 million for 2005/06 with reserves of £2 million at March 2005.
- 3 The Strategic Housing Service is responsible for; housing strategy and enabling the provision of affordable housing; homelessness and housing needs; and private sector housing.

Scoring the service

- 4 We have assessed the City of Lincoln Council as providing a ‘fair’, one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹

	Prospects for improvement?				
Excellent					‘a fair service that has promising prospects for improvement’ A good service?
Promising		☀			
Uncertain					
Poor					
	Poor	Fair ★	Good ★★	Excellent ★★★	

Source: Audit Commission

- 5 We have assessed the Strategic Housing Service as fair because:
- customers have easy access to services supported by informative leaflets;
 - there are policies in place to provide a sensitive and appropriate response to some vulnerable client groups;
 - there is a sound framework in place for the effective development of the housing strategy;
 - homeless households are dealt with professionally and the temporary accommodation provided is to a good standard with effective support arrangements;
 - the Council works well with partner agencies in the voluntary sector to provide good quality, short-term, supported accommodation for young people in particular;

¹ 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.

- there are positive community, housing and environmental benefits being achieved for residents in Abbey Renewal Area;
- standards in the private rented sector are being ensured through the student accreditation scheme; and
- there is a strong corporate focus on value for money, with work underway to deliver efficiency gains.

6 However, a number of areas require improvement:

- service standards are not in place for all services and feedback from customers is not systematically gathered and used to improve services;
- there is limited information about the diverse profile of customers to guide the strategic response to delivering services to meet these needs;
- there has been limited provision of affordable housing to date and targets in the short term will not be met;
- the housing advice and assistance service is under-developed and is not yet sufficiently coordinated to ensure that the capacity in providing the service is maximised;
- the length of time homeless households spend in temporary accommodation is too long and the Bed and Breakfast arrangements are not satisfactory;
- move on arrangements for young people in supported housing are not robust;
- the strategic approach to private sector housing is under-developed;
- the grants service to improve house conditions and provide aids and adaptations is not customer focussed, there is limited partnership working and budget available for grants is not fully spent; and
- the strategic housing service cannot robustly demonstrate that its services offer value for money, because it does not systematically collect and analyse the costs of delivering its services and has no systems for evaluating any added value as a result of its partnership working.

7 The Council has promising prospects for improvement because:

- the Council can demonstrate a track record of delivering improvements which are resulting in positive benefits for customers;
- there are clear aims for the service supported through a sound performance management framework;
- improvement planning is effectively used to improve services and arrangements are in place to secure continuous improvement;
- robust financial planning aligns resources to priorities and supports delivering improvement;
- the Council works well in partnership with others increasing the capacity for delivering services; and
- the Council has been successful in attracting external funding to deliver services.

8 Strategic Housing Services | Scoring the service

8 However, we identified the following barriers to improvement:

- there has been mixed success in improving performance across key service areas;
- the monitoring of outcomes from improvement plans is not part of a coordinated approach to assess overall progress in meeting the Council's priorities;
- the effectiveness of the performance management system is reduced in some areas by the lack of appropriate indicators of success; and
- there has been no systematic evaluation of the capacity needed to deliver the strategic housing role, not all the resources to support it have been identified and the additional capacity provided by partners has not been assessed.

Recommendations

- 9 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs¹ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Strengthen the focus on customers by:

- *involving customers in developing and publishing service standards and monitoring performance against these;*
- *establishing systems to gather regular feedback from customers and using this to inform service development; and*
- *building up information on the customer profile to increase the understanding of the diverse needs of the community and using this to develop appropriate strategic responses and tailored services.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- giving customers clear expectations about the services they receive;
- enabling services to respond more effectively to customer needs;
- improving customer satisfaction; and
- services are provided equitably and sensitively and in response to known needs.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by June 2006.

¹ Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high costs is over 5 per cent.

Recommendation

R2 Strengthen the strategic response to addressing housing needs by:

- *developing a comprehensive private sector renewal strategy to complement the wider housing strategy;*
- *working corporately within the Council and with external partners to maximise the provision of affordable housing through all available routes; and*
- *identifying and agreeing the Council's own resources that are available to enable affordable housing and improve the private sector.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more effective use of private sector housing to meet housing needs in the city;
- increased ability to meet housing needs through additional affordable housing; and
- reduced time spent by homeless households in temporary accommodation by increasing the opportunities for permanent housing.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. However, there are capital resource implications leading on from delivering this recommendation. This should be implemented by June 2006.

Recommendation

R3 Strengthen the homelessness and housing needs service by:

- *developing housing advice and assistance to deliver a homelessness prevention service;*
- *maximising the impact of housing advice across the city by working with partners to effectively coordinate the services available;*
- *developing robust arrangements for move on accommodation from supported housing; and*
- *using more appropriate bed and breakfast accommodation when necessary.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- preventing homelessness through appropriate advice and assistance;
- reducing the demand on temporary accommodation; and
- increasing access to supported housing schemes by having more bedspaces available; and
- minimising the disruption for homeless households when placed in bed and breakfast accommodation.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2006.

Recommendation

R4 Strengthen the private sector housing service by:

- *streamlining the delivery of the grants service with focus on the customer;*
- *working more effectively with partners to deliver the grants service;*
- *identifying ways of influencing those factors in the housing market that impact on the effective and timely delivery of the grants service; and*
- *spending the budget available.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- customers will receive a quicker and more coordinated service; and
- customers will be helped through more grants being delivered.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by June 2006.

R5 Improve value for money and integrate it into working practices by:

- *systematically collecting and analysing the costs of delivering services;*
- *comparing the costs and quality of services with others; and*
- *evaluating the added value brought by working with partners.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more effective use of resources.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by September 2006.

R6 Strengthen performance management by:

- *improving the assessment of progress against priorities by better co-ordination of improvement plans; and*
- *improving the local performance indicators collected to measure critical areas of success in all service areas.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased ability to identify and tackle weak performance;
- increased ability to identify and implement options for improvement; and
- more effective measurement of progress against priorities.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by June 2006.

Recommendation

R7 Address capacity issues by:

- *evaluating the capacity needed to deliver the strategic housing role and assessing the capacity available;*
- *determining the housing strategic role in the light of the capacity available; and*
- *maximising partnership working to increase capacity.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better understanding of the capacity needed to deliver the strategic housing role;
- ability to set challenging but realistic ambitions for strategic housing; and
- more effective joint working to deliver services and priorities.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. However, there are resource implications if capacity needs to be increased. This should be implemented by June 2006.

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

Dates of inspection: 31 October to 4 November 2005

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Report

Context

The locality

- 11 The City of Lincoln is one of seven districts in Lincolnshire in the East Midlands. It is the administrative centre of the county and differs from neighbouring districts in that it is a small and mostly densely populated urban area within a large rural and sparsely populated county. There is a population of 86,000 with black and minority ethnic communities making up 2.1 per cent (2001 census). The number of students is growing as the new university develops and young people aged 16 to 24 now represent 15 per cent of the population.
- 12 The economy of the city is based on service and distribution industries and the travel to work population of over 175,000 is significantly larger than that in the city. Unemployment stands at 3.3 per cent compared with the national and regional averages of 2.6 per cent and 2.4 per cent respectively. Lincoln is ranked 66th in the Indices of Deprivation 2004 with three of the wards among the 10 per cent most deprived in England.

The Council

- 13 The Council comprises 33 councillors with the Labour Party in overall control. The Council set up the leader and executive cabinet model in April 2002. There are eight executive portfolio and five overview and scrutiny committees. There are four additional regulatory committees and two specialist panels.
- 14 The political structure is supported at officer level through the chief executive and the following three directors:
 - Director of Resources;
 - Director of Development and Environmental Services; and
 - Director of Housing and Community Services.
- 15 The Council employs 855 staff and has a General Fund budget of £13.7 million for 2005/06 with reserves of £2 million at March 2005.

The service

- 16 The Strategic Housing Service is responsible for:
 - housing strategy and enabling the provision of affordable housing;
 - homelessness and housing needs; and
 - private sector housing.
- 17 The service is delivered in the following context.

- 18 There are approximately 39,100 homes in the district, of which 8,138 are owned by the Council. In the private sector 77 per cent are owner occupied, 4 per cent are owned by registered social landlords (RSLs) and 19 per cent are privately rented. About one third of the private sector stock was built before 1919 and 29 per cent fail the decency standard, mainly because of poor thermal comfort. The poorest housing is found in Park and Central wards.
- 19 The housing market in Lincoln has changed significantly in recent years with house prices rising quickly and above the national rate of increase. The growing student population is placing increased demand on the private sector and the city has a high percentage of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). This has contributed to an increased demand for affordable housing in the social sector, with 3,910 applicants on the housing register March 2005, and a rise in homelessness.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 20 Housing is a priority for the Council and its partners. The community plan has nine key themes one of which is 'Addressing Housing Need'. This has been taken forward as an aim in the Council's strategic plan which sets the following as a key priority:
- 'Delivering measurable progress towards more of our residents having decent homes to live in'.
- 21 The housing strategy 2004 to 2007 sets out the four priorities for the housing service as:
- achieving a more balanced housing market;
 - improving services and standards for council tenants;
 - improving conditions in private housing; and
 - extending housing and support for vulnerable people.
- 22 The priorities and objectives for the service reflect national and regional priorities and are linked through other corporate strategies to provide a framework for meeting the Council's and the community's wider goals. The service planning framework aims to cascade the priorities and objectives throughout the organisation.

Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?

- 23 The assessment is based on the '*Key Lines of Enquiry in Housing Management*' issued by the Audit Commission's Housing Inspectorate in July 2004. This service inspection focuses on the following functions:
- strategy and enabling;
 - homelessness and housing needs; and
 - private sector housing.
- 24 In addition to this core group of functions, we also consider the overarching issues of:
- access (to services) and customer care;
 - diversity; and
 - is the service achieving value for money?

Access and customer care

- 25 Improving access to services is a key priority for the Council. In general, customers have easy access to the Council's housing services, either in person at City Hall and the local offices, by telephone through the housing help desk or on line via the website. There is a range of informative leaflets available and a corporate customer care code with service standards. However, there is limited customer involvement in determining the strategic housing services, with few published service standards and no systematic process for gathering customer feedback. The complaints procedure is not working effectively in driving service improvements.
- 26 The reception facilities provided are customer friendly and provide a pleasant environment. Most homeless clients access services through City Hall. The Property Shop offers access to the choice-based lettings service and also some housing advice. Private sector services, including grants assistance, are accessed through the Property Shop and the Abbey neighbourhood renewal office. The two area offices also provide a point of contact for any housing or council service enquiry. With the exception of the St Giles Office, the future of which is currently being considered as part of the stock retention programme, all offices offering housing services are DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) compliant. The Council is implementing a programme to ensure that it meets the requirements of the DDA for all of its buildings and most are now compliant.
- 27 Access to the services by telephone is either through the housing helpdesk or by direct lines to individual officers. The helpdesk telephone system is open from 8.30am until 7.00pm Monday to Friday. It automatically collects a range of information on performance for monthly reporting, much of which is available in real time. The Council has prioritised access to services as a key improvement area, and as part of this, is developing a corporate call centre with a customer relations management system. All services will join this over a three year programme with housing services due in April 2006.
- 28 The Council's website is informative and attractive and a number of services are available on line. Customers can apply for housing and bid for properties on line, over the internet or at the Home Finder Kiosks located in the housing reception areas. The kiosks are well used with 1,177 'hits' in October and similar levels in previous months. However, we used the system but did not find it user-friendly and needed to seek help from officers.
- 29 The out-of-hours service is effectively provided at first point of contact by the Council's Control Centre. There is a rota system of officers, who have received some training on how to deal with homeless clients presenting out-of-hours, to deal with calls referred by the Control Centre. Officers will arrange temporary accommodation and meet clients on site if necessary. Clients are then advised to visit the homelessness service the next working day.

- 30 The Council uses the National Interpretation Service to assist customers to access services. Guidance on using the service is available for staff and the telephone equipment to operate the system is in place. Because of the need to protect expensive equipment, this service is offered through a secure interview room with a screen which has been designed for use with potentially violent clients. However, the screen presents an additional barrier to an already vulnerable client, and consideration should be given as to whether any alternative arrangements can be made.
- 31 There is a range of informative leaflets available covering housing services. These include a suite of leaflets developed by the Council and those provided by other agencies. The Council's leaflets are written to the Clear English Standard and have strap lines offering translation in the main community languages and in large print. However, the corporate customer care code and Home Finder does not include the strap lines. The strap line itself does not say what the leaflet is about to enable readers to decide whether or not they require it.
- 32 The Council has not set and published service standards across all of its strategic housing services. Although some of the housing service's internal procedures set out minimum service delivery standards, the Council has not involved customers in developing these standards or published performance against them. However, there are corporate customer care service standards in place which set out the customer care that can be expected, including response times for correspondence and answering telephone calls. These standards are monitored corporately through progress reports against the customer services action plan. The housing helpdesk publishes its telephone performance on the website.
- 33 There is no systematic process for regularly gathering customer feedback on services. Customer surveys were carried out as part of the best value reviews of strategic housing services and the findings from these were used to inform the improvement plans. There is also a customer survey carried out as part of the annual review of the Housing Register and the findings have been used to develop improvements, for example the introduction of a newsletter for applicants. However, the Council does not routinely seek feedback from individual service users, for example from grant applicants.
- 34 The Council's corporate consultation framework uses a number of different methods to seek service users' views on a range of issues. The housing service has not used the corporate framework to date but is planning to do so in February 2006.
- 35 The corporate complaints system is not currently working effectively. We examined a number of complaints and whilst timescales had been adhered to, it was not always clear from the paperwork how the complaint had been resolved. Individual complaints are tracked and monitored but there is no formal analysis or reporting of complaints by type or frequency to inform service delivery. The Council is aware of these shortcomings and a review of the system has been carried out. An officer group has been set up to implement improvements.

Diversity

- 36** The Council has limited information available on its customer profile and the needs of the diverse groups, which hinders the development of strategies and policies. Monitoring of services is not sufficiently comprehensive and it is not used to identify and drive service improvement. However, the Council has recently made progress in addressing diversity issues and has a number of policies and action plans to take the service forward. The housing service has a number of policies tailored to provide an appropriate response to meet diverse needs.
- 37** Historically, the Council has made slow progress in developing the diversity agenda and does not yet reach Level One of the Equalities Standard. In recognition of this, capacity was increased by the appointment of a dedicated officer in March 2005. This has led to progress in a number of areas corporately including a resourced plan to achieve Level Three of Equalities Standard in three years, an updated race equalities scheme and corporate equalities policy, the development of a draft corporate equality plan, guidance for Heads of Service to ensure that service plans include equalities issues and a reconstituted corporate equalities steering group. However there has been limited work on impact assessments for services, although training for managers is being procured to assist with this.
- 38** The Council is implementing a comprehensive budgeted plan to deliver compliance with the requirements of the DDA and performance against this is reported to members. Physical works to buildings are nearing completion and the Council has recognised that it also needs to evaluate the way in which services are delivered to ensure compliance and maximise accessibility. This will be incorporated into the action plans of the various services. The Council is working county-wide to prepare a joint strategy to tackle the requirements of the DDA 2006.
- 39** The Council's workforce does not reflect the communities it serves and there is no plan as to how this under representation will be addressed. Diversity training is available but this is not mandatory and take-up has been patchy. The housing service has provided some externally facilitated diversity training for its staff and a corporate programme is being proposed. Partner agencies we spoke to were of the view that services would benefit by raising awareness of diversity issues in order to deliver them more effectively.
- 40** The Council has limited information on the profile of its communities and has relied on the census for data, a criticism reflected in the Council's Community Cohesion Report. However, the information and research base is being gradually built up using the demographic information available and the Council is working with partners to establish the needs of particular groups. Ward audits have been carried out and information has also been picked up by the housing needs and stock condition surveys. However, as the stock condition survey was not analysed by ethnicity or gender the Council missed an opportunity to increase the information base on the housing conditions of different groups.

- 41 The Council is also working in partnership to build up information and understanding about its communities, for example through a project with the University of Leicester to evaluate the needs of ethnic elders. There is also work with the Lincoln Race Equalities Council and different communities, in particular Bengali, Tamil and Travellers, to improve the understanding of their needs. The Race Equalities Council is represented on the Housing Board of the local strategic partnership (LSP) to ensure involvement in strategic issues.
- 42 Lincoln is designated as a 'cluster' centre for asylum seekers and refugees and the Council has housed a number of single people, who have been granted refugee status, through the choice-based lettings system. This has led to concentrations of refugees in the single person accommodation in the tower blocks in the city. Although members have considered the potential difficulties that this could cause, the Council has not taken any action to address these. The Council works as part of EMCARs (East Midlands Consortia for Asylum Seekers and Refugees) to develop appropriate responses.
- 43 The housing service has drafted a black and minority ethnic (BME) housing strategy which is developing the Council's understanding of its customer base. However, it recognises that further engagement with the communities is needed in order to incorporate their needs and views. Refugee Action is involved in trying to constitute minority groups, whom the Council can involve in the development of strategy and services. Work is also underway county-wide to map the diverse groups and a regional bid has been put in to gather information, run focus groups and coordinate the work that is being carried out in the different districts.
- 44 The housing service complies with the CRE (Commission for Racial Equalities) Code of Guidance in Rented Housing and reports annually to members on this. A number of services are monitored by ethnicity and the Council completes the Housing Corporation's CORE returns on lettings. However, this is not comprehensive and there is no ethnic monitoring in the private sector housing service. Also, the information collected is monitored rather than acted on, for example the figures show that the Council is not meeting its target of 5 per cent of lettings for BME groups but no action has been taken to understand and address this.
- 45 The housing service has a number of policies and procedures to support the needs of customers. A racial harassment policy is in place with any incidents reported through a central point and forwarded to the Lincolnshire REC. This is supported through the housing assistance policy which can provide repeat victims with security measures such as the installation of alarms. There is a housing domestic violence policy and a support framework providing a sensitive response to victims. This is discussed in more detail in the homelessness and housing needs section of the report. The protection from abuse for vulnerable adults policy gives clear guidelines to staff about the Council's role and responsibilities and is linked to the policies of other relevant agencies.
- 46 The Council also works with partners to meet the housing needs of vulnerable groups and has effective working arrangements with a range of voluntary agencies. Private sector housing officers attended an event held by Age Concern to explain the housing grant service and entitlement to grants.

- 47 The aids and adaptations service through disabled facilities grants is discussed in the private sector housing section of the report. Existing adapted properties in the social rented sector are advertised through the choice-based lettings scheme but are matched to clients who require the adaptations where possible.

Strategy and enabling

- 48 The Council is developing its housing strategic role. There is a comprehensive research base on which to build the housing strategy, increasing consultation with partners and effective involvement in county-wide working. The Council has laid the foundations to enable increased provision of affordable housing and it works well with its RSL partners. However, the strategic framework for the enabling role is not yet in place, there has been limited provision of affordable housing to date and targets for affordable homes will not be met in the short term.
- 49 The development of housing strategy in Lincoln has started from a low base, as historically the Council's focus was on its landlord's role. Also, in terms of delivering affordable housing, the housing market did not require significant intervention until two or three years ago. The rapidly changing housing market and the option appraisal of the housing stock have led the Council to recognise the importance of its housing strategic role. It has increased capacity to deliver this role by appointing to a new post of housing strategy manager, in June 2004, and more recently by shifting existing resources to create a post dedicated to strategy and enabling. The strategic role has also been recognised through the establishment of the Housing Board as a sub-group of the LSP, with a delivery plan to take forward the community plan's priority to address housing needs. This is supported at officer level by the Corporate Officer Group which is responsible for providing a cross-cutting approach to the delivery of the Council's strategies.
- 50 The housing strategy 2004 to 2007 sets out the four priorities for the housing service. It includes an improvement plan, aimed at achieving a number of actions during the first year of the strategy, to provide a basis to take the service forward and meet the requirements of the 'fit for purpose' criteria of Government Office for the East Midlands (GOEM). Currently, the Council is developing and consulting about what its key housing priorities should be over the next three years. The proposed priorities build and extend the existing ones and draw on the improved research base and policy developments of the last year. Following consultation, the Council will submit the strategy to GOEM for assessment as 'fit for purpose'.
- 51 The Council has comprehensive information which it is using to develop its housing strategy. Housing needs and private sector stock condition surveys have been completed. The regional market assessment has provided useful baseline data for the region and identified the sub-regional housing market areas. The Council is bidding jointly with its sub-regional partners, West Lindsey and North Kesteven District Councils, to the Regional Housing Board for funds to carry out a sub-regional market assessment. Other sources of market information include the Lincolnshire Observatory and ward audits carried out by the Council. The information now available on the housing market and housing conditions provides a sound basis upon which to develop the housing strategy.

- 52 The development of the housing strategy has been informed through consultation with stakeholders. Two member seminars were held in November 2004, a presentation made to the LSP, staff questionnaires were sent out and interviews were held with RSL (registered social landlord) partners. In addition, a community event day was held with stakeholders, facilitated by consultants. A similar event is being held in November 2005 to enable stakeholders to consider the draft strategic priorities. An annual framework has been developed for the continuous review and development of the strategy in future years. This will involve planned consultation exercises throughout the year and will make use of the corporate consultation framework to seek views from the Citizen's Panel.
- 53 The Council works effectively regionally and sub-regionally to develop housing strategies, policies and initiatives. The Council's Director of Housing and Community Services chairs the Lincolnshire Housing Forum, which has a wide range of members including RSLs, health authorities, Probation and Social Services. The Forum has a strategic focus and has a number of sub-groups supporting it, such as the homelessness sub-group and the strategy sub-group, which is chaired by the Council's Housing Strategy Manager. The Forum is bidding to the Regional Housing Board for ODPM funds to deliver the regional housing strategy. It has also successfully bid for £86,000 to set up a county-wide rent deposit scheme.
- 54 The provision of affordable housing through the enabling role has been limited to date and the Council will not meet its targets in the short term. However, the Council has put a number of building blocks in place as a basis for delivering affordable housing in the City, although it will be some time before these result in tangible outcomes.
- 55 The Council does not yet provide a strategic framework for its enabling role and few affordable homes have been provided. In 2003/04, 31 affordable housing units were delivered and a further four in 2004/05. All of these were for shared ownership or low cost and were provided through planning requirements under section 106 agreements. The Council has never provided its own capital monies to enable the provision of affordable housing and Approved Development Funding through the Housing Corporation has been limited.
- 56 However, a more strategic and corporate approach is being developed. Through the development of its local development framework (LDF), the Council has identified the housing options available and has projected the housing outcomes, including the number of affordable housing units, for each of the options. The Council is due to decide on the preferred option early in 2006 which will then be subject to further consultation. As the LDF develops, it will influence the delivery of affordable housing.

- 57 Corporate commitment and cross-service working to deliver affordable housing is clearly evident, with arrangements strengthened at both a strategic and operational level. The Corporate Officer Group ensures that housing issues are addressed as part of the wider economic regeneration and development of the city. This includes proposals for 450 homes to be provided as part of the regeneration of the Brayford Enterprise Park, 40 per cent of which will be affordable, and also a smaller scheme to enable affordable housing as part of a work space development project.
- 58 The housing needs survey carried out in 2004 identified that 159 affordable homes were required annually to meet housing needs. Following this, a further study was commissioned to assess how the requirements for affordable housing could be delivered. This concluded that in the longer-term affordable housing requirements would be met as part of the significant planned development for the Eastern and Western Growth Corridors due from 2010 onwards. However, in the short and medium term, the Council faces a significant challenge. An Urban Capacity Study has been carried out which shows that there is sufficient land in the city to provide the housing required but there are issues around its financial viability for development. This is being addressed through the Council's role in 'Investors in Lincoln'.
- 59 The Council has been a partner in 'Investors in Lincoln' for some time. This is a company made up from a number of partners including developers, the County Council, the university and RSLs. 'Investors in Lincoln' is currently identifying sites which may not come forward for development because of high-costs or high-risks, and finding ways in partnership to overcome these obstacles. Currently, three possible development sites have been identified and are being pursued by the company.
- 60 Planning requirements for the provision of affordable housing under section 106 agreements were amended in August 2003. The thresholds for sites on which affordable housing was required were reduced to those which could accommodate 25 dwellings or more or were larger than one hectare. The ratio of affordable housing to be provided on these sites was increased to 20 per cent. Unfortunately, the nature of development sites within the city has meant that many sites still fall below the new thresholds. The Council hopes to address this as the LDF develops but this is subject to statutory timescales.

- 61 However, as a result of improved corporate working and the increased priority for affordable housing a number of section 106 agreements are in the pipeline. These are projected to deliver 79 affordable housing units over the next two or three years and a further two schemes are under discussion which could deliver 100 affordable units. The Council also has £210,000 of commuted sums in the pipeline. Discussions with developers take place before or at outline planning permission stage to set out the Council's requirements, which are then reflected in the section 106 agreement. Corporate working through COG is aiming to ensure that the housing to be provided is of the right type and size and a broader plan is starting to be developed as to what is needed across the city as a whole. Operationally, a Section 106 Monitoring Group is responsible for monitoring all section 106 agreements and ensuring that they are progressed in accordance with the stated time lines.
- 62 There has been limited enabling of affordable housing through the Approved Development Programme (ADP), the main provision being supported housing. Bids have been submitted for 2006 to 2008 which include the re provision of the Women's Refuge, an extension to the ex-offenders hostel and affordable housing units at Ingleby Crescent. The Council has been active in supporting the re-provision of the Women's Refuge along with the bid for Supporting People grant to provide the residential and floating support. The new refuge is to be developed on a Council owned housing garage site and will increase the accommodation available for women and their families from six to nine. However, the Council has not provided a strategic framework for previous bidding rounds under the ADP and has relied on supporting bids initiated through RSLs.
- 63 The Council has not used its own resources to support the provision of affordable housing, and any capital monies have been invested in its own stock, in accordance with Council priorities. The Council has developed an asset management plan to inform the assessment of resources available to meet the corporate priorities. Housing garage sites have been identified as part of this process and fed into the plan. However, the decisions as to how the resources are to be distributed and used have not yet been taken by members. In terms of housing, a balance will need to be struck between the funding needed to meet the investment needs of the Council's own housing stock, and the competing demands for affordable housing and improving conditions in the private sector housing stock. Until the resources are identified affordable housing proposals cannot be worked up.
- 64 The Council has used its enabling role to meet supported housing needs in the City. A frail elderly scheme of 36 flats is nearing completion at Bunkers Hill. The need for this type of accommodation was identified in the 2000 Housing Needs Survey and it has been provided by an RSL with ADP funding. Becam House comprising four units of temporary supported accommodation for teenage mothers was also provided through ADP.

- 65 However, opportunities are being lost in further developing and reconfiguring housing-related support services. The Council is a member of the Supporting People Commissioning Body that approved the five-year strategy, submitted to the ODPM in March 2005. The current weaknesses in partnership working across the county are hindering progress with the programme. The Council is actively participating in the development and delivery of Supporting People at county level and needs to continue to robustly engage with the county.
- 66 Partnership working with RSLs has not been strategically driven although the Council has a track record of working well with RSLs at an operational level. Meetings have taken place to progress particular schemes, but the working arrangements have not been part of a more strategic framework, which assesses housing needs, develops solutions and monitors performance. The Council has recognised this, and in order to develop a strategic approach and formalise operational working it has recently entered into a partnership agreement with seven RSLs working in the area.

Homelessness and housing needs

- 67 The Council is being successful in preventing homelessness through increased housing advice and assistance. Homelessness cases are dealt with professionally and sensitively. The standard of temporary accommodation provided is good, there is effective support for clients and the Council works well with partner agencies to provide a range of supported short-term housing. However, the approach to advice and assistance lacks a comprehensive and coordinated approach and the monitoring and evaluation of working with partner agencies is under-developed. The length of stay in temporary accommodation is too long, and the use of bed and breakfast as emergency accommodation involves clients being placed some distance away from Lincoln, which is unsatisfactory.
- 68 The Council works well with other districts to tackle homelessness. A county homelessness strategy was developed to provide a framework and agree overall priorities for action. Within this, the district councils identified their own key issues for each of the priorities and developed an action plan to deliver these. In Lincoln, the Lincoln Homelessness Forum is responsible for monitoring progress.
- 69 The Council seeks to meet housing needs and provide choice to customers through its choice-based lettings (CBL) scheme. The Property Shop, based in the town centre, runs the CBL scheme, receiving housing applications and processing bids for properties. When the scheme was introduced in 2002, the Council had problems of low demand for some of its properties and areas. Apart from some sheltered schemes, the Council no longer has difficulty to let properties and in March 2005 there were 3,910 applicants for housing. However, the success of the CBL scheme has meant that applicants now wait about two years before their bid for a property succeeds and it has become increasingly difficult to meet the housing needs of priority groups.

- 70 In recognition of this, the Council has reviewed its allocation policy to better reflect the housing needs of priority groups and ensure that vulnerable groups receive appropriate priority. The revised policy is currently being consulted on. The Council is also working to widen the access to social housing, and is in discussion with partner RSLs to develop a joint Housing Register and a common allocations policy, with all vacancies going through the CBL scheme. One RSL is already part of the CBL scheme and a number of others use the scheme to advertise particular vacancies.
- 71 The Council has been successful in increasing the level of housing advice and assistance it offers and there are indications that this is now resulting in reduced homelessness. However, the service is still moving from a reactive to a preventative basis and there are further opportunities to extend advice and assistance further.
- 72 Homelessness officers provide advice and assistance to all clients who present as homeless or who are seeking help, unless a homelessness investigation is required to meet statutory requirements. A housing advice case is opened and a housing advice form is completed detailing the advice and information given. These cases are monitored and where the housing issues are resolved and homelessness prevented they are recorded as such.
- 73 Housing Options Assistants, based in the Property Shop, also offer advice and assistance to customers. However this is limited, and if the case appears complex or the client may be homeless, the customer is referred to the homelessness service at City Hall. The advice offered through the Property Shop is not recorded and captured formally, although notes are held on the housing application, This means that the Council cannot assess the impact of any advice given in relation to preventing homelessness and meeting housing needs more generally. More formal procedures, which can be used to inform the BVPI (best value performance indicator) for repeat homelessness, were introduced in November 2005 to address this. The Council recognises that it could offer a more comprehensive advice service by co-ordinating and maximising the capacity within the homelessness service and Property Shop. However, Housing Options Assistants are primarily responsible for managing housing applications and bids through the CBL scheme. There is a persistent backlog in verifying housing applications, currently about three months, which suggests that workload issues will need to be addressed before any re-prioritisation of duties can take place.
- 74 Housing advice is also available through the voluntary sector operating in the city, but this is has not been assessed as part of an overall approach to co-ordinating the services on offer. The Housing Board commissioned an exercise to address this. Urban Challenge, a community umbrella group, has mapped the provision of advice services and the gaps can now be identified. Advice for young people is readily available but there is less for other groups. A housing advice event took place in November and key outcomes from this include establishing advice for diverse communities, a localised interpretation service and to consider the feasibility of a central advice centre.

- 75 Comprehensive advice packs, made up of a series of fact sheets, for both homelessness and housing advice are given to clients. These provide clients with more information about the service offered and guide them through the process. Although these are helpful and informative they have not been developed with customers and would benefit from being more user-friendly. For homeless clients, some service standards are included within the advice pack but performance against these is not formally monitored. However, other than this there are no published service standards for the Housing Needs Service and Property Shop. The Council does not routinely survey customer satisfaction with these services to help identify and inform service improvements.
- 76 The Council has had mixed success in using the homelessness prevention tools available. It has run a successful pilot rent deposit scheme, which is available to homeless clients in priority need. Since January 2005, when the scheme started, 14 deposit guarantees have been taken up. Only one has resulted in a deposit being paid out and in the remaining 13 cases, homelessness was prevented. A report is scheduled for the Executive recommending that the scheme continues. There has also recently been a successful bid for £86,000 to set up a rent deposit scheme county-wide.
- 77 However, the Council has been less successful in using mediation as a means of preventing homelessness. The Lincolnshire Mediation Service takes referrals but there has been no take-up by homeless clients because they either do not wish to use the service or they fail to attend when appointments have been made. Homelessness Officers provide a degree of mediation in the course of their investigation and there are discussions to bring in mediation as part of the joint assessment process with Social Services. However, the Council is not currently maximising the benefits that mediation can offer as part of the prevention role.
- 78 The Council does not use discretionary housing benefit to assist in preventing homelessness and is therefore failing to use all the resources at its disposal. The housing and housing benefit services are now discussing how discretionary housing benefit could be made available to assist in homelessness prevention activities.
- 79 The level of homelessness has reduced in the last few months. Homelessness presentations and acceptances remained steady over 2003/04 and 2004/05, although these were a significant increase from previous years. However, the indications this year suggest that homelessness numbers are falling. From April to September there were 183 presentations with 84 acceptances, as opposed to 367 presentations and 164 acceptances for the same period in 2004/05. Although the reasons for this have not been analysed in detail, the Council would point to their increased prevention role resulting in this positive outcome. The information collected so far for the new BVPI on homelessness records 17 cases have been prevented.

- 80 Homelessness investigations are carried out professionally and appropriately. There are comprehensive procedures in place and applications are easy to follow, with summary sheets detailing main points of the investigation and the decision made. Decision letters are clearly written and provide relevant information, although they are 'legal' in their presentation. There are few requests for reviews of decisions, with three since April 2005. In all of these the decisions were upheld. The Council monitors the percentage of decisions made in 33 days as a local performance indicator and performance remains steady at around 92 per cent.
- 81 The Council works well on the ground with its partner agencies to provide support to vulnerable clients. There are a number of supported housing schemes with both residential and floating support arrangements.
- 82 The Council offers a sensitive service and effective support arrangements for victims suffering domestic violence. The Senior Homelessness Officer deals with domestic violence cases and works with the Women's Centre, the Women's Refuge, victim support and the Police Domestic Violence Unit to develop appropriate solutions and support packages. The Council has also set up a sanctuary scheme, offering security to those victims wishing to remain in their homes through additional locks, stronger doors, alarms and a safe room if required. The Women's Centre has recently received funding for a sensor alarm which picks up movement in a room, along with noise or any conversations. So far, eight women have been helped through this scheme and only one has required subsequent re-housing.
- 83 The Women's Refuge provides temporary accommodation and outreach support. However, the number of women needing a place and the average length of stay is increasing. The Senior Housing officer visits the Refuge regularly to discuss progress with clients. The plans for a new purpose built refuge, described earlier in the strategy and enabling section of this report, will increase the provision to accommodate nine households.
- 84 Access to emergency accommodation is provided by the Nomad Shelter. The Council contributes funding to this scheme. The shelter provides temporary accommodation for up to 28 days. A kennel is also available for clients' dogs. A recent count carried out by the Council showed that there was no rough sleeping in the city, although the Council intends to keep this under review.
- 85 Young people are a priority in the homelessness strategy and the Council works with a number of agencies to provide for this client group. There are about 200 supported bed spaces for young people between 16 and 35 in Lincoln provided by various agencies. Referrals can be made through the homelessness service and also through the Property Shop where young people are seeking housing, but not necessarily presenting as homeless. There are joint procedures with Social Services to assess individual needs. Most schemes have on-site support for clients and some offer floating support. We visited a number of schemes and found them to be offering a good standard of accommodation and effective support arrangements.

- 86 Although there are effective working relationships between the Council and agencies to deliver services and solutions for clients, this is less well developed at a strategic level. Some of the arrangements are covered by service level agreements or protocols but this is not universal. We found some confusion amongst the agencies we spoke to about the policies and procedures in relation to housing their clients and some practical issues which need to be addressed at a more strategic level. The lack of available move on accommodation is leading to continued stays in accommodation for clients who no longer require support and is in effect causing bed blocking. There is also limited evaluation of the outcomes being achieved through the partnership working.
- 87 The standard of temporary accommodation and support for homeless households is good but the length of time waiting for permanent accommodation is too long. The bed and breakfast accommodation used is 50 miles from Lincoln which is not satisfactory.
- 88 The Council uses bed and breakfast accommodation as a last resort. Since April, five families have been placed in bed and breakfast with an average stay of 4.3 weeks. Five single households have also been placed. In 2004/05, bed and breakfast was used for 23 households. The bed and breakfast establishment used is about 50 miles away in Loughborough, because the bed and breakfasts in Lincoln are unwilling to accept homeless households. Although the Council minimises the use of bed and breakfast, these arrangements are not satisfactory.
- 89 Temporary accommodation is provided through Schoeffler House, a hostel with 22 self-contained flats and bedsits. In addition, there are four flats adjacent to the hostel for teenage mothers. The scheme is owned by Nottingham Community Housing Association and is grant aided by the Council. Housing support is provided 24-hours by NACRO. The scheme is of a good standard, located close to facilities and has weekly visits from a number of agencies, including health visitors and benefit advisors. Clients can use the office phone to contact the Property Shop and bid for properties but there is no internet facility available for bidding on line. Clients we spoke to told us they were satisfied with the service they were receiving from the Council. The survey carried out by the Council, as part of the best value review, also showed this. Clients' main concerns were around the length of time waiting for permanent housing. They also told us that as they tracked their bids for properties through the CBL scheme, their hopes were raised only to be disappointed when they were unsuccessful as a result of late bids from other applicants.
- 90 Schoeffler House can only provide accommodation for families and not single people. This is because the funding arrangements through Supporting People, to pay for the housing support through NACRO, do not allow for support to single people. The Council is seeking ways to address this.
- 91 However, the Council has been successful in securing funding through Supporting People for a support worker to provide floating support to 'homeless at home' clients, for clients who are receiving housing advice and during the first six months of a tenancy. This will fill a current gap in provision and the officer is expected to be in post by January.

- 92 The length of stay in hostel accommodation is too long and rising. This is monitored as a BVPI with performance in 2004/05 at 19 weeks. The current average stay has risen to 23 weeks. Homeless households have priority cards and are expected to bid for properties every cycle through the CBL scheme, and are chased if they fail to do so. Some properties are designated for priority cardholders only to increase the supply for homeless clients, and the revised allocations policy is also aimed at better reflecting the needs of those with additional priority. However, the lack of improvement in performance is of concern to the Council and the Departmental Management Team has set up a group to look at this in detail. Consideration is also being given to referring it to a member and officer 'performance clinic' under the performance management framework discussed later in the report.
- 93 In addition to the hostel, the Council also uses private sector leased properties to provide temporary accommodation. In the last year it has increased the supply by taking on six additional properties bringing the total to 17.

Private sector housing

- 94 The private sector housing role is not strategically driven, is reactive in its delivery of services and has not been effectively managed. The service is not customer-focused, targets for processing grants are not being met and the budget has not been spent. Partnership working is not effectively contributing to the service. However, the Council is making progress in the neighbourhood renewal area, in tackling empty homes and in promoting affordable warmth. There has been successful work around the private rented sector and Houses in Multiple Occupation through the student accreditation scheme.
- 95 The Council has not yet developed its private sector renewal strategy, although it has plans to do so. This means that the delivery of the private sector role does not sit within a strategic framework and provides a reactive rather than proactive service. However, the Council has up-to-date information on stock condition, following a stock condition survey carried out in the early part of 2005. This provides an up-to-date research base on which to develop the private sector renewal strategy.
- 96 Following the regulatory Reform Order in 2003, the Council reviewed its existing arrangements and developed its housing assistance policy setting out a framework for the delivery of grants. The Council offers renovation and home repair assistance grants, disabled facilities grants, home secure grants and affordable warmth grants. It also funds an Alleygates scheme in the Park and Abbey wards and supports environmental works in the renewal area and elsewhere if appropriate. The Council gave some consideration to introducing a loan scheme to fund home renovation but did not pursue this. This will be considered as part of the development of the private sector renewal strategy.

- 97 The Council has adopted a more strategic approach to intervention through its activities in the renewal area. In 1998, the Council attracted SRB (single regeneration budget) funding and set up a renewal area in the Abbey ward of the city, in response to the poor housing conditions exhibited. The project runs for ten years and when the SRB funding ceased the Council was successful in bidding for NRCF (Neighbourhood Renewal Challenge Fund) funding. In the renewal area, close relationships have been forged with resident associations and community organisations to target investment and determine priorities for environmental works, such as the provision of play areas and improved lighting. Surveys are carried out in sub-sections of the renewal area which gather information on the profile of residents and the condition of properties. These are then used to 'zone' the delivery of enforcement and advisory work. The renewal area office also acts as a focus for the community with a number of groups, such as the local history group, using the facilities for meetings and other activities.
- 98 The outcomes for the renewal area were evaluated when the SRB funding ceased in 2001 and new objectives set. There is annual reporting of progress against these but there has been no further formal evaluation, although a number of schemes have now been completed. Whilst there have been clear benefits around community involvement and environmental works, the outcomes in terms of improving the condition of the housing stock have been more limited with only nine properties improved as a result of grants in 2004/05. There is also no clear forward plan for the renewal area or how it will contribute to meeting housing needs as part of the wider private sector renewal strategy.
- 99 Engagement with private sector landlords has improved in the last year, with four meetings of the Landlords' Forum taking place. A mix of housing officers and housing benefit officers attend and service the meetings. Agenda items include housing benefit issues and accreditation schemes.
- 100 The Council is not customer-focused in its delivery of the grants service. Grants are not generally publicised or promoted because of concerns over the capacity of the private sector renewal team to cope with increased demand. However, given that the grant budget underspends, this is not satisfactory. The Council has plans to address this. The application process is not customer-friendly and the guidance, although comprehensive, is not easy for customers to follow. The procedures for grants include time scales for carrying out various stages of the process and performance is monitored against these. However, they are not captured and published as service standards for customers. There is no system to obtain customer feedback following receipt of the service, although a survey was carried out as part of the best value review.

- 101** The Council identified, through its best value review of the service, that the process for delivering the grants service is cumbersome. Limited IT support means that the procedures, other than logging on the enquiry register, rely on paper-based systems for both processing applications and capturing performance information. There are plans to investigate IT solutions using the standard packages which are available. However, the procedures in place are comprehensive and ensure that grants are dealt with correctly. We looked at a number of case files and found them in good order enabling a proper audit trail of individual cases.
- 102** Performance in delivering grant assistance has been poor in recent years. Although delays in processing enquiries have reduced substantially from 23 months in 2003/04 to 12 months in 2004/05, the Council is still failing to meet its target of 15 days, with an average of 32 days for the first quarter of 2005/06. The Council's target for determining applications is 20 days and performance was 31 days and for authorising payment claims the target is 10 days and performance was 11 days. However, the overall time customers wait for grants, including the time waiting for an occupational therapist's assessment, is not monitored and the delays in the grants process are contributing to the significant underspend of the grants budget.
- 103** The Council is not currently working well in partnership with the OT service or the Home Improvement Agency (HIA) to deliver an efficient and effective grants service for customers. Officers work with the relevant agency on individual cases to try and resolve outstanding issues but this has not been supported at a strategic or management level to identify solutions to common problems and find better ways of working. For example some cases are still showing live after several years because the formal paper work to close the case has not been received from the OT service. Regular liaison meetings with the OT service and the HIA used to take place to address areas of concern but it was felt that these were not proving useful and so they ceased.
- 104** The service offered by the HIA has been of limited assistance to the Council in the last year. The Council is supporting the proposals for the development of a county-wide HIA as part of the Supporting People programme. This scheme has taken a number of years to set up during which the interim arrangements for the Lincoln HIA service experienced governance and staffing difficulties. Because of these difficulties there has been little input from the HIA into the Council's DFG programme and none into the affordable warmth programme. The recent appointment of the manager for the new county-wide HIA, with the launch date of January 2006, provides an opportunity for a more coherent approach to providing services. The Council is committed to working in partnership with the new agency to deliver an effective service.
- 105** There is an approved list of contractors to carry out grant works but the Council has identified that delays in carrying out works, and in particular for DFGs, can be due to the shortage of contractors. To address this, the Council has bid for sub-regional funds to develop skills in the local construction industry.
- 106** Performance in spending the budget for grants in recent years has been poor as shown in the table overleaf.

Table 2 Grant budget spend

Year	Budget	Spend
2002/03	£967,000	£602,612
2003/04	£900,000	£589,463
2004/05	£900,000	£755,726

Within these overall total figures the grant spend for DFGs, other than in 2002/03, exceeded the budget available. Some of the underspend on the renovation grant budget was used to compensate for this.

- 107** There is little improvement in the current year with actual spend on grants, other than DFGs, at £37,900, although the level of commitment at £318,500 against the annual budget of £675,000 is high. Spending for DFGs is on target and the level of commitment at £195,000 currently exceeds the budget of £175,000. The Major Projects Monitoring Group has agreed that money can be moved between the renovation and the DFGs budget throughout the year to meet demand.
- 108** The Council has delivered demonstrable improvements through its Home Secure Project which offers home security grants and the Alleygates scheme in the Park and Abbey wards. Funding for an officer to deliver the programme was secured through a NRCF grant of £19,000. The works for the Alleygates scheme are carried out in partnership with the Probation Service, which provides the labour through community service orders. In 2004/05, home security grants improved 19 homes at cost of £17,169 and 20 alley gates were provided covering 85 homes at a cost of £6,379.
- 109** An evaluation of the project has shown a 50 per cent reduction in burglary in the area. A residents' survey carried out as part of the evaluation showed increased feelings of security and no incidents of victimisation since the installation of the gates. Funding for the project officer runs out in March 2006, and although the Council is seeking to mainstream the post, there is no guarantee that this will be achieved and no certainty as to whether the project can be sustained.
- 110** The Council responds promptly to complaints about property conditions, has a comprehensive enforcement policy and procedure in place and takes enforcement action where necessary. We accompanied officers on visits to deal with enquiries and complaints and observed that customers were offered comprehensive advice and information and dealt with professionally. The customers we spoke to indicated they were satisfied with the service received.

- 111** The Council does not operate a registration scheme for HMOs, and other than in the renewal area where all properties are visited as part of the zoning arrangements, there is no proactive inspection programme. There were 2,368 Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) in Lincoln at March 2005, which is a high number representing about 7 per cent of the stock. The significant increase in the student population in recent years has stimulated the private rented market and increased the number of HMOs.
- 112** However, the Council has worked well in partnership to deliver a student accreditation scheme for properties rented in the private sector. The scheme was introduced in December 2004 and is administered by the university and college. The Fire Service inspects 100 per cent of properties and makes referrals to the Council if there are concerns about the state of repair. The scheme has not yet been formally evaluated but about 1,000 properties are now accredited.
- 113** The Council has started to take a more proactive approach to bringing empty properties back into use but intervention to date has been limited. However, the number of empty properties is low, with 148 empty for longer than six months at April 2005 and the number returned to use is high compared to other local authorities. The Council has developed an empty homes policy and a cross-service group involving housing and planning officers was set up in September to start implementing this. Consideration is being given as to how empty dwellings orders, enforced sale procedures and commuted sums through section 106 agreements can be used to bring homes back into use. The intention is to identify ten empty properties to tackle first and increase publicity around empty homes. Empty homes are on the agenda for discussion at the next Landlord's Forum meeting.
- 114** However, there is no empty property register and officers rely on records built up during the course of their work, and data from council tax records and planning applications, to establish the numbers of empty homes. There have been few incentives in the past to encourage owners to bring properties back into use and a lack of clarity over how to tackle long-term empty properties. We saw a number of empty homes in the Park ward of the city which were in poor condition and had been empty for many years. This gives an overall rundown appearance to the area, despite the recent installation of Alleygates.
- 115** The Council is developing its partnership approach to deliver affordable warmth and offers a number of schemes in relation to improving the thermal comfort of homes and energy efficiency. The Council has drafted an affordable warmth strategy, building on the 2002 strategy and further emphasising the partnership working to deliver affordable warmth.
- 116** The Council has recently secured £1 million of funding from the London Energy Company for a save and secure scheme for targeting and installing energy efficiency measures in Lincoln. The Council also works with six other local authorities as part of the Home Energy Lincolnshire Partnership scheme, and with funding secured from the Energy Saving Trust, offers a bulk discount scheme for energy efficient measures such as loft insulation and cavity wall insulation. This scheme also offers a free no obligation energy survey and report and is open to homeowners and private tenants alike.

- 117 The Council's performance for its private sector housing functions as measured by the two national BVPIs is in the top 25 per cent in comparison to others. BVPI 62, the proportion of empty or unfit dwellings made fit or demolished, was 4.25 per cent in 2004/05. Also, the Council performed well against BVPI 64, the number of private sector vacant dwellings that are returned into occupation or demolished during the year as a direct result of action by the local authority, reporting 133 in 2004/05, which is in the top 25 per cent. However, performance in the first quarter of 2005/06 was well below target with only 2 long-term empty properties brought back into use against a target of 19 and only 4 unfit properties made fit against a target of 13.
- 118 The Council is developing plans to implement the requirements of the Housing Act 2004. It is working with other local authorities in the East Midlands to provide training for staff and briefings for landlords. An information guide for elected members is being developed and the Council is on track to complete the review of its enforcement policy by the April 2006 deadline. However, there is uncertainty over-resourcing the implementation of the Act, particularly in relation to licensing. The Council has no plans for increasing capacity to carry out the new responsibilities for licensing HMOs, and is awaiting the outcome of its bid to the Regional Housing Board for supplementary allocations of funding before it considers what options are available.

Is the service delivering value for money?

How do costs compare?

- 119 Cost comparisons are not sufficiently developed to show whether value for money is being delivered and costs are not systematically collected across all services. However, the Council has compared some of its costs to others and in general this demonstrates that these are low.
- 120 As part of the best value review of the service, the Council compared its services and its costs with others. These costings were based mainly around the staffing costs for providing the services set against activity levels where possible. Whilst this showed that on the whole the Council's costs are lower than its comparators, there are issues of comparing like with like and there was little consideration of quality issues. The information, although useful, is not robust enough to analyse and compare whether value for money is being achieved.
- 121 The Council has assessed that it costs £25 to allocate a property through the CBL scheme, which it believes represents value for money. However, the Council has been unable to find any other CBL scheme with which to compare costs.
- 122 The Council's budgets do allow for service costs to be identified but these are not systematically collected and analysed, although the fundamental review of budgets described below will start to address this. However, continuous budget pressures have focused the Council on aligning resources against priorities, developing resource plans alongside service planning and ensuring that capital projects are not approved unless the revenue budget to support it are in place.

How is value for money managed?

- 123** The Council cannot demonstrate value for money across its services. However, it has made progress in developing a strategic approach to achieving value for money and delivering efficiency gains, and there are a number of examples of action taken to improve value for money.
- 124** Over the years, the Council has needed to make budget savings in order to balance its accounts, and is required to achieve a further £1 million of savings by 2008 to achieve a sustainable financial plan. The Council has adopted a more strategic approach to improving efficiency and value for money aimed at delivering both the savings required and the more effective direction of resources into the corporate priorities.
- 125** There was a corporate focus on efficiency through the restructuring which took place over 2004/05. Although this took some time, it resulted in a reduction of 30 posts on the establishment, mainly at senior and middle management level, and net savings of £618,000. A large proportion of this was used to meet the budget savings required but some was allocated to a corporate budget to be used for investing in services.
- 126** The Council has set up an 'Excellence 2008' Group to drive forward service improvements. This group has responsibility for ensuring that the planned efficiency gains are achieved and value for money is delivered. For 2005/06, the efficiency target for the Council is to achieve savings of £560,000, of which £280,000 is to be cashable. Last year, the efficiency gains were delivered through the partnership arrangement in the Leisure Service, by reducing sickness absence and by increasing council tax collection. This year the plans are around continued reductions in sickness absence, procurement savings and reduced transaction costs.
- 127** The Council is building a sound basis from which to assess and improve value for money and to ensure that all available resources are directed to priorities. A fundamental review of budgets is underway. Service Heads are expected to justify their current budgets, releasing money where appropriate and to prepare a business case to support any future growth. Consultants are providing some contextual information about costs in other councils in the audit family and the budgets will then be subject to further challenge and debate. The intended outcome is that all budgets will be scrutinised corporately and re-allocated where appropriate to meet corporate priorities. This is a departure from previous practice where savings identified in a particular service could be reinvested in the same service area.
- 128** Alongside of the fundamental review of budgets the Council has also started a business process re-engineering (BPR) exercise. Resources have been allocated for three business analyst posts. All business processes will be mapped and efficiency gains identified. Priorities for BPR include access to services and private sector housing.

- 129 The Council does not have a strong track record of using procurement to drive value for money. A procurement officer was appointed in 2004 and a procurement policy was approved in March 2005. A procurement strategy has been developed and an action plan to achieve compliance with the national procurement strategy. Performance information and indicators to measure procurement activities have been identified. A target for procurement savings has been set for 2005/06 of £180,000. However, to date only £29,000 of savings have been achieved through the corporate stationery and drinking water contracts.
- 130 The Council is working county-wide to take forward procurement. It is a member of the Lincolnshire Procurement Forum and there has been a successful bid to the Centre of Excellence for £100,000 to introduce a procurement card scheme. There are also proposals to develop shared IT support across the county and joint procurement for temporary agency staff. A neighbouring council is also 'buying' procurement expertise from Lincoln.
- 131 There has been limited use of partnering to date to achieve efficiency gains. However, partnering arrangements have been successfully used in the management of the Leisure Centre and are being actively pursued in Housing Landlord Services to deliver the investment programme.
- 132 Evidence of the Council taking action to achieve value for money in the housing service is mixed. There are examples of initiatives to improve value for money. Electronic property listings for the CBL scheme are now being sent to about 800 clients, which saves on paper and postage, and the 'free' labour provided by the Probation Service for the installation of Alleygates reduces the costs of the scheme.
- 133 However the Council has not received value for money this year in respect of the services provided by the Home Improvement Agency (HIA). The Council contributes £30,000 annually in grant aid to the HIA. The Council has not received an adequate service in return for this money and has had poor value for its grant aid.
- 134 The Council provides the homelessness and housing needs service in partnership with a range of agencies. The Council also contributes funding to some agencies. As discussed earlier, these agencies offer valuable services and contribute positively to the Council's priorities. However, the Council does not evaluate the outcomes from the partnership work and whether value for money is being achieved.
- 135 There has not been any exercise to assess value for money in using bed and breakfast or other forms of temporary accommodation. The Council spent £25,142 on bed and breakfast for 2004/05. This year to date, £12,374 has been spent. Analysis by the average cost per month is showing a reduction from £2,095 in 2004/05 to £1,649 this year. Although this suggests that expenditure is reducing, this is an area which can incur significant costs to the Council and requires careful monitoring and analysis to demonstrate whether value for money is being achieved.

Summary

- 136** We have assessed the Housing Strategic Service provided by the Council as a 'fair' one-star service.
- 137** Customers have easy access to services, with policies in place to provide a sensitive and appropriate response to some vulnerable client groups. Homeless households receive a professional and sensitive service and the temporary accommodation available for them is of good standard with effective support arrangements. The Council works well with partner agencies in the voluntary sector who provide good quality short-term supported accommodation.
- 138** There is a sound framework in place for the effective development of the housing strategy and the foundations have been laid to deliver more affordable housing. Positive benefits are being achieved for residents in the Abbey Renewal Area and standards in the private rented sector are being addressed through the student accreditation scheme. There is a strong corporate focus on value for money, with work underway to deliver efficiency gains.
- 139** However, there are no comprehensive service standards in place, feedback from customers is not systematically gathered, and information on the diverse profile of customers is limited. The housing advice and assistance service is under-developed and the length of time homeless households spend in temporary accommodation is too long. There has been limited provision of affordable housing and targets in the short term will not be met. Intervention in private sector housing lacks a strategic approach and the grants service is not effectively delivered.
- 140** The strategic housing service cannot robustly demonstrate that its services offer value for money because it does not systematically collect and analyse the costs of delivering its services, and has no systems for evaluating any added value as a result of its partnership working.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 141 The Council can demonstrate a track record in delivering improvements which are of positive benefit to customers. On the whole, sound progress has been made against improvement plans and external recommendations, although some actions have missed their target time. Improvement in performance in the various service areas is mixed.
- 142 The Council is making progress against the comprehensive five-year improvement plan developed following the CPA (Comprehensive Performance Assessment) report in 2003. For example, weaknesses around diversity and the limited housing strategic role, identified in the CPA inspection, have both been tackled.
- 143 The Council carried out a best value review of its housing landlord service in 2002 and developed a comprehensive improvement plan as a result of this. Although some of the actions have been amended and re-scheduled in the light of changing circumstances, the majority of improvement actions have been delivered, with only one currently exceeding its timeline. We inspected the landlord service in 2003 and the Council has also made good progress in implementing the recommendations of our inspection report.
- 144 Following the best value review of strategic housing services earlier this year improvement plans were developed, with actions for completion over the next three years. Progress against this has not been formally monitored but actions in relation to developing service standards, which should have been completed by November 2005, have slipped.
- 145 However, a number of service improvements have been achieved which are contributing to the Service's key priorities and delivering positive outcomes for customers. These include:
- the introduction of a rent deposit scheme which is assisting in preventing homelessness;
 - more extensive and improved housing advice and assistance;
 - improved support for victims of domestic violence through the introduction of the sanctuary scheme;
 - the Home Secure Project providing physical security measures and increasing resident's feelings of safety; and
 - partnership working to develop the student accreditation scheme.

- 146** The Council has also put building blocks in place to secure future improvements. For example, a consultation framework for developing the housing strategy and arrangements that will deliver affordable housing in future. Additional floating support has been secured and will help more homeless households from January 2006.
- 147** However, some key improvements needed in services have not been delivered. For example, there has been limited progress in working with the County Council to improve services and the budget underspend in grants has not been successfully addressed.
- 148** Performance against key indicators is mixed. In private sector housing, performance for the two BVPIs is in the top 25 per cent. BVPI 62, for unfit homes made fit or demolished, has slowly reduced since 2002/03 while BVPI 64, empty homes returned to use, has improved. Performance this year to date suggests that targets will not be met, although performance in relation to these indicators is cumulative throughout the year.
- 149** The BVPIs for time spent by homeless families in temporary accommodation is also mixed. The time spent in bed and breakfast has gone up and down since 2002/03. The time spent in hostel accommodation is increasing year-on-year and has risen again during the current financial year. However, other areas of homelessness are showing improvement, with reduced numbers of homeless households presenting and being accepted this year, homelessness being prevented in a number of cases and the percentage of decisions made in 33 days increasing from 84 per cent in 2003/04 to 92 per cent in 2004/05.
- 150** The Council cannot yet demonstrate a strong track record in delivering value for money. Although there is a corporate commitment to delivering value for money, this is not yet embedded throughout the organisation. Officers are aware of their responsibility to achieve value for money, and there are some examples where action has been taken to deliver this, such as sending property listings electronically. The corporate restructuring also delivered significant savings. The work to deliver value for money in future is underway but is not yet resulting in demonstrable and tangible benefits.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 151** The Council has clear aims and priorities for the Housing Strategic Service, with a service planning framework to deliver these. There is strong commitment to continuous improvement shown by strategic leadership and additional capacity to deliver this. Improvement planning addresses service weaknesses and performance management arrangements are sound. However, the assessment of progress against the Council's priorities is hindered by the lack of coordination in monitoring the outcomes of the various plans. The effectiveness of the performance management system is reduced in some areas by the lack of appropriate indicators of success.

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- 152** The housing priorities are detailed earlier in the report. They are set out in the housing strategy and are revised and developed through consultation with stakeholders. The priorities reflect national and regional priorities. The housing strategy forms part of, and is linked to, the overall framework of plans to deliver the Council key aims, which in turn reflect the aims in the community plan.
- 153** The Council has a comprehensive performance management system in place to cascade the aims and priorities through the organisation, although this is new and still not fully embedded. Each service area is responsible for producing an annual service plan, which develops the overarching priorities into service priorities, along with the actions needed to achieve them. These are translated and developed further through the appraisal system for staff. The housing service plan details the service priorities, identifies the resources needed and develops an action plan to deliver them. The service plan is cross-referenced to the Council's strategic plan to demonstrate how it is contributing to the wider objectives. However, because of the number of housing priorities in the service and corporate plans, the different wording used and the changes as plans are revised, the priorities lack some clarity with the risk of key messages being lost.
- 154** The Council actively uses improvement planning to take its services forward. A best value review of the Housing Strategic Service was carried out in 2005. The review was thorough, using best value principles to identify areas of weakness and develop plans to address these. Twenty-nine improvement outcomes were identified for strategic housing services. These support the delivery of the agreed priorities and include:
- delivering an improved cross-cutting housing strategy supported by a private sector renewal strategy;
 - increasing partnership working;
 - prevention of homelessness and the development of housing options; and
 - agreeing and publishing service standards for all service areas.
- 155** The improvement outcomes address the weaknesses identified through our inspection and the plans to deliver them are SMART, showing the resource implications and the timescale in which actions are to be carried out. In our view these form a sound basis for delivering an improved service.
- 156** Monitoring of improvement plans and their relationship to each other is not sufficiently robust. Service managers monitor the progress against the action plans in their service areas, and more formal reporting is made to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. However, there is no overall framework which allows all the different action plans across the Council to be effectively co-ordinated. The Council has recognised this is an issue and will be addressing it through the work of the Excellence 2008 Group (EO8).
- 157** The Council has developed clear proposals for meeting efficiency targets and value for money. These are discussed in more detail in the value for money section of the report. The Council has appropriate monitoring arrangements to assess the progress it is making, and has placed responsibility for delivering the efficiency agenda at a senior level with the EO8 Group.

- 158** The Council is committed to continuous improvement and has set its ambition to achieve 'excellence' by 2008. This will be delivered through the EO8 Group. The group is high-level, made up of the Leader and Deputy Leader, the Corporate Management Team and three key Heads of Service, and provides the strategic leadership for delivering excellence. Resources have been prioritised to create additional capacity, with a project team set up to deliver the EO8 policies. The Group has set priorities, which include improving access and the development of e-government, and has held two workshops with staff to take on board their views and ideas and involve them in the improvement process.
- 159** The Council has a robust performance management system in place which is driving improvement. However, it is not yet fully embedded, and not all of the performance indicators which make up the system, are effective in measuring the critical areas of success in achieving the Council's priorities.
- 160** The performance management system was introduced formally across the organisation in April 2005. It is based on the BVPIs and supplemented by local performance indicators. The corporate policy team is responsible for capturing the BVPIs on the 'TENS' performance management system. Performance information is available to all staff and members on the intranet, with information presented in a variety of ways such as graphs.
- 161** In the Housing Service performance is monitored by service managers through monthly updating of a central spreadsheet, which responsible officers are required to complete. Performance is managed through discussions at team meetings and, by exception at Housing Service Team meetings. Every six weeks, there is a Departmental Management Team dedicated to performance where areas of concern are identified and remedial action agreed. In response to poor performance in relation to the increasing time spent by homeless households in hostel accommodation (BVPI 183b), the Departmental Management Team has set up a task group to examine performance in detail and seek solutions.
- 162** Performance management at member level is robust. The Portfolio Holder for Housing meets regularly with Heads of Service to discuss performance and other issues. Performance is reported to the Housing Overview and Scrutiny Committee on a six-weekly basis and the Portfolio Holder is required to attend and answer any questions. Any concerns over performance are referred to the Performance and Corporate Management Overview and Scrutiny Committee. If the Committee is of the view that further action is needed to improve performance, it sets up a 'performance clinic'. The 'clinic' is made up of members and officers and its role is to consider the performance issue in-depth, including looking at good practice elsewhere, and develop solutions to improve. Services can also self-refer to the performance clinic to address areas of concern. The Housing Service has not yet used the performance clinic but is considering referring performance against BVPI 183b. The performance clinic is currently considering sickness absence and council tax recovery.

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- 163** The performance indicators used to measure the Council's achievements are not sufficiently comprehensive to allow a robust assessment of progress against stated outcomes. In housing strategic services there are few BVPIs, and although old BVPIs have been kept as local indicators, these do not necessarily present a full picture. Performance information is gathered at lower levels in the organisation, some of which is key to assessing performance, but not necessarily picked up through the performance system. For example, whilst the length of time spent in hostel accommodation has been identified as an issue through the performance management system, the time taken to process grants, often for very vulnerable clients, has not.
- 164** Performance indicators have not yet been linked to budgets and resource planning, although there are plans to do so. However, there are arrangements through the fundamental review of budgets to ensure that efficiency and value for money gains are directed towards priorities.
- 165** Budget monitoring is generally sound. Recent investment in the financial management system provides on line information for budget holders. Regular meetings take place between housing service managers and the housing accountant to monitor and manage budgets. Capital budget monitoring is carried out by a capital monitoring group. However, the significant underspend against the housing grants budget in recent years indicates that the challenge provided by the group is not sufficiently robust.
- 166** There are arrangements in place to manage risks in the organisation. The housing service plan identified seven key risks. The Council is strengthening its arrangements for managing risk and approved a new risk management policy and strategy in October 2005, setting out the roles and responsibilities for the management of risk. Staff briefings have taken place but the system still requires embedding.
- 167** The Council is self aware of its areas of weakness. The self-assessment clearly shows the areas which the Council recognise as needing improvement. Our inspection has identified similar weaknesses.
- 168** The Council is also keen to learn from others and seeks out good practice. It has been a member of the CWOIL benchmarking club for some years comparing and exchanging good practice as well as performance. Hartlepool Borough Council, recognised by the Government for good practice in its homelessness service, carried out an assessment to inform the development of the Council's own service. The Council has also used customer surveys to identify improvements needed. For example, feedback from the annual survey of housing applicants led to better information being provided in accordance with customers' wishes. However, the Council does not systematically gather customers' views in order to learn from them.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 169** The capacity to deliver the housing strategic service has been increased over the last 18 months which is resulting in an improved service. There is robust financial planning which aligns resources to priorities. The Council works effectively with others to deliver its priorities and has been successful in attracting external funding. However, there has been little strategic evaluation of the capacity required for delivering the strategic housing role, not all the resources to support it have been identified, and an assessment of the additional capacity created through working with partners has not been carried out.
- 170** Increased capacity to deliver the Housing Strategic Service has been achieved by the redirection of resources within the Council's own finances and through attracting external funding. This resulted in the creation of the Housing Strategy Manager post, two posts in the homelessness team funded through the ODPM and an extra post in the private sector renewal team paid for through Neighbourhood Renewal Challenge Funding. This additional capacity has led to improved services. However, the external funding for the posts runs out in March 2006, and although bids have been made through the strategic planning process for the posts to be made permanent, there is no guarantee that these will be successful.
- 171** The Council recognises the significant role that the Housing Strategic Service needs to play in delivering the Council's wider objectives and that capacity may need to be increased further. It is exploring ways of how this can be achieved within existing resources. Better cross-service working is ensuring corporate support for the delivery of housing objectives. The business re-engineering process underway is aimed at finding more effective ways of working. Private sector renewal activities have been prioritised for this approach.
- 172** However, there is no systematic evaluation of capacity in the organisation, although the need for this has been identified and is starting to develop at a corporate level. The housing service plan includes an assessment of resources, which can be used as a basis to inform workforce planning and identify the capacity needed to deliver services, but this has not yet been developed.
- 173** Information technology (IT) is not effectively contributing towards increasing capacity. Housing strategic services are less dependent on IT than many service areas, but the lack of appropriate systems in the private sector housing renewal team means that delivering the service is labour intensive. The Council has plans to address this.

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- 174 The Council has invested in organisational support to assist service managers deliver and improve services. This is resulting in a more effective approach to building capacity but it will be some time before the benefits of this flow through to service users. As part of the corporate restructuring, additional capacity was created and refocused in Human Resources, resulting in increased support for managers and a more effective and coordinated approach to training. Investment has been targeted on management training with senior and middle managers attending a two day assessment centre, and Heads of Service attending a four-day leadership programme. Resources have been identified for member training and a corporate training programme has also been developed. However, the commitment to training is variable with 17 per cent of those booked on courses not turning up, and there is no systematic evaluation of the impact of training.
- 175 The Council is making more effective use of staff appraisal to support the delivery of its priorities. A new appraisal scheme was introduced in May which is more linked to competency and capability than the previous scheme. Most staff we spoke to had received their appraisal interview or had agreed a date for this. However, there is no corporate monitoring of the implementation of the scheme, although this is carried out at Directorate level.
- 176 Regular team meetings take place to keep staff informed and improve communication. The Council has recently introduced late morning opening on a Wednesday morning to allow 8.30am to 9.30am to be used for meetings and training sessions. Once a month the meeting is dedicated for corporate team briefs.
- 177 The Council has invested in the PRIDE (Personal Responsibility in Delivering Excellence) scheme which recognises the work that individual members of staff contribute. Staff and customers can make nominations and award ceremonies are held.
- 178 Sickness absence remains a significant issue facing the Council, reducing the capacity of the organisation. Progress is being made to address this through new policies and procedures and performance in reducing sickness absence is being considered by the performance clinic. The average days lost through sickness reduced to 12 days for 2004/05, which although an improvement on previous years is still above the average. For 2005/06, a target of ten days has been set but performance this year to date is similar to last year and the target is unlikely to be met. Sickness absence in the Housing Service is not as high as in some areas.

- 179** There are robust arrangements in place to ensure that resources are aligned to deliver priorities. The Executive sits as the Strategic Review Group to determine the allocation of available resources, which it assesses against the corporate objectives to ensure resources follow priorities. Capital projects are assessed to ensure they are in line with agreed priorities and provision is made for any revenue implications. The medium-term financial plan sets out 12 strategic objectives aimed at delivering a balanced budget and supporting the delivery of priorities. The plan also seeks to anticipate future commitments, with some provision being made to cover the new licensing responsibilities, HMO costs and the growth in homelessness. The fundamental review of budgets will inform the further development of the plan and also ensure that all available resources are targeted at priorities.
- 180** Resources to deliver the housing strategic role have not been fully identified. The Council has limited resources and works in the context of constantly needing to make savings. The Housing Service is required to find the balance between meeting the investment needs of its own stock and the strategic responsibility of meeting growing housing needs through more affordable housing and improved conditions in the private sector. The asset management plan, recently developed, offers resource options. However, the decisions on how these are to be used have not yet been made.
- 181** The Council is working effectively with others to increase resources and capacity. There is joint working with a number of district councils in the county across a number of areas, sharing expertise, capacity and resources. There was joint procurement of the housing needs survey with a neighbouring council and further joint exercises are planned. External funding has been successfully attracted to support delivery of services, in particular through SRB and NRCF. Partnership working with the voluntary sector is increasing the services available and assisting the Council to meet its priorities. However, the Council is not yet maximising the opportunities for procurement and partnership working. It has carried out little formal evaluation of the benefits brought or the capacity added through working with partners.

Summary

- 182** We have assessed the Council as having promising prospects for improvement.
- 183** The Council can demonstrate a track record in delivering improvements which are of positive benefit to customers. There are clear aims and priorities for the Housing Strategic Service, supported by a sound performance management framework. Improvement planning addresses service weaknesses and there is a strong commitment to continuous improvement. The capacity to deliver the housing strategic service has been increased over the last 18 months which is resulting in an improved service. There is robust financial planning which aligns resources to priorities, the Council works effectively with others to deliver its priorities and has been successful in attracting external funding.

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- 184** However, improvement in performance is mixed and the assessment of progress against the Council's priorities is hindered by the lack of co-ordination in monitoring the outcomes of the various plans. The effectiveness of the performance management system is reduced in some areas by the lack of appropriate indicators of success. There has been little strategic evaluation of the capacity required for delivering the housing strategic role, not all the resources to support it have been identified and the additional capacity brought by partners has not been assessed.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 3 Best value performance indicators

Performance indicator	All England top quartile 2003/04	City of Lincoln 2002/03	City of Lincoln 2003/04	City of Lincoln 2004/05 (Unaudited figures)
BVPI 62 - Unfit homes made fit or demolished	4.32%	5.06%	4.71%	4.25%
BVPI 64 - Vacant private homes returned to use or demolished	46.5	38	88	133
BVPI 183a - average length of stay in B&B	1.21 weeks	4 weeks	0.84 weeks	2.41 weeks
BVPI 183b - average length of stay in hostels	0 weeks	13 weeks	15.25 weeks	19.30 weeks

Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
 - the Council’s self-assessment of the service;
 - Corporate Plan;
 - Housing Strategy 2004 to 2007;
 - Homelessness Strategy;
 - Housing Service Plan;
 - Strategic Housing Service Best Value Review;
 - various committee reports and minutes of meetings; and
 - leaflets and information for tenants.

Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 2 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 to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
- visits to supported housing schemes;
 - visits to development sites;
 - visits to temporary accommodation for homeless households;
 - visits to partner agencies; and
 - file checks.

Appendix 4 – Positive practice

- 1 *'The Commission will identify and promote good practice. Every inspection will look for examples of good practice and innovation, and for creative ways to overcome barriers and resistance to change or make better use of resources'* (Seeing is Believing).

Helping victims of domestic violence

- 2 The Council has set up a sanctuary scheme, offering security to those victims wishing to remain in their home through additional locks, stronger doors, alarms and a safe room if required. However, in addition the Women's Centre has recently received funding for a sensor alarm which picks up movement in a room along with noise or any conversations offering a more sophisticated form of security.

Improving security and obtaining value for money through a home secure project

- 3 The Council has delivered demonstrable improvements through its home secure project which offers home security grants and the Alleygates scheme in two of its most deprived wards. Funding for an officer to deliver the programme was secured through a Neighbourhood Renewal Challenge Fund grant. The works for the Alleygates scheme are carried out in partnership with the Probation Service, which provides the labour through community service orders.

Working in partnership to bring difficult sites forward for development

- 4 The Council has been a partner in 'Investors in Lincoln' for some time. This is a company made up from a number of partners including developers, the County Council, the university and RSLs. 'Investors in Lincoln' is currently identifying sites which may not come forward for development because of high-costs or high-risks, and finding ways in partnership to overcome these obstacles. Currently three possible development sites have been identified and are being pursued by the company.