

Local Authority Housing Inspection Report

February 2006



Affordable Housing

West Devon Borough Council

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local services for the public. Our remit covers around 11,000 bodies in England, which between them spend more than £180 billion of public money each year. Our work covers local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we ensure that public services are good value for money and that public money is properly spent.

Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0845 056 0566.

© Audit Commission 2006

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 020 7828 1212 Fax: 020 7976 6187 Textphone (minicom): 020 7630 0421

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

Contents

Local Authority Housing Inspections	4
Summary	5
Scoring the service	6
Recommendations	9
Report	12
Context	12
The locality	12
The Council	12
The service	13
How good is the service?	14
What has the service aimed to achieve?	14
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?	14
Access and customer care	15
Diversity	17
User and stakeholder involvement	18
Partnerships	20
Strategic approach to housing	23
Enabling new housing	26
Prevention of homelessness	27
Private sector housing	30
Is the service delivering value for money?	32
How do costs compare?	32
How is value for money managed?	34
Summary	35
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	37
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	37
How well does the service manage performance?	39
Does the service have the capacity to improve?	42
Summary	45
Appendix 1 – Performance indicators	46
Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed	47
Appendix 3 – Positive practice	48

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 and national 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** West Devon Borough Council is one of the largest districts in the country, located in the south west of England. Over 40 per cent of the area is located within the Dartmoor National Park (DNP), which is responsible for its own its own planning policy and development decisions. The population is 50,200 and about a third live in the two main markets towns of Tavistock and Okehampton, with the remainder living in very small rural communities spread across the borough. The large area and small population make the borough one of the most sparsely populated areas in England.
- 2** The area has a small ethnic population. Less than 1 per cent of the population is from minority ethnic communities, compared to 13 per cent nationally and 4.5 per cent regionally (2001 census). There are a growing number of people from non-white British groups and this currently accounts for under 3 per cent of the local population. The area has a higher than average elderly population which is projected to rise just under 5 per cent up to 2010.
- 3** The Council has adopted a committee structure divided into executive, scrutiny and subcommittees which govern the business of the Council. There is no overall political control and the political balance is made up of 12 Conservatives, nine grouped and two ungrouped independents, eight Liberal Democrats. The Council employs 125 staff across all services.
- 4** The Council transferred its housing stock to West Devon Homes in 1999.
- 5** The inspection covered a broad range of services which contribute to the delivery of affordable housing including planning, private sector housing, homelessness, housing strategy and enabling.

Scoring the service

- 6 We have assessed West Devon Borough Council as providing a 'good', two-star services 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 good service that has promising prospects for improvement' A good service?
Promising			☀			
Uncertain						
Poor						
		Poor	Fair ★	Good ★★	Excellent ★★★	

Audit Commission

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.

- 7 We have assessed the Council's provision of affordable housing as providing a good service because:
- there is a wide range of ways that customers can access the service, and information about affordable housing is easy to obtain;
 - the Council is measuring levels of service user satisfaction and using this information to identify improvement;
 - strategies and plans have been developed based on wide spread consultation and are closely aligned with financial strategy and commitments;
 - there is up to date housing needs research in place and work is currently taking place to identify the needs of gypsies and travellers;
 - realistic targets have been set for the delivery of new affordable homes based on a broad understanding of housing need;
 - new supported housing schemes are being developed to meet the needs of some vulnerable people;
 - there is strong partnership working in place which is delivering outcomes and increasing the capacity of the Council;
 - good use is being made of the planning system which is producing new affordable housing in line with the Council's targets;
 - the Council has invested in the homelessness and advice service which has increased the focus on prevention and this is having a positive impact;
 - a large number of empty homes are being brought back in to use and work in the private sector is being targeted at key areas; and
 - the service can evidence some value for money initiatives.
- 8 However there are some areas that require improvement.
- service standards are not comprehensive across all parts of the service or well-publicised;
 - there is a lack of comprehensive diversity and equality monitoring across the service;
 - the Council has failed to embed equalities and diversity focus in to the day-to-day delivery of the service;
 - there has been limited success in engaging with some of the traditionally hard to reach groups in the local community;
 - the Council is not measuring the success of its partnerships; and
 - comprehensive benchmarking within the service requires further development.

9 We have judged that the service has promising prospects for improvement as:

- the Council has a strong record of delivering improvements to the service which are having a positive impact on maximising the availability of affordable housing;
- key weaknesses identified in the CPA assessment have been addressed;
- many of the right strategies such as homelessness and housing are in place to deliver improvement;
- there is a clear ambition for the service which has been translated in to clear affordable housing targets for the future;
- there has been positive improvement in a number of key performance indicators such as in a number of homelessness indicators, and private sector housing indicators;
- arrangements are in place to monitor improvements in the way affordable housing is delivered;
- clear leadership has set the aims and objectives for the service. Affordable housing is a top priority for the Council and this is supported politically and by the evidence of community consultation;
- the medium-term financial strategy is helping to target resources at priority areas;
- partnership working is strong and increasing capacity within the Council;
- additional resources have been allocated to the service which have helped to improve outcomes, including attracting additional funding; and
- the Council has a culture of learning from others and this has resulted in improvement to the way the Council delivers affordable homes.

10 However, there are some areas for improvement:

- there has been a lack of progress in some key areas such as equalities and diversity;
- the Council has been slow to tailor services to address diversity issues;
- the Council has not yet progressed some human resources issues such as review of equal pay; and
- a training programme has only very recently been put in place to increase the capacity of councillors.

Recommendations

- 11 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 costs² 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 To ensure the effective delivery of the housing strategy develop the private sector renewal strategy to include all issues affecting the provision of good quality private housing.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is to show how the Council will continue to reduce the number of empty homes in the area and increase the supply of affordable homes.

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

Recommendation

R2 To improve stakeholder involvement and customer care:

- *collate and review satisfaction surveys on all new housing development and use the results to inform future affordable housing development; and*
- *develop with service users service standards for all parts of the service and ensure that they are well-publicised and reported.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- have in place an agreed level of service which service users and councillors can review to ensure that it is being delivered; and
- use feedback from people moving in to new affordable homes to make future improvement in design and processes.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by six months.

² 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

R3 To strengthen management and leadership:

- *take steps to measure the effectiveness of partnerships;*
- *put in place the improvements that will meet level 2 of the equalities standard and ensure that diversity focus is embedded in to the day-to-day delivery of the service; and*
- *explore how modern procurement methods can be used to commission new housing and private sector housing renewal work.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- demonstrate to the local community that equality and diversity issues are a key priority for the council and is delivering improvements for all members of the local community;
- increase the information available to assess if the right partnerships are in place; and
- be able to demonstrate value for money is being achieved through the procurement of new affordable housing.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by 12 months.

Recommendation

R4 To use this inspection report to drive improvement:

- *develop an action plan to address all other weaknesses identified within the report; and*
- *report the findings and recommendations of this report to the Forward Planning and Housing Committee and LSP housing subgroup.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- produce an up to date improvement plan that addresses all weaknesses identified by the inspection and ensure that key councillors are fully briefed.

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

- 12 We would like to thank the staff of West Devon Borough Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: November 2005

Regional contact details

Audit Commission

Housing Inspectorate

3-6 Blenheim Court

Matford Business Park

Lustleigh Close

Exeter, EX2 8PW

Telephone: 01392 315600

Fax: 07392 427383

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 West Devon Borough Council is one of the largest (geographically) councils in the country and is located in the South West of England. The district is very rural and sparsely populated with two main market towns located at Tavistock and Okehampton. Dartmoor National Park (DNP) is within the Council's boundaries (covering 40 per cent of the area). The DNP is responsible for its own planning policy and development decisions. The district also contains two areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and 12 Sites of Special Scientific Interest. At 448 square miles, it is the largest district in Devon in terms of area and the 14th largest in England.
- 14 The population of the area is 50,200 people, with a higher than average elderly population, 20 per cent over 65 years compared to 18 per cent regionally and 16 per cent nationally. There is a low BME population of less than 1 per cent compared to just under 5 per cent regionally and 3 per cent nationally. There are a growing number of people from non-white British groups which currently account for 2.7 per cent of local people, mainly from eastern European countries.
- 15 The area is generally affluent, and the district is ranked as the 164th most deprived area out of 354 nationally, where one is the most deprived. There are some areas which are less affluent, such as Lydford which includes Princetown, which falls in to the top 25 per cent most deprived wards in England. The majority of local people are employed in public administration and distribution services. Unemployment in March 2005 stood at less than 1 per cent compared with the regional average of one and a half per cent and the national average of 2 per cent.
- 16 The average home in the district costs £215,784 which is above the regional average of £204,587. The average wage compared to the average cost of houses means that buying a home in the area is becoming less affordable to local people.

The Council

- 17 The Council comprises 31 councillors. No party has overall control and the political balance is made up of 12 Conservatives, 8 Liberal Democrats, 9 grouped and two ungrouped independents. The Council has adopted a committee structure divided into executive, scrutiny and sub committees which govern the business of the Council.

- 18 The Council employs approximately 125 people across four departments which are the chief executive, corporate services, leisure and direct services and environment community and housing services. The Council is debt free and has an agreed three-year capital programme in place. The Council's overall general fund budget for the year 2005/06 is just over £7.6 million.
- 19 The Council transferred its housing stock to West Devon Homes in 1999. In July 2004, it took back the homelessness and advice service within the Council, following a competitive tendering process.
- 20 The Council was rated as 'good' following the Comprehensive Performance Assessments (CPA) undertaken by the Audit Commission in 2003.

The service

- 21 The inspection covered a broad range of services which contribute to the delivery of affordable housing, including planning, private sector housing, homelessness, strategy and enabling. The inspection looked at how the Council works in partnership with others to deliver affordable housing and how well it understands the local housing market. Affordable housing can be defined as low cost market housing and subsidised housing irrespective of tenure or ownership that is available to people who can not afford to rent or buy properties generally on the open market.
- 22 There is currently no single housing inspectorate key line of enquiry (KLOE) which specifically covers all aspects of affordable housing but in undertaking this inspection we have drawn together all the relevant elements of the KLOEs covering strategy and enabling, private sector housing, homelessness and housing needs. Elements of the Council's planning service were also included in the scope of the inspection.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

23 The Council's vision is:

'through effective working with partners, local communities and the public, maintain the very high-quality of life of the area and the environment and help all residents to enjoy these'.

24 To deliver this vision the Council has identified four key corporate priorities which are:

- economic prosperity;
- housing;
- community life; and
- recycling.

25 Housing is an important corporate priority for the Council and it has three key aims by which to deliver this:

- meeting affordable housing needs;
- meet the needs of homeless people; and
- to improve the private sector stock condition.

26 Within the housing strategy 2000 to 2006 (2005/06 update) there are a range of clear targets in place which if delivered will help to improve the supply of affordable homes in the borough. 2005/06 targets include:

- deliver 562 affordable homes between 2004 and 2009;
- introduce choice-based lettings by May 2006;
- reduce levels of homelessness by 5 per cent in 2005/06; and
- halve the use of temporary accommodation by 2010.

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

27 Generally, the Council is providing positive community leadership and is responding to many of the priorities and needs of the local community. It has a strong focus on involving and consulting local communities and uses this information to build its strategies and priorities. This is discussed in more detail later in the report.

- 28 The Council is helping to contribute to national and regional priorities, both corporately and within the housing service. Areas include targeting work in the private sector housing to improve the levels of decency and bring empty homes back in to use. Transferring the Council's housing stock released capital to build more affordable homes as well as enabling the LSVT to improve the housing stock to meet the Government's decent homes standard (DHS). Reducing the levels of homelessness and the time that homeless families stay in emergency bed and breakfast accommodation.
- 29 At a corporate level many of the new housing developments are contributing to corporate priorities such as economic prosperity and community life through requirements of section 106 agreements. Recent examples include contributions to community facilities and education.
- 30 The Council has been very slow to achieve level 2 of the local government equality standard. There is a lack of focus on moving the equalities and diversity agenda forward. Consequently the housing service has lacked ambition in meeting the needs of some hard to reach groups. Staff and Councillors understood the importance of engagement but had achieved limited success and were unclear how to improve outcomes.

Access and customer care

- 31 Overall, there are more strengths than weaknesses in the way that people can access the service. There is a range of ways in which people can access services, including those people who live in the rural areas of the borough. Information is helpful and easy to obtain either in published form or through the Council's website and the Council is using satisfaction surveys to shape the future service delivery which means that service users are influencing how the service is delivered.
- 32 Access points for the service are generally accessible. Currently the services are based in offices in local market towns, Tavistock and Okehampton, with an additional local presence in Tavistock high street. The offices are fully compliant with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act. This makes it easier for people to physically access the services.
- 33 The Council has made use of its website to enable people to access information about affordable housing services. There is a range of information available and the site is relatively easy to navigate. Included on the website is information about homelessness and how to avoid it, benefits, medical assessment forms and development briefs for identified sites in the local plan. This means that service users do not have to travel to Council offices to access information, which is particularly helpful for a dispersed rural community.

- 34 The Council provides effective frontline service to service users. Phones are answered effectively and enquiries are dealt with in a courteous way. Email enquires are dealt with promptly and requests for information are responded to quickly. An out-of-hours freephone service is available in case of emergencies and environmental health officers have been trained to provide an out-of-hours service for people presenting as homeless. This is supported by the levels of customer satisfaction with services across the Council which in 2003/04 were at 66 per cent which places the Council's performance in the best 25 per cent of councils. Responding promptly and providing an out-of-hours service means that service users do not have to wait to receive a response from the Council when approaching them for advice or assistance.
- 35 The Council has produced informative leaflets about the affordable housing services. This includes an information pack which contains a range of advice leaflets in loose leaf format so they can be easily updated as required. The pack has advice on homelessness, the private rented sector, benefits including a rent deposit scheme, homelessness services and local housing associations working in the area. It is a useful and helpful way to provide information about securing accommodation in the area.
- 36 Housing services are widely publicised throughout the Borough. Information on housing services is available in local libraries including the mobile library, social services offices, GP surgeries and hospitals, Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), and supermarkets. Housing advice posters are also displayed widely, in particular, on parish notice boards. The Council has also effectively promoted affordable housing through its community newspaper which has carried a range of articles, including housing advice surgeries, rent a room scheme and information on new developments. The Council is helping to promote the awareness of affordable housing as a local issue.
- 37 The Council has acted to address the difficulty of providing a service to a dispersed rural population. It regularly holds surgeries in local libraries during the day and evening. These sessions although not yet particularly well attended, are well-publicised and provide a convenient and local service for rural communities. The local CAB also provides an advice desk in local courts, providing advice for tenants facing possession proceedings. A flexible range of access points is important as people living in a rural and dispersed area may find it difficult to travel to a central service point to access help and assistance.
- 38 Customer surveys are used to measure levels of satisfaction across many aspects of the service and this information is being used to shape future service delivery. They include surveys of service users who have received private sector grants, homelessness services and housing advice. This information is being used to make changes that service users say would improve the service they receive such as introduction of evening homelessness advice surgeries and changes made to some temporary accommodation. This information is helping to develop the service in ways that service users find helpful.

- 39 Service standards are not comprehensive and where they are in place, are not publicised. Standards for the new homelessness service are on the Council's website but these are an isolated example. The Council has not yet begun to regularly report on these standards. Without wide publication and regular monitoring, customers and councillors can not know how well the service is doing.
- 40 Departmental service standards are not comprehensive and are not well-publicised. There are recently revised corporate customer service standards in place. These were developed in consultation with service users and regular monitoring is in place. Housing staff have all received customer care training.
- 41 Some contact details and signposts for service users are confusing. The homelessness telephone contact number referred to in advice leaflets differs from the Freephone one published in the community newspaper. The Council has responded to this feedback and will rectify the error. It is important that contact details are consistently correct, particularly when they are for a service that is often assisting people in crisis.
- 42 The Council is failing to measure levels of satisfaction of tenants moving in to newly developed housing. Partner housing associations have not surveyed new tenants on behalf of the Council which means that it is missing an opportunity to learn from new tenants and collect feedback for improvement in to future housing development.

Diversity

- 43 The Council's approach to equality and diversity in relation to affordable housing services is weak. There is limited monitoring in place and a weak response to identifying the needs of all sections of the local community. Councillors have not received equalities training and there has been a lack of progress at a corporate level in progressing to level 2 of the equalities standard.
- 44 There is a lack of comprehensive monitoring of services for equality and diversity. There is monitoring taking place for homelessness and advice services but this information is not being analysed and in other areas such as private sector grants there is no monitoring of service users. There have been 15 parish surveys in the past three years and the Council has not used this opportunity to measure equalities and diversity trends locally. The housing strategy recognises that there are gaps in the Council's diversity knowledge but it is failing to maximise the opportunities to improve their knowledge base. The lack of sufficient information about the diverse needs of the local community means that the Council can not plan future housing provision to meet the needs of all groups within the community in an equal way.

- 45 The Council has not developed strategies for meeting the needs of specific diverse groups within the community, such as older people, people with disabilities or travellers. The housing strategy highlights that there are gaps in the Council's knowledge as well as identifying the gaps in housing provision such as floating support for independent elderly and an extra care scheme for older people. The Council is beginning to address this situation through its work across Devon with neighbouring authorities to develop a cross regional approach to meeting the needs of travellers. It is also working with the County Council to deliver the Supporting People five-year strategy, which has recently delivered the Borough's first Supporting People housing development for people with learning disabilities and poor mental health. However, the lack of information on local diverse groups means that the Council can not be confident that it can determine priorities in a balanced way that will effectively meet the needs of the community.
- 46 The Council has failed to embed the equalities and diversity training into day-to-day service delivery. Equalities and diversity training has been undertaken by all staff across services relating to the delivery of affordable housing but basic measures such as straplines on recently published leaflets and promoting the availability of alternative formats such as Braille continue to be omitted. The result is that some people could find it more difficult to access services and receive help.
- 47 The Council's development programme does include a range of schemes which will meet the needs of some local vulnerable groups. A key priority highlighted in the housing strategy is the provision of an extra care scheme for older people. By supporting strategic priorities the Council is supporting development bids that will help to meet gaps in provision of housing for vulnerable local people.
- 48 The Council is complying with its statutory duty to carry out race equality impact assessments. It has completed initial equality assessments (EIAs) for all 'high priority' housing policies, for example the allocations policy. All EIAs highlighted the need to include paragraphs about the availability of translations and Braille, large print and audio versions. This will help to ensure that all potential service users are aware of their rights. Many of the weaknesses identified in the inspection are highlighted in the assessment for action. Measuring the impact that strategies may have on diverse group helps to assess what improvements need to be made in order to ensure that all services are accessible and appropriate to all members of the local community.
- 49 Corporately, the Council has achieved level one of the local government equality standards and is now aiming to achieve level 2 within the next year. The Council also has a race equality scheme which includes a comprehensive complaints procedure which deals with any complaints of unfair treatment.

User and stakeholder involvement

- 50 There is a strong focus on user and stakeholder involvement and this is an area of strength for the service. The Council's strategies and plans have been informed through widespread consultation. In addition strategies and plans are being kept updated through ongoing consultation and this information is being used to shape service delivery.

- 51 Housing strategies and the local plan have been shaped by public consultation. Consultation on the local plan was initially based on planning for real exercises which allow local communities to engage with the Council and ensure that local people are able to be fully involved in planning for the future of their communities. It is vital that local people have opportunities to be involved in the preparation of planning policies and the determination of planning applications that will shape their areas for up to ten years ahead. This helps to ensure that public support is maintained.
- 52 The housing strategy was developed following wide ranging consultation with service users, landlords, public sector partners, West Devon's local strategic partnership (LSP) and statutory and voluntary agencies. The strategy links consultation results to future actions and subsequent strategy updates have developed consultation to include some hard to reach groups, such as young people. This level of local consultation has helped the Council to understand the importance of affordable housing for local people.
- 53 The housing strategy has been widely distributed. It is regularly discussed at partnership meetings and forums and awareness raising presentations are regularly undertaken to ensure that housing issues within the Borough are understood. A housing strategy subgroup of the LSP ensures that consultation and feedback is an ongoing process. At every partnership group and forum meeting feedback is gathered to inform the strategy process such as:
- discussions with all agencies working with young people in West Devon around the issues for young people and housing resulted in the inclusion of specific targets within the strategy;
 - consultation with parish councils has helped determine development priority areas and areas where parish surveys are to be undertaken;
 - the domestic violence forum identified the need for West Devon to have a furniture store. This has been made a priority action; and
 - consultation with the DNP on parish surveys highlighted the importance of prioritising some surveys where there were thought to be higher levels of housing need. As a result some Parish surveys were brought forward in the survey programme.
- 54 In 2003, the Council undertook a wide ranging homeless review which formed the basis of the homelessness strategy. This included interviews with key partners and stakeholders. This culminated in a consultation day on the draft strategy. This approach has ensured that key non-housing partners such as the local PCT were given the opportunity to have an input in to shaping how the Council planned to tackle the issue of homelessness in the future.
- 55 The Council carries out regular surveys of homeless applicants. This information is used to shape the day-to-day delivery of the service. Results have changed the way that services are managed and provided, for example the introduction of evening advice surgeries and a change of management culture in one homeless hostel. This is a useful way to keep consultation live and up-to-date so that it can have an immediate impact on service delivery.

- 56 The Council is successfully consulting with rural communities through the use of Parish surveys and locally organised events. The Rural Housing Enabler, a post jointly funded by neighbouring Councils, has been active in assisting the Council in this area. The Council works closely with parish councils to engage with local communities to identify housing needs and carry out face to face consultation. Over the last four years, the Council have completed 15 parish housing need surveys. The information provides valuable local intelligence which is important in the more rural parishes where sample sizes in the borough wide housing need surveys are lower. The parish surveys also raise the awareness of affordable housing needs within these communities.
- 57 Regular forums are held with partners. These include forums with partner housing associations to discuss development and housing management issues, private landlords and those working as voluntary agencies locally such as the CAB. These are a useful way to maintain up to date contact with key partners and obtain regular feedback about services being provided.
- 58 At a corporate level, the Council has recently completed a consultation exercise on its budget for 2006/07. Over 350 local people completed the survey which was available through the Council's website and local newspaper. The results of the survey are being collated and will go before the Council's strategies and resources committee, and a final decision on the budget will be made in February 2006. This type of exercise is one way that the Council is enabling local residents to have their say on important financial decisions covering a range of issues from spending on day-to-day services to financing major projects such as affordable housing.

Partnerships

- 59 This is an area of strength for the Council who are working well with partners, both with neighbouring districts and cross-county partnerships. These partnerships are beginning to have an impact on delivering affordable housing, preventing homelessness and reducing housing need.
- 60 Capacity is being increased across the Council by partnership working. Partnership working through the Devon Strategic Housing Group has produced additional resources for the Council to deliver affordable housing. The group regularly shares information and strategic priorities. In particular, the pooling of resources to appoint a homelessness coordinator, affordable housing coordinator and rural housing enabler has enabled work to progress jointly on the following areas:
- Devon-wide homelessness action plan;
 - affordable housing action plan; and
 - rural housing action plan.

- 61 The Council is working with other councils in Devon, by utilising additional resources to extend the availability of affordable housing and support. Money raised from second homes council tax has been used to fund various schemes. The table below shows how this revenue has been used with the Council's revenue funding to deliver new affordable homes.

Table 2

Year	WDBC revenue	Revenue	Project
2004/05	£18,311	£109,403	Purchase of two units of self contained accommodation for single persons in Okehampton.
2005/06	£32,000	£593,000	Capital funding for delivery of extra care housing scheme in Okehampton.

- 62 Effective partnership is delivering positive results in relation to private sector housing priorities. A key partner is the home improvement agency 'Care and Repair' with whom the Council is delivering its grants to the private housing sector. This partnership is helping to contribute to the strategic objectives of the Council such as improving the private sector housing stock and enable older clients to have a single point of contact throughout the claim for grant and subsequent works.
- 63 The Council is working in partnership to bring empty homes back into use. Currently there are two projects, one in Tavistock and a larger one in Horrabridge which are addressing the effects of past mining activity. The Horrabridge partnership has successfully drawn down £173,000 of government grant aid to investigate mining problems. It is anticipated that a key outcome will be to restore confidence and stability to the housing market and commercial viability of the village. The project will be returning more than 80 vacant properties to use which have been blighted by the mining problems in the area. This is in addition to the 20 vacant homes (empty for the past two to three years) that have already been brought back onto the market. English Partnerships are enthusiastic about the Council's approach and have asked the Council to present papers at a national conference on the subject to show the benefits of effective partnership working in this way. These partnerships have brought back in to use approximately 28 per cent of empty homes which are helping to reduce the pressures for new developments in the area.
- 64 The housing services work well together to support community aims. There is a well-established joint protocol with social services and Youthwise which provides a clear direction for handling applications from young people. This makes it more likely that they will be able to work together to prevent youth homelessness.

- 65 The Council has successfully established key strategic partnerships. The housing strategy is an integral part of the Authority's key strategic documents alongside the community plan, corporate plan and local plan. One of the local strategy partnership's (LSPs) early successes was forming a housing strategy subgroup which included all key partners. A number of actions in the housing strategy are assigned to LSP partners and the strategy is monitored through the housing strategy subgroup. This approach is helping to keep partners informed and establish ongoing involvement and monitoring of affordable housing. This helps to ensure that the Council does not overlook significant local issues, and that partners are signed up to its aims.
- 66 The Council works proactively with its housing association partners. During a focus group, representatives from partner associations said that relations with the Council are generally good, with regular meetings both on an individual basis and as a group. The Council were considered to be proactive in setting the affordable housing agenda and that their strategic approach provides a clear vision for the service. Housing association partners agreed that the Council has clear aims and that they had had an opportunity to influence and develop the current housing strategies. This makes it more likely that housing association partners will contribute to and help deliver what is needed to maximise the supply of affordable housing.
- 67 The Council has been successful within the Supporting People Partnership in Devon where county-wide needs assessment and planning is happening across health, housing, social services and probation. Locally, the Housing Strategy Subgroup and the Housing Support Planning Group bring much of the local partnership working together within the LSP framework. These groups are chaired by the Chair of the Future Planning and Housing Committee and have wide representation from all partners, stakeholders and community representatives. During the inspection a range of partners spoke highly of the Council's proactive approach to working on county-wide issues. The Council has been relatively quick compared with other councils to link, for example, the housing strategy with the Supporting People agenda, and actions within the strategy are on track for delivery. This success will ensure that the borough delivers on a range of supported housing schemes where needs information has identified gaps in provision.
- 68 The Council has developed a good and mutually supportive relationship with the DNP. The two partners have worked closely to assist each other to deliver their own local plans. While there will inevitably be disagreements given their different aims, these are handled within a professional working relationship and a framework of regular meetings. Recently, two exception sites have received planning permission from the DNP within the borough. The relationship has demonstrated that each partner is working to assist the other in achieving their objectives.

- 69 The Council is working with landlords in the private rented sector to help tackle the problems of accessing this sector, particularly for people in receipt of benefits or low incomes. A private landlords' forum meets twice a year and the Council has also recently launched a regular newsletter, at the landlords' suggestion. Staff from the homelessness and advice service, as well as representatives from the Council's benefit service, attend these meetings. The Council also provides a mediation service through its housing advice service for landlords and tenants to try and prevent disagreements leading to the termination of a tenancy. This approach is important as it provides advice and encouragement to private landlords to offer tenancies to people in receipt of benefit who would otherwise have to present themselves as homeless.
- 70 The Council is not measuring the effectiveness of its partnerships that are delivering affordable housing. Areas such as external advice services (to which the Council contributes funding) are not being measured to assess if they are contributing to the reduction of homelessness or helping clients to access or retain tenancies in the private rented sector. The Council does not know how effective these partnerships are or whether funding would be better targeted at new partnerships which may produce more effective outcomes in terms of maximising all opportunities to increase the availability of affordable housing.

Strategic approach to housing

- 71 The Council's strategic approach is contributing towards maximising the availability of affordable housing. It has developed good quality strategies that support balancing housing markets. The Council is working in a holistic way, different service streams work well together and there is a common understanding of the difficulties that exist in delivering its affordable housing priorities.
- 72 The Council has developed a high-quality housing strategy which is updated annually. The strategy meets the government office's 'fit for purpose' criteria. The document is clearly set out and identifies the Council's priorities. It is supported by a homelessness strategy and private sector housing strategy. These documents form the basis of service action plans and provide a focus upon which the Council is agreeing priorities and resources.
- 73 The Housing strategy links with the Council's corporate priorities and those of national and regional government. There are clear links through the provision of affordable housing, improving the existing stock and provision of housing in rural areas to sustain community facilitates. These priorities determine resources and link directly in to the Council's capital strategy. The housing strategy also links closely to both regional and national priorities. The housing strategy mirrors the key regional priorities of affordable housing, private sector renewal and decent homes.

- 74 The Council works on a sub-regional basis and on a strategic basis with other Devon councils on a county-wide basis through the Devon Strategic Housing Group. The Council plays a leading role in the group which acts as mechanism to engage strategically with key stakeholders such as social services, Devon Domestic Violence Forum and Health Forum. The group's priority areas include homelessness, planning and affordable housing and Supporting People. Achievements have included the establishment of a rural housing enabler post, and homelessness strategy research officer. Working strategically in this way increases the capacity of the council and ensures that their approach is appropriate not just for the local area but also enhances the approach being taken by neighbouring councils.
- 75 There are clear and well-publicised planning policies in place that set out the delivery of affordable housing. The local plan enquiry was completed in spring 2005 and the plan is now fully adopted. The Council has adopted supplementary planning guidance in the form of an affordable housing code and has a minimum threshold in place that states that all new developments require at least 35 per cent affordable homes. The Council has successfully implemented this threshold which is producing more affordable homes, some of which have and will be built without public subsidy.
- 76 The Council has an up-to-date housing needs research base which helps it to understand the local housing market. The Council has responded to updated needs and affordability information. For example, it has recently amended the ratio of rented to shared ownership homes from a 90:10 ratio to a 70:30 ratio which reflects an increasing need for more shared ownership/equity homes. This means that the numbers of new affordable homes being built better match what local people need, and reflect the rental and low cost ownership needs of the local community. The evidence of need supports this approach to new developments and has successfully raised the profile of affordable housing to become a key priority for the Council and local people.
- 77 The Council has up-to-date information about the condition of the private sector housing stock and has used this information to shape its Housing renewal strategy. Data from the survey suggests that the Council has a different housing profile to both the south west and England as a whole, such as a higher concentration of pre-1919 homes and lower levels of social housing. Consequently, the Council has strategically targeted resources at priority areas including:
- remedying the £15 million backlog of urgent repairs predominantly affecting pre-1944 dwellings;
 - investing in the private rented sector; and
 - improving home energy efficiency.

- 78 In addition, the strategy also takes in to account relevant national and regional targets, including national performance indicator BVPI62 which measures the proportion of properties classed as 'unfit for habitation' that are made fit or demolished as a result of action by the Council and indicator BVPI64 which measures the number of empty properties that are brought back into use as a result of action by the Council. The Council is ensuring that it is addressing both local and national issues as part of its strategic approach to the delivery of affordable homes.
- 79 The Council has targeted its private sector grant work to address some of the problems identified in the private sector stock condition survey. Resources through the grants system are being targeted at key areas such as renovation grants, tackling unfitness, firework to HMOs and energy efficiency work. This is important as the Council has limited resources available and many of the private sector homes are failing decency standards due to poor levels of thermal comfort and lack of fire prevention work. It is important that Council resources are used where they will have the biggest impact on retaining the supply of housing in the private sector.
- 80 The Council is working well across departments to deliver affordable housing. Staff and Councillors demonstrated a strong awareness of the priority of affordable housing and were working together to deliver this. Housing and planning services work together on key consultation exercises and this is being strengthened by the current approach that the Council is taking to consulting people on the new planning development framework where work also includes consultation about the Council's core objectives, including housing. This is resulting in the Council maintaining capacity to delivery affordable housing (which is critical in such as small organisation) and mainstreaming planning and affordable housing issues, retaining their high priority amongst local people.
- 81 The Council has not fully developed all the strategic options that are available to address the housing issues in the private sector. There are a significant number of empty homes in the borough. The HSSA 2004 return identified 402 empty homes in the area. Although the Council is working well to bring some of these homes back in to use (discussed earlier in the report) its strategic approach for the longer-term is not clear and requires further development. There may be some homes that could be brought back in to use that would in turn reduce the need for new development in some locations. This means that the Council is not fully maximising the available capacity of the housing stock to provide decent homes in all areas.
- 82 The Council does not have specific research data that assesses the housing needs of the local BME community, young or older people in the area. This is a gap in the current housing needs information, which is partly being met through the use of Parish surveys but is not comprehensive across the area. This means that there may be some housing need, particularly from some of the harder to reach groups that have not been fully identified.

Enabling new housing

- 83 The Council has met its targets to enable new affordable housing. Performance is continuing to improve and the Council is now making good use of the adopted local plan.
- 84 The Council has supported one of its key priorities, affordable homes, by investing housing capital receipts. In 1999, the Council ring-fenced the capital receipt from the transfer of its housing in order to fund affordable housing projects. Between 1999 and 2004, the Council committed £3.2 million towards affordable homes. This commitment helped secure a further £3.5 million from the Housing Corporation which enabled the Council to provide 169 affordable homes over the period, exceeding its target of 130.
- 85 The Council is linking capital strategy to key priorities. The Council's three-year capital programme was approved in February 2005 and demonstrates a commitment to deliver affordable housing. As the Council has limited resources it prioritises future capital expenditure through a corporate process where Councillors assess and decide which bid to support. This is also accompanied by public consultation. Both exercises have resulted in affordable housing coming out the most important priority for the Council. The Council has allocated to invest an additional £1.35 million for affordable housing over three years. Although the figures are relatively low it does in fact represent 41 per cent of the Council's whole capital budget. This expenditure has been factored into the Council's five-year target for affordable housing.
- 86 The updated housing strategy is predicting that between 2004 and 2009 the Council will deliver another 562 affordable homes. This is supported by the local plan through which the Council is securing new affordable homes at nil public subsidy. Since the adoption of the plan the Council has delivered five family homes and this is forecast to increase to as many as 178 completions in 2006/07. Since the adoption of the local plan in March 2005 there has been three section 106 agreements made which have secured 35 per cent affordable housing, which will produce 182 units at no cost to the Council. The local plan has brought about a significant increase to the number of affordable homes that the Council can deliver.
- 87 Good use is being made of the planning system. The adopted local plan sets a minimum 35 per cent target for affordable homes on new development sites and a full analysis of the likely number of dwellings on each site has been produced. The results have been profiled alongside the Council's own capital resources for affordable homes to provide annual targets for each of the next five years which combine to give the five-year target of 562 new affordable homes. The successes of section 106 agreements since March 2005 indicate that that this is a realistic target.

- 88 The Council is working to encourage development and ensures that planning staff are available to offer support and advice before planning applications are made. The Council has adopted supplementary planning guidance which includes an Affordable Housing Code of Practice. This gives developers clear guidance on the number of new affordable homes required, the mix and type of dwellings required, location on the site and the levels of affordability of housing within the borough.
- 89 The adoption of the local plan has significantly helped the Council to enable more affordable housing through the planning process. During 2004/05, the Council enabled 17 affordable homes to be developed. The first quarter of 2005/06 shows that outline planning permission has been granted for developments that will result in 60 new affordable homes, secured through section 106 agreements. There are a number of other sites where 35 per cent affordable housing has been negotiated. These applications have committee resolutions to grant but are waiting the signing of the section 106 agreement and will produce more than 100 additional affordable homes.
- 90 As a planning authority the Council is working with partners to develop new initiatives and alternative ways to enable affordable housing. The Council is enabling development across the Borough, including rural areas. Effective work with the DNP and parish councils has resulted in the DNP granting planning permission on two exception sites which will produce 100 per cent affordable homes.

Prevention of homelessness

- 91 The Council's approach shows more strengths than weaknesses and it is beginning to reduce the need for affordable housing by preventing homelessness. Since the service has returned as an in-house service, there is an increased emphasis on preventative work and this is supported by an established multi-agency approach.
- 92 The Council has in place a good homelessness strategy and the ODPMs overall assessment stated that it was '*a very well informed strategy, following an excellent review approach, which clearly identified gaps in provision*'. The strategy has a strong focus on prevention which is beginning to have positive outcomes. The number of accepted homeless households in priority need have reduced for the first time since 2000/01 from 118 in 2003/04 to 108 in 2004/05.
- 93 The Council provides a good range of homelessness prevention measures. An analysis for the Devon Strategic Housing Group in October 2005 showed that the Council provided a comparable range of services as other larger authorities in Devon. Preventative services have been targeted at pressure areas for the homelessness service such as young homelessness.

- 94 The quality of housing advice being provided by the Council to potentially homeless people is of a good quality. Shelter recently carried out a range of mystery-shopping exercises and reported that 67 per cent were rated as good or very good, producing a good overall standard. There is also a comprehensive range of informative leaflets published. The housing application form gives options available other than renting from housing associations such as shared ownership and renting from a private landlord. The literature includes the ward location of all housing association properties in the locality. This helps people make more informed choices about their housing options and may reduce the risk that they will have to make a homeless application.
- 95 The Council is effectively using rent deposit schemes to help people at risk of homelessness access accommodation in the private rented sector. The number of deposits paid has risen consistently over the past five years from 13 in 2000/01 to 31 in 2004/05. This is important as the Council's affordability criteria shows that the average private rent compared to affordability levels is high and without assistance it is likely that some people would not be able to afford the pay a deposit as required by many landlords. This would mean that in 2004/05, an extra 31 people would probably have presented themselves as homeless in addition to those accounted for.
- 96 The Council is successfully reaching people who are survivors of domestic violence through the homelessness and advice service. The results of this proactive approach in 2003/04 resulted in a large increase in the number of people presenting as homeless rising from 6 in 2002/03 to 17 in 2003/04, numbers have settled back down in 2004/05 to nine. This is helping some vulnerable people to be put in touch with support and advice to find alternative accommodation where appropriate.
- 97 The Council has put in place an initiative to help address the growing numbers of young people who are presenting themselves as homeless. In June 2004, the Council set up a pilot scheme called 'Homeless at Home' which enables the Council to make payments to family or friends of a young homeless person where bed and breakfast accommodation would be the only alternative. The scheme is funded through ODPM grant. Figures up to March 2005 show that seven households benefited from this alternative and a net saving of £13,005 has been made to the bed and breakfast budget. A common difficulty for parents accommodating adult children is that their children are on low incomes and unable to contribute towards household costs. This creates financial pressures and stress which can result in parental eviction. Schemes that offer financial help in these circumstances reduce the risk of this happening.

- 98 The Council is continuing to try to address the concern of young homelessness. A recent initiative to help reduce the number of young people becoming homeless is a young person's mediation scheme. This is aimed at trying to support families and young people to resolve conflicts before they escalate and the young person has to leave home and become homeless. The scheme was set up in October 2005 and at the time of the inspection had not had any outcomes due to the short time it has been operating. Similar schemes in other councils suggest that this type of intervention is successful and reduces the number of young people having to find alternative accommodation.
- 99 The Council is increasing the amount of accommodation available for homeless people. The Council works with a local housing association to lease private sector homes from private owners on a short-term basis over three years. The scheme provides properties on two to three year leases. Properties are let on assured short-hold tenancies to homeless households nominated by the Council at housing association rent rates with the Council subsidising the difference between this and the market rent. At the end of 2004/05, eight households have been housed on this scheme resulting in a net saving, when compared to bed and breakfast costs, of £11,108. The scheme offers a further alternative to bed and breakfast accommodation and has ensured that the authority has met the government target to not place families in bed and breakfast for more than six weeks.
- 100 The Council has been successful in encouraging people who are under-occupying family accommodation to move to smaller homes. They have achieved this by working in partnership with local housing associations, Age Concern and a local area support service to operate a tenant incentive scheme. This is financially supported by the Council who also provide practical assistance and advice to participants when moving. The scheme has successfully released seven homes in the past year. This is an effective way to ensure that the best use is made of the existing social housing and increases the availability of accommodation for homeless families.
- 101 There is an up-to-date assessment of the causes of homelessness in the area. The Council undertook a detailed survey as part of the development of its homelessness strategy and this information is being kept up-to-date. Current statistics indicate that the two main causes of homelessness are short-term lets coming to an end and young people leaving home. The Council is using this information to target some of its preventative work such as work in local schools and providing housing benefit advice to private landlords through the forum and newsletter. This approach should help to reduce the number of people presenting as homeless.
- 102 The Council is not monitoring and measuring the outcomes of external advice services such as the CAB and its own in-house service. There has not been any assessment of how effective advice work has been to prevent homelessness. There is a lack of activity data on housing advice and this means that the Council is funding and providing services with out knowing how effectively they are in reducing the need for more affordable housing.

- 103 The Council has carried out limited outreach work undertaken by the homeless and advice service to reach the traditionally hard to reach groups such as young people. Although the service holds surgeries in a number of locations throughout the borough, some of which are during the evening, the numbers who attend are low. At the time of the inspection, the Council was setting up a project to visit local schools to discuss housing and homelessness issues as part of the students' curriculum. This will help to inform young people of what their housing options are and enable them to make a better informed choice when leaving their parental home.

Private sector housing

- 104 This is an area of strength and is contributing to the availability of affordable housing in the area. The Council has comprehensive information about the condition of the private housing sector which it is using to target its approach to maximising the housing that is available. It has prioritised work in houses in multiple occupation (HMO) to reduce the risk of people having to leave and become homeless, targeting work that will improve energy efficiency, making homes more cost effective to heat and meet decency standards as well as bring a large number of previously empty homes back in to use. Further work is required on the longer-term strategy to continue to make available affordable housing in the private sector in the future.
- 105 The Council has comprehensive information which it is using to tackle poor conditions in the private housing sector. A survey was carried out by independent consultants during 2003 and the final report received in January 2004. The survey included assessments on the cost of private sector repairs, assessments on the levels of unfitness, a technical assessment on the energy efficiency of dwellings and an assessment of the compliance with the decent homes standard. The survey also looked at the new housing health and safety rating system and applied that standard to the results of the survey. The survey provided has been used as a key piece of data for the housing strategy 2003 to 2006, (updated annually) and the housing renewal strategy last updated in January 2005. Although the private sector housing strategy concentrates on the core functions of housing grants, housing enforcement, houses in multiple occupation and energy efficiency, it links into the community safety and homeless strategy. It also links in with the main environmental health service plan which includes other public protection measures such as water supply, drainage and radiation protection which are important local issues in West Devon and can contribute to the fitness of a property to live in.

- 106** The Council also has a range of contextual data in place to which it is using to assess the stock condition situation effectively. This includes an empty homes database, houses in multiple occupancy database, grant database and council tax records. Energy efficiency information is compiled on a separate software package and this includes data from planning, building control, private companies and other agencies. In addition the Council is accessing key data provided by Devon County Council and the South West Regional Health Authority on income, employment, housing, health, well-being and lifestyle trends. The combinations of these along with the survey have been used to feed in to the private sector renewal strategy 2005 and the housing strategy.
- 107** Work in the private sector is being targeted to increase the compliance with the decent homes standard (DHS). This has been used to influence the Housing Renewal Strategy 2005 and grants are being targeted to the vulnerable residents, particularly where levels of thermal comfort are low. Currently, 88.9 per cent of private homes fail the DHS on thermal comfort. In response, the Council has allocated resources on energy efficiency, particularly the PLEA scheme and the Warm-up Devon scheme, both of which are targeting vulnerable and deprived households.
- 108** The Council is monitoring the position of housing associations operating in the area and their progress on achieving the decent homes standard. They are doing this through regular liaison meetings with housing associations and monitoring through the use of Housing Corporation performance indicators. The average compliance amongst local associations is 98 per cent. This shows that the social housing rented stock in the area complies with the DHS and provide modern accommodation.
- 109** The Council is targeting important priorities, such as the assessment of HMOs in advance of 2006 licensing requirements. All HMOs have been surveyed and risk-assessed, and a database of stock and resident information compiled. The Council worked well with private landlords and were able to get 100 per cent compliance without having to take any enforcement action. This helps to ensure statutory requirements will be met, residents' safety improved and reduces the risk of HMOs being closed and residents being made homeless.
- 110** The Council is engaging effectively with private landlords. There is an established private landlords' forum and this has been recently complemented by a private landlords' newsletter. Private landlords attending a focus group spoke of a very positive and supportive working relationship with the Council, both through the landlords' forum and outside it, and compared it positively with other Councils in the south west. This approach is assisting the Council to enable some people with a housing need to access the private rented sector more easily.

- 111 The number of empty homes in the area is reducing and the Council has up-to-date information that identifies where they are. As discussed earlier in the report, the Council has been partially successful this year working with its partnership in this area. However, the strategic approach in the future is not clear and this is an area which requires further work. Although this is not a major problem in the area, it is important that there is a strategic approach to bring as many homes back in to use as possible as this may reduce the need for more new developments.
- 112 The Council has had some success engaging with local estate agents. A general housing advice leaflet has been published for local agents to give to those looking for accommodation but who they are unable to help. The Council has been less successful persuading local agents to record data which would capture local market activity. This is an area where there is scope to engage further with the private sector.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 113 This is an area of mixed performance. There is an increasing focus on value for money in the service but the Council still has significant gaps in terms of comparative benchmarking information to compare service costs and performance. There have been positive outcomes from an enhanced homelessness and advice service and the Council has been successful in attracting external funding to increase capacity.

How do costs compare?

- 114 The Council is successfully allocating capital to support its key priorities. This has resulted in the Council increasing its investments in service areas that are helping to reduce the need for more affordable housing such as homelessness. Following deterioration in outcomes and criticism during the CPA inspection the Council agreed an enhanced specification and funding for the service which following a competitive tendering process the service has come back in-house. Benchmarking with other councils was undertaken to compare costs for similar services. The external provider was shown to be more expensive and the in-house team less costly, although the service was still more expensive than others. Higher spending in this area has resulted in an improvement in outcomes.
- 115 Where the Council has increased funding outcomes have improved. The homelessness and advice service is now a lot more focused on early prevention and can point to a number of cases where dispute resolution has prevented homelessness. For each case of prevention, there are average savings of £647 (based on 2004/05 figures) as well as significant savings arising from the fact that a complex investigation is not required. The service has launched successful schemes which have reduced the cost of bed and breakfast expenditure by finding alternatives. Not only have significant savings been found but many fewer households are being placed in emergency accommodation which is often more expensive.

- 116** The Council has targeted resources in the private sector on work in HMOs. Over a £0.5 million has been spent on improving HMOs, with over £4 of private money being levered in for every £1 spent by the Council. The Council's approach is to assist HMOs to meet standards rather than focusing on enforcement which might result in HMOs being closed and vulnerable people being made homeless. All grant work is competitively tendered and an internal shadow costing is prepared to guard against uncompetitive high tenders. The approach adopted by the Council encourages communication between the private sector landlords and the Council. It also enhances a good relationship for future inspections by environmental health officers and encourages landlords to come forward and ask for advice in improving HMO standards and ensuring the safety of the occupants.
- 117** The cost comparison made as part of the re-tendering of the homelessness service show that the Council is expensive compared to other providers in their family group but less expensive than the external tender.
- 118** At a corporate level the Council compares performance against its CIPFA nearest neighbours group as well as its own family group which includes the other 11 most sparsely populated Councils in England. Total expenditure is slightly higher than the average for the Nearest Neighbours and family group. However, a regression analysis showing the relationship between expenditure and population reveals that there is a fixed cost element of council expenditure and taking this into account, expenditure is average when compared to similar sparsely populated authorities. The two above average highest spend areas for the Council are housing and waste management, both of which are key corporate priorities.
- 119** The Council has not reviewed the procurement of training at either departmental or corporate levels. Consequently it is not evaluating whether the way the training budget is being spent produces value for money. It has recently introduced an online evaluation form which is beginning to produce some assessment of whether the courses have delivered the required outcomes.
- 120** The Council has very limited information which it can use to determine the costs of services and use data to compare performance on affordable housing. It has recently made a formal evaluation in preparation for a value for money inspection but this data does not form part of the routine management information. There have been one off examples such as the re-tendering of the homelessness and advice service where comparisons were made but no established ongoing effective benchmarking takes place. The Council is currently working on the production of a value for money strategy which will be produced in November 2005. The lack of current comprehensive benchmarking data means that the council does not know whether its affordable housing services are expensive compared to other Councils, which is a key element in demonstrating value for money.

How is value for money managed?

- 121 The Council has adopted a corporate procurement strategy which has been applied to the procurement of some services, such as homelessness and advice.
- 122 The Council has undertaken some joint procurement with other councils. The purchase of the ICT required to deliver a CBL is being undertaken on a consortium basis and work to update housing need information, particularly around gypsy and travellers housing needs is being commissioned with neighbouring district councils.
- 123 The Council is successfully securing additional funding from external sources and responding to opportunities to increase capacity. A strong performing planning service has brought in planning delivery grant of approximately a million pounds, partly used to supplement affordable housing services. Capital receipts from the LSVT have been recycled back in to the development of new homes and ODPM homelessness grant has been utilised on a range of preventative projects discussed earlier in the report. The Council responded positively and swiftly to the unexpected withdrawal of Local Authority Social Housing Grant (LASHG) in February 2003, going debt-free, which effectively secured additional external funding as well as releasing reserved capital receipts which have been invested in additional affordable housing, a key corporate priority.
- 124 There is evidence of a spend to save approach, such as the Homeless at Home scheme. The Council makes payments, calculated per night, to host families who are able and willing to provide accommodation for accepted homeless households, on a temporary basis as an alternative to bed and breakfast. The scheme provides value for money and has helped a number of households, since its inception in April 2004. Fourteen families have been housed at a cost of £12,950 against an estimated bed and breakfast cost of £30,425. The service maintains a local indicator which measures on a quarterly basis the saving (compared with B&B) which accrues from 'Homeless at Home' stays.
- 125 The payment of landlord deposits enables household's access temporary accommodation without having to find the often substantial upfront deposit. In 2004/05, the 31 cases where homelessness was prevented would have ended up being placed in emergency accommodation which would have cost the service an additional £20,057. The Authority recovers deposits at the end of tenancies and although there is a small cost in terms of running the scheme this is a cost effective way to help maximise the provision of affordable homes.

- 126** The Council is benefiting from its private sector leasing scheme, established in April 2004. The properties are let on an assured short-hold tenancy, to homeless households, nominated by the Council. Because of the market rent levels, the Council subsidises the rents and the tenants are charged the equivalent of an affordable rent. In 2004/05, the scheme is estimated to have housed eight homeless households which, if housed in traditional emergency accommodation, would have cost an additional £11,108. Many of the households in PSL are in receipt of some housing benefit and net figures have been used to estimate the overall saving to the Council, as it is likely that had the same households been placed in bed and breakfast over this period the housing department would have recouped 62 per cent of costs from housing benefit.
- 127** The Council's policy for disabled facilities aims to maximise the re-use of disabled facilities and currently the recycling of facilities provides a 50 per cent saving on the cost of buying new equipment.
- 128** The Council has been open to external challenge on the quality of the service provided. Areas such as the Shelter review of the homelessness and advice service and an inter-authority auditing carried out by the environmental health department are two examples where services have been reviewed by external teams producing an improvement action plan which has been implemented.
- 129** The Council is not making full use of modern procurement methods with its partners. The grant improvement work undertaken by the Home Improvement agency is undertaken through a traditional tender route. A modern partnership with local contractors or use of a schedule of rates through approved contractors could result in savings both in terms of time and cost. Housing associations are not being encouraged to develop joint procurement in the region. The development of new affordable homes with housing associations and developers is on a tender basis and there have not been any projects that have delivered new homes modelled on a modern partnership model.

Summary

- 130** We have assessed the Council's approach to the provision of affordable housing a good two star service. There are a number of positive aspects to the Council's performance but there are some areas for improvement.
- 131** The Council has a strong strategic approach to the delivery of affordable housing based on wide spread consultation and places affordable housing as a key priority, matching this with capital and revenue allocations. This is enhanced by strong partnership arrangements which are increasing capacity within the Council.
- 132** Work in the private housing sector has been focused on areas that will have an impact and are helping to improve the quality of the housing stock, particularly around thermal comfort and HMOs.
- 133** The Council has successfully developed in partnership a new supported housing provision and has targeted new bids around the provision of extra care housing which is a current gap in provision.

36 Affordable Housing | How good is the service?

- 134** There has been an improvement in the homelessness and advice service with a new focus on prevention which has resulted in positive outcomes. The local plan is now fully adopted and this is proving to be an effective tool through which the Council has increased the amount of affordable housing being developed, including some at no cost to public funds.
- 135** There are some weaknesses where the service needs to improve. Progress on diversity has been slow and the service lacks focus in this area. There has not been a structured evaluation of partnerships and the evaluation of value for money in the service is underdeveloped.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 136** The Council has a strong record of delivering improvements to the service which are having a positive impact on improving the supply and condition of housing to meet needs. There has been continued improvement in most performance indicators but there is still slow progress on improving the level of unfit homes and progressing the Council's equality and diversity agenda.
- 137** Since transferring housing stock in 1999, the Council has made considerable tangible improvements in its priority areas with respect to its strategic approach to balancing the local housing market. These include the following.
- Being the first authority in Devon and the second in the south west region to have a 'fit for purpose' housing strategy, this forms the basis of the Council's strategic approach to the provision of affordable housing.
 - The strategy has been supported by corporate planning processes which have provided additional resources to meet action plans and effective performance monitoring to ensure that those action plans are being delivered.
 - The local plan has been through a public inquiry and been fully adopted in May 2005.
- 138** The improvements made to the service have resulted in real benefits to service users both in terms of new services offered and significant improvements to the availability of affordable housing options available. These include the following.
- The number of affordable homes provided since stock transfer and the adoption of a local plan which have already assisted the Council in negotiating higher levels of affordable housing on new developments and those in the planning pipe line. In 2004/05 the Council met its target to deliver 44 new affordable homes (35 were occupied at year end, a further 12 were close to completion and were occupied during the summer of 2005) and overall shows an improving trend in outcomes.
 - An 8 per cent reduction in homeless households in 2004/05, reversing a trend which has seen a 37 per cent increase between 2000/01 and 2003/04. This decrease is due in part to homelessness prevention work including landlord deposit and mediation services.
 - The average length of stay of homeless families in bed and breakfast reduced from 52 days in 2002/03 to 25 days in 2004/05.
 - No families have been placed in bed and breakfast for more than six weeks since March 2004.
 - Seven houses have become available for homeless families through the tenants' incentive scheme.

- Eight homeless households have been provided with good quality longer-term privately leased accommodation, avoiding the need for bed and breakfast.
- The time taken to deal with both major and minor planning application has improved over the past three years to match that of the best 25 per cent of district councils in England.

- 139** The Council has achieved continued improvements in some key performance indicators relevant to the supply of affordable housing. Performance in 2004/05 resulted in improvement in a number of homelessness indicators, and private sector housing indicators. These include the time a homeless persons spends in a temporary hostel, the percentage of people who re-present as homeless and the number of private sector homes empty more than six months and returned for people to live in, all showed continuous improvement which placed the Council as one of the best performing councils. Other areas showed improvement such as the amount of time homeless people spent in bed and breakfast which resulted in average levels of performance. These improvements all have a positive impact on the Council's ability to make best use of the supply of housing in the area.
- 140** The Council improved its performance in 2004/05 in terms of the delivery of new affordable homes. Performance in 2003/04 placed the Council in the average range of performance compared to other councils at 1.8 per cent of affordable housing completed or acquired per 1,000 dwellings. This is an improvement on 2002/03 when the Council achieved 1.4 per cent which also was the equivalent to average performance when compared against other councils. This was before the local plan was adopted and planning approvals indicate that this figure will increase significantly in 2005/06.
- 141** The Council has also improved performance corporately in key measures of customer satisfaction across all services and complaints handling. In both instances the Council is now placed in the top 25 per cent performing of district councils and shows strong customer focus and services that are meeting local priorities.
- 142** The Council has addressed all of the weaknesses identified in the CPA inspection undertaken in 2003. These included areas that have an impact on affordable housing, such as a lack of focus on homelessness prevention, outstanding repairs to the private sector housing, staffing capacity and internal working relationships and certainty around financial commitments to key priorities. These improvements are all helping to improve the Council's approach to balancing the local housing market.
- 143** The Council has responded well to two external reviews of the homelessness service by Shelter. The most recent study, a follow up report to the 2003 review, says that there is considerable improvement, particularly in customer care and in the availability of detailed advice, on a range of subjects that was likely to be effective.

- 144** The Council is beginning to improve the way that it measures value for money across the service. There has been assessment and comparisons made against the homelessness and advice service, and this information has been as part of the evaluation exercise when the service was re-tendered. Costs of initiatives such as the deposit scheme and tenants' incentive scheme are all costed and the Council is able to show how schemes are helping to reduce the cost of bed and breakfast accommodation. However, there are gaps in cost information held for some areas, such as supply of new affordable homes and work in the private housing sector. Generally, there is a lack of comparisons being made with other councils providing similar affordable housing services. This means that although the Council knows its own costs and how effective the service is, it can not know how successful these services are in terms of value for money compared to other councils.
- 145** The Council has not improved the number of domestic violence places that it provides or supports. Performance currently places the Council amongst the worst performing councils for the past three years in terms of providing or supporting accommodation for this vulnerable group of people. However, the Council does support an outreach project which provides a comprehensive service to survivors of domestic violence. The Council with its partners have taken this approach as it provides flexibility, particularly in a rural area such as West Devon.
- 146** There has been very slow progress progressing the Council's diversity agenda and this is also a weakness at service level. Race equality impact assessments have very recently been completed and the resulting action plans have not yet been implemented. At a corporate level the action plan to achieve level 2 of the equalities standard has slipped and the target is now 2006.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 147** There are both strengths and weaknesses in this area. The Council has clear strategic priorities in place that are supported by action plans, which are regularly reported to the senior management team and councillors. The service has been open to external challenge and the Council has a culture of learning from best practice. Priorities are supported by financial commitment which links through to corporate objectives. However, there is lack of leadership to shape services that address the equalities and diversity agenda, the application of performance appraisals is not consistent and there is irregular formal record keeping such as meetings with external partners and one to one staff reviews.
- 148** The housing strategy sets out clear priorities which are supported by targets and action plans that are of a good quality. The aims and targets in the plans, if delivered, will bring about improvement and help the Council to balance its local housing market. There are both short-term, quick wins and longer-term targets are included in the annual plans. For example, the five-year target to deliver 562 affordable homes by 2009 is broken down into annual targets based upon capital commitments and an assessment of when major new developments are due to come online.

- 149 The plans identify key staff responsible for delivery and the required action to deliver each priority. These targets form part of appraisals and regular meetings take place between managers and staff to monitor progress towards meeting individual targets. Successful outcomes from the plans have and should in the future produce improvements in the delivery of affordable housing.
- 150 Key strategy documents are kept up to date. Housing strategy update documents have been published in the two subsequent years following the 'fit for purpose strategy'. These updates provide a full progress report with respect to the housing strategy targets as well as updated action plans. This is a helpful way for the local community and stakeholders to be kept informed about what the service is trying to achieve and how successful it has been in delivering its key objectives for the year.
- 151 Governance arrangements within the Council are bringing together all housing services. In 2002, a reorganisation of council committees resulted in the creation of the Future Planning and Housing Committee. This committee considers all aspects of the housing strategy and receives a quarterly performance monitoring report. A separate 'exception based' report on all Council services is considered by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee which investigates areas of performance which are below expectation.
- 152 The Council has a strong performance management framework in place. Councillors are engaged in the process and committee chairs sign annual performance contracts and are held responsible for delivery against their service plan targets in the same way as officers. This is helping to ensure that there is a strong focus on outcomes and improvement.
- 153 The Council has a culture of learning from others. Staff and councillors retain close contact with a range of organisations. In particular, officers from the service and a councillor have visited Wychavon District Council to learn from an excellent council delivering affordable housing. One of the outcomes to this visit is that the service is introducing a text messaging service for homeless applicants.
- 154 The Council has developed improvements based on external challenge of the service. It has used Shelter to carry out two reviews of its homeless and housing advice service to inform its development and to measure subsequent progress as a result of changes. This has shown demonstrable improvements to the customer. The service is working towards achievement of Community Legal Service Quality Mark in 2006.
- 155 The Council has used detailed survey information and best practice from other authorities to plan the development and staffing of its new customer services teams. Staffing levels will be matched to known peaks and troughs, and design for light, space and disability issues will match good practice seen elsewhere. Serious consideration has been given to how more complex advice on areas such as planning and homelessness, can be delivered whilst meeting the target to deliver 60 to 70 per cent of services at first point of contact.

- 156** The Council undertakes benchmarking against 11 other district councils. In addition as part of service reviews, performance is also reported and compared against Devon districts in the performance plan, in addition to comparing against the best performers nationally. The results and implications of benchmarking are discussed at forums such as the Devon Accounting Group. However, in terms of outcomes for affordable housing, there has been very little impact except for the comparisons that were made during the tendering of the homelessness and advice service.
- 157** The Council has a clear process through which it allocates resources and funding to support the delivery of its key priorities. The corporate plan 2005/06 and improvement plan provides an overview of the Council's priorities, objectives, targets and performance. Key corporate plan targets and indicators are translated into committee performance contracts which are monitored by the Council's four committees on a quarterly basis. This system is underpinned by comprehensive service plans which mean that targets can be traced through service plans to departmental and individual responsibility. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee monitor overall performance and investigate where performance is below expectation.
- 158** There is weak leadership in tailoring services to address diversity issues. Some partners expressed concern that the Council has failed to act as a strong community leader and is not driving the diversity and equalities agenda forward. Officers acknowledged that it was 'difficult' and a 'hard slog' to tackle politically, despite having a strong councillor 'champion'. This was further supported by the lack of clarity from key partners in understanding what the Council's approach to diversity is. The Council has met with its partner the Devon Race Equality Council (after the inspection) to strengthen the community development work that is planned through the LSP in West Devon (DREC). Early proposals are to bring forward new proposals for the deployment of a Community Development Worker resource in West Devon and the intention to set up a mechanism for closer ongoing liaison and joint working with DREC on this project. More significantly the partnership has agreed to provide the LSP members with some quick win suggestions in order to kick start the process. It is important that the Council is able to deliver some improvements in this area as without strong community leadership it will be difficult for the service to make progress and be able to demonstrate that it providing a service that is tailored to and reaching all parts of the district.
- 159** The quality of completed performance appraisals is mixed. The staff we met generally had up-to-date, detailed and frank personal appraisals identifying strengths, weaknesses and targets linked to the corporate competency framework, including professional development. These referred in general terms to the most important duties of their posts which do link to corporate objectives. However, not all actions and targets are SMART and one of the six appraisals reviewed was not thorough and was completed poorly. It is important to have a strong appraisal process in place as this helps to motivate staff and deliver corporate targets.

- 160 Not all performance management arrangements support continuous improvement. Both staff (one-to-ones) and housing association partners (liaison meetings) said that meetings are not always minuted. This could lead to confusion about the actions which participants are required to take and thus impact on delivery of targets. Frontline staff told us that they receive quarterly performance monitoring information and performance management is part of supervision sessions. These information supervision sessions are held monthly and in some cases more frequently, but they are not formally recorded as the annual appraisals are. The lack of formality in recording a variety of meeting to discuss progress could result in lack of clarity and focus for future improvement.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 161 There are more strengths than weaknesses in this area. The Council has determined that affordable housing is a key priority and capacity has been adapted to support this. There are clear lines of political accountability and experienced and knowledgeable senior councillors. Financial capacity is closely aligned to key priorities and there is a strong focus on partnership working to increase the capacity of the Council generally. The Council does not have an effective human resources framework in place and no training plan for councillors.
- 162 There is strong political support for the Council's affordable housing ambitions. This corporate aim has benefited from unanimous support from councillors in successive annual corporate priority reviews. This, in turn, has resulted in increase funding for service areas that are making a positive contribution to the delivery of affordable housing. The resulting improved performance has attracted additional external investment in the service.
- 163 The Council is investing in staff training. Staff demonstrated understanding of how their service role contributed to affordable housing. Professional development is a key part to the appraisal process and there is a corporate and service training plan in place. This can be seen as an investment in the future and a way that the Council can encourage staff to remain in their employment.
- 164 Capacity is increasing through partnership working. The Council understands that if it is to deliver improved services it must ensure that capacity is kept high. This has been achieved through strong partnership working both at a service and corporate level. There are a number of joint projects where the Council is working across district boundaries. The Council works closely with Teignbridge, Mid Devon and South Hams councils to consider joint working and shared services. Building Control operates as a shared service partnership and negotiations are advanced to transfer the Council's payroll contract to South Hams District Council. It is anticipated that this will both reduce costs and improve the quality of the service. Additionally, the four councils have used capacity building monies to pilot a single service for undertaking consultation. Some established partnerships are already producing benefits for affordable housing such as the empty homes work.

- 165** Partnerships address national priorities and service weakness. The Council is currently designing, with other Devon authorities, a choice-based lettings scheme for 2006 which will deliver not just improved customer choice, but also systematically identify people's housing support needs and address many current housing ICT weaknesses. Homeless cases will continue to receive priority through the proposed 'banding' scheme. The Council is also working with local councils including Plymouth City Council to deliver and update its housing need and market analysis of the area. This is expected to be delivered May 2005.
- 166** The Council is working in partnership to improve the data it holds on private sector homes. This is being delivered through a partnership of councils in Devon and Cornwall looking to share information and update the stock condition survey on a sub-regional basis. This will be done by the letting of a long-term contract across the two counties to one firm of consultants. This should produce benefits in terms of cost and also provide comparative data across counties, Councils and wards.
- 167** There are a number of current corporate partnership projects such as the partnership arrangement with neighbouring district councils to procure a human resources ICT package. When operational this will provide ICT capacities to complete functions that are currently have to be manually completed. All the chief executives have signed up to the partnership and it is expected to deliver in early 2006/07. This will have a positive impact on the human resources capacity within the Council.
- 168** Financial planning is closely linked to agreed corporate objectives. The Council has a five year medium-term financial strategy (MTFS) covering the period 2006/07 to 2011/12 and a three-year capital programme from 2005/06 to 2007/08. The MTFS sets out how the Council structures and manages its finances, over a five-year period, to ensure that this fits with and supports the direction of the Council's objectives. Financial pressures and capital bids have been identified with links to corporate objectives and service plans. Both the planning and homelessness services have been allocated additional resources through this process and have received additional budget provision which has resulted in improved performance.
- 169** There are regular budget monitoring arrangements in place. Quarterly reports are produced for revenue and capital budgets and profiling is completed for revenue budgets. Staff are skilled in budget management. All budget holders have access to, and have been trained in using, the financial system. Additional support is available through the finance 'buddy' system which provides a named finance contact for budget holders, with meetings taking place on a quarterly basis. This assists in monitoring and also allows focus on wider financial issues. This means that there is tight financial control and that councillors are kept regular informed.
- 170** The Council is undertaking a number of projects to increase its ICT capacity and improve the service to customers. A key stage is the modernisation of its main Tavistock offices and the relocation of all back office staff to these new offices, while developing a customer services centre in its second largest town, Okehampton. The project is revenue neutral but it is estimated that it will produce an improved customer focus, particularly in terms of customer access.

- 171 There is a corporate focus on value for money. The Council is currently working on the production of a value for money strategy which will be produced in November 2005. The strategy is aimed at increasing the level of awareness on value for money issues and identifies further areas where improvements can be made. The forward look annual efficiency statement shows seven key areas where the Council will increase its efficiency. More efficient working through better ICT is a key area of focus and additional targets based on improving processes. These include areas that will contribute to improvements in affordable housing delivery such as:
- improving the planning service for applicants and other stakeholders by implementing the 'planning portal' so that all activity can be accessed and processed online;
 - fully implementing a document management system; and
 - implementing a new revenues and benefits system which is forecast to modernise the system and create a more efficient and effective service for customers and stakeholders who await payment of rent, such as private landlords.
- 172 The Council has adopted a revised corporate procurement strategy and is using this to jointly procure a choice-based letting (CBL) system on a sub-regional basis. This will bring benefits for housing applicants while still giving homeless applicants a high priority. The new ICT system that will support CBL will have the additional capacity to collate up-to-date housing needs information across the sub-region. This approach increases the Council's capacity to deliver this project and provides an effective tool to capture housing needs information for applicants on the housing register and those people using the homelessness route, on a wider sub-regional level.
- 173 Councillors and senior managers are clear about their strategic and operational roles. There is a separation between housing enabling, private sector housing functions, homelessness and housing advice elements of the service, on both a political and officer level. Each service stream has clear responsibilities and accountabilities in place. Separating the functions allows staff and councillors to focus on different targets and actions without being distracted by other issues. This is especially important for the housing advice team who, prior to the re-tendering exercise, were frequently called away to support other housing functions. Each area has specific work plans which are closely linked to key strategies and related committees. In turn, these are linked to the over arching housing strategy which ensures that each service also works holistically to deliver the corporate aim of delivering affordable housing.
- 174 The Council is open to new ideas. Housing staff are exploring some innovative routes to increase the supply of new affordable housing. These include different shared equity models and ways to encourage landowners to come forward and develop their land for affordable housing. These attempts have not yet produced outcomes but the council's activity in this area shows support to maximise all opportunities.

- 175** The Council has limited human resources capacity. The Council has a small workforce and when a post becomes vacant or a person is on long term leave it has a big impact. The Council has less than one full time personnel staff and is currently working to develop a partnership with a neighbouring council to buy in some additional human resources support. This if successful should help to address some of the capacity issues in this area. Currently, workforce planning has not been completed which means that the Council does not know what its longer-term staffing requirements are likely to be.
- 176** There has been no training programme in place to increase the capacity of councillors. There have been delays in the distribution of funding from the Devon improvement programme, which has resulted in the Council only agreeing a formal training programme in January 2006. The service has arranged a number of briefing sessions on key areas such as housing enabling and homelessness. However there are also serious gaps in training, such as equalities and diversity. There are concerns that time is passing and only if councillors are re-elected will the full benefits of the training programme be realised.

Summary

- 177** We have concluded that the prospects for improvement in the service are promising.
- 178** There is a positive track record in delivering improvements to the service that are having a positive impact on the delivery of affordable homes. Key strategies are in place and there are clear action plans that if delivered will help to maximise the available affordable homes for local people. There is an established performance monitoring system that regularly reports on performance and clear political accountability. Affordable housing is a key corporate priority and this is supported both politically and through the Council's medium-term financial planning. At a corporate level the Council is beginning to focus on value for money issues and these will result in improvements for the service, particularly around customer services.
- 179** However there are areas for improvement. Not all key performance indicators have shown consistent improvement and there has been slow progress in progressing the improvements that will contribute to equalities and diversity issues in the local community. Some performance management arrangements could be strengthened and the benefits of a training programme for councillors have not yet been delivered.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance Indicator	West Devon 2003/04	Best 25 per cent 2003/04	West Devon 2004/05 (unaudited)	Best 25 per cent 2004/05 (unaudited)
BVPI 62, percentage of unfit dwellings made fit or demolished	2.18	4.32	1.61	4.75
BVPI 64, Number of vacant dwellings returned to use	0	Not available	1.00	55.75
BVPI 183a Households in priority need in B&B	5.30	1.21	4	1

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;
 - the adopted local plan (March 2005);
 - Affordable Housing Code of Practice;
 - the housing strategy 2005/06 (update);
 - community plan;
 - private sector housing renewal strategy;
 - homelessness strategy; and
 - a range of performance reports.

Appendix 3 – Positive practice

*'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)*

Empty homes

- 2 Partnership working to bring back empty homes that have been blighted by problems caused by local mining industries.