

Affordable Housing

Tewkesbury Borough Council

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Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

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

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

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

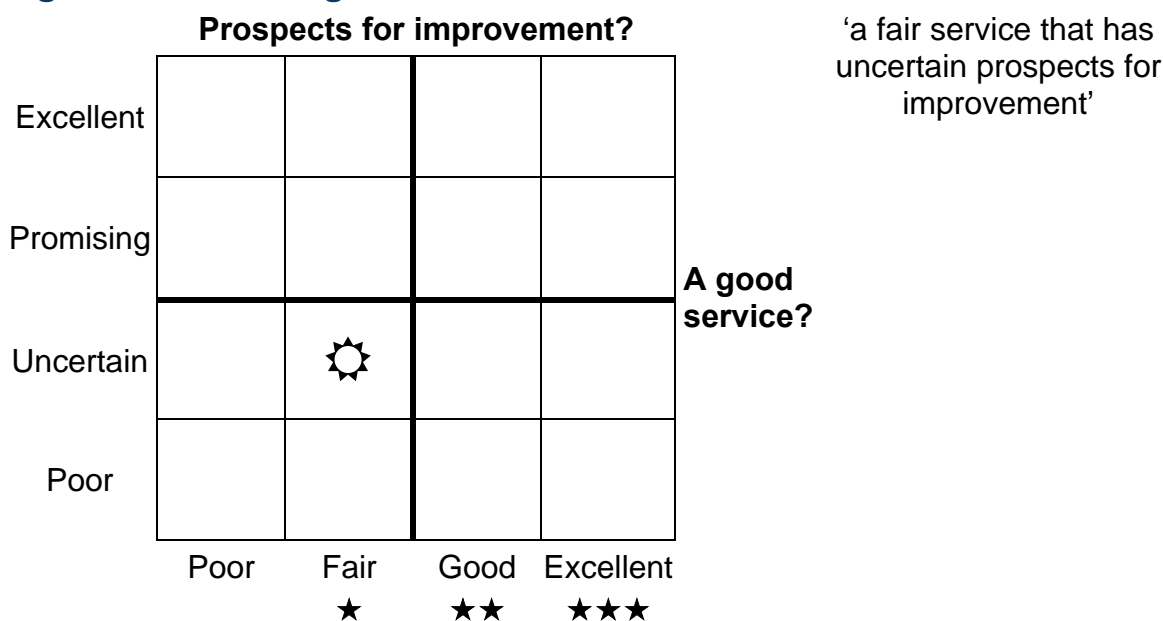
Summary

- 1 Tewkesbury borough covers 160 square miles and is one of six district councils in Gloucestershire. It is a predominantly rural area, comprising part of the Severn Valley and the western fringes of the Cotswolds.
- 2 The population of the borough is 78,200 people and this is anticipated to grow considerably by about 24,000 people over the next 15 years. A small black and minority ethnic (BME) population exists at 3.3 per cent (describing themselves in the Census as not white British) and gypsies and travellers represent a substantial minority population.
- 3 The area is generally prosperous with low unemployment and low levels of deprivation. Average house prices are high and have increased by over 50 per cent since 2000. While average gross weekly wages at £343 are above the regional average, access to home ownership is difficult.
- 4 The Council has no overall political control and the administration is shared between the political groups. It has 290 full-time equivalent staff and has a net revenue budget of £6.8 million in 2005/06 and substantial capital reserves of approximately £30 million following the sale of the Council's housing stock in 1998.
- 5 In 2004, a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) was carried out by the Audit Commission and this rated the Council as fair. A balancing housing markets diagnostic was completed at the same time and found a high need for service improvement. In addition, an inspection of the housing service was completed in 2002 and reported in January 2003. This scored the services as fair, one star with promising prospects for improvement.
- 6 The Council provides all elements of the housing services under inspection. This includes management of the housing register, homelessness, housing advice, private sector housing, enabling new affordable homes and preparation of the housing strategy.

Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed Tewkesbury Borough Council as providing a ‘fair’, one-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 8 The Service is judged as fair because of the following.
- There is a good understanding of housing need, diversity and special needs within the borough to help plan services.
 - Strong approach to the delivery of mainstream new affordable housing through the draft local plan and more effective corporate working.
 - Effective partnerships exist for the provision of affordable housing through the Gloucester Housing Market Partnership, the Cheltenham and Tewkesbury Partnership and the Rural Housing Market Partnership.
 - Good quality support for residents needing disabled facilities adaptations working with the Anchor Home Improvement Agency including the provision of a handyperson.
 - An increased emphasis on the prevention of homelessness has started to help more people remain in their homes.

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.

- 9 However, there are some areas for improvement.
- The availability of services is not well promoted, they are not always customer-focused and unless people know how to access services they cannot get assistance.
 - The broad high level understanding of the housing market is not supplemented by a good understanding of private sector housing and local diverse needs to ensure services are targeted to best effect.
 - A weak strategic approach to the provision of housing services and maximising the opportunity of private sector housing to help provide more housing and reduce the use of bed and breakfast hotels for homeless people.
 - Little tailoring of services to meet the diverse needs of the community, particularly for older and younger people and little use of the affordable housing development programme or private sector services to meet their needs.
 - The Council cannot demonstrate that services represent value for money and takes little action to ensure savings or greater efficiency.
- 10 The service is judged to have uncertain prospects for improvement because of the following.
- While aspirations are clear, what the Council will do to meet its aim of a 'better balance in the housing market' is unclear and its plans are too vague and too internally-focused to deliver improvements that residents would notice.
 - The Council does not know if it has the financial or staff capacity to deliver its future plans and has not consistently matched resources to what it has prioritised.
 - Performance management arrangements are not fully effective.
 - Ensuring services are value for money is not actively managed and does not feature in the Council's future plans.
 - Leadership in driving forward improvements is mixed with a strong focus on new affordable housing and less on delivering improvements in other areas, such as private sector housing.
 - Although this is contrasted by the achievement of improvement in some of the housing services areas, notably homelessness, disabled facilities grants and the ability to deliver affordable housing in the future.

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 Improve access to services and standards of customer care by:

- developing consultation and feedback mechanisms for service users so that the Council can ensure services are relevant and tailored to their needs;*
- updating the website and ensuring a wide range of information about all elements of the service is available; and*
- preparing a comprehensive range of information leaflets and publicity material to cover all aspects of the service and making these widely available across the borough in places where service users are most likely to find them.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased customer satisfaction;
- opportunity for all residents to access support and advice; and
- delivery of an equitable service to a diverse community.

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

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

R2 Improve the effectiveness of service delivery by:

- *gathering robust information about the condition of private sector housing to include the extent of compliance with the decent homes standard (DHS) – by May 2007;*
- *analysis of other existing data sources to target services and further research by client group and/or local area (parish) to ensure proactive targeting of services to those in greatest need – by January 2007; and*
- *revising the existing housing strategies to make clear the approach the Council intends to take to deal with diverse housing needs, make better use of the private sector in tackling housing need and in helping people remain in their homes - by January 2007.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased support to, and improved housing conditions for, vulnerable residents allowing them to maintain their independence;
- better use of limited staff and financial resources through more effective targeting; and
- long-term improvement in the condition and use of housing in the borough.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs.

Recommendation

R3 Improve the effectiveness of the prevention of homelessness by:

- *assessing the reasons for homelessness and through working with clients to review the range of, and resources for, prevention work; and*
- *developing a robust quality assurance system to ensure that housing advice meets the standard required by residents.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased support for residents threatened with being made homeless; and
- improved and consistent quality of service.

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

Recommendation

R4 Strengthen the ability of the service to deliver improvements in the future by:

- developing a robust strategy to ensure the value for money of housing services, this should include an assessment of unit costs of elements of the service including housing market partnerships, how they compare and an exploration of the opportunities for efficiency savings;*
- developing a medium-term financial strategy which makes clear how savings are to be achieved and links the projected resources to the council's aims and future plans; and*
- developing an effective training programme for councillors and managers to enhance leadership and performance management skills.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improve value for money;
- a greater range of services provided and to better quality; and
- more effective leadership to drive forward ambitions.

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

Recommendation

R5 Strengthen the approach to service planning and improvement by:

- *ensuring all strategies and plans are clearly informed by consultation with services users and other stakeholders;*
- *ensuring that all strategies and plans address equality and diversity issues and reflect the needs of vulnerable people;*
- *ensuring that the actions contained with strategies and plans are outcome-focused, relate to customers and directly contribute to the achievement of aims and objectives. All actions should have a clear indication of scale of the outcome to be achieved; and*
- *ensuring effective management of performance by councillors and managers through regular monitoring of progress with plans and by active management of a comprehensive suite of performance measures which focus on outcomes.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improve accountability for service delivery;
- improved management of the service and the ability to redirect resources to best effect; and
- increased ability to deliver improvements of importance to all residents.

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

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

Dates of inspection: 16 to 20 January 2006

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Report

Context

The locality

- 13 Tewkesbury borough covers 160 square miles and is one of six district councils in Gloucestershire. It is a predominantly rural area, comprising part of the Severn Valley and the western fringes of the Cotswolds. Tewkesbury is the principal town with a population of 10,000 people, which dates back to medieval times and is situated at the meeting of the rivers Avon and Severn. While much of the population live in the more rural parts of the borough, more than 30,000 people live in the growing communities on the fringes of Cheltenham and Gloucester.
- 14 The population of the borough is 78,200 people and this is anticipated to grow considerably by about 24,000 people over the next 15 years. The growth is expected in the number of older people, which already account for almost a quarter of the population, and in the number of children - around 37 per cent increase. A small black and minority ethnic (BME) population exists at 3.3 per cent (describing themselves in the Census as not white British) and gypsies and travellers represent a substantial minority population.
- 15 The area is generally prosperous with low unemployment and low levels of deprivation. Overall, the borough is ranked 296 out of 354 in the index of deprivation (with one being the highest). Employment in the borough is concentrated in public administration, banking, distribution and manufacturing (which is above regional and national levels) and around 50 per cent of residents work outside of the borough.
- 16 Average house prices are high and have increased by over 50 per cent since 2000. While average gross weekly wages at £343 are above the regional average, access to home ownership is difficult. Residents will need access to funds equivalent to 6.8 times average wages to afford an average priced home.

The Council

- 17 The Council has no overall political control and the administration is shared between the political groups. Of the 38 councillors, 18 are Conservatives, 9 Liberal Democrats, 3 Labour and 8 Independents in three separate groupings. The Council operates a 'fourth option'¹ democratic structure with three policy committees, a scrutiny committee and four regulatory committees.

¹ A model of democratic control - based on a committee system rather than an executive cabinet - and permitted only as a 'fourth option' in smaller councils with a population less than 85,000.

- 18 The Council has 290 full-time equivalent staff. It is organised into four directorates comprising corporate services, community services (including housing and public space issues), planning and development and resources. The Council has a net revenue budget of £6.8 million in 2005/06 and substantial capital reserves of approximately £30 million following the sale of the Council's housing stock in 1998. The interest of some £1.5 million is used to reduce net expenditure and, consequently, council tax is about half the average for the other Gloucestershire districts.
- 19 In 2004, a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) was carried out by the Audit Commission and this rated the Council as fair. A balancing housing markets diagnostic was completed at the same time and found a high need for service improvement. In addition, an inspection of the housing service was completed in 2002 and reported in January 2003. This scored the services as fair, one star with promising prospects for improvement.

The service

- 20 The Council provides all elements of the housing services under inspection. This includes management of the housing register, homelessness, housing advice, private sector housing, enabling new affordable homes and preparation of the housing strategy. Prior to 2004, homelessness, advice and the housing register were provided by external agents. These were re-tendered and brought back in-house under contract. All services are provided as part of one team within the community services directorate.
- 21 The inspection covered a broad range of services which contribute to the delivery of affordable housing. It looked at how the Council works in partnership with others to deliver affordable housing and how well it understands the housing market. The inspection assessed how well the Council enables the provision of all types of affordable housing from new homes to the reoccupation of previously empty housing. The inspection also focused on how well the Council makes best use of the existing housing stock to help residents remain in their homes or to make more of it available to those people in the greatest housing need.
- 22 A single key line of enquiry (KLOE) that covers all aspects of the provision of affordable housing is presently out for consultation. In undertaking this inspection, the team have drawn on the relevant sections of the KLOEs for strategy and enabling, homelessness and private sector housing. Elements of the Council's planning service were also included within the scope of the inspection.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 23 The Council's plan for the period 2004 to 2008 establishes its role for the future as the delivery of services, planning for the community's needs and providing support for others to contribute to meeting those needs and aspirations. The Council states that it is committed to becoming an excellent local authority. It sees its business as:

'Helping communities to flourish in a quality environment'.

- 24 To achieve this ambition, the Council has focused on four priorities based on the aspirations expressed in the community strategy:
- providing support and investing in communities;
 - supporting a buoyant economy;
 - providing a safe, clean and cared for environment; and
 - improving access to services for all.
- 25 Under the priority to 'provide support and invest in communities', the Council states the key housing objective which is *'a balanced housing market which will meet our private, social and affordable housing needs'*. The council plan 2004 to 2008 gives the following targets.

Table 1

1. A balanced housing market which will meet our private, social and affordable housing needs	
By 2008	2004/05
Complete 2,200 new homes including 30 per cent affordable housing. Complete three affordable rural housing schemes on exception sites. To have assisted in the renovation of 40 unfit houses through renovation grants. To have brought 20 empty properties back into use. Facilitate disabled adaptations to properties by approving 360 disabled facilities grants.	To provide 86 new houses of which 27 are low cost affordable and 59 are social rented. To have purchased and put into use up to 10 properties for homeless families. Achieve 300 housing completions.

- 26 Further objectives which are directly relevant to its housing services are to 'enhance the focus on customer needs including the needs of the young and old' and to 'deliver and improve on the equalities agenda'.
- 27 These aims are reflected in the Council's housing strategy 2005 to 2010, which states the specific priorities for housing in the borough as:
- meet housing needs through the provision of affordable housing and improving the quality of the housing stock;
 - produce a balanced housing market;
 - promote sustainable developments and communities; and
 - meet the needs of the homeless through implementing the homelessness strategy.
- 28 The Council includes no targets or milestones to support these priorities, but does make clear the national, regional and sub-regional priorities and how the Council is incorporating these with their local priorities. The provision of more affordable housing is a key priority for the Council and the local community.

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

Access and customer care

- 29 The quality of access and customer care is weak. There is little information about the services available, they are not well promoted and are not customer-focused in how they are delivered. In contrast, the main access point, the Civic Centre, is accessible and welcoming and the Council works well with county-wide partners to give access to specialist advice and support.
- 30 Reasonable access is available for people seeking housing advice and support. The Civic Centre, just outside of Tewkesbury town centre, is fully accessible and opens from 8.30am to 5.00pm (4.00pm on Fridays). It is spacious and welcoming with plenty of seating and confidential, accessible interview rooms. Housing advice officers are available with or without appointments and the local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) are also located in the offices and open on a part-time basis. However, in the three advice surgeries operated corporately in the other main urban areas, housing information and advice is not readily available and not well promoted through the corporate leaflets. The Council has not discussed access arrangements to housing services with users and, therefore, cannot be sure if it meets their needs or is accessible.

- 31 The Council's website provides basic information about housing services. The site is reasonably easy to navigate and does include some of the advice leaflets about the service and an information newsletter. The information about services is quite limited and does not give details of the range of support the Council is willing to offer, particular with regard to preventing homelessness. Some sections are particularly sparse, notably for private sector housing and others are out of date, for example the pages on new affordable housing which date back to 2000. While the website refers residents to some of the Council's partner agencies this is not comprehensive, for example it does not include the CAB. The website does not help residents access the service and does not allow them to submit applications online.
- 32 A limited range of advice and information leaflets are available. The Council has produced an advice pack for those residents calling at the main council office, but this is not available without asking for it or in any other locations in the borough. The information in the pack is focused on those applying to go on the housing register. There is information about the register, shared ownership and Homebuy, the rent deposit and rent guarantees schemes which are all of reasonable quality. Much of the information is contained in printed A4 sheets of small print. The information is useful but not easily accessible or customer-focused. While a small number of documents state that the information is available in a range of formats, most do not and the strapline is not printed in different languages or a larger font. The lack of quality information makes it difficult for residents to help themselves or to understand the options available.
- 33 The range of information about the prevention of homelessness is limited. The Council has produced a service charter for homelessness and advice. This lists the services available and the subjects covered. While the list is comprehensive, it does not explain how people will be helped, what type of service is provided or the standard. The information does not explain the range of support available from the Council or its partners (such as floating support) and does not emphasise the prevention work on homelessness.
- 34 The Council has not promoted the availability of its services widely. There have been some references in the Council's newspaper to residents, the sections on the website and the limited information which forms part of the advice packs. The Council has not made its printed information available throughout the borough and has very little information about some services such as private sector housing. The Council has not consulted with service users to better understand their needs, in terms of service delivery, access and how they found out about the service. This reduces the effectiveness of the Council's work to prevent homelessness as some residents may not be aware of the help available.

- 35** Feedback mechanisms from customers are underdeveloped and do not cover all housing services. The Council collects information on satisfaction with the rent deposit scheme, disabled facilities grants and has recently started to collect satisfaction information from people who have applied to be on the housing register. These showed high levels of dissatisfaction which the Council has acted on, with more recent figures showing a marked improvement. For other service areas, such as homelessness or dealing with housing complaints, there is no opportunity for customers to give feedback. This includes making complaints about how the Council has provided the service. While there is a comprehensive corporate approach to complaints, the forms are not part of the advice pack and residents are referred to the Advice Manager in the event of a complaint rather than the procedure. Consequently, the Council gets very few complaints and therefore has limited opportunities to learn from customer feedback.
- 36** Support and advice is available through other agencies supported and funded by the Council. It manages these through county-wide protocols agreed with the other Gloucestershire districts and gives the Council access to a wide network of advice. An important local service, the Young Single Homeless Advice Project, is available as a drop-in advice service on Wednesday afternoons and through outreach work at other times. This helps many young people in the borough each year and links well with other services made accessible by the Council including floating support for young people and families and Nightstop (short-term accommodation for younger people).
- 37** The Council makes the service available outside of usual office hours. In the event of an emergency, housing advice staff are available to assist residents that are homeless or threatened with homelessness. This assistance may include advice and referral to other agencies or arranging temporary accommodation.

Diversity

- 38** This is an area where performance is mixed. The Council has focused its attention on the largest single ethnic group, gypsies and travellers, and has responded well to their needs. More corporately, in its community cohesion work, the Council has taken action to address the needs of younger and older people. However, the diverse needs of all groups is not well understood to ensure services are directed to best effect.
- 39** The Council's housing strategies do not fully address diverse needs. There is little recognition in strategies of the different needs of particular people in the community, what services they may require and how the Council may need to respond. The black and minority ethnic (BME) community is small as a proportion of the whole population at just over 3 per cent¹ and while mentioned in the housing strategy there is no assessment of their needs. The needs of other groups, such as those people with a disability and older people, and how the Council will respond is not considered. There is no indication of the size of this community, issues specific to them or how the Council is tailoring services to meet their needs.

¹ 2001 Census - those people categorising themselves as not white British.

- 40 Supporting strategies to meet the needs of specific groups have been slow to be developed. The need for such strategies has been recognised by the Council and it is in the early stages of a draft strategy for older people though it has little time remaining to complete this before its target deadline of March 2006. This strategy and others, for example for young people and people with mental illness, have slipped in their production from the middle of 2005. Their absence reduces the Council's effectiveness in ensuring diverse needs are properly addressed.
- 41 Corporately, the Council has not taken a strong lead in developing its approach to equalities and diversity. It has achieved Level 1 of the Equality Standard (on a scale of one to five) and while an equality impact assessment has been undertaken in housing, this is very basic, includes no actions to improve access and service quality and did not involve front line staff. The Council has ensured that all staff and Councillors have received equalities training, but this is not well embedded within strategies, policies and procedures. These weaknesses mean the Council cannot be sure its services are provided equally and meet the needs of all groups in the community.
- 42 The Council does not monitor service provision by the diversity of its community. It does not record details of the ethnicity, age, disability of residents that access housing services. Only ethnicity information is collected for applicants to the housing register. As information is not collected in other areas, the Council is unable to assess under-representation of some groups in those that access services or if they are provided fairly to all.
- 43 Comprehensive information at a borough-wide level to understand diverse needs is available. The Council has good information from its housing needs survey undertaken in 2004 and good information about the housing needs of vulnerable people obtained by the Gloucestershire County Council Supporting People team. In contrast, however, the housing surveys undertaken at a parish level provide insufficient information about diversity. Of the six surveys completed, none included information about ethnicity, disability or other special needs, such as wheelchair access. While the Council will be able to determine the potential need for specialist housing borough-wide, it has missed an opportunity to influence others and to understand better where such housing should be located.
- 44 A key ethnic group within the borough is gypsies and travellers and the Council is working to improve its understanding. Research on the housing needs of this group is being commissioned with other councils in the County and is scheduled for 2006/07. The Council with the County Council has undertaken research on the health needs of gypsies and travellers which has supported the consultation work carried out with this community as part of site improvements. The Council is very much aware of this ethnic group and the need for more information to understand what services are needed and how they should be provided. This positive approach is reflected in the difficult decision to allocate and retain, in the local plan, three possible sites for gypsy and traveller housing.

- 45 The Council was awarded Beacon council status for its work on community cohesion in 2003. It has recognised some of the different needs of groups within a mixed and urban and rural community and has taken action corporately to help address the issues with gypsies and travellers, younger and older people. Examples include the more intensive management support on travellers' sites, development of a 75 person extra-care scheme and various actions such as sports development, youth council, outreach and prevention of bullying, for younger people.

Strategic approach to housing

- 46 The Council's performance in this area is mixed, though there are real strengths in its partnership approach to the development of new affordable housing. Its main housing strategy and the third draft of the Local Plan set a clear approach for the provision of affordable housing and how national, regional and local priorities will be integrated. However, it has yet to fully develop its strategic approach to private sector housing and homelessness and how these link with the rest of the service.

Understanding of the housing market

- 47 The Council has a good understanding of housing need to help inform its policies and strategies. In 2004, a housing needs survey was completed for all districts in the County. This was a good quality piece of research which gave results for the County as a whole – 7,700 new affordable homes needed – and for each district. The level of housing need estimated for Tewkesbury is 1,624 new affordable homes per year, most of which will need to be smaller, one bedroom accommodation with the rest as family housing. The survey gathered a lot of information about the characteristics of the people in the borough such as income, disability and employment status though little of this is fully analysed with the needs information.
- 48 The mainstream housing need information is supported by research into the housing needs of vulnerable people. This was commissioned by the county's Supporting People team and gives good quality information about special needs. While some of the information is only available at county level, much of it can be analysed for each district. This should help the Council in its development of sub-strategies, particularly for older and disabled people.
- 49 The return of the housing service (register, homelessness and advice) in-house has given the Council more information about the key issues facing residents. The Council received little information from the previous service providers about trends in housing need and demand and the type of problems encountered. The Council now has all these services as part of one team and is able to gather such information directly. The lack of an effective ICT system restricts what it is able to record and analyse. However, through manual systems it has been better able to track the reasons for homelessness and needs expressed through the housing register.

- 50 The housing needs information has been used to assist in the development of affordable housing. The Council has set a high target, given the local context, of 30 per cent of all housing to be affordable and this has been supported through the consultation for the local plan and through the subsequent local plan inquiry. The needs information has highlighted a greater level of need for rented housing. This is reflected in the Council's requirement for 75 per cent of all new affordable housing to be for rent with the remainder for low cost home ownership.
- 51 Through the Council's main development partner housing association, good quality information has been gathered about the needs of key workers. The needs of the staff of the police, fire, education and health services were assessed. The only area of need highlighted was for teachers and the Council has put considerable resources into the Homebuy scheme to help these people access housing. However, the Council has not consulted other significant employers in the borough to understand if they have recruitment problems linked to house prices.
- 52 Only 6 of the 47 parishes have had housing needs surveys which limits the Council's understanding of the opportunities for more rural housing. It works with its parish councils to encourage the completion of parish plans and for them to carry out local housing need surveys. It has held several parish seminars on such matters with housing being a strong component. However, it has not been proactive in using its research (housing needs data and that on the housing register) to identify those parishes where the need appears greatest and to commission surveys. Greater knowledge would help persuade parish council's and local people of the need and opportunity for more affordable housing.
- 53 The Council's information about private sector housing is limited and not robust. The last proper survey of the condition of private sector housing was in 1995 and this was updated through a telephone survey which was completed in 2004. The Council attempted to contact the people and homes surveyed in 1995 with limited success and struggled to get sufficient responses from new samples of residents picked at random. The use of a telephone survey to obtain information about property condition is not reliable as householders are rarely sufficiently experienced to make accurate judgements about defects in their homes. While the survey does give information about levels of unfitness, disrepair and the cost to address these problems, it failed to collect information about the decent homes standard compliance, information about the occupants of poor quality housing or about where potential accommodation may exist such as 'over the shop'. The lack of robust information undermines the Council's ability to target its resources to best effect or develop the right approaches to best meet housing need.

User and stakeholder consultation

- 54** In developing the community plan the Council, and its partners on the local strategic partnership, carried out several consultation events with stakeholders and residents. Through consultants, residents were interviewed to assess their views on the key issues in the borough and their priorities. Residents interviewed came from a variety of backgrounds and the information collected was comprehensive and used to inform subsequent consultation events. The Council's locality forums were used to discuss, more widely with key stakeholders, the issues affecting the borough and the possible solutions. The need for affordable housing, particularly for younger people, was a key outcome in all the consultation events.
- 55** The Council made good use of the community plan consultation to inform the development of the housing strategy. The work with residents was used to help prepare the strategy which, once written, was discussed through a day long stakeholder event. This included a wide range of agencies and partners, including other councils, CAB, Shelter, housing associations and other representatives from the voluntary sector. The day was usefully run as a series of workshops focusing on specific issues such as affordable housing and homelessness. In the workshops, delegates considered the issues and the possible solutions proposed in the strategy and suggested amendments and refinements. This approach gave stakeholders a good opportunity to influence and comment on the Council's main housing plan.
- 56** A standard approach has been taken for the consultation on the draft local plan. The Council has met its statutory duties in terms of consultation and for the first draft in 2001 it was proactive in its engagement with parish councils. The plan is in its third draft stage and the Council has been more reactive in subsequent dealings with parish councils responding when requested and attending public meetings as necessary. The Council has had a considerable response to the draft plans and its public inquiry lasted 52 weeks which gives an indication of the scale of the debate and consultation over the plan.
- 57** Mechanisms for ongoing consultation are underdeveloped, but improving. The Council has not made use of a multi-agency forum or steering group to oversee the development of its housing strategies or to ensure they remain relevant and up to date. The Council reformed the Tewkesbury Housing Forum in late 2005 which includes representatives from the main housing associations operating in the borough, but does not include community representatives or private landlords. The absence of this group for in excess of 18 months has limited the Council's engagement with key stakeholders.

- 58 Housing service users are not actively engaged by the Council. They have no opportunity to influence how services are delivered for them or the range of services available. Service users were not involved or consulted as part of the Council's development of its homelessness strategy or its private sector renewal strategy. The Council has not sought customer feedback, for example by talking to those tenants who were homeless, have used temporary accommodation, been on the register or housed in newly built property. This is a missed opportunity to learn from those with first hand knowledge of many aspects of the service.
- 59 Engagement with private sector landlords and agents has begun but remains limited. As part of the launch of the rent guarantee and rent deposit schemes in 2004, the Council wrote to landlords to make them aware of the scheme and of the services it offers. Little work has been done since to sustain engagement including limited use of the Landlord's Forum managed through the housing benefit section. Landlords have limited knowledge and understanding of the Council's work to prevent homelessness and the support available for them and their tenants. The Council has not engaged with landlords to help it develop its policy and approach to the private sector or to understand how it may stimulate the market to better meet its objectives within the housing strategy.

Corporate Approach

- 60 The Council's housing strategy, completed in 2005 and rated as 'fit for purpose' by GOSW¹, does not provide a sound framework to achieve objectives and improve housing services. The strategy sets out the main housing issues in the borough and makes useful linkages to national and sub-regional priorities based on the South West Regional Housing Strategy. However, it does not make clear what the Council's strategy will be in dealing with the issues faced or how the options explored will be taken forward. While the action plan could describe some of this, it does not sufficiently. The strategy does not set out how services will work together to overcome problems, for example engagement with private sector landlords to reduce homelessness. The strategy does not explain how its objectives will be achieved, notably the more general ones such as 'making best use of existing housing stock', 'minimising the use of bed and breakfast accommodation' or 'promote sustainable development'.
- 61 For two key elements of the housing service, homelessness and private sector housing, the Council's strategic approach is not well developed. The homelessness strategy was based on a basic review of the service, with little analysis of the effectiveness of service provision or how the service may need to be developed if homelessness was to be effectively prevented. The strategy highlights the need for comprehensive prevention and advice service, more and different temporary accommodation and for gaps in service provision to be met. However, the lack of robust analysis restricts the Council's ability to target resources to best effect.

¹ Government Office for the South West.

- 62** Similar weaknesses exist for the 2005 private sector renewal strategy. While this describes the issues which prevail in the borough, there has not been the analysis of the research or present service provision to properly develop the approach to be taken. Too much of the strategy is based on the need for more research and preparation of further plans. How the Council intends to improve the quality of the housing stock, return empty homes to use or help residents remain in their homes is unclear and still to be developed. While the Council has taken the view that private sector housing is a lower priority, the key objectives in the housing strategy and the council plan are for 'a balanced housing market' with an emphasis on private sector housing to meet these objectives. The strategy fails to make clear how the Council will achieve these or the opportunity posed by greater use of the sector.
- 63** In contrast, the approach taken to the delivery of new affordable housing is robust. The Council has worked closely, and taken a lead at times, with other district councils in the county to form three important partnerships. The Gloucester Housing Market Partnership (GHMP) between Tewkesbury, Gloucester City and Stroud is the longest standing and has been followed by the Rural Housing Partnership with four other districts and the most recent is the Cheltenham and Tewkesbury Housing Market Partnership (CTHMP). The partnerships have tendered and appointed housing association development partners to work with property developers on all allocated sites. The partnerships have identified the land where they wish affordable housing to be provided and work closely with developers, through section 106 agreements¹, to secure affordable housing. The partnerships have brought considerable benefits in terms of skills and resources and perhaps most importantly, have enabled the development of affordable housing in the locations where people want to live and are able to work. The approach has seen each council facilitate and fund development out of their district or borough boundary to the benefit of the county's residents and to help meet housing need.
- 64** The partnership approach is sustained through regular liaison and meetings of the partnerships. They are scheduled for the same day and the partners are discussing opportunities for bring the separate partnerships together more formally. The liaison meetings bring together representatives from the partner councils (housing and planning staff), the Housing Corporation and housing associations. The meetings focus on the development of sites, progress with building and resourcing. The partnerships have been successful in leveraging in over £66 million for affordable housing from the Housing Corporation and private developers to deliver, in the future, in excess of 2,000 new affordable homes.

¹ Section 106 agreements - section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act

- 65 A strong, county-wide, approach exists to service delivery and service planning. Tewkesbury Borough Council takes an active part in these partnerships which have increased the range of services available and added capacity to deliver improvements. Examples include:
- cross-county research for housing needs, key workers and needs of vulnerable people;
 - choice-based lettings – procurement of a common ICT system and process to administer this across the county;
 - advice protocols – working through strategic housing groups to agree common protocols for advice and support agencies working in the county; and
 - Supporting People – the Council works closely with the County Council and is an active member of its core strategy group.
- 66 The Council held Beacon status for community cohesion in 2004. The Council has a strong commitment to ensuring its communities, especially its rural communities, are supported and new development is well integrated with the necessary infrastructure. While this approach is still developing, some outcomes are apparent in housing developments where community facilities and shops have been incorporated.
- 67 Housing and planning work well together to enable the delivery of affordable housing. Two officer groups exist. The section 106 group has representatives from housing, planning, legal and finance and focuses on the Council's requirements and negotiations on development sites. The strategy officers group focuses on the Council's approach to housing and affordable housing. The effectiveness of the two groups is developing and information sharing is increasing. The groups have helped improve the understanding of respective responsibilities and provide a framework for improved joint working.

Making the best use of existing housing

Prevention of homelessness

- 68 The Council has refocused its efforts towards prevention and this is having some impact on the demand for more affordable housing. Strong county-wide support from a variety of agencies helps the Council, but it has been slow to develop a more comprehensive range of prevention measures.

- 69 The Council is seeking to prevent homelessness and, therefore, reduce the need for temporary accommodation and new affordable housing. It tendered the homelessness and advice service in 2004 and formed an in-house team. The Council put additional resources into the service to fund the extended contract specification which increased the range of advice and support available with a clear emphasis on the prevention of homelessness. All customers now have a discussion with a housing advisor to help prevent them becoming homeless and advisors make contact with landlords, mortgage companies and parents, in the case of family disputes. The number of applicants accepted as homeless has reduced from a high in 2004/05 of 198 to an estimated 155 (pro rata for the whole of 2005/06). While the number of acceptances in the last five years has remained largely static at an average of 178 per year, if the estimate is correct for 2005/06, this would represent a reduction of 13 per cent.
- 70 Residents in housing need or facing homelessness are helped to secure private rented housing. The Council has introduced a combined rent deposit and rent guarantee scheme. This helps residents secure assured short-hold tenancies in the private sector and give landlords confidence that in the event of problems they will get paid for rent arrears or repairs up to a maximum of £600. The scheme has been accessed by 29 people and it is popular with those landlords aware of it. This initiative, while small, has helped increase access to housing and so reduced the need for other affordable housing.
- 71 Discretionary housing benefit (HB) payments have been well used to help sustain tenancies. The Council's officers promote the availability of discretionary housing benefit with clients, so that it has allocated all the resources available to it from government, and information is available on the Council's website. The Council has been equally active in encouraging people to take-up welfare benefits to which they are eligible and has helped residents apply for £631,000 in 2004/05. Action has also included take-up of the Pensions Credit where the Council has achieved 96 per cent take-up, in excess of the PSA (public service agreement) target. Benefit advice roadshows are held in the borough about twice per year with other agencies such as the Pensions Service, to help increase benefit take-up which in turn gives people more choice in meeting their housing needs.
- 72 The Council's benefits service is working well to assist in the prevention of homelessness. A common grievance of private landlords relates to problems with the payment of housing benefit. A fast track service is operated for all landlords and this is promoted through the landlords' forum. HB staff work well with housing staff to assist those people temporarily in bed and breakfast accommodation. Housing benefit applications are routinely completed now and housing advice staff are verification framework trained to assist with applications. This has had the positive effect of reducing costs to both the Council and homeless people.

- 73 A range of other services are available, facilitated by the Council, to assist homeless people as part of prevention as well as support. Floating support services are available from county-wide providers such as Gloucestershire Housing Association (GHA) for young people and Bromford Corinthians HA for families. Shelter provides an advice and support project for young single homeless people on a county-wide basis. They have an office based in the town and much of the service is delivered as outreach support. The 'Nightstop' service links families willing to give a bed to a younger person for a night or two, often to relieve pressure in family relationship disputes.
- 74 The Council is making good use of its nomination agreements with housing associations with homes in the borough. It receives in excess of the 75 per cent for Severn Vale and 50 per cent for other HAs. By being able to nominate so many residents from the housing register this helps prevent homelessness and reduce the time people are waiting for more suitable housing.
- 75 The Council has secured an alternative to bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation for some residents. To help meet the 2004 deadline for no families in B&B for longer than six weeks, it purchased six properties for sale on the open market. These are well located and managed in areas of high demand and where people want to live. The Council maintains regular contact with the people it has placed in temporary accommodation, including young people in B&B.
- 76 Other options to prevent the use of bed and breakfast though are limited. Single homeless people will spend many months, some more than a year, in B&B and the number in this type of housing has not fallen significantly. The Council has been slow to develop a wider range of options to help prevent homelessness and so reduce the use of B&B. Even though relationship breakdown and family dispute are the main reasons for homelessness, there are no formal mediation services available. The Council relies on housing advisors and the youth outreach worker to assist in resolving family disputes and on an ad hoc basis will use the Gloucestershire Mediation Service. Other commonly used tools such as accommodation lists, private sector leasing or 'fix it' funds are not available.
- 77 The contract specification requires the delivery of a comprehensive proactive service for the prevention of homelessness which current provision has yet to fully meet. Particular requirements included are to ensure the service is fully accessible and a wide range of information is available on matters such as family disputes, nuisance, domestic violence and money advice. While the Council has increased its emphasis on prevention, the weaknesses identified in terms of access to the service and its promotion, reduce the Council's effectiveness and may mean that it is not providing support where it is most needed.

Private sector housing

- 78 The Council has not fully utilised the powers it has available to make best use of private sector housing and so reduce the need for more new affordable housing. Where services are provided these are good quality, but too few services are available to support residents to stay in their homes or to encourage greater provision. This is an area of weakness.

- 79** The Council's housing strategy recognises the need for more work with the private sector to help it meet its objectives, but few services are available. The Council does not provide assistance to vulnerable and low income home owners through actions such as advice, home surveys, equity release, loans or grants. The Council does not have the information it needs to know how many vulnerable people live in homes that fail the decent homes standard (DHS). It has not developed its approach to meeting the national DHS target and it is unclear of the amount of work it may need to do. A greater focus in this area would help people stay at home, sustain communities and reduce the demand for new affordable housing.
- 80** A basic service exists for those residents in poor housing conditions. The Council responds to complaints from tenants and will work with landlords to improve conditions. The Council does not actively promote this service in the borough or through HB notifications. It does not operate any form of voluntary accreditation scheme to help improve conditions and it has not taken enforcement action to ensure conditions are improved quickly. Loss of assured short-hold accommodation is the second most likely reason for homelessness, some of which will be due to poor conditions (stock survey revealed an increase in the level of disrepair in the borough by 93 per cent), and therefore greater action in this area may help reduce homelessness.
- 81** Few actions are being taken to increase the amount of private sector housing available for people in housing need. The Council does not offer grants to landlords or assistance for the conversion of residential or commercial property in return for nomination rights. While only a small number (estimated at 136) of long-term vacant homes exist, it has yet to develop its empty homes strategy and a lack of capacity has meant that little action has been taken to return homes to use. A small scheme is operated known as the Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme (HERS) for the improvement of older buildings in Tewkesbury town centre. This has enabled the return of six flats in the last three years, though with no nomination rights. The budget for this is very limited and is not available for the conversion of space over shops.
- 82** Good quality assistance is provided for disabled residents and older people needing adaptations or repairs. The Council carried out a thorough review of the service in the last year which has resulted in improved procedures and much shorter processing times. Satisfaction with the service is high and while demand is also high, the Council has ensured adequate resources are available to prevent a waiting list. In 2005/06, the Council has added £300,000 of its resources to the £159,000 government grant. In providing the service, the Council works with Anchor Home Improvement Agency to administer disabled facilities grants and also supports them to provide a handy person service. This is available for elderly residents and helped over 400 last year with small repairs and improvements. Both of the services are important for vulnerable residents to help them live more independent lives.

- 83 To help make better use of adapted housing, the Council has established a register. All adaptations funded by the Council are recorded and the Council is trying to incorporate adaptations funded by housing associations. The register is used when making nominations to prospective new tenants to try and house people in homes that meet their needs. While the register is fairly new, it is a positive development.
- 84 The Council has been effective in dealing with houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). Following a robust assessment to identify HMOs in the borough, it has risk assessed the 24 known HMOs and commenced an inspection and improvement programme. The small number has meant the Council is up to date with its inspection programme and has secured improvements in properties where often the worse housing conditions exist.
- 85 Effective arrangements are in place to help residents with energy efficiency issues and those in 'fuel poverty'. The Council supports the Gloucester Energy Advice Centre (GEAC) and works with other district councils in the county to provide a range of services. Initiatives such as the Warm and Well scheme and the Rent Warm, Rent Well have helped residents improve the energy efficiency of their homes. This has been through financial assistance as well as advice and referral to other agencies and in 2004/05 these schemes helped over 300 households. Through GEAC and the county's affordable warmth partnership, households likely to be in fuel poverty have been mapped at a ward level. This has helped the Council and others target their energy efficiency promotion work to best effect.

Enabling the provision of more housing

- 86 The Council has a clear commitment to the provision of mainstream affordable housing and has laid good foundations for its delivery. Overall, this is an area of strength with good plans and partnerships in place supported by the draft local plan and supporting guidance. However, relatively few new affordable homes have been developed in recent years and little to meet the special needs of particular groups.
- 87 Through the housing market partnerships, the Council has made available a considerable amount of resources, even with the ending of local authority social housing grant. In 2005/06, it is continuing to provide £400,000 for the CTHMP and £167,000 for GHMP in return for around 600 homes over the life of the local plan. For each of the partnerships, the sites on which affordable housing will be sought are clearly identified, along with the number of homes planned. Developers and housing associations are engaged early on in the process to resolve disputes and make clear what is required.

- 88 While the local plan is still in draft form, the Council has adopted it at each stage and used the policies to negotiate affordable housing. The local plan is very clear on the 18 allocated sites for housing development and equally clear on the level of affordable housing expected on each of the sites. Supporting the plan is supplementary planning guidance (SPG) for affordable housing. This is ambitious in terms of the number of homes to be delivered through the local plan – 30 per cent of all new homes built amounting to over 1,100 new affordable homes. Current negotiations indicate that the Council will achieve 27 per cent on these sites based on 75 per cent being for rent and 25 per cent being shared ownership. This is strong performance.
- 89 The Council is making good use of section 106 agreements to secure affordable housing. While it has not been fully effective in this in the past, its practice now is clear and of the 18 allocated sites in the local plan, 11 have been awarded planning permission with section 106 agreements completed on eight and in progress for the other three. The SPG anticipates that new affordable housing will be provided without public subsidy and negotiations with developers have been successful on this basis with the Council securing close to its 30 per cent target for affordable housing.
- 90 The Council has consistently required on-site provision through its section 106 agreements. This has helped ensure that affordable housing is provided in all locations across the borough contributing to building more sustainable communities. The Council has taken a pragmatic approach where commuted sums have been taken. A large commuted sum for a major development has given the Council sufficient funds to support its affordable housing development plans for some years.
- 91 Good support is provided for developers. As sites come forward, development briefs are prepared making clear the Council's expectations in terms of housing style, landscaping, open space and other infrastructure requirements. Support is provided at pre-application stage from planning officers and from the housing enabling manager, and through the partnerships the developing housing association is allocated. The Council is to use some of its planning delivery grant to add staff support at the pre-application stage to improve arrangements still further.
- 92 Performance in enabling the development of affordable housing in rural areas is positive. The Council as part of the Rural Housing Partnership has enabled the provision of 61 new homes in the last five years and through rural exception sites 95 in the last 10 years. A large proportion of these have been in or around the town of Winchcombe, a larger settlement in the west of the borough, rather than spread over the area. The Council part funds a Rural Housing Enabler with other district councils in the county and has run several parish seminars promoting the need for more affordable housing. It also monitors housing applications by six localities to help direct its housing development work and the work of the Rural Housing Enabler. However, relatively few parish housing needs surveys have been completed and the Council has not been proactive in gathered needs information in those parishes where affordable housing issues are the greatest to ensure its work is directed to best effect.

- 93 The number of new affordable homes provided has been low and well-below target. The Council set an overly ambitious target of 550 homes from 1998 to 2003 following transfer. By 2004, it had enabled the provision of only 119 homes. In 2003/04, it enabled 71 and in 2004/05 this had reduced to 42, against a target of 86 in the council plan. It is anticipated in 2005/06, the Council will have enabled the provision of 93 new homes (35 net gain as some are the result of the redevelopment of 58 flatted properties owned by Severn Vale).
- 94 The Council has not fully ensured that housing developments closely meet housing need. It has given permission for the development of just under 200 homes per year, but has not ensured these are smaller homes, one and two bedroom, which is where the highest levels of need exist as shown in the housing needs survey and the Council's housing register. The picture is similar for the affordable homes provided. Councillors have been reluctant to see the provision of one bedroom homes preferring family accommodation to be built. These actions have not helped the Council reduce its use of bed and breakfast hotels and meet a growing area of housing need. The Council has begun to recognise this and recent negotiations reflect a better balance of housing types to include one bedroom homes.
- 95 The Council has been slow to enable the development of housing that meets special needs. All the housing provided in recent years has been general needs even though the need for special needs housing is apparent. There is a lack of move-on accommodation in the borough for people who are presently in supported housing but are able to live more independently. There are no refuges for people suffering domestic violence and little provision of young single homeless or those with mental health problems. The uncertainty over future Supporting People funding has in part restricted what the Council has been willing to see developed. However, the increased emphasis on floating support away from accommodation based support should remove any perceived restrictions and allow for future development to meet special needs.
- 96 Plans for the delivery of affordable housing are reasonable but tend to focus on what will be delivered through planning gain. Through the section 106 officers group the delivery of affordable housing is planned and monitored. A spreadsheet is used to plot progress with sites and the status of section 106 agreements. However, the plan does not include all affordable housing being secured only that which is being delivered through section 106 agreements. It does not include housing enabled through Homebuy, rural exception sites or through redevelopments such as those by Severn Vale. The plan does not make clear the type and size of housing required, the subsidy available and what added value might be expected or the risk associated with the development. More robust and comprehensive plans would help ensure developments were sustainable, met needs and were well integrated with other initiatives.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 97 Performance in this area is poor. The Council does not know if services represent value for money and where actions have been taken this has not been part of an active strategy to manage the cost and quality of services.

How do costs compare?

- 98 The Council has not considered the costs of the housing services compared to others or in the context of the level of performance it achieves. The Council has not assessed the unit cost of individual elements of the service, such as dealing with advice or homelessness applications or giving grants. Such information would have enabled managers to understand the cost of services relative to the number of clients and performance achieved. It would also have enabled the Council to benchmark its services with those of other councils or housing associations to highlight opportunities for different models of service delivery. This type of information may have helped the Council understand which prevention services are the most cost effective in reducing homelessness, or which advice services are best to help older people remain independent in their homes.

How is value for money managed?

- 99 The Council is not actively managing services to ensure value for money is achieved. A lack of capacity and resources are cited as reasons why new initiatives and proposals, some put forward by councillors such as PFI for affordable housing or private sector leasing, are not developed and taken forward. In examining such opportunities, the Council has not assessed the longer term cost benefits that may arise from 'spend to save' initiatives. This would enable more informed decisions to be made about staff resource allocation to develop ideas more fully.
- 100 The housing market partnerships are very likely to represent value for money and to have enabled the provision of more homes for the Council's investment. While this is a robust approach neither the Council, or its partners, have assessed the extent to which the partnerships to give value for money or whether opportunities exist to make them better. While Tewkesbury Borough Council (TBC) is unsure if this is appropriate, Gloucester City Council has assessed the effectiveness of their client management of all their partnerships. This has highlighted the need for improvements in the management of the housing market partnership including the assessment of value for money. TBC have focused on the low cost of each new home for the amount of subsidy they provide. It has not examined whether more could have been done.

- 101 While the actions taken to prevent homelessness and the estimated reduction of 13 per cent in applications will have led to savings these have not been quantified. The opportunity for further reductions in the cost of bed and breakfast as temporary accommodation has not been taken. The Council has not used its development programme to provide move-on accommodation and it is reluctant to see one bedroom homes built. These factors mean single homeless people remain in bed and breakfast hotels which, even with high levels of housing benefit claimed, still have a high cost to the Council.
- 102 A clear strength for the Council in terms of value for money is its work with councils and other agencies across the County. The Council takes an active role in county partnerships which enable to access and provide services it would not otherwise be able to. Many examples exist and include the rural housing enabler, the housing advice service provided by Shelter, and the energy efficiency work.

Summary

- 103 Overall, we judge that the Council's approach to the provision of strategic housing services is fair.
- 104 The Council has a housing strategy which is underpinned by robust research and is strong on the issues and the broad options available. The strategy makes clear links with national regional priorities and, with the local plan and SPG, sets a clear approach for the delivery of new affordable mainstream housing. However, the Council's strategic approach to the prevention of homelessness, meeting the needs of particular groups of residents such as the elderly, and the critical role of the private sector in this, remains unclear. It does not actively engage with service users to help it better understand their housing issues and how services should be provided so that they are accessible and tailored to meet their needs. While in some areas, the Council is providing a useful service to residents, the lack of promotion means the Council cannot be sure people are accessing the service and getting the assistance available.
- 105 Where services are available for homeless residents or disabled people needing adaptations these are provided well. While some aspects of the Council's approach to diversity are underdeveloped, it has focused on the needs of its largest ethnic group, gypsies and travellers. However, the range of services for service users is not as extensive as it needs to be and this means that not all those in need are helped and the Council is missing opportunities to make better use of private sector housing to address this. The Council is not able to demonstrate it is delivering value for money.
- 106 The Council does work well in partnership with others across the county and this means there are more services for residents than the Council alone could provide. Its housing market partnerships provide a robust approach and are starting to deliver more affordable homes to counteract the relatively low numbers provided to date. It is making good use of its section 106 planning powers to secure more homes and without public subsidy as well build cohesion in the community.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 107** The Council has demonstrated a track record of being able to improve some services, notably homelessness, processing disabled facilities grants and the ability to deliver affordable housing. It has addressed some of the issues which came out of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) diagnostic undertaken in 2004 and it has completed some of the actions in its strategies and plans. Overall, strengths and weaknesses are balanced.
- 108** In respect of affordable housing, the Council has improved its ability to deliver in the future, though there is no improvement in the number of homes completed to date. Increasing the number of homes enabled takes several years as new policies need to feed through into new planning approvals and current developments will be those given under previous policies. It has put in place a robust local plan, affordable housing guidance and good quality partnerships with resources to deliver on the plans. With building blocks in place, the Council should be able to deliver in excess of 1,000 new affordable homes in the coming years.
- 109** The return of the housing advice, register and homeless service in-house has resulted in improvements. The Council has invested approximately £100,000 in additional resources which has enabled an expansion of the service with a greater emphasis on prevention work. The small reduction in homelessness applications suggests that this investment is working as does the high levels of satisfaction from customers applying on the housing register. The Council has little information to fully quantify the scale of improvements and will need more to be sure that outcomes represent value for money.
- 110** The review of the disabled grants service has resulted in improvements. The Council has streamlined procedures and this has resulted in quicker processing of grants. Now almost 100 per cent of applicants will receive a grant approval within 12 weeks.
- 111** Performance against the key national indicators shows some improvement. The number of empty homes returned to use has increased from 2 to 17, though some of this is due to a one-off action to purchase six houses for temporary accommodation. There has been a reduction in the use of bed and breakfast (B&B), the time people spend in B&B and the Council has sustained its performance of no families in B&B for more than six weeks.

112 Progress against the weaknesses identified in the CPA balancing housing market diagnostic is mixed. Several major items have been completed and these have taken up the available resources in the housing team. Consequently, other actions have slipped or little progress has been made. The Council has:

- a new housing strategy that has been rated as 'fit for purpose' by GOSW;
- further developed the local plan and it is at the final stage for approval;
- researched the needs of gypsies and travellers - one of the minority groups in the borough;
- implemented the rent deposit and guarantee scheme;
- progressed the county-wide choice-based lettings scheme; and
- improved performance for empty homes returned to use.

113 In contrast other actions have not been completed:

- no sub-strategies in place for groups such as older people, though some early work started;
- lack of move-on accommodation; and
- action plans not robust (see next section).

114 A similar picture exists in relation to delivery of actions in the housing strategy and related plans. Many of the actions are process changes to internal systems or for reviews of arrangements which will lead to further plans for actions. The actions to promote the service, improve communication for service users and develop some new services have slipped and not been completed. Where reviews were due, progress has been slow and so outcomes are not apparent, examples include the review of the homeless strategy, building a picture of the private rented sector and satisfaction questionnaires of new residents. The lack of outcomes would make it difficult for residents to know if services have improved.

115 While service delivery arrangements have changed, several of the recommendations from the 2002/03 inspection have not been fully completed. Recommendations for more use of outcome targets and measures for the service and the development of performance management have not been implemented and remain weaknesses.

116 The Council has not demonstrated improvement in its approach to value for money. The annual efficiency statement does not identify any savings in the housing services for 2004/05 or looking forward over 2005/06. The lack of awareness of costs, comparisons and opportunities for savings reduces the Council's ability to secure improvements.

How well does the service manage performance?

117 The Council does not effectively manage its performance and this is an area of weakness. While ambitions are clear, the outcomes desired are not and performance management is underdeveloped. The Council's plans are not robust, resourced and do not contain actions which are likely to deliver significant improvements.

- 118** Housing is stated as a priority for the Council. Its ambition is to achieve 'a balanced housing market which will meet our private, social and affordable housing needs' and in the Council Plan it sets some clear targets for the number of new affordable homes to be provided and for others to be improved. While the aim is included in the housing strategy, the targets are not and no others are included. The four main priorities and objectives within the housing strategy are not supported by any indication of the scale of the outcome to be achieved. Without this, the aims and objectives are aspirations and it is impossible to gauge what benefits and improvements will be achieved or if actions taken have been effective.
- 119** The supporting action plans to the housing strategies are inadequate. The actions do not describe what the Council will do to improve or enhance services. Many are to 'continue to work with', 'monitor and maximise use of', 'research the needs of' or 'investigate the introduction of' without making clear what the benefit to customers will be. The plans indicate the output and these are most commonly the production of a report or plans for further action. The plans are largely short-term with most target dates as 'ongoing' or up to 2006/07 and do not make clear the resources needed to deliver an outcome only to process to the next stage. While the Council's objectives are sound, the actions proposed are unlikely to deliver improvements that customers would notice.
- 120** As discussed in previous sections in the report, the Council's housing strategies do not effectively articulate its approach to the delivery of housing services. The private sector housing strategy does not fully consider the links between the private sector, affordable housing and homelessness. Equally, the housing strategy does not fully explore the diverse needs of different groups in the community and how the Council may need to respond. As a clear strategic approach has not been developed, the opportunity to maximise the use of resources has been missed. The strategy could enable the Council to manage its services better and deliver improvements for customers.
- 121** Performance is not well-managed. The Council lacks an effective performance management system that allows it to understand how well a service is operating and where under performance exists so it can take corrective action. Very few national performance indicators exist for housing services and, even though this is a priority service for the Council, there are few local indicators and these are confined to disabled facilities grants processing. Performance reports are descriptive of the volume of the service being delivered and contain almost no information about the outcomes achieved, such as homeless prevention. The range and quality of performance indicators provided to Scrutiny Committee at their quarterly meetings does not enable them to monitor or manage performance or improve value for money. The impact of these weaknesses is that councillors are less able to perform their role in effective governance of services.

- 122** Performance monitoring and management by managers is underdeveloped. Few measures have been developed to help managers monitor how well the service is delivered. Assessment is largely on the basis of the volume of clients dealt with in various aspects of the service and while performance is discussed at management team meetings, there are few records of this to report to senior managers or councillors. The performance indicators within the housing services contract are not fully monitored, satisfaction results are not widely gathered and services are not monitored to ensure diverse needs are met. Managers and consequently the Council, does not know if a 'better balance in the housing' has been achieved and does not know if the actions taken in preventing homeless are as effective as it would like.
- 123** Councillors and senior managers do not ensure that actions in plans are being delivered and are effective. An annual report is considered by Scrutiny Committee on progress against plans, but no more frequent assessment is undertaken by Chief Officers Management Team (COMT) or by directorate management teams. This reduces the ability of managers to redirect resources where actions are slipping or to stop further work when it is not having the desired effect. The slippage in key actions from the existing action plans highlights the need for better management.
- 124** There is a lack of understanding among councillors, and to a lesser extent among senior managers, of the imbalances in the housing market and how these may be tackled. An example of this is the underestimation of role of the private sector in providing more housing and helping reduce the use of B&B. The lack of leadership has had wide ranging consequences in how the service is managed. The key weaknesses described below are interlinked.
- The Council has failed to set objectives, which are not just aspirations, but are tangible with clear outcomes and targets that will lead to improvements for customers.
 - Councillors have been reluctant to prioritise where resources (staffing and financial) will be allocated and targeted. Resources are not consistently targeted to priorities which has led to a reduction in resources for affordable housing and private sector housing.
 - Managers are reluctant to bring issues, strategies and actions forward to councillors because of a perception that these will be rejected without full consideration of the strategic impact. Managers' chosen tactic is to bring matters forward incrementally, such as the private sector renewal strategy, to reduce the likelihood of rejection, but in doing so councillors often do not get the full picture on which to make a more informed decision.
 - Where decisions are taken, these are reactive and do not reflect a considered approach to tackling the problems faced.

- 125** There are some positive aspects in the Council's management of the service. Clear leadership has been given for the provision of mainstream affordable housing. Councillors and senior managers recognise the need for more homes and this is reflected in key corporate documents such as the community plan, council plan and housing strategy. The Council has ensured that an effective corporate approach is developing, notably between planning and housing staff. It has worked with others to form the housing market partnerships to enable it to deliver more housing and has shown real leadership in enabling developments outside of its borough boundary for the good of residents.
- 126** Plans for the delivery of more affordable housing are adequate. Through the local plan and the housing market partnerships, the Council has a clear plan of where affordable housing will be developed although this is focused on housing secured through section 106 agreements. Other forms of affordable housing, such as Homebuy, the return of empty properties or where redevelopments are taking place are not planned or monitored in the same way.
- 127** The performance of staff is adequately managed. The Council has established a system of joint annual reviews (JARs) for its staff appraisals. These include basic links to service business plans and key strategies though lack targets by which performance could be measured. More frequent one-to-one meetings are held between staff and managers as well as team and manager meetings. The staff survey highlights that these have contributed to improved staff satisfaction and better understanding of the objectives of the organisation.
- 128** The Council is open to learning. Several examples exist of where it has made changes to the way services are delivered or planned, for instance, amendments to the housing services contract after consulting with other councils and changes as a result of customer feedback, for example the out-of-hours telephone service. Learning is shared across the organisation through team meetings, 'café society' meetings and through 'Lite bites' lunchtime meetings held for staff to discuss services and opportunities for improvement.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 129** The lack of clarity about what the Council will do to meet its aims, reduces its ability to resource for the future and ensure it has capacity. There are strengths in what the Council has done – extra staff, new ICT and it has attracted resources to enable the provision of more affordable housing, however, these are outweighed by other weaknesses, particularly the lack of a medium-term financial strategy to ensure financial resources are directed to priorities and the Council's future plans.

- 130** The Council lacks financial capacity to deliver its future plans and develop services in line with need. There is a low council tax and increases generate little income to pay for more services. The Council has in excess of £30 million invested and it relies on the income generated, some £1.5 million per annum, to balance the budget. The Council does not have a medium-term financial strategy which links to corporate priorities and future plans. A medium-term financial projection exists which sets out the resources the Council is likely to have available but this does not include projections of the expenditure likely from the Council's future plans. The Council is faced with the need to save £400,000 this year and anticipates it will have to make further significant savings in the next two years. The lack of a strategy which details where savings will be made and what services/actions will be financed means the Council cannot be sure that what it intends to do, it will be able to.
- 131** The exception to this is the delivery of affordable housing. The Council has committed its own resources (in the capital strategy) and has been successful in attracting resources for new affordable housing. Examples of this are the resources from the Housing Corporation for the housing market partnerships and the resources from the Health Authority for the £5.1 million 75 persons extra-care unit. The Council has accepted a commuted sum of £2.1 million in lieu of onsite housing provision and this has given financial security in the medium-term. These resources are ring fenced to affordable housing and the Council will use them to support the housing market partnerships for the next few years.
- 132** The ability to manage services will be improved through new ICT. The Council is about to install a new ICT system for the management of all housing services. This system links with the county wide choice-based lettings system and will give much more information about how well the service operates. The system has the potential to generate reports for user satisfaction, ethnicity/diversity monitoring and process performance.
- 133** The Council has increased the staff available to deliver services. As part of the in-house delivery of the housing services contract additional staff have been employed. These have included a senior housing advice officer, an accommodation officer, a research and monitoring officer as well as a housing standards officer. A further appointment, after a long vacancy, has been the Housing Enabling Manager which has added capacity to deliver and negotiate more affordable housing. However, these officers have been employed to deliver the existing level of service as required by the contract. The weaknesses in the Council's future plans mean it cannot be sure it has enough staff with the necessary skills to deliver its objectives. Even to deliver the actions as stated – which are all expected within current resources - will be challenging given the service's lack of capacity.

- 134** The partnership approach taken by the Council to the delivery of many housing services has added to its capacity. The Council is more able to deliver improvements as the partnerships bring additional skills and resources. A number of examples exist.
- The work on energy efficiency is enhanced considerably by the use of the Gloucestershire-wide advice centre.
 - The housing market partnerships have given skills for rural housing development and in negotiating section 106 agreements.
 - The Council intends to use some of its planning delivery grant to employ an officer to assist with pre-planning application support to help in housing developments.
- 135** Human resource management is adequate. The Council responded to the comments made from staff in the staff survey and introduced revised absence management procedures and clear policy for JARs. More recent results show staff have found the appraisal system helpful and sickness absence, both short and long-term has improved, though performance may remain in the worst 25 per cent of councils for 2005/06. Effective leadership of the Council is limited by the absence of key individuals such as the chief executive and senior councillors, through illness.
- 136** The Council has an adequate system for training. Staff and councillors are trained in the core subjects the Council views as important. Training covers equality and diversity, customer care and service specific matters such as homelessness. The Council does not have a specific management competency programme, though managers in the service have undertaken various management courses such as 'systems thinking' and management certificates or diplomas. However, skills in terms of performance management and service planning are underdeveloped, which when combined with the weak performance management framework, reduces the Council's ability to drive forward change and improvement.
- 137** The delays in getting the local plan approved have meant that the number of homes built in the borough have been quite low - around 200 per year against a projection of 400 per year. As a result, the Council needs to ensure that around 700 per year are built to meet the County structure plan targets. To meet its targets, this will place considerable strain on the Council in terms of dealing with planning applications and negotiating section 106 agreements for affordable housing. It may also stretch the capacity of house builders and housing association developers to bring to the market that number of homes. This may be a particular concern for the sale of shared ownership homes and one the Council has not fully considered.

Summary

- 138 In conclusion, we have judged that there are uncertain prospects for improvement. While the track record of improvement in some service areas is a driver for change, the significance of the barriers such as weak plans, weak performance management, combined with the lack of a financial strategy removes confidence in improvement being sustained.
- 139 The Council does not have effective performance management arrangements to understand if the service is achieving now or in the future. Its plans for the service are unlikely to deliver improvements customers will notice and the lack of performance systems means it will not know if the resources expended have had any impact.
- 140 The Council has not clearly articulated the outcomes it desires in its key strategic documents. Consequently, it does not know how it will achieve its aims, what resources it needs and where these will come from. The Council faces major challenges across a wide range of services and without more robust interlinked financial and service planning tools it will struggle to deliver the improvements required of it.
- 141 The public sector is required to make considerable efficiency savings in the next few years. The Council has not explored the opportunities which may exist in the housing service and its plans and performance management arrangements make no reference to improved efficiency or cost effectiveness.
- 142 The Service has demonstrated its ability to deliver change and improvements are apparent in some areas. The most notable area is the delivery of more affordable housing, where the Council is well placed to deliver in excess of 1,000 homes. This will make a real difference in the community and help ease pressures on the homelessness service.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 2

Best value performance indicator	TBC performance for 2004/05	Comparisons with other Councils		
		Best 25 per cent	Median	Worse 25 per cent
62 - unfit homes made fit	0.6	4.7	2.9	1.6
64 – vacant dwellings returned to use	17			
203 – percentage change in families in bed and breakfast	-5	-7	9	28
183a – number of weeks in B&B	8	1	3	5
183b – number of weeks in hostels	0	0	8	18
2b – progress for the promotion of race equality	Third quartile			
106 – percentage development on brownfield land	91	94	80	57

Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
 - housing strategy 2005 to 2008;
 - the community strategy;
 - the council plan;
 - the housing renewal strategy 2005;
 - the homelessness strategy 2003;
 - the housing needs survey 2004;
 - the housing needs of vulnerable people survey 2004;
 - the draft local plan (second modification);
 - the housing supplementary planning guidance;
 - 'Voices of Tewkesbury'; and
 - disabled facilities grants review 2005.