

# Strategic Housing Services

**Wyre Borough Council**

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

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

### **Copies of this report**

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

© Audit Commission 2006

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

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

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

[www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk)

# Contents

Service Inspection	4
<b>Summary</b>	<b>5</b>
Scoring the service	6
Recommendations	8
<b>Report</b>	<b>10</b>
Context	10
The locality	10
The council	11
The council's strategic housing service	12
<b>How good is the service?</b>	<b>13</b>
What has the service aimed to achieve?	13
Access and customer care	14
Diversity	16
Housing strategy and enabling	19
Homelessness and housing advice	22
Private sector housing	25
Is the service delivering value for money?	29
Summary	32
<b>What are the prospects for improvement to the service?</b>	<b>33</b>
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	33
How well does the service manage performance?	34
Does the service have the capacity to improve?	36
Summary	38
<b>Appendix 1 – Performance indicators</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken</b>	<b>42</b>

## Service Inspection

This inspection has been carried out by the Audit Commission under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. These principles embody the objectives of our Strategic Plan and Strategic Regulation. They also reflect the principles from *The Government's Policy on Inspection of Public Services (July 2003)*.

Audit Commission service inspections should:

- focus on public service outcomes from a user perspective;
- act as a catalyst to help inspected bodies improve their performance;
- concentrate inspection work where it will have most impact, so that it is proportionate and based on an assessment of risk;
- be based on a rigorous assessment of costs and benefits, with a concern for achieving value for money both by the inspected organisation and within the inspection regime itself;
- be, and be seen to be, independent of the inspected organisation;
- report in public, using impartial evidence to inform the public about the performance of public services so as to enhance accountability;
- involve collaborative working with other inspectorates and external review agencies to achieve greater co-ordination and a more holistic approach to the assessment of performance by audited and inspected bodies;
- share learning to create a common understanding of performance that encourages rigorous self assessment and better understanding of their performance by inspected organisations;
- be carried out objectively by skilled and experienced people to high standards and using relevant evidence, transparent criteria, and open review processes; and
- enable continuous learning so that inspections can become increasingly effective and efficient.

We assess services using published key lines of enquiry (KLOE) to inform our judgements. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's web site at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk).

This report is issued in accordance with the Audit Commission's duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

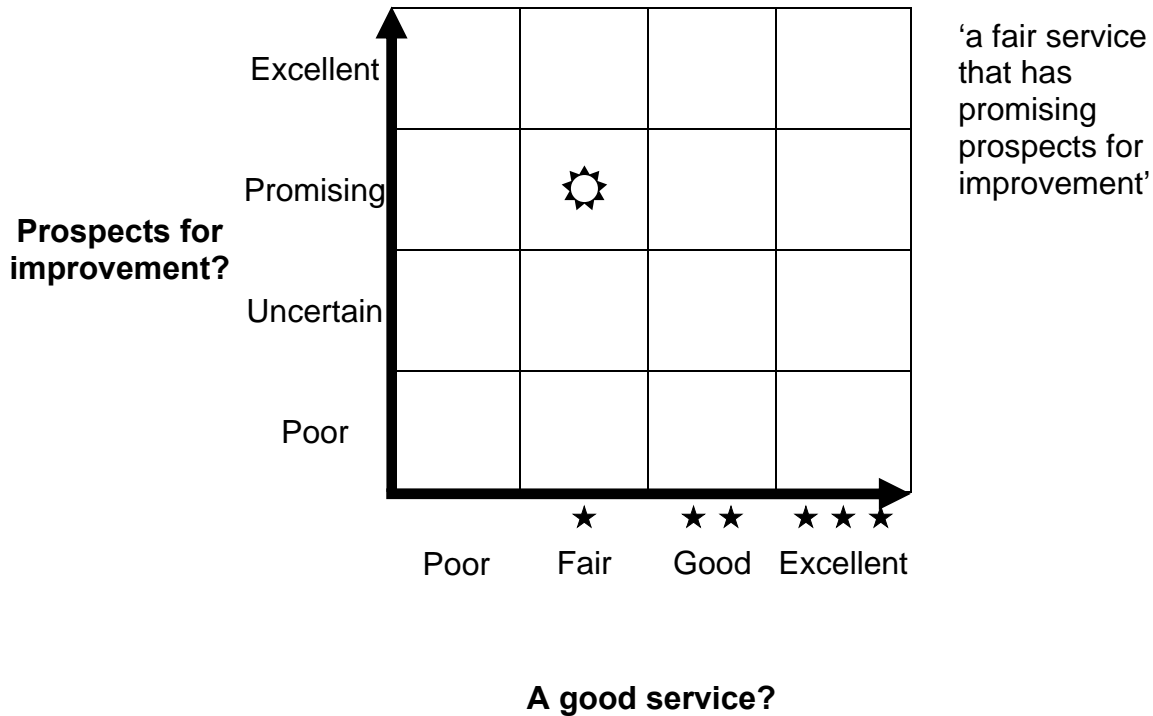
## Summary

- 1 Wyre is a borough within Lancashire in northwest England. It covers an area of 283 square kilometres and includes the coastal towns of Cleveleys and Fleetwood, the market towns of Garstang and Poulton-le-Fylde and outlying villages. The population of 109,000 is largely concentrated along the coastal areas with only a quarter of people living in rural areas.
- 2 The Council comprises 55 councillors and is controlled by the Conservative party with 33 seats. A Leader and Cabinet are responsible for decision-making. Each of the six Cabinet members has individual executive responsibility for portfolio areas.
- 3 The housing inspection covered access and customer care, diversity, housing strategy and enabling, private sector housing, homelessness and housing advice and value for money. These housing services are those that remain with the Council following the transfer of all of the Councils housing stock to Wyre Housing Association in 1996.

## Scoring the service

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

**Table 1 Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>**



Source: Audit Commission

- 5 The service is a fair, one-star service.
- There is a single point of contact for most council services through Connectwyre – the Council’s contact centre.
  - Public areas in council buildings are suitable for, and accessible to, people with disabilities.
  - Information is provided in a range of formats to meet customers’ needs.
  - Consultation with all relevant stakeholders on specific initiatives, such as homelessness.
  - Partnership working with a series of agencies is well developed.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

- The council has a good understanding of housing need and private sector stock condition in the area.
- Services are generally improving and meeting need.

There are a series of weaknesses, including:

- a high proportion of calls presented to Connectwyre are abandoned;
- personal access for customers outside the main population centres to services is difficult;
- libraries as a means of accessing services has not been developed;
- customer complaints and feedback are not systematically analysed to improve customer access and focus;
- no analysis has been made of which sections of the community are accessing services;
- resources for addressing unfitness are inadequate; and
- the supply of affordable housing at its present pace will not meet demand.

6 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- there have been a series of improvements to services which will be noticed by service users;
- performance has improved across a number of indicators;
- a value for money approach is developing;
- there is a clear commitment from senior officers and councillors to improve services;
- performance management systems are developing; and
- the Council is learning from other providers and show a willingness to change.

Areas for improvement include:

- complaints and satisfaction levels are not gathered effectively or used as opportunities for learning;
- target setting is modest and underdeveloped, some key targets are not achieved;
- action planning is not always SMART;
- demand for affordable housing will not be met with present policies;
- training and staff development measures are not comprehensively applied; and
- absenteeism rates for the Council are high but falling.

## Recommendations

- 7 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the council. In addition we identify the approximate costs<sup>2</sup> 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 should do the following.

<b>Recommendation</b>
<i>R1 Comprehensively gather and act on customer satisfaction and feedback with services.</i>

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- services will be tailored to meet service users needs; and
- improved services.

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

<b>Recommendation</b>
<i>R2 Set targets for increasing the percentage of vulnerable adults living in decent homes.</i>

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- meet government targets; and
- improve the living conditions of the vulnerable.

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

---

<sup>2</sup> Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 percent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

**Recommendation***R3 Address levels of unfitness within an appropriate timescale.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- higher standards in privately rented accommodation.

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

**Recommendation***R4 Assess the effectiveness of services in preventing homelessness.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- services tailored to maximise their effectiveness; and
- reduction in the number of homelessness presentations.

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

**Recommendation***R5 Adopt an overarching value for money strategy.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more efficient use of resources; and
- more resources to spend on council priorities.

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

# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 8 Wyre is a borough within Lancashire in northwest England. It covers an area of 283 square kilometres and includes the coastal towns of Cleveleys and Fleetwood, the market towns of Garstang and Poulton-le-Fylde and outlying villages. The population of 109,000 is largely concentrated along the coastal areas with only a quarter of people living in rural areas. It has grown by 8.4 per cent since 1982 and is considerably increased by summer visitors. Around 26 per cent of the resident population is retired, above the national average of 18.5 per cent.
- 9 The black and minority ethnic (BME) population is 2.4 per cent and 1.2 per cent of the population are from non-white ethnic communities. The two largest non-white minority groups are Indian and Chinese.
- 10 Wyre is ranked 161st (out of 354) in the indices of deprivation for local authority areas in England (with 1 being the most disadvantaged). The borough as a whole is relatively prosperous but it has pockets of deprivation – one third of its areas are amongst the most disadvantaged 10 per cent nationally for access to housing and key local services - 20 per cent of households have no earned income. Car ownership is below average. The local economy has fewer jobs in manufacturing, business and distribution than nationally but more in the public sector and in agriculture. Tourism is very important across the whole borough. Unemployment is below average.
- 11 The population overall experiences poorer health than in England as a whole. The percentage of people with a limiting long-term illness is above average. Some individuals and groups are vulnerable to experiencing poorer health, due to factors such as poverty, housing and access to jobs and services.
- 12 The Wyre Strategic Partnership, comprising public, private community, faith and voluntary organisations, has produced a community plan which identifies the vision 'Thriving communities, prosperous business with opportunities so that all our residents can achieve a good quality of life'.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Wyre Strategic plan 2005

## The council

- 13 The Council comprises 55 councillors and is controlled by the Conservative party with 33 seats. A Leader and Cabinet are responsible for decision-making. Each of the six Cabinet members has individual executive responsibility for portfolio areas. The governance arrangements are supported by five Overview and Scrutiny Committees, which reflect portfolio responsibilities, and regulatory committees. The Council's net revenue budget for 2005/06 is £13 million. The net revenue budget for housing in 2005/06 is £1.666 million, including capital charges. There is also a housing capital budget of £455,000 and it is estimated that planning services costs of £14,350 per annum are related to its work on affordable housing issues.
- 14 The Council's mission statement, vision, corporate priorities and values are stated in its first Corporate Plan (2005-2008). Five corporate priorities set out what the Council is aiming to achieve. One priority relates directly to housing:
- 'We will ensure that everyone in the community has somewhere to live and local opportunities to access opportunities for a healthy and fulfilling lifestyle.'*
- 15 The Council transferred its housing stock to Wyre Housing Association (WHA) in 1996. Services for homeless families and people were transferred under a five-year agency agreement and will be brought back into the council in July.
- 16 In 2004 the Council was judged to be weak following a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) inspection. The Council's Improvement Plan, following CPA, includes objectives to:
- improve engagement with the community; and
  - develop an overall approach to addressing the diverse needs of the community.
- 17 The Council is progressing well in addressing its improvement priorities and the weaknesses identified in the CPA. Most of the tasks in the CPA improvement plan have been completed or are continuous actions that directly or indirectly deliver improvements. The Council is making good progress in changing service delivery to meet the needs of local people by developing a culture that is focused on 'Customer First'.
- 18 A progress assessment report in March found several improvements and commented:
- 'The Council is progressing well in addressing its improvement priorities and the weaknesses identified in the CPA and Progress Assessment Report 2005.'*
- 19 The Council's Housing Strategy has been declared 'fit for purpose' by Government Office North West.

### **The council's strategic housing service**

- 20 The housing inspection covered access and customer care, diversity, housing strategy and enabling, private sector housing, homelessness and housing advice and value for money. These housing services are those that remain with the Council following the transfer of all of the Councils housing stock to Wyre Housing Association in 1996.
- 21 Total housing stock in the borough totals approximately 48,000 units of which 3,700 belong to social landlords, predominantly Wyre Housing Association.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 22** The Council has a clear hierarchy of plans with corporate and service plans and priorities appropriately aligned.
- 23** The Council's mission statement, vision, corporate priorities and values are stated in its Corporate Plan (2005-2008). The mission statement is:
- 'to work with local communities to make Wyre a better place to live, work and visit.'*
- 24** Five corporate priorities set out what the Council is trying to achieve.
- Living places: We will improve, preserve and maintain those neighbourhoods and places which local people consider valuable for recreation, conservation, commerce and daily living.
  - Living Organisation: We will provide a flexible and responsive organisation that supports delivery of services in an efficient and effective manner through continual improvement, regular challenge and listening to local people.
  - Living Economy: We will promote investment, create jobs and build modern sustainable communities.
  - Living Safely: We will work with others to make Wyre a safer place to live, work and visit by helping to reduce crime and the fear of crime in the local community.
  - Living Healthily: We will ensure that everyone in the community has somewhere to live and local opportunities to access opportunities for a healthy and fulfilling lifestyle.
- 25** The Housing strategy also has five objectives, which dovetail with corporate objectives, particularly living healthily:
- to work with local agencies to tackle homelessness;
  - to give people choice about where and how they live;
  - to work to improve the condition of the housing stock;
  - to work with private developers to secure affordable housing and re-use empty homes; and
  - to help older people and people with disabilities to stay in their homes longer through the provision of advice and grant assistance.

## Access and customer care

- 26 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in the Council's approach to access and customer care. We found that the Council is enabling customers to access its services in a range of ways which are appropriate to its mix of rural and urban areas. Housing need is found in all areas and communities within the borough and it is important the council make easy access to services for all communities. Staff show a commitment to customer care and we found a range of helpful information on offer. There are customer care standards in place, although these are not comprehensive. There are some areas of weakness including a lack of detailed analysis of customers' actual and preferred access methods. There is also an inconsistent approach to seeking customer feedback across all services and libraries as information points have yet to achieve their full potential.
- 27 The council has recently rearranged access to services in a strategic manner. A network of area offices, criticised in a recent Audit Commission report - 'Access and Customer focus', have been closed and replaced with:
- a contact centre, Connectwyre;
  - information points in local libraries;
  - payment points in Post Offices; and
  - a benefits advice bus and officers regularly visiting residents in their homes.
- 28 It is easy to access housing services. Users can contact the Council by telephone, e-mail, the internet and by personal visit to the civic centre in Poulton-le-Fylde.
- 29 Most housing services can be accessed by Connectwyre - the council's customer contact centre – the service is available during office hours (8.30 am to 5.00 pm) and its number is widely advertised. A number is provided for emergency requests and callers are directed to a duty officer. Call response rates are improving but still attract criticism from agencies working in the area. In May 2005, 28 per cent of incoming calls were lost with an average waiting time of over three minutes. Since then call response rates have improved significantly with 2005/06 average response performance of 4.5 seconds and the percentage of calls answered in ten seconds at 94 per cent.
- 30 Challenging targets are in place for the call centre service. Connectwyre aims to answer 80 per cent of customer enquiries at first point of contact by June 2006. Performance is currently running at 78 per cent. Call centre technology and queuing software provide the framework for a robust performance management system to track customer access and responsiveness, but this is not being used to ensure that staff are always available to provide a prompt service and respond to anticipated increases in demand.

- 31 Personal access to services is mixed. The Council's main access point at the Civic Centre in Wyre is attractive and well laid out. The offices are open between 8.30 and 5.00pm, the reception is well signposted, modern and has private interview facilities. Appropriate targets are in place for waiting times which are monitored and reported to members.
- 32 The Council's other personal access points through Lancashire Council's libraries is less effective. A free phone is available to talk to council staff but library staff could not answer routine enquiries and information leaflets were not always available. Only one library had a link to the council's website and the libraries are not signposted as information points. Service standards are not applied and the quality of information available is not monitored. Some Council staff were unaware of the service provided by libraries. This restricts residents' access to services.
- 33 Rural areas are served by a touring information bus offering advice on council services and claiming benefits. The bus has been partly funded from central government and Wyre HA and is directly linked to council benefit and information systems. Staff from other agencies such as the Pensions Service and Wyre HA also hold 'surgery sessions' on the bus giving advice. However the bus is not easily accessed by people with a physical disability as it cannot 'kneel'.
- 34 The council's web site has recently been improved but few interactive features. Interactive features are limited, for example complaints and applications for grants cannot be made on line. This will restrict the extent of e business completed by the Council.
- 35 A series of informative leaflets outlining the various services available to homeowners and tenants are available but the standard of presentation varies. Not all leaflets indicate if they are available in other formats or languages, type is often small and the mixing of similar type colour and background make them difficult to read. Again this will restrict access to services.
- 36 Customer service standards are not comprehensively set. Corporate customer service standards are in place, covering general customer care issues and are monitored and reported to members. However, the lack of published standards, for example, in private sector regulation and grants activity or housing advice makes it difficult for service users to know what they can expect in these areas.
- 37 Residents are kept up to date with council services and new developments through the council newspaper, Wyre Voice. The quarterly paper is attractive and mixes information and updates on projects in an easy to read format. Work on the private sector renewal projects appears along with grants available to residents and landlords in the area. It is an effective means of keeping residents up to date with their council.
- 38 The council has not analysed the costs and benefits of different access methods to services nor carried out large scale research on barriers to access such as opening hours or surgery venues. This is a missed opportunity to tailor the service to meet needs, particularly when identifying which services to offer over the phone and those in person.

- 39 Limited information is currently available on customers who are not yet accessing services. At present the Council is only profiling customers who have already accessed the service and is not aware of those who have not. Collecting such information is important if a better understanding is to be gained of all customers needs and to identify barriers to services.
- 40 Customer and partner consultation processes are effective. Large scale formal consultation exercises, such as the one that informed the homelessness strategy, are extensively and effectively completed. Smaller scale exercises are similarly effective such as the Burn Naze renewal strategy, which has a resident on the steering group. This is an effective means of ensuring services meet users needs.
- 41 The housing service has not yet established comprehensive mechanisms to seek feedback from its service users. Although the care and repair service routinely surveys its customers, there is a lack of service user satisfaction surveys in other housing services. This means that there is no comprehensive information about user satisfaction to guide service improvement.
- 42 Informal complaints are not recorded. By not recording informal complaints the Council are missing opportunities for learning.
- 43 It is easy to make a formal complaint. Complaints can be made in writing, by email, over the phone and through downloading a form from the website. The ethnicity, gender and disability of complainants are recorded, but there is no evidence of this information being used to influence services.
- 44 The complaints procedure is not comprehensively explained to prospective complainants. The policy sets out how customers can complain, service standards and appeals process and what will happen if their complaint is upheld. However, the procedure does not explain how you can progress your complaint should you be dissatisfied with the response or details of the Local Government Ombudsman service.
- 45 Complaints are not monitored for the quality of their response or systematically used for learning. Complaints are not monitored and analysed across the Council to ensure that they are dealt with in an appropriate and timely way. The Council is not proactively monitoring trends in customer complaints so that it can target its resources to areas of greatest need or importance to local people. It is not sharing learning from feedback and complaints between services. By not doing this the council are unsure as to the quality of their response and is missing opportunities to improve their services.

## **Diversity**

- 46 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in the councils approach to diversity. The Council has adopted a comprehensive Equality Strategy, all Council buildings are Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant and languageline is available to all staff. However not all staff or councillors have been on diversity training, there is no provision for travellers and until recently grants were insufficient to meet the identified needs of people with disabilities living in the community.

- 47 The Council has adopted comprehensive Equality Strategy incorporating commitments to develop equality objectives and targets, consultation, impact assessment, monitoring, audit and scrutiny. It sets out how the Council is working to promote diversity within its workforce and the wider community. The Council conforms to level 1 (out of five levels) of the Equality Standard for Local Government and hopes to achieve level 2 by 2005/06.
- 48 The Council is taking steps to understand the diversity and needs in the borough. The Council has recently completed a draft Wyre Profile to understand the diversity of the borough. The profile contains socio-economic data, broken down into a series of categories including: ethnicity and age bands, deprivation, economy, education, health, housing and transport. This information is used to shape services such as the care and repair service and development of sheltered housing. Such an approach will help tailor services to meet the needs of the areas residents.
- 49 The needs of vulnerable people are not systematically recorded or flagged up on IT systems. A new IT system is to be shortly installed which can accommodate this information. Presently staff are unsure of the detailed needs of their customers and therefore unable to provide an adequate service to meet their needs.
- 50 Detailed equality impact assessments have been completed for all sections of the housing service. The assessments address diversity issues such as helping vulnerable people stay in their homes through the care and repair service and supporting independent advice agencies.
- 51 The council complies with the DDA, one of only three councils in the North West to achieve this. Presently only one unit of homeless accommodation for the disabled is available in the borough, although the Council intend to address this through their private sector leasing scheme.
- 52 Action has recently been taken to address barriers to service improvement in the disabled facilities grants service.
- Resources have been increased to meet the demand for DFG's. In recent years provision for DFG's has fluctuated but from 2004/05 resources have been increased significantly and will continue to increase until 2006/07.
  - Home loss and disturbance grant is offered to social housing tenants to free up adapted properties when the adaptation is no longer required.
  - New leaflets and publicity promote the adaptations service effectively.
  - A new priority system has been introduced to ensure those most in need get help first. Based on best practice from ODPM and other authorities, a multi agency prioritisation panel decide the priority to be allocated to an individual application.
- 53 However a number of barriers remain:
- satisfaction with the service is not consistently gathered or acted upon;
  - there are no service standards for DFGs;

## 18 Strategic Housing Services | How good is the service?

- customers sometimes experience difficulty in obtaining the necessary quotations from two contractors which can delay processing;
- the prioritisation system has not been advertised to or developed with service users; and
- waiting lists are still lengthy and the authority has been slow to react to increasing demand. The waiting list has been shortened from 183 (December 2004) but still stands at 57 (February 2006).

- 54** Training for councillors and staff on diversity is not comprehensive, despite this being a clear aim of the council. The portfolio holder for housing and some senior staff in the housing section have not had any diversity training. This is poor and sends the wrong message about the council. Other staff have received training on relevant issues such as how to protect vulnerable adults from abuse. A programme of training has recently been produced and it is expected that all staff and councillors will have been on some diversity training shortly.
- 55** The reporting of those using services by diversity is under-developed. The housing service monitors some aspects of its service by ethnicity, including homeless acceptances and complaints. However, there is no information about the profile of those taking up housing advice or requesting the services of the private sector housing team. This will make it hard to identify patterns of under-representation and assess if services are being provided fairly.
- 56** No services are provided for travellers. There are no sites in the borough for travellers and no information is provided for them. There has been no formal research into their needs and contact with traveller's representatives in the area has been unproductive. The Council are legally obligated to assess the needs of travellers, presently there are no plans to address this and their needs will go unmet.
- 57** The workforce does not reflect its community, economically active people with disabilities and the BME (black and minority ethnic) community are under-represented. The local BME population is about 2.4 per cent and around 9.8 per cent of the population are disabled. However the council only employs 0.56 per cent BME staff and 1.31 per cent disabled staff. This is being addressed through the Human Resource Strategy and the Equality Strategy Action Plan which has set targets to be achieved by March 2007 which reflect the economically active proportions of the disabled and BME populations in the area.
- 58** The Council has taken some steps to make its services accessible to different groups, although there are some gaps. The website has 'AA' status a minicom and Language Line service is advertised at public offices and staff have been trained in its use. However, not all information is offered in other languages and the formats of some leaflets is weak.

- 59 The council is only just beginning to address community safety issues such as domestic abuse and hate crime. The council's community safety strategy has a series of priorities and targets which include addressing domestic abuse and hate crime. However little has been done previously to address either problem, for example there is no domestic abuse strategy, no baseline figures to judge the effectiveness of any initiatives and there is no hate crime panel. Encouragingly a service standard to remove all offensive graffiti in 24 hours has been set, the council part fund a worker at a women's refuge in a neighbouring borough and offer additional security to victims of domestic violence. Nevertheless this inconsistent approach will leave vulnerable people uncertain of the Council's response.
- 60 Contractors employed by the council have a code of conduct to abide by. The code covers general behaviour when working in someone's home and issues relating to diversity. The code is not monitored, however, and the council are unsure if the code is observed in practice.
- 61 The council cannot effectively monitor the number of vulnerable households in decent homes in the private sector, as it is required to do to deliver its Public Service Agreement seven, (PSA7) target. The government has set out in PSA7 targets to increase the estimated national levels of vulnerable people living in decent homes from 57 per cent to 65 per cent by 2006 and to 70 per cent by 2010. Presently the council only has an estimate of the number of vulnerable in none decent homes from information drawn from a number of sources. It has no targets for vulnerable in none decent homes in the private sector and is unsure if it will meet the 2010 target.

## Housing strategy and enabling

- 62 This is the key area of inspection for councils who have transferred their housing stock because it is an assessment of how they perform their principal 'enabling' role of ensuring there is sufficient housing of good quality to meet the needs of the district's residents.
- 63 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The Council has agreed a housing strategy which is based on detailed housing needs and stock condition surveys and has acted on their findings. It has adopted a strategic approach in allocating scarce resources to areas of greatest need and to address underperformance. It has consulted effectively on key strategies and developed joint working with a variety of other agencies. However, the Council has been slow to respond to increasing homelessness and housing demand and it is uncertain if it will meet its targets for affordable housing. The Council does not have an affordable homes action plan and targets for new affordable homes are below that stated as required in the housing needs survey.

- 64 Following an extensive consultation exercise a comprehensive housing strategy for the period 2005/06 has been agreed. The strategy links with national and local priorities such as 'homes for all' and the local homelessness strategy. A summary of the strategy is available in leaflet form which has been supplied to stakeholders in the area. The strategy has been declared fit for purpose by GONW. Progress towards the strategies targets and objectives are monitored through a housing theme group and annual strategy updates.
- 65 There are also strong internal working processes in place between housing, planning, legal, finance and environmental health sections which assist in ensuring delivery.
- 66 The strategy has a vision and four key objectives:
- enabling the provision of at least 60 affordable homes per year;
  - reducing homelessness;
  - private sector renewal and energy efficiency; and
  - helping vulnerable people stay in their own home.
- 67 Each objective within the housing strategy has an action plan attached outlining how it will be achieved. The action plans generally are SMART<sup>4</sup> but crucially funding sources are not always specified.
- 68 The housing strategy is based on robust information; a housing needs and a private sector stock condition survey was completed in 2005. The housing needs survey addresses younger and older persons and key worker accommodation issues and information can be broken down geographically into eleven sub areas - reflecting the mix of urban and rural in the borough. The survey incorporated HHSRS and Decent Homes Standard (DHS) information.
- 69 The Council has a good understanding of the private sector housing market and other influences such as travel to work areas and average incomes. An analysis of market trends for both sale and renting was completed for the housing needs survey and internal information on waiting list and homelessness was also gathered. This information has been used to inform the housing strategy.
- 70 The information in the needs and stock condition surveys are not being kept up to date. There is no routine updating of information from existing data sources such as homelessness, housing advice and housing register or of house prices and rent levels. This undermines the currency of information held.
- 71 The strategy interfaces effectively with the sub regional strategy. Wyre are members of the Lancashire West housing group and are involved in the production of sub regional housing strategy for the region. A sub regional framework has been created on which the strategy will be built. The council has established a series of partnerships with a variety of stakeholders to deliver housing objectives. The council are part of a series of strategic partnerships at the regional and sub regional level. This includes Lancashire partnerships and sub regional partnerships with other local authorities.

---

<sup>4</sup> Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Resourced and Time Bound.

They have also contributed to funding regional and sub regional housing studies such as the CURS study: 'Changing housing markets in Cheshire, Cumbria and Lancashire'. This improves the chances of delivering objectives and meeting need.

- 72** Good use is made of information sources to focus resources in the most needy areas and groups. As well as taking advantage of traditional sources such as the housing needs survey and census information, super output area information has been used. In particular this identified need in the Burn Naze area which had previously been masked by the relative affluence of the larger ward area.
- 73** The council has been slow to respond to the demand for affordable housing in the borough. It has been clear for some time through growing waiting lists and admissions into homeless accommodation that demand for housing is outstripping supply. A modest target of 60 additional affordable housing units per year has been set, based on what is known to be in the pipeline rather than providing a stimulus to raise performance, and considerably below the 330 stated as required in the housing needs survey.
- 74** The council has been slow, since the abolition of Local Authority Social Housing Grant, to consider more innovative forms of funding for development and has not responded to the messages in the Audit Commissions report: Building More Affordable Homes. The private finance initiative has not been considered as the Council consider it ill suited to the relative small size of the authority. A leasing scheme for temporary accommodation has only recently commenced to coincide with the loss of agency presently providing the homeless service loss of temporary accommodation. It will be difficult for the Council to meet the demand for social housing without exploring different means of securing accommodation.
- 75** Affordable housing new builds have fallen over the last three years. In 2002/03, 41 units were completed, 2003/04 84 units were completed while to date in 2005/06 only 11 units have been completed. The council is part of the newly formed Affordable Homes Partnership Group, set up to increase the number of affordable homes in the borough. The group is made up of stakeholders in the area and has an action plan which is generally SMART. The action plan shows some progress against the group's aims, however this has yet to translate into an increase in affordable housing starts.
- 76** Although the Council does not have an affordable housing strategy some ad hoc recent attempts have been made to improve the supply of affordable housing:
- section 106 agreements have been changed from 20 per cent affordable homes on a site to 50 per cent. Over the past three years 68 per cent of affordable units have been built under Section 106 agreements;
  - a land identification process has been pursued with their three partner Registered Social Landlords (RSL's) and parish councils;
  - the Council has made provision within its Local Plan Policy to enable rural exception sites for affordable homes to secure planning permission;
  - grant for Nominees Scheme returning empty homes into affordable use;

## 22 Strategic Housing Services | How good is the service?

- creation of a multi agency affordable housing task group;
  - 87 per cent of new build dwellings on brownfield sites, one of the highest in the region;
  - use of Blackpool council properties; and
  - funding has been secured from the Housing Corporation for a right to buy, 'buy back' scheme.
- 77 The Council has positive relationships with the RSLs it works with and has a choice based common housing register. It has regular formal contact their stock transfer RSL, Wyre Housing and with private landlords through a landlords forum.
- 78 There are about 1,000 caravans on 18 Park Home sites in the borough but no traveller sites. Services are provided for residents living in Park Homes such as insulation and advice, but no provision is made for travellers. There is a gap in the council's services in this area, responsibility for which may fall on neighbouring councils.

## Homelessness and housing advice

- 79 The homelessness service offered by the Council has more weaknesses than strengths. Homelessness services are provided by an agency on behalf of the council. Satisfaction levels of service users are not systematically gathered and record keeping of homelessness presentations is weak. The Council are still reliant on bed and breakfast (B&B) accommodation and government targets are not reached. However there is a clear resolve to improve homelessness services by bringing them back in house and there are already signs of improvement.
- 80 Tackling homelessness is a corporate priority and it is clear that the Council are putting measures in place to combat the problem. The homelessness forum is attended by senior councillors and officers, in 2005 a new permanent post of homelessness project officer was created and a robust review of homelessness services was commenced. The review led to the decision to bring the service back in house in July of this year. Other services have been developed such as the 'spend to save approach' and strong tenancy support services.
- 81 The recent review of the homelessness service was widely and effectively consulted upon. This included all stakeholder agencies in the borough and service users. Findings from the consultation were incorporated into the strategy.
- 82 The strategy has six key objectives, the most of important of which are:
- preventing homelessness;
  - increase and improve the provision of temporary accommodation; and
  - improve access to settled accommodation.

- 83 The review of the homelessness service led to a detailed action plan which meets all the requirements of SMART. The plan covers all the issues one would expect from an organisation abreast of thinking on how to combat homelessness. A series of targets have been set to improve the service such as the reduction in the use of bed and breakfast accommodation by 50 per cent by 2009.
- 84 Performance on homelessness is mixed. It is in the top quarter of local authorities in minimising the stay of homeless households in hostel accommodation and has significantly reduced repeat homelessness from 15 in 2004/05 to one in 2005/06. However the council is in the third and bottom quartiles for length of stay for households in bed and breakfast accommodation and the per centage of repeat homelessness acceptances.
- 85 After a period of growing homelessness there are now signs that this growth has been reversed. In the period 1989/99 to 2004/05 acceptances increased by 177 per cent. At the same period applicants registered on the Councils common housing register have increased by 159 per cent. However, a trend in the reduction of the number of statutory applications and acceptances is now developing. This is encouraging and shows the effectiveness of preventative measures.
- 86 The homelessness service has completed an analysis of service take up by ethnicity. The analysis showed that the service is broadly equally accessed by all sections of the community.
- 87 The agency providing the homelessness service on behalf of the council has not performed well. The service is covered by a service level agreement detailing such things as the per centage of homeless applicants who received a determination on the homelessness status within 33 days and the average length of stay in B&B accommodation. A number of important targets were not reached, for example, the average length of stay in B&B and/or hostel accommodation and generally the service is poorly administered.
- 88 Although it is easy to access the homelessness service lacks a customer focus. In particular:
- there are few service standards;
  - satisfaction levels are not systematically gathered;
  - the standard of interview facilities is varied; and
  - the speed of homelessness determinations has declined over the last three years.

The quality of service is not effectively gathered and without comprehensive service standards applicants cannot judge the service received against that which should have been delivered.

## 24 Strategic Housing Services | How good is the service?

89 There are number of barriers to improvement in the service.

- The service is delivered without a comprehensive procedure manual.
- Record keeping varies, one application form was not signed and several were undated.
- Standard letters do not use plain english and terms such as 'common housing register' and choice based lettings are not explained.
- Advice given is not always recorded and there are no records of applicants approval to send information to other agencies.
- Applicants are not supported in selecting properties from the choice based lettings system.

The service lacks sensitivity to some of its clients needs during what is a difficult time for them.

90 There are some strengths though:

- where no duty is owed, households with children are appropriately referred to social services under s213A of the Children's Act;
- priority need and intentionality are correctly interpreted and local connection pursued;
- 'mystery shopping' test calls to the out of hours homelessness service are completed;
- a series of leaflets are available outlining the various means of securing affordable housing in the borough;
- a private sector leasing scheme is being developed for homeless applicants;
- construction of a 'foyer' and homeless families hostel;
- applicants are informed of right to appeal and referred onto advocacy agencies; and
- there is a detailed appeals procedure and appeals are appropriately dealt with by the Council. Investigations are thorough and meticulous notes kept.

This shows a desire to improve the service in a manner which will be noticed by service users.

91 The standard of temporary accommodation is high. Reality checks of temporary accommodation found them to be clean, safe, secure accommodation. Accommodation is regularly inspected and a bed and breakfast information pack is available for all households entering bed and breakfast accommodation. The pack is available in other formats and contains and lot of useful information. Unfortunately none of the homelessness service users spoken to during the inspection could recall being given a copy of the information pack and the council could not provide evidence to the contrary.

- 92 In March 2002, the government set a target that, by March 2004, no homeless family with children should have to live in a B&B hotel, except in an emergency, and even then for no more than six weeks. The Council has a downward trend in this area and the average stay for 2005/06 was slightly below six weeks.
- 93 There is an emphasis on preventing homelessness and preventative measures are financially supported by the council and administered by partner agencies through service level agreements. The measures include:
- mediation service;
  - rent bond guarantee scheme;
  - talks at schools and other bodies;
  - intensive tenancy support scheme: and
  - a homelessness directory supplied to all agencies working in the field.

Several agencies complained that some services such as tenancy support were overstretched. This will reduce the effectiveness of preventative measures.

- 94 Good links are maintained with other agencies working in the field. The council hosts a well attended and effective homelessness forum on a quarterly basis. Voluntary and statutory agencies are generally praiseworthy of the councils support and found officers easy to access and responsive to their needs.
- 95 A series of protocols with other statutory agencies about dealing with vulnerable groups have been made. This includes homeless 16/17 year olds who are not owed a duty under the 'Children Leaving Care Act 2000 and Prolific and Other Priority Offenders (PPO) Strategy. The development of the PPO protocol was led by WBC and has been put forward by the Police to GONW as best practice. This will help the vulnerable and protect the community.

## Private sector housing

- 96 The way the council delivers private sector housing services is integral to its wider housing strategy. There are links between private sector housing and homelessness in terms of prevention and supply. There are also links with enabling because management of the private sector stock can be integral to meeting the need for affordable good quality homes.
- 97 There are balance of strengths and weaknesses in the way private sector housing services are delivered. The council has responded to identified need and tailored its services around this. However it has been slow to develop other means of improving housing conditions such as through equity release loans and levels of customer satisfaction are not systematically gathered. Targets for addressing unfitness are modest and it is likely that unfitness in some properties may not be addressed for some time.

- 98 The council has a good understanding of the condition of private sector stock in the borough. A comprehensive private sector stock condition survey was carried out in 2003 alongside its housing needs survey. The survey covered income levels, DHS and the HHSRS and made the following findings:
- 4.4 per cent of all dwellings are unfit compared to a national average of 4.2 per cent;
  - 63 per cent of unfit dwellings are occupied by households on low incomes;
  - fuel poverty and poor thermal insulation are common in the private rented sector, SAP ratings are below national averages;
  - average cost to make all dwellings fit is £2,639, totalling £5.5 million borough wide;
  - unfitness is highest in the private rented stock and dwellings built before 1919, nearly a third of dwellings in the Burn Naze area are unfit; and
  - there is a strong correlation between the vulnerable and poor quality housing.
- 99 Although there are no obvious indicators of rapid changes in stock condition, the council has not continually updated this survey with information collected during other surveys. This undermines the currency of the information. A further survey is programmed for 2008.
- 100 The Council has a clear and comprehensive strategic private sector housing renewal policy. The policy was effectively consulted on and addresses council priorities and areas of greatest need. It incorporates the DHS and the HHSRS and addresses locally identified issues in the housing stock such as affordable warmth and owner occupiers on low incomes. High level objectives in this area are covered in the housing strategy and dovetail with wider council objectives.
- 101 The policy provides details of how the Council tackles disrepair in the private sector. This includes support directly from the Council and that available from partners. Support provided directly by the Council includes a mix of advice and grants. Grant works must bring properties up to both the DHS and to meet HHSRS as well as energy efficiency standards.
- 102 The council does not have an empty homes policy and has a mixed track record in dealing with private sector homes. Although the Council is in the top quarter of all local authorities in either making fit or demolishing unfit private sector dwellings it is in the bottom quarter of all authorities in the percentage of private sector dwellings empty for six months or more.
- 103 It is easy to access private sector housing services. The availability of grants and loans are advertised through leaflets, posters and articles in the Council's newsletters. When a renewal policy was adopted for the Burn Naze information leaflets a local publicity campaign was launched which involved open days and roadshows and advertising of schemes in the local press.

- 104** The council maintains good links with private landlords in the area. It has an effective landlord's forum and has produced a private landlord's information pack. The pack does not indicate if it is available in other formats, is in small font and does not carry any language straplines. Nevertheless the pack contains a lot of useful information to landlords and generally encourages good management of dwellings, particularly HMOs. Private landlords spoken to during the inspection, of which some had enforcement action taken against them, are happy with the services offered by the council.
- 105** A data base of HMO inspections is kept. The data base is regularly updated with information from inspections and other departments such as building control.
- 106** A collaborative approach is adopted with landlords when dealing with unfit properties. Landlords with unfit properties are offered a variety of solutions to deal with repairs such as grants for nominees and the sale of them to a housing association partner of the Council. This is backed up with the threat of enforcement action.
- 107** Private sector housing services are pro actively promoted with residents but its impact is uncertain. Information leaflets are sent with housing benefit notices and posters put in places likely to be used by those living in privately rented properties, such as post offices and doctors surgeries. Overseas students at the nearby nautical college have been briefed on the standards they should expect in private sector accommodation. Aside from the proactive inspection of houses in multiple occupation, minimum standards in the private rented sector are only enforced following tenant's complaints regarding disrepair. The effectiveness of advertising is judged by the response to it, this is not however compared to any previous campaigns and it is difficult to make judgements on the take up.
- 108** Insufficient resources have been allocated to deal with unfit and empty homes in an effective manner. The stock condition survey showed:
- around 55 per cent of the areas 1,139 HMO's are considered unfit for a variety of reasons; and
  - around 1280 homes are on the empty homes register.
- 109** However, grant budgets and targets to address this are modest:
- a budget of £500,000 per year for the next three years.
  - address the 20 worst HMO's each year;
  - improve the standard of 150 privately rented properties over the next three years; and
  - bring 15 empty homes back into use each year.
- Although the resources devoted to private sector housing are effectively used with a five-year risk based programme of HMO inspections the majority of unfit HMO's will not be inspected for some time.

- 110 The council has been slow in responding to the Regulatory Reform Order (RRO) 2002 with the powers in the act not being drawn up into a procedure until December 2005. The RRO required all local authorities to rethink the way they deliver private sector housing services, moving away from giving grants to giving loans. A budget for equity release loans was available in 2005/06 but no spend was achieved. Equity release loans could help the large numbers of low income owner occupiers in the borough maintain their properties.
- 111 The council has prepared for the new powers available to them in the 2004 Housing Act. Details of the act have been provided to landlords in their information packs and a briefing has been given to the landlord's forum. ConectWyre have been briefed on the Act and standard responses to the most frequently asked questions prepared. The council newspaper has also carried details of the Act. Using powers in the Act to access housing benefit information the council is writing to all landlords explain what is expected from them. Both officers and staff are aware of what the new Act expects of them.
- 112 As part of the strategy of targeting areas in greatest need an area based regeneration initiative has been adopted for the Burn Naze area. There is an ambitious target to reduce unfitnes in homes in Burn Naze from 30 per cent to 5 per cent by March 2008. However the initiative has fallen behind schedule and objectives are unlikely to be met if work does not progress on time.
- 113 Fuel poverty and low SAP ratings are being addressed. A variety of grants are available to improve living conditions such as:
- PHEEW - a grant to provide insulation, heating and hot water; and
  - Wyred for energy, external insulation for park homes.
- 114 A useful information pack is provided to park home owners on insulation and grants available to them. The council works in partnership with a private contractor to complete works at a competitiiive rate. The award winning scheme has been featured in local and national press and has significantly improved insulation and saved residents money. Park home residents are often on low incomes and suffer fuel poverty.
- 115 The council provide an effective care and repair and handyperson service. The service was awarded the quality mark from the National Home Improvement Agency in November. Funding for the service comes from a variety of sources and is provided for both Wyre and Fylde Borough Councils. The service links with a series of other voluntary and statutory agencies such as the fire service, PCT and Age Concern. The service is used to deliver home security and safety equipment such as smoke alarms and an electric blanket exchange. The service also liaises directly with hospitals to facilitate discharges and reduce bed blocking co-operation between agencies can help reduce overall cost to the public sector.

- 116** It is easy for residents to access the care and repair service. Details are supplied to all agencies who are likely to have contact with the services client group (over 60 and disabled) and it is advertised in the council's newsletter and the website. Referrals come from a variety of agencies and some clients contact the agency directly. In an area of high levels of owner occupation, but low incomes it provides a valuable service.
- 117** Satisfaction levels could be gathered in a more effective manner. On a quarterly basis all service users are contacted and asked if they are happy with the service. It is more effective to gather satisfaction levels after the completion of works. Changes have been made to the service following comments from service users and has led to staff being trained in benefits advice and applications made to charities for funding for repairs to clients homes.
- 118** There has been no analysis of what groups are accessing the care and repair service and applying for grants. Although application forms for grants are available in other formats and asks for the ethnic origin of the applicant it is unclear how the information about ethnicity is used to influence service delivery. Without information on take up of private sector housing services the council are unsure if their services are reaching all sections of the community.
- 119** Support is given to a series of advocacy agencies working the borough. A five-year funding commitment has been given to the CAB and other agencies have benefited, for example in the support of additional staff. Agency staff spoken to during the inspection have a good co-operative relationship with council staff, considering them to be helpful and co-operative in resolving customer enquiries and complaints. Good relations between the council and agencies ultimately means customers are more likely to get a better service.

### **Is the service delivering value for money?**

- 120** A critical judgement made during inspections is the extent to which customers are receiving value for money in the manner their services are provided. This is not always the same thing as low cost because quality is also important and dependant on context, high cost services can still provide value for money (VFM). In Wyre there is a generally positive picture, with some benchmarking, leveraging in of external funds, partnership procurement and a developing efficiency agenda.
- 121** The Audit Commission reported on value for money in the council in 2005. The study showed a number of weaknesses such as an historic focus on cost savings as opposed to overall VFM. The council has also not investigated its costs or compared them with other providers or has an overarching value for money strategy. More encouragingly it was found that areas of higher spending are moving to be broadly in line with stated priorities.
- 122** Following the Commissions report a value for money action plan has been agreed. The plan does not incorporate SMART with few actions having means of measurement and resources not identified.

123 The March 'Use of Resources' report by the Audit Commission commented that:

*'The Council currently achieves value for money in some services. Its overall and service costs compare favourably with other district councils and its nearest neighbours and are not significantly higher than other councils providing similar levels and standards of services. The overall relationship between costs and the range, level and quality of services, including overheads and capital costs is positive.'*

The council is in the bottom quarter of comparator group for housing spend.

124 The Council has a corporate procurement strategy for the period 2005/08 which lacks savings or efficiency targets. The strategy has a series of objectives which include securing value for money but also other issues such as developing and maintaining the local economy. Initiatives such as e procurement, purchasing cards and partnering are mentioned but not developed. A procurement plan detailing how the strategy will be enabled has yet to be developed.

125 The councils Annual Efficiency Statement does not identify any efficiency gains in the strategic or private sector housing services, efficiency gains will be made in the following areas:

- procurement through the appointment of a joint procurement officer with Fylde BC; such as waste management and cross boundary working;
- re-engineering of back office functions and office closure programme;
- opening of the contact centre; and
- amalgamation of existing services.

126 The Council has a medium term financial strategy which is a financial expression of the corporate plan. It shows a large increase in budget to accommodate bringing the homelessness service back in house but no increases in costs over the next three years.

127 Over the next three years Wyre BC is expected to achieve a modest 2.5 per cent per annum efficiency gains compared to their 2004/05 baseline. At least half of these will be cashable, releasing funding for reinvestment in front line services or holding down Council Tax. Based on Wyre's baseline expenditure of £12.4 million this requires a year-on-year improvement of £0.3 million of which £0.15 million will be cashable.

128 The Council can, however, demonstrate some quality improvements through partnership working in a number of areas, some of which are significant:

- refuse, street cleansing and recycling services have been amalgamated into one contract procured jointly with Fylde BC, which won an LGC procurement award;
- services for the homeless and care and repair services are provided with charities and other agencies; and
- an information bus tours local rural areas partly funded from central government and Wyre HA.

- 129** There are some strong partnerships with other providers. For example, Wyre HA administers the common housing register and match funds DFG's and the council has participated in sub regional research and joint negotiations with other authorities to improve access to affordable housing. This is an effective way to address common problems and cross boundary issues.
- 130** There has been some success in leveraging in funding through partnerships. This includes:
- Eaga grants for delivering energy efficiency schemes;
  - Housing Corporation Annual Development Programme allocation of £3.1 million for this year for 44 units of rented housing;
  - an award winning partnership with a private contractor to complete insulation works to park homes at a competitive rate;
  - supporting people grant and the housing renewal budget; and
  - free energy efficient light bulbs and electric kettles provided by energy suppliers.
- 131** With the exception of homelessness services the council has not made any assessment of the relationship between costs and the range, level and quality of services provided. A spend to save policy has had some impact in reducing admissions to homelessness accommodation. The 'spend to save' policy allows staff, for example, to repay arrears to a landlord to avoid the expense and disruption of admitting a family into homelessness accommodation.
- 132** Some benchmarking has been carried out and the Council are members of the northern LSVT benchmarking group. The homelessness service is being brought back in house because of comparative studies which show the service to be performing poorly and having high costs. The council consider they will improve on the performance of the previous contractor because of tighter cost control and improved staffing ratios.
- 133** Analysis of the value for money of the homelessness service shows mixed results but an improvement on previous years. Across the two indices by which value for money is assessed (average length of stay in bed & breakfast and average length of stay in hostels) Wyre shows no change in the former between 2003/04 and 2004/05 but a significant improvement in the latter. Over the last year there has been a 23 per cent reduction in cost per homeless applicant without an apparent reduction in services. This has partly been achieved by the reduction in the use of B&B accommodation and an improvement in HB recovery rates.
- 134** Value for money has not been established in renewal works or major adaptations. Although a single contractor has been secured for external renewal works by competitive tender in the Burn Naze area no efficiency gains have been secured when letting the contract. When completing grant assisted internal works or major adaptations residents can make their own choice from a list of select contractors. In changing contractors the council is missing out on opportunities for partnering arrangements.

## Summary

- 135 Wyre's strategic housing services are a fair, one-star service.
- 136 The Council has a clear hierarchy of plans with corporate and service plans and priorities appropriately aligned. It is easy to access services and most indicators point to improving performance. Good means of formal consultation and links with other groups and agencies have been developed. The Council complies with the DDA and resources to meet the demand for DFG's have been increased. Information on housing needs and stock condition is robust and the Council is beginning to act on the surveys findings.
- 137 There has been no large scale study of residents preferred means of communication and satisfaction with services is not gathered and acted upon in a systematic manner. Demand for affordable housing will continue to outstrip supply and unfitness will only be tackled slowly. The customer facing aspects of homelessness service need improvement and value for money has not been established in the service.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

### What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 138 There have been a series of improvements to services which will have been noticed by service users. Homelessness services have improved with a reduction in the use of B&B accommodation and the development of preventative services. Connectwyre's performance shows signs of improvement and private sector housing resources are directed to areas of greatest need. Until recently the pace of change has been slow and it is unlikely that the council will meet the demand for affordable housing. Customers satisfaction monitoring is underdeveloped and it is not possible for the council to demonstrate how the housing service has improved.
- 139 The June 2004 CPA assessment of the council was scored weak. A progress assessment in March 2006 found several improvements including: a positive direction of travel review and an enhancement of strategic leadership. However the report mentioned that the council still needs to sustain investment to develop capacity and performance management.
- 140 There has been a number of improvements over the past two years. As part of an access strategy the council has closed a network of area offices and replaced them with alternatives: contact centre - Connectwyre, information points and libraries, post offices for payments and an enhanced web site. Connectwyre has resulted in more service requests being resolved at the first point of contact and has freed specialist staff to concentrate on their primary tasks. The web site has been enhanced and contains a lot of useful information, but would benefit from more interactive services.
- 141 There have been several improvements in housing which will be noticed by service users including:
- the development of preventative homelessness services;
  - private sector housing services being focussed into areas of greatest need;
  - improved access to services through other agencies and a series of leaflets outlining what services are available; and
  - increased funding for the aids and adaptations service.
- 142 Changes have made a demonstrable improvement to services which include:
- reduced waiting times for aids and adaptations;
  - reductions in the number of homelessness acceptances and stays in B&B accommodation;
  - reductions in the number of unfit properties; and
  - an effective care and repair and handyman service.

## 34 Strategic Housing Services | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 143 In line with its corporate priorities progress in improving the overall quality of services and addressing areas of under-performance. BVPI's show generally improving performance. In 2004/05, 20 of 37 service performance indicators improved with only three (relating to processing benefits claims and recovery of overpayments) declining significantly. Homelessness indicators improved with no stays in hostels, compared to an average of 18 weeks in 2003/04, and the average stay in bed and breakfast accommodation reduced from 11 to 6.9 weeks.
- 144 The Council's approach to value for money is developing. Following the CPA a value for money action plan has been agreed. However the plan does not incorporate SMART with few actions having means of measurement and resources to complete actions are not identified. Without systematic means of measurement the council are unable to evaluate the success of their policies.

### How well does the service manage performance?

- 145 There is a clear desire to improve services with more drivers for improvements than barriers. The service responds well to external reports and is keen to learn from leaders in the field. Following the CPA inspection changes were made, an overview and scrutiny group was developed and the senior management team was restructured. However target setting is generally modest and some key targets have not been achieved. The housing action plan is not SMART and outcomes from services are not systematically recorded.
- 146 A culture of performance is developing with individual staff roles being linked to high level corporate objectives. A process by which strategic and corporate planning to service and individual performance is linked is described as a 'golden thread' and is underpinned by:
- a strategic planning cycle that continually re-appraises priorities via consultation;
  - a performance management system that focuses on outcomes that matter;
  - a performance appraisal system that focuses on the individual and/or team performance; and
  - a change of culture to one that regards performance and quality of service delivery as paramount.

The 'thread' links such issues as the council's priority to improve healthy living and a series of housing related issues such as increasing decency and putting 70 per cent of all capital spend for home improvements into the Burn Naze and Pharos areas.

- 147 Performance information is reported in an accessible manner. Within a single document first quarter performance against the National Performance Indicators is displayed using a traffic light system to indicate if performance is on target. The document has been grouped according to the council's five key themes, it also indicates the trend of performance and if it is part of a long or short term trend. Performance for this year shows the council missing a number of key targets such as the percentage change in number of families in temporary accommodation.

- 148 There are effective measures in place for monitoring performance. A high level scrutiny committee oversees council performance on major indicators included in the corporate plan. Quarterly reports are provided to the overview and scrutiny committee to enable them to monitor progress against targets, including those relevant to housing in the corporate plan. Areas of under performance can therefore be quickly identified and acted upon, for example with bringing the homelessness service back in house.
- 149 The borough is kept up to date with the Council's performance. On a quarterly basis progress against the councils 'promises' are also reported in the form of traffic lights in the Council's newsletter. The healthy living promise, which incorporates most housing related issues, such affordable warmth and increasing the number of decent homes shows that all promises are being kept. This will help keep the borough abreast with council performance.
- 150 The council shows a clear commitment to improving services with annual assessments. The council has responded well to its weak CPA result with an improvement plan and this is reflected in its positive PPA assessment. Following the CPA inspection changes were made including the development of an overview and scrutiny group and the structure of the senior management team was changed which included appointing a managing director from outside of the organisation. Some weaknesses identified by the inspection team were addressed while the team were on site.
- 151 A new performance management system is to be introduced in the new financial year which can collate and report indicators against service or cross cutting themes. The new system is due to be rolled out shortly after the year end and provides a greater degree of sophistication of capturing and presenting performance information. This will help improve performance monitoring.
- 152 Some local indicators have been developed and are incorporated into the performance management system. Housing have a series of local indicators to measure lower level performance areas, for example, the number of houses in multiple occupation inspected, that support high level objectives. Local indicators assist in providing a more complete measure of performance in areas important locally.
- 153 Monitoring of individual staff performance is not developed. The council has a performance management and development scheme which should involve all staff having quarterly performance review meetings and annual performance reviews. However not all staff have received these despite the scheme being launched in May of last year and the council are therefore unsure of the individual performance of their staff.
- 154 When formulating policies the council has used best practice from elsewhere. For example, Wigan Council, a beacon council for Private Sector Renewal acted as a 'critical friend' for Wyre's own renewal policy. Similarly the procedure for allocating DFG's has been based on the ODPM's good practice guide for delivering adaptations for the disabled. Learning from best practice elsewhere will improve services.

## 36 Strategic Housing Services | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 155 There is a visible high level commitment to improving homelessness services in Wyre. The Leader of the Council and Housing portfolio holder attends the homelessness forum and opens proceedings with a clear statement of the council's commitment to improve the homelessness service. This shows agencies and neighbouring council's present that the council is serious about raising performance.
- 156 Targets are often modest, for example targets around unfit and vacant dwellings are below actual performance. Such modest target setting may fail to stimulate performance and depress performance.
- 157 Housing and Regulatory services have a service plan for the period 2005/06. The plan covers all housing objectives and links to the corporate plan. The service plan has an action plan to implement its objectives. However the plan is not SMART, lacking in detail and not identifying resources required to implement the plan. Not all actions within the service plan have been kept to. For example no progress has been made on reinvesting capital receipts from right to buy sales.
- 158 The Council is not consistently capturing and monitoring satisfaction across its full range of services. There are areas where the Council is missing opportunities to capture customer feedback, for example, from people who have used the hostel accommodation. The Council are therefore unsure if services are meeting user's needs.
- 159 A ten per cent survey of all customers using housing services has been introduced but it is too early for any findings to be collected. Findings from the surveys will influence the percentage of surveys sent out, should the service attract negative comments then a greater number of surveys will be sent. It has been found to be more effective to survey all service users' satisfaction levels.

### **Does the service have the capacity to improve?**

- 160 The council's aims for housing are realistic in its current context and desired outcomes are clearly articulated. Councillors have a clear vision for housing which includes further reductions in the threshold for affordable housing on new build sites, the wider use of leasing arrangements and addressing unmet need. Its medium term financial strategy is aligned with Council priorities and resources are directed to areas of greatest identified need. IT systems need upgrading and the recent reduction in high levels of absenteeism must be continued.
- 161 The council has a resourced medium term financial strategy for the period 2005/06 to 2007/08 which aligns budgets to corporate objectives. The strategy is resourced and accounts for price and wage inflation. It links to the council's objectives and other key strategies such as the capital and asset management strategies. The strategy incorporates a detailed risk assessment covering most eventualities. It facilitates effective planning.

- 162** Resources are generally directed to areas which have been identified by the council as priorities and which most require it. Through stock condition surveys the Burn Naze ward has been identified as having the highest number of unfit properties and consequently renewal activity is concentrated into this area. Similarly the needs of the increasing number of elderly people are being addressed by increasing the resources available for DFGs. This meets the council's key objectives around healthy living.
- 163** It is unlikely that the council will meet the demand for affordable housing in the borough. Although affordable housing is identified as a priority, insufficient resources have been allocated to dealing with the issue. For example, Right to Buy (RTB) receipts are not being used directly to address the increasing shortage of affordable homes. RTB receipts go into a corporate pot and there is no ring fencing to ensure the money is used in housing or in innovative ways to address the borough's housing issues. Housing is therefore not able to take advantage of a possible source of funding to deal with local housing issues.
- 164** The council has recognised and acted upon weaknesses in its IT and GIS systems. Presently the systems involve manual reporting on a series of issues such as the management of grant budgets. Financial provision has been made for new systems which will increase capacity and free staff time to deal with other issues.
- 165** The Council's GIS systems are arranged in a haphazard manner and not co-ordinated. In line with its e-government strategy it has secured funding for a corporate GIS system.
- 166** The Council has a mixed record in its management of human resources (HR). Although Audit Commission audit of People Management within the council found the newly developed HR strategy and action plan fit for purpose there are issues around absenteeism. Sickness levels in the council are above local authority averages, in 2004/05 sickness absenteeism stood 12.6 working days per employee, a rise of 0.1 per cent on the previous year. A priority is attached to managing sickness and following a series of initiatives the Council is on track for an improvement in 2005/06 with an estimated outturn of 10.6 days. Continued high rates of absenteeism will place further strain on already stretched front line services.
- 167** Training and professional assessment of staff is mixed. Around 70 per cent of council staff now hold the European Computer Driving Licence and the Council was awarded Investors in People status in September 2004. However some senior staff and councillors have not been on diversity training and some staff have not been assessed. Both training and assessment are priorities for council and point to weaknesses in HR management.
- 168** Closer working with neighbouring authorities is well developed. Wyre is working with neighbouring councils to raise the profile of affordable housing issues. In partnership with six other councils, Wyre is developing a sub regional housing framework to put common issues in a north west context and be better placed to lobby funding bodies on affordable housing. Working collectively, Wyre and its neighbours will be better informed and better placed to lobby for additional funds.

## 38 Strategic Housing Services | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 169 The council has had some success in attracting investment into the borough. Since stock transfer in 1996 it has secured:
- over £6 million in Local Authority Social Housing Grant for the provision of 200 affordable homes;
  - section 106 agreements have produced over 100 affordable homes;
  - brought empty private sector homes back into use; and
  - with the transfer association Wyre Housing Association over 100 affordable homes have been created.

### Summary

- 170 Overall Wyre's strategic housing service has promising prospects of improvement.
- 171 The Council can demonstrate a gradual improvement in many of the key performance indicators and services. The corporate plan is beginning to provide a single and consistent focus for councillors, officers and the community. Councillors and senior officers have a good grasp of the process of prioritisation and the plan's priorities are influencing the alignment of management arrangements and the allocation of resources. Councillors and officers have a clear commitment to improving services and consulting with its partners and service users. The housing service has the capacity to improve through its continued investment in IT and additional resources to support homeless people. It has attracted additional resources into the service and through its joint procurement with partners of services has made efficiency gains.
- 172 However, there has been deterioration in performance in some areas and at a detailed service level not all plans are SMART. There is limited learning from complaints and service user feedback is not comprehensively gathered. Target setting is modest and training and staff development is not comprehensively applied. Absenteeism is high and recent reductions must continue.

## Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Indicator	2004/05	Avg	2003/04	Avg	2002/03	Avg
BVPI 62 % of Private Unfit Dwellings Made Fit or Demolished	5.40		4.90	3.39	5.00	3.29
BVPI 64 Number of Private Dwellings Returned to Occupation	26.00		39.00		34.00	
BV183a Average Length of Stay in Bed and Breakfast (Weeks)	8		11.00	6.81	3.40	7.40
BV183b Average Length of Stay in Hostel Accommodation	0		18.00	14.96	7.30	14.52
Number of people sleeping rough on a single night	1					
The % change of in average number of families in temporary accommodation	13.46					
% of top 5 % of earners that are women	26.70		21.70	28.13	27.59	26.33
% of top 5 % of earners from BME communities	0.00		0.00	2.75	0.00	2.57

#### 40 Strategic Housing Services | Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>2004/05</b>	<b>Avg</b>	<b>2003/04</b>	<b>Avg</b>	<b>2002/03</b>	<b>Avg</b>
Days sick per member of staff	12.63		12.46	10.34	13.01	10.10
% of disabled employees	1.49		1.31		1.48	2.67
% of BME employees	0.8		0.6		0.64	4.04

## Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
  - Corporate Strategy;
  - Housing Strategy;
  - Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy;
  - Homelessness Strategy;
  - Equality and Diversity Strategy; and
  - Procurement Strategy.

## Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
  - office checks;
  - telephone Interviews with residents;
  - visits to temporary accommodation;
  - telephone interviews recipients of various private sector housing grant schemes;
  - website checks; and
  - check of leaflets and information available for residents.