

# Strategic Housing Services

**Bromsgrove District 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 and national services for the public.

Within the Audit Commission, the Housing Inspectorate inspects and monitors the performance of a number of bodies and services. These include local authority housing departments, local authorities administering Supporting People programmes, arms length management organisations and housing associations. Our key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) set out the main issues which we consider when forming our judgements on the quality of services. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing](http://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 Bromsgrove District Council is a district Council in Worcestershire. The population is 87,837 of which 3.3 per cent are from minority ethnic communities. The district is mainly rural with about 90 per cent designated as green belt land. The main centres of population are Bromsgrove, Rubery, Alvechurch and Wythall.
- 2 The Council is conservative led with 22 of the 39 seats.
- 3 The Council employs 454 staff across all services and its net revenue budget for 2005/06 is £9.8 million.
- 4 In 2004 the Council engaged with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) to support its recovery. Within this engagement the Council accepted a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) category of 'poor', and the Audit Commission agreed to postpone the Council's CPA inspection. Arising from this engagement the Council has developed and started to deliver a recovery plan. The Council is planning to emerge from this period of engagement by March 2007.
- 5 The inspection covered access and customer care, diversity, value for money, housing strategy and enabling, homelessness and housing needs, and private sector housing. The service is estimated to cost £461,555 in 2005/06.
- 6 The inspection scope covered the services remaining after the Council transferred its housing stock through Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) to the Bromsgrove and District Housing Trust in March 2004.

## Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed Bromsgrove District Council as providing a 'poor', zero-star service that has uncertain 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>**

	<b>Prospects for improvement?</b>				
Excellent					'a poor service that has uncertain prospects for improvement'  A good service?
Promising					
Uncertain	☀				
Poor					
	Poor	Fair ★	Good ★★	Excellent ★★★	

Source: Audit Commission

- 8 The strategic housing service provided by Bromsgrove District Council is a 'poor' service because:
- there is a lack of comprehensive service standards;
  - the Council does not have an overarching vision for the delivery of customer centred services;
  - there is limited customer feedback to enable the Council to tailor services to the needs of the community;
  - support services, and information provided to people living in temporary accommodation is weak, and the quality of hostel accommodation is poor, with shared facilities and increasing lengths of stay;
  - there is a lack of leadership in the promotion of diversity within the Council, with an absence of strategic policy and plans on diversity issues;

<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.

- work identified to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 has not been fully completed;
  - the Council's approach to demonstrating and delivering value for money is weak;
  - there is an absence of cost information to ensure that a balance between price and quality is achieved;
  - the Council has done little to balance the housing market and there are now substantial problems with affordability in the district;
  - planning constraints are limiting further expansion of the social housing sector;
  - the numbers of people living in temporary accommodation are increasing, as is the length of time that they are having to remain in unsettled circumstances;
  - there are few tangible outcomes from the work done on the private sector, with a weak approach to houses in multiple occupation;
  - there is little promotion of the grants service available to the private sector; and
  - little action has been taken to deal with empty homes in the district.
- 9 There are some strengths in the service. These are as follows.
- The customer contact centre is of high quality with a good range of information available.
  - The externalised homelessness and housing advice services are competently delivered and are accessible.
  - There is a clear, fit for purpose housing strategy in place, which has been formulated through effective consultation with external stakeholders.
  - The Council has good up to date information on stock condition and housing needs in the area.
  - There has been positive work to enable the development of infill sites in Bromsgrove to develop affordable housing.
  - effective arrangements are delivering a sound Disabled Facilities Grants service that is financially well supported by the Council.
- 10 The Council has uncertain prospects for improvement because:
- there is a lack of overall leadership in setting a clear vision for strategic housing services and a lack of a sustained focus and track record in improving strategic housing services;
  - there is a lack of effective leadership on the diversity agenda, with a reluctance to provide pro-active services to meet the needs of all sectors of the community;
  - difficult decisions about affordable housing and the provision of temporary accommodation for homeless people have been avoided;

## 8 Strategic Housing Services | Summary

- there is an absence of a clear strategy on the future of the poor hostel accommodation provided by the Council for homeless households;
- not all options to increase the availability of rented accommodation have been considered and implemented;
- planning issues are preventing the delivery of additional units of affordable housing, with an absence of clear guidance on development;
- there is a lack of an overarching performance management system linking corporate priorities through to individual plans;
- Personal Development Reviews are not being comprehensively undertaken across the Council; and
- there is a lack of focus on delivering value for money.

11 There are some strengths in the Council's approach to improvement. These are as follows.

- There has been a sustained focus by staff on ensuring that bed and breakfast is not used for families.
- Strategic housing staff have a good range of skills, experience and commitment to the delivery of effective services.
- The new leadership arrangements are improving member to member and member to officer relationships.
- A clear, fit for purpose housing strategy is in place supported by other strategic housing plans and strategies.
- There is a good awareness among staff about the strengths and weaknesses of the strategic housing service.
- Strategic housing services have secured additional financial support to provide more staff resources from 2006 onwards.
- There are low levels of sickness absence.

## Recommendations

- 12 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 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 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 Develop a specific, measurable, achievable, resources and time bound (SMART) action plan to address all weaknesses identified in this report and ensure that progress is regularly monitored and reported corporately.*

### **Recommendation**

*R2 Strengthen the focus on providing effective access and customer care by:*

- *introducing, publishing and monitoring service standards in conjunction with customers;*
- *establishing systems to gather regular feedback from customers and use this information to inform service development; and*
- *ensuring that effective monitoring arrangements are in place covering externalised services.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- delivery of services in accordance with customer needs;
- increased engagement by customers and increased customer satisfaction; and
- greater transparency in the provision of services.

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 per cent and high costs is over 5 per cent.

**Recommendation**

*R3 Strengthen the corporate approach to diversity by:*

- *developing training for front line staff in dealing with people for whom English is not a first language;*
- *ensuring that all Councillors receive diversity training;*
- *complete diversity and equality impact assessments in the establishment of all plans and strategies;*
- *ensure that translation straplines are included in all leaflets to indicate their availability in other languages and formats; and*
- *display prominent posters indicating the provision of interpreting and translation services at all access points.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- demonstration of community leadership and to be able to demonstrate that services are being equitably and sensitively;
- compliance with legislation and positive practice; and
- increased customer satisfaction from all members of the community.

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

**Recommendation**

*R4 Improve the approach towards value for money by:*

- *setting out a clear corporate strategy on providing value for money;*
- *ensuring that service heads have access to good quality information about the costs of service, across all areas; and*
- *comparing costs with other service providers and ensuring that this information is routinely reported and shared with external partners.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to ensure that resources are used more effectively and efficiently;
- to provide better options for service delivery, leading to improved outcomes for service users; and
- the delivery of demonstrably effective, value for money services which provided a balance of cost and quality.

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 providing effective performance management by ensuring that:*

- *individual personal development plans are completed within a set timescale linked to the development of corporate and service plans;*
- *a consistent reporting framework of both local and national performance indicators is established; and*
- *training needs against the service objectives are established on a regular basis and training is delivered.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- enable weaknesses within service delivery to be identified at an early stage;
- engage all staff in having common objectives for the Council's priorities; and
- deliver a more effective strategic housing service.

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

**Recommendation**

*R6 Improving leadership and support for strategic housing and addressing the needs of vulnerable people by:*

- *ensuring that members play a more prominent and pro-active role in influencing regional housing issues;*
- *ensure that members are fully involved in developing a strategy for the future of hostel and temporary accommodation in the district;*
- *reconsidering the effect of the planning moratorium of the delivery of affordable housing; and*
- *working in a more focussed way with officers in seeking to redress the imbalance in the housing market.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better outcomes for people living in temporary accommodation;
- clearer partnership working with external stakeholders, set on a firm vision for housing in the district; and
- improved delivery of affordable housing.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2007.

- 13 We would like to thank the staff of Bromsgrove District Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 27-31 March 2006

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# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 14 Bromsgrove District covers an area of 83.8 square miles and lies to the south of Birmingham in the county of Worcestershire. The district is predominantly rural with about 90 per cent designated as green belt land. The main centres of population are Bromsgrove, Rubery, Alvechurch and Wythall.
- 15 The population is 87,837 in 35,168 households, which is projected to increase to 92,250 by 2011. Unemployment is substantially below the national average (5 per cent) and currently stands at 1.9 per cent. Bromsgrove is the lowest ranking and least deprived district in Worcestershire in respect to overall deprivation and ranks in the bottom 20 per cent of most deprived local authorities across England.
- 16 The population is mainly white British who represent 96.7 per cent. The total ethnic minority population of 3.3 per cent is made up of White Irish (1 per cent), Asian (0.8 per cent), mixed (0.8 per cent), Black (0.4 per cent) and Chinese (0.3 per cent). Over a quarter of all households in Bromsgrove contain only older people (25.2 per cent). There are an estimated 6,964 households in Bromsgrove with one or more members in an identified special needs group. This represents 19.1 per cent of all households in the district and is well above the national average. Those with a physical disability are the most prominent group at 56.7 per cent, with frail elderly the next largest group at 37 per cent.

### The Council

- 17 The Council comprises 39 Councillors and moved to the Leader and Cabinet model of governance in March 2001. The Conservatives have overall control with 22 Councillors. There are six Labour Councillors, six Independents, four Wythall Ratepayers and one Liberal Democrat.
- 18 In 2004 the Council engaged with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) to support its recovery. As part of this engagement, the Council accepted a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) category of 'poor' and the Audit Commission agreed to postpone the Council's CPA inspection. Arising from this engagement and its categorisation as 'poor' the Council has developed and started to deliver a recovery plan. The Council is planning to emerge from this period of engagement by March 2007.
- 19 The Council has set out key priorities for the allocation of funds during this period of engagement. These key priorities are:
  - objectives of the recovery plan;
  - statutory services not being carried out to an acceptable standard;

- key community needs, and
- spend to save schemes.

### **The service**

- 20** There are 35,168 households in the district of which 83.4 per cent are owner occupied, which is the 11th highest figure in England and Wales. A total of 11 per cent of homes are rented from a housing association and four per cent are privately rented. House prices have risen much quicker than the national average in the past few years. The average price of a house is £219,949, and Council tax records show that Bromsgrove had considerably fewer properties in the lower Council tax bands of A and B, and many more properties within E to H, than both the National and West Midland averages. There are approximately 4,050 households in receipt of housing or Council tax benefits, one of the lowest figures in Worcestershire.
- 21** The inspection covered access and customer care, diversity, value for money, housing strategy and enabling, homelessness and housing needs and private sector housing. These are the key housing services retained by the Council after housing stock transfer to the Bromsgrove and District Housing Trust took place in March 2004.
- 22** Services within strategic housing are delivered in partnership with external bodies through contractual arrangements set up when stock transfer took place. The housing advice and homelessness prevention service is provided by Bromsgrove Citizens Advice Bureau, and the homelessness service is provided by Bromsgrove and District Housing Trust.
- 23** The Council currently has a moratorium in place preventing the development of new general needs housing in the district. This was put in place as the Council had exceeded targets for the housing requirements set out in the Worcestershire Structure Plan resulting in an overall oversupply of housing. One of the few exceptions to the moratorium is the provision of affordable housing; however, the impact of the moratorium on the development of affordable housing within larger sites is considerable.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 24** The Council has been through a challenging period recently. The focus of attention has been on the recovery plan and this sets the framework for delivery of individual services delivered by the Council.
- 25** The Housing Strategy 2006-2011 has been assessed as 'Fit for purpose' by the Government Office for the West Midlands. The strategy details four key priorities that seek to address and contribute towards corporate, national, regional and sub-regional priorities. These are:
- addressing the shortage of affordable housing;
  - improving the quality and availability of private sector housing;
  - addressing homelessness; and
  - assisting vulnerable groups to live independently.
- 26** The Council has a number of other plans and strategies in place which set out aims and objectives for the strategic housing service. These include a Community plan, homelessness strategy and a private sector housing strategy. The key priorities of the community plan are:
- the development of a Home Improvement Agency;
  - development of extra care housing; and
  - the provision of affordable housing.
- 27** The objectives of the Council's private sector housing strategy link with priorities in the main Housing Strategy. These are:
- aim to increase the availability of private housing for rent to supplement the supply of affordable social housing;
  - assist the homeless to access private rented tenancies to reduce the use of temporary accommodation; and
  - support vulnerable people to live independently.

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

### Access and customer care

- 28 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in the Council's approach to access and customer care. There is a lack of comprehensive service standards, and a weak corporate approach to access and customer care. The service is fragmented across a number of locations which prevents the provision of a seamless and comprehensive service to vulnerable people. There has been limited involvement in getting customer feedback to shape service delivery, and support for those in temporary accommodation is weak. However, the customer contact centre is of high quality delivering a good range of easily accessible council services, partner agencies are providing good quality accessible housing advice and homelessness services and common easily understandable leaflets are available in all locations.
- 29 There is a weak corporate approach to access and customer care. For example, there is no overarching vision about how services should be delivered to customers. Officers are unclear about how services should be integrated between the use of IT systems, face to face contact, or other means of communication. There are some signs of an improved approach to this issue with the recent development of a 'Customer First' strategy and a communications strategy, but this has yet to make an impact on service delivery. Therefore the lack of a strategic vision leaves staff unable to set a framework for access and customer care across services that effectively combine with other parts of the Council.
- 30 There is a lack of comprehensive service standards in place across the service. Service users cannot be clear about the level of service that they should expect to receive and are therefore unable to complain effectively about perceived poor service. This limits the effectiveness of service provision.
- 31 There has been limited involvement of users in shaping services. Although some customer feedback has been obtained through satisfaction surveys this has not been fully translated into service delivery improvements. For example, there is little work that has been undertaken on assessing the views about those users of the homeless service who have been in temporary accommodation or people who have used the private sector grants service. This undermines the ability of the Council to shape services to the needs of users.
- 32 The separation of functions within strategic housing between BDHT, the CAB and the Council is confusing for customers. The location of offices and the split of homelessness prevention and advice, and the homelessness service results in a fragmentation of the service which is not clear for users. Whilst there is some written information attempting to explain who does what homelessness and preventative services are spread across different locations. The way in which services are delivered means that customers do not receive a seamless and easily accessible service.

- 33 There is a lack of customer care in the way in which the Council provides information. For example, receptionists at the main Council offices are not able to provide a map showing the location of the customer contact centre, or a leaflet describing services available at the Hub. So whilst they verbally signpost customers this is not providing a fully supportive approach to customer care.
- 34 The Council is not providing adequate signposting for the location of services. For example, the signposting for the HUB is poor with users being unable to read the sign on the building from the main road, and the signposting for the Citizens Advice Bureau is limited. This limits the effectiveness of the services and makes it more difficult for users to find Council services in emergency circumstances.
- 35 Telephone contact arrangements have some weaknesses. For example, the out-of-hours contact number for BDHT (and therefore homelessness) is not a free phone or low rate number. In addition the Councils' translation service does not have effective telephone answering arrangements in place. This may cause problems in contacting BDHT for people in vulnerable or challenging circumstances.
- 36 The Council has effectively provided a central point of contact for customer with the establishment of the 'Hub' facility in 2005. This a one stop shop for a wide range of Council services located in Bromsgrove Town Centre. It is operated in conjunction with the County Council and positively it is open on Saturday mornings. The Hub is located in good quality offices, with a good range of information on display. There are high quality private interview room facilities and access to a full range of Council systems to help provide information. This shows that the Council is willing to respond to the needs of the people of Bromsgrove in providing a good quality central access point to services.
- 37 The service is making effective use of the Council's website in providing a good range of information for users of the strategic housing service. All relevant strategies are available and there is a good range of information on housing options in the district and services for homeless people. Clear information is provided about external partners and associated Council services like planning and housing benefit. This ensures that good information is provided to service users with access to the internet.
- 38 Key Council partners are providing good quality offices to deliver externalised Council service. For example, there are good quality and welcoming offices at the Bromsgrove and District Housing Trust and at the Bromsgrove Citizens Advice Bureau. These offices have a good range of information on display about a wide range of service, and all include the common set of leaflets produced by the Council on strategic housing services. This provides users with good access to a range of Council service and provides a confident face to the delivery of public housing related services.

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

- 39 There are some examples of good collaboration between the Council and partners. For example, the Council makes private interviews facilities available at the Hub for clients to have a telephone interview with BDHT, and BDHT provide taxi transport facilities between Council, CAB offices and BDHT's main offices. Out-of-hours emergency telephone numbers are displayed on the outside of Council and partner offices. This shows a focus on providing vulnerable people with assistance to gain resolution of housing or homelessness issues.
- 40 The Council provides a good range of basic leaflets describing the individual service areas included within strategic housing services. These are set out in plain English and cover what the service can provide, how it is provided and how to access services and make contact. These leaflets follow a common format and are generally user friendly. This provides customers with a good basic understanding of the range of services available.
- 41 The Council is providing an effective and recently strengthened out-of-hours service on homelessness. This service is jointly funded by the Council and BDHT and provides for two trained homelessness officers to be on duty at all times to address emergency homelessness cases. This shows a willingness of the Council to work in partnership with external partners to address the needs of vulnerable people in the district.
- 42 The Council is undertaking customer satisfaction work in some areas, but there has been an historic lack of getting good customer feedback to enable services to be tailored to local needs. The Council is now obtaining written feedback from users of the Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) service, users of the housing advice and prevention service and some questionnaire responses from users of the homelessness service. This is now enabling the Council to understand the needs of service users more clearly.

### Diversity

- 43 Diversity is an area of significant weakness for the Council. There is no effective leadership being demonstrated to promote diversity and the Council lacks a clear and comprehensive strategy for addressing diversity and equality matters. Although audits of premises have been carried out thoroughly not all work has yet been completed to ensure compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act 2005. Information about translation services is inconsistent and staff lack training on dealing with people who do not have English as a first language. Overall the approach towards diversity and equality issues is not fully developed and embedded.
- 44 There is a weak corporate commitment to diversity. For example, equalities and diversity does not form an explicit part of the values, key priorities, objectives and vision as set out in the Corporate Plan. There is little work being undertaken to ensure that Council service provision is effectively being provided to all sectors of the community and that consideration of diversity is an integral part of all activities. This lack of leadership on diversity issues leaves staff and the residents of Bromsgrove District unclear about the values of the Council, and prevents service delivery improvements taking place within a set framework.

- 45 The Council does not have a full range of up to date equalities policies and procedure in place. For example, the existing equal opportunities policy is considerably out-of-date and does not refer to recent changes in the legislation framework around diversity and equalities; for example, the existing equal opportunities policy does not refer to the Human Rights Act or the Race Relations Amendment Act. This prevents Council officers and members from having a clear reference point to ensure that all actions taken are meeting the diverse needs of the community, and leaves Council actions of diversity open to challenge.
- 46 The Council does not have a comprehensive approach to dealing with customers for whom English is not the first language. For example, there are no posters on display clearly indicating the availability of translation services. Front line officers working at both the main Council offices and the Hub customer service centre have not been trained in how to effectively deal with people who do not speak English, and there is a lack of clarity about how users could be signposted to the Council's partner translation service. This restricts the availability of Council services and advice to people for whom English is not a first language and does not show a focus of the needs of all sectors of the community.
- 47 Councillors are not showing leadership in pro-actively addressing diversity. For example, members have not yet had equalities and diversity training and there is a lack of understanding among Councillors on the importance of ensuring that services address the needs of potential users, rather than being reactive to existing users. The needs of people with mental health illnesses, drug and alcohol users, travellers, and domestic violence are not being fully considered. This lack of leadership means that services are not comprehensively addressing all the needs of the community.
- 48 There is a lack of comprehensive monitoring by diversity categories for the advice and homelessness prevention service. Although figures are provided by the CAB about use of the service, and the reasons why advice is being given, there is an absence of information about the ethnic origin of users of the service. This prevents the Council having a good understanding of trends happening within the district, limiting the Council's ability to shape services to the local context.
- 49 The Council is not representative of the community. The number and percentage of Black and minority ethnic employees, and employees with disabilities is lower than the regional and national figure. This prevents the Council from having good role models to ensure that diversity issues are a priority for the Council and that services can be delivered equitably with consideration of all the needs of the community.
- 50 The Council does not have a focus on ensuring that domestic violence services are working well. For example, the existing refuge for women fleeing domestic violence is under considerable strain, with a long waiting list. Additionally this facility only has sufficient capacity to deal with women who are formally referred by agencies in the district, and is unable to assist self referrals. The Council does not have any plans place to provide additional support or commitment to these services. This means that there will continue to be limited resources to help support people experiencing domestic violence.

- 51 The Council has invested in good quality access audits for all public buildings to determine what work is required to meet the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The Council is very clear, therefore, what work is required, what it would cost and how effectively it could be undertaken. However, not all of the requirements identified within these audits have yet been carried out. For instance, the tourist information centre in Bromsgrove Town Centre is not accessible to a wheel chair user. This prevents some sections of the community having full access to Council services.
- 52 The Council has taken a more pro-active stance on the provision of translation services recently, but this is not yet fully operational or effective. For example, it is positive that there are now translation straplines on the main strategic housing leaflets, however, other leaflets still issued by the Council do not have these important messages contained within them. This lessens the effectiveness of the Councils' written communications and does not show a focus on addressing the needs of all sectors of the community.
- 53 The Council has provided good access at the Hub customer contact centre for people with disabilities. For example, there are hearing loops, automatic doors, and wheelchair accessible public toilets. This building has been subject to detailed audit and work to address any perceived weakness has been carried out. This shows a level of commitment to the needs of vulnerable people and people with disabilities ensuring that they can equitably gain access to Council services.
- 54 The Council is showing an enhanced recent commitment to address the diversity agenda. The Council has now achieved level two of the Local Government equalities standard and impact assessments have been carried out across the operation of strategic housing services. This is assisting officers to understand what still needs to be done to ensure that services are provided equitably.
- 55 The Council is providing positive financial commitment to the needs of older people and people with disabilities. For example, the Disabled Facilities Grant budget has been increased in recent years and is substantially above the capped level provided by the ODPM. Given that the local context information shows a higher percentage of older and vulnerable people living in the district this is an effective response to the needs of the local community.

### **Housing strategy and enabling**

- 56 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in the Council's housing strategy and enabling role. The Council has an effective housing strategy in place which is assessed as being fit for purpose by the Government Office, there is a solid information base on housing needs and stock condition, and some good opportunistic infill developments of affordable housing in Bromsgrove. However, there has been little corporate effort to balance the housing market in Bromsgrove, there has been a poor approach historically to delivering affordable housing, and planning issues are limiting further expansion of the social housing sector. There is an absence of a clear strategy on the future of the poor hostel accommodation in the district, leading to poor outcomes for residents of the hostels, and a lack of exploration of options to increase the availability of rented accommodation.

- 57 The Council has given increased prominence to the role of strategic housing during the last two years. For example, the creation of a dedicated strategic housing team has been a success, with much closer multi-agency working taking place and effective consultation contributing to the development of the housing strategy. There has also been an increased financial commitment made to support the service. This is helping to improve the outcomes for housing in the district, with some recent successes on delivering affordable housing on infill sites in Bromsgrove.
- 58 The Council's housing strategy 2006-2011 is assessed as being 'fit for purpose' by the Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM). Having a good quality housing strategy in place will ensure that all associated services will have a framework to operate within, and external partners will have a clearer understanding of the direction that the Council intends to take for strategic housing services.
- 59 The Council has good baseline data and information on housing stock condition in the district and on housing needs. For example, a private sector stock condition survey was carried out in 2004 by external consultants. This was a comprehensive report which covered energy efficiency, meeting the decent homes standard and also looked at the socio-economic profile of households. The survey also took account of the Housing, Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS), an alternative method for looking at the condition of dwellings in an area taking into account the potential hazards of a dwelling in relation to any persons using it rather than a study of the fabric condition of the home. A housing needs survey was also undertaken in 2004 which has provided an overview of the housing situation in Bromsgrove, calculating an estimate of housing need and also looking at housing demand across all tenures and property sizes. This work ensures that the Council has access to good baseline information to inform decision-making.
- 60 There has been effective and wide ranging consultation with the community, stakeholders and partners during the development of the housing strategy. For example, a Black and minority ethnic focus group was held with staff now building upon the contacts made through this process, there is a regular and popular private landlord forum in place, and housing association liaison is inclusive and working well. This means that the Council has been well placed to take a wide range of views and experience into account in the compilation of the housing strategy.
- 61 There is some positive working taking place to provide affordable housing in the district. Officers have been able to identify a number of infill and garage sites, particularly within Bromsgrove where additional housing can be developed. There has been increased emphasis on bringing these sites forward given the moratorium on developing larger general needs housing sites in the district. This is enabling small additions to be made to the stock of affordable social housing in an area of considerable housing need. However, the actual numbers of new dwellings being produced through this process is small with 22 properties for rent completed in 2005/06 and around 20 properties for shared and fixed equity low cost housing.

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

Taking into account 'buy backs' of properties for dispersed temporary accommodation and the properties bought through the 'Homebuy' scheme, the total number of affordable units achieved during 2005/06 was 75. However, the overall additions to the housing stock are very limited, particularly in the area of family accommodation. This is barely keeping pace with the loss of social housing properties through right to buy where 22 units were sold in 2004/05 and 18 units in 2005/06.

- 62 The Council has raised the profile of rural housing needs in the district and is now achieving some success in rural housing developments. For example, it has been working closely with the Worcestershire Rural Housing Enabler and has carried out rural housing needs surveys in five areas. Three rural housing consultation events have been held and planning permission has been achieved for the first rural social housing scheme in the district at Belbroughton. This is helping the Council to address concerns about affordability issues in rural areas, and successful development will help raise the profile of rural issues and help identify other possible development sites.
- 63 The Council is not, however, providing a financial commitment to the support work on the housing needs of rural parts of the district. For example, Bromsgrove is the only rural local authority in Worcestershire which does not provide funding for the Worcestershire Rural Housing Enabling officer. This service is only continuing in Bromsgrove District because BDHT have agreed to provide some additional funding. A budget bid was considered by Councillors but turned down due to financial constraints. This does not indicate a commitment by Councillors to take steps to balance the housing market in rural areas.
- 64 In addition to consultation on the housing strategy there are good liaison and working arrangements in place with housing associations working in the district. This takes the form of regular meetings to discuss both new development and existing properties. Officers at the Council are working collaboratively with the largest landlord in the district, Bromsgrove and District Housing Trust, both at an operational and strategic level. There are regular meetings taking place between senior officers at both organisations which are minuted and feed into service planning. This ensures that common issues can be considered and can be incorporated into service delivery improvements.
- 65 The Council has a clearer focus at a staff level on working regionally on housing issues with neighbouring local authorities. For example, officers are proactively involved in the work of the South Housing Market Group (made up of all local authorities in Worcestershire, Warwick District Council and Stratford on Avon District Council). This is helping to link work regionally on needs, affordability and the development of the Regional Spatial Strategy. This is ensuring that the needs and aspirations of the people of Bromsgrove can be used to influence regional housing considerations.

- 66 There has been little corporate effort to assist in balancing the housing market in Bromsgrove. Officers within strategic housing have been unsupported in using all of the possible options to address concerns about affordability and the limited amount of social housing in the district. Whilst officers have been opportunistic in identifying small scale development sites, the lack of leadership and vision more widely has stifled innovation. This has impacted on the lack of affordable social housing and poor outcomes for people in temporary accommodation or in housing need.
- 67 There is a lack of a common vision for housing at a member level, which would set a clear framework for the future of Bromsgrove. Officers have driven forward the development of the housing strategy despite members rather than as a result of a common understanding of the way forward. For example, whilst members acknowledge that affordability is the key issue, there is no clear consensus of whether the moratorium on larger scale general needs housing sites should be lifted or is still appropriate. Whilst it is clear that the numbers of homeless households moving into temporary accommodation is increasing there is also no clear direction or leadership being given by Councillors to addressing this issue. This leaves staff and external partners without a clear mandate from Councillors about the future direction of housing in Bromsgrove, and undermines staff efforts to address concerns about affordability.
- 68 Whilst having an effective housing strategy in place, the Council is not effectively considering the wider strategic issues within Bromsgrove and the connections with economic and social regeneration activities are not well understood. For example, there are ambitions to attract more high technology jobs to the area, but the effect and impact of a lack of affordable housing on this ambition is not well recognised. This limits the effectiveness of the Council's corporate planning and community support role.
- 69 There has been little publicity on the effectiveness or impact of previous housing strategies or the outcomes of strategic housing actions in Bromsgrove. For example, the lack of delivery on affordable housing in the district for many years has not been well disseminated and this prevents people in Bromsgrove understanding the impact that Council policy and actions are having on people in housing need or those in temporary accommodation.
- 70 The Council does not have an effective planning function in place that supports the need for additional affordable housing in the district. There has been a historically poor approach to delivering affordable housing, and the outcome of this has been substantial development of sites containing large executive homes, apartments and general needs family housing for sale, to the detriment of provision of properties for social rented housing or schemes for special needs, the homeless or vulnerable client groups. There has been a lack of effective use of section 106 agreements to ensure that affordable housing has been included in early considerations on development sites. This has resulted in people having to stay longer periods in unsuitable hostel or temporary accommodation, and there being a lack of suitable housing options for those in housing need.

- 71 The imposition of the moratorium in 2004 to prevent any further large scale general needs housing developments has limited the deliverability of affordable housing in the District. The effect of the announcement of the moratorium speeded up planning applications by developers of sites, mainly under the threshold limit of 25 units. This has contributed to the imbalance in the housing market in Bromsgrove with a lack of affordable social housing for rent.
- 72 There is a lack of capacity within the Council's planning function. This has been a historic issue, which has not been resolved. Staff turnover within the department has been high and recruitment has been difficult. This has impacted upon the Council's ability to take a more strategic approach to planning considerations and to provide comprehensive support to other relevant departments.
- 73 The Council does not have a full range of planning tools in place to support the housing strategy and to assist in balancing the housing market. For example, there is a lack of supplementary planning guidance to help support the development of affordable housing in the district. The Council is therefore constrained in its ability to set clear numbers or percentages of affordable housing on the sites that have been identified. The effect of this has been to restrict the numbers of affordable housing units delivered in the area in recent years.
- 74 The Council does not have clear written guidance to support the planning function on the type, quality and layout of affordable and other social housing being developed in the district. For example, there is an absence of development briefs and written guidance in this area. This means that developers and housing associations do not have a clear framework of the Council's stated requirements about the characteristics of a particular development.
- 75 The Council lacks specific plans to achieve the target of 400 new affordable housing units over the next five years, as set out on the current housing strategy and the target is aspirational. The target was modified at the end of strategy consultation as a result of input from external partners, and is acknowledged by the Council as being challenging. However, there is a substantial gap between the numbers of definitely identified development opportunities and the overall target. It is not clear how the Council is going to be able to fill this gap given the moratorium on larger development sites, and therefore the delivery of future affordable housing may be restricted.
- 76 There is a lack of an agreed strategy on the future of temporary accommodation in the district. As set out in the section of this report on homelessness the existing hostel accommodation is poor, and has been so for many years, with shared facilities and small rooms being used for families. Whilst discussions have taken place with BDHT this has not yet resulted in a clear strategy being agreed on the future use, location or investment needs of all temporary accommodation in the district. This prevents staff from effectively communicating with those people on temporary accommodation about their future, and prevents Councillors being able to give good information about the hostels to local residents.

- 77 The Council has not used all of the possible options to increase the availability of housing for rent in the district. For example, the Council does not have a private sector leasing scheme in operation whereby the Council guarantees to provide a defined management service to private landlords in return for the use of private rented properties to be used to meet the Council's homelessness duty. Landlords that were contacted during the inspection expressed an interest in his type of scheme. This lack of innovation and the use of all options are limiting the availability and effective use of all housing in the district.

### **Homelessness and housing needs**

- 78 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in the Homelessness and housing needs service. The quality of temporary hostel accommodation is poor, with insufficient support generally being provided to those in temporary accommodation. There are a lack of housing options for over 25 year olds, an increasing number of people in temporary accommodation or 'homeless at home' and a lack of innovative use of the private sector housing stock. However, there are some positive aspects. There are effective arrangements in place with external partners to deliver a competent homelessness and housing advice service. This is working well, with good outcomes for those seeking advice and rapid decision-making for homeless applicants, with no use of bed and breakfast being used for families.
- 79 The Council is providing a good quality, effective and appropriate advice and assistance service to homeless people or those in housing need. This is delivered in partnership with the Bromsgrove Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and is set out and managed through sound contractual arrangements supported by a service level agreement (SLA). These arrangements are ensuring that users are seen by qualified and experienced staff quickly and the service is accessible.
- 80 People seeking housing or debt advice are seen rapidly by the CAB. The service provides dedicated housing specialist case workers, and also utilises more generic staff. Advice is given through telephone interviews and some home visits take place. The service has been effective in intervening in, and providing solutions to cases where it has only been involved when the client had reached a crisis stage. This service is providing a valuable and supportive service to people seeking basic advice and to those in more challenging circumstances.
- 81 The Council is meeting its statutory duty in the way in which homelessness applications are administered in partnership with Bromsgrove and District Housing Trust (BDHT). There is a service level agreement in place for this service also. BDHT is processing homeless cases promptly and the quality of casework and decision-making is good. The time for decision-making is rapid with 96 per cent of applicants receiving a decision within 33 days. This provides homeless and vulnerable people with an effective service that is moving them towards more settled accommodation in well managed way. However, there is lack of written procedures in some areas of the homelessness service. For example, there are no written procedures of dealing with homelessness assessments. This undermines the effectiveness of the process and does not provide managerial certainty that decision-making is being made on an equitable and consistent basis.

- 82 The Council has been effective in reducing and minimising the use of bed and breakfast accommodation over a number of years. There has been no use of bed and breakfast for families for some years, and only occasional use of bed and breakfast for single people, and these have been in emergency circumstances. This is ensuring that homeless people are not housed in unsuitable and unsupportive bed and breakfast accommodation, and is meeting a key Government target.
- 83 The lack of affordable and social housing in the district is contributing to some people remaining in temporary and hostel accommodation for long periods. This situation is getting worse. The average length of stay in hostel accommodation of households which include dependent children or a pregnant woman has increased from 8.61 weeks in 2004/05 to 18 weeks in 2005/06. This is causing considerable pressure on the management of hostels and the support needs of families in temporary accommodation and lengthens the period of uncertainty whilst waiting for more settled accommodation to be available.
- 84 The condition of the Council's hostel accommodation is poor. There are four hostels in the district, and all provide shared kitchen, toilets and bathing facilities, and the mix of clients being housed in this accommodation presents substantial challenges to those housing in the hostels. The overall condition of the properties is poor, lacking capital investment for many years. The facilities are not wheelchair accessible. This means that vulnerable people and families are being housed for long periods in inadequate and unsuitable accommodation.
- 85 The management arrangements for the hostels are flawed. Whilst owned by the Council they are managed by BDHT. However, the contractual arrangements contained within the SLA are insufficiently specific about the management requirements for the hostels. For example, it does not specify the numbers of managerial visits that should be made to the hostels or what support mechanisms should be provided to individual residents. This has led to some poor outcomes and a lack of effective management at the hostels, which is compounding the challenges faced by residents, and adding to the perception of mismanagement by other local residents.
- 86 There is limited support and information being provided to people in temporary accommodation across the district. This is evident for both those in temporary accommodation and those housed in the dispersed stock of temporary accommodation spread across the district. Whilst there is some support provided by hostel superintendents and through floating support services, this is not provided within set frameworks or service standards, and is not comprehensive. This means that some people in temporary accommodation lacking effective support and being unsure about their rights, responsibilities and what their future housing accommodation will be.
- 87 There is some positive work being undertaken in the district, through partnership arrangements, to focus on homelessness prevention for under 25 year olds. For example, the homelessness preventative service makes referrals to the Baseline private tenancy scheme that offers rent deposit, rent in advance and rent guarantee facilities for people under 25 years to promote private sector renting.

This is helping to move vulnerable young people into settled accommodation in the private sector.

- 88 There is a lack of a full range of housing options for over 25 year olds in the district. The private tenancy scheme run by the Basement project does not have sufficient resources to enable it to be extended to the over 25 year olds. This means that this group find it more difficult to provide sufficient guarantees to landlords to enable them to move into the private rented sector within Bromsgrove.
- 89 There is good strategic working between the Council, BDHT and other housing associations on providing additional accommodation for the homeless. Working in partnership has added 21 self contained properties to the pool of dispersed temporary accommodation that is used to house homeless people. For each property that the Council funds through this 'buy back' mechanism BDHT match with an additional property to add to the pool of temporary accommodation. This helps to alleviate the pressure on the hostel accommodation in the district.
- 90 The Council has been effective in minimising the cases of repeat homelessness in the district. The Council and external partners are monitoring the level of cases and this has been very low. This indicates that the focus on preventing tenancy failure of people who have been homeless in the past is working effectively.
- 91 The Council has a sound process in place for appeals against homelessness decisions. This is run in conjunction with BDHT and the effectiveness of existing homelessness administration is shown by the very low level of appeals that have been made over the last two years. This ensures that existing administrative arrangements are effective and helps to speed up the resolution of homeless applications.
- 92 There is a mixed picture on the quality of preventative work being undertaken in the district for homelessness. Whilst the preventative work done through the CAB is effective, the operation of family mediation services in the district is not working well to provide solutions until situations have reached crisis. BDHT report that significant numbers of homeless presentations are being made where low level intervention and support would have been possible to resolve family tensions and prevent homelessness occurring. This is adding to the pressure on temporary accommodation and support services in the district.
- 93 The Council is not effectively monitoring the level of nominations being provided by housing associations in the district. Whilst the Council is receiving a higher percentage of nominations through BDHT, the Council lacks detailed information on the performance of others. This prevents the Council from understanding whether the best use is being made of the existing housing stock to support the Councils' homelessness duty.

- 94 The Council is not effectively using customer feedback to improve homelessness services. For example, surveys of homeless customers do not measure satisfaction with services during the post acceptance period. Surveys are sent out by BDHT after homelessness acceptance occurs, but the household may spend long periods on temporary accommodation following this. Therefore the satisfaction levels with the whole homelessness process are unknown and prevent the Council effectively shaping service delivery on the basis of user feedback.
- 95 The pressure on accommodation in the district is increasing with increased numbers of people being classified as 'homeless at home'. This is where the Council accepts that it has a duty to house the person through homelessness legislation, but that person is not placed into temporary accommodation, but for example, sleeps at a the home of a relative. This is a short term solution to the lack of suitable accommodation in the district but does not assist effectively vulnerable people to find long term settled accommodation.
- 96 The Council has not used all possible options in addressing the needs of homeless and vulnerable people in the district and it has not been sufficiently innovative on using all housing options to limit homelessness. For example, a bid was made to the Council to provide a 'spend to save' scheme that could be used, for instance, to provide financial support to a single parent enabling them to remain at home. This was turned down by Councillors. This limits the options for assisting people and is adding to the numbers of homeless applications.
- 97 The Council is not using all of its powers effectively to support vulnerable people. For example, the Council has been overly restrictive in the use of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) through the housing benefit system. These could have been used more imaginatively to support people in vulnerable circumstances. The Council has not made explicit its policy and procedure in the use of DHPs or what budget allocation has been made for these to be paid. This limits the number of option for external homelessness prevention services.
- 98 There are some gaps in written guidance setting out the relationship between external partners and the Council. For example, BDHT does not have written protocols in place for joint working with external advice and support agencies in the provision of homelessness services. These are now being developed in conjunction with work being undertaken on protocols by the county homelessness officers group. This absence of protocol undermines the effective working arrangements of agencies working in Bromsgrove.

### **Private sector housing**

- 99 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in the Council's approach to private sector housing activities. There are few tangible outcomes from activity in the private sector with limited targeting on reducing the number of vulnerable households in non decent housing. The council has not taken a pro-active approach to ensure high standards in houses in multiple occupation. There has been little preparation undertaken on responding to the introduction of the Housing, Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS), although staff have been trained in this area.

There has been little promotion of the availability of grants, there are weaknesses in the Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) process and follow up activity, and little work to bring empty private sector homes back into use. However, the Council has good baseline information on the needs of the private sector and is now in a position to target activities more effectively. There are sound arrangements in place to provide Disabled Facilities Grants, and a good level of financial support.

- 100** There has been limited promotion of the range of measures available through the private sector housing strategy. For example the availability of grants, loans and other support has not been well promoted to owner's occupiers in the district. There are some leaflets available on private sector grants but these are limited. This means that the effectiveness of the Council's approach to the private sector is lessened, and that residents of the district are not fully aware of the range of support that the Council is able to provide.
- 101** The Council is not effectively spending its budget on private sector housing activities. For example, the expenditure on discretionary grants is showing a considerable under spend at present, and the service cannot carry this forward into subsequent financial years. This prevents the Council from making the projected impact in the private sector as set at the time when budgets were allocated.
- 102** The Council has effective partnership arrangements in place to deliver Disabled Facilities Grants. There are good working relations between the Council, and the social service occupational therapists. The Council has a new joint partnership 'The North Worcestershire Care and Repair Agency' which now deals with the majority of owner-occupier and private tenant requests for grant aid. This service also carried out home assessments on safety, property suitability and assesses any need for home repair assistance. This demonstrates a commitment to needs of owner occupiers living in the district.
- 103** The Council is providing an effective Disabled Facilities Grants service. Waiting times from assessment of work required to completion are between six and twelve months, with minor or standard (for example stair lifts) works being completed more rapidly. The Council has developed a d priority rating scheme to help ensure that those applicants in most need are dealt with effectively. This demonstrates a focus on the needs of vulnerable people or those with disabilities and helps to ensure that they can live independently in their own homes for longer periods.
- 104** The Council has shown a financial commitment to the needs of older people and people with disabilities. For example, the Council commits funding for DFGs within its capital programme well in excess of the capped level to which the Government contributes. This ensures that people in need of DFGs do not have to wait excessive periods for work to their homes to be undertaken.

- 105 Satisfaction surveys are being used well to assess the work being undertaken by Care and Repair in conjunction with the Council on DFGs. These are being used to assess the overall level of service experienced by users, and also to determine qualitative issues on how the service can be improved. This is assisting the Council to shape its policies and procedures on the provision of DFGs more effectively and shape services to the needs of service users.
- 106 There are some weaknesses in the way in which DFGs are provided. There is a lack of clarity and specific information provided to applicants on the prioritisation scheme in place. This means that those in most need, for example, the terminally ill or those in hospital would be unaware that the Council could fast track their applications. This lack of explicit information would also prevent users of the service being able to challenge their position on the waiting list, or being clear whether their individual application was prioritised correctly or not.
- 107 The Council is not making sure that work done through the DFG process is suitable for the applicant and their needs. There is, for example, no formal requirement to visit recipients of DFG grants after a defined period to make sure that their health and safety needs have been covered correctly. This limits the effectiveness and suitability of DFGs in ensuring that the needs of people to live independently in their own homes are met.
- 108 There has been limited work done by the Council in identifying and bringing empty homes in the district back into use. Whilst this is not a significant or major issue in the district staff have already identified that there are at least 34 isolated cases where there may be potential for bringing dwellings back into use. However, a lack of staff resources has prevented any further work being done on this issue. The appointment of a new Housing Initiatives officer due to commence in May 2006 will be tasked to address this issue.
- 109 The service is not working collaboratively with other departments of the Council to identify any developing trends in empty homes. For example, strategic housing does not receive information from the Council tax department on empty properties, through the use of Council tax records. This limits the way in which the Council can respond to, or identify developing trends in this area.
- 110 There has been little monitoring of outcomes as a result of the Councils' private sector activities. Although some basic compilation of performance indicator information has taken place, the service is unable to quantify the effect of work and commitment to the private sector housing strategy. This prevents the Council having clear understanding of the impact of allocated funds to this area of activity.
- 111 The Council has done little to ensure that conditions in Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) in the district are well managed and providing good living conditions for residents. Although there are believed to be very few HMOs in the district the Council lacks any systematic evaluation of the numbers, location and types of HMOs in operation. The Council did have a voluntary registration scheme in place which proved to be ineffective. The Council now intends to set up a mandatory registration scheme through the changes in legislation brought about by the Housing Act 2004, but work to develop this is still at an early stage.

This means that HMOs in the district are potentially hazardous for residents without the Council playing an effective role in ensuring high standards for all of the people living in Bromsgrove.

- 112 The Council has a good understanding of the private sector stock condition and needs data. It has good accurate baseline information on the critical issues affecting people living in the privates sector. For example, baseline stock condition information is showing that there are concerns about the thermal efficiency of some homes in the private sector and therefore the Council is putting extra staff resources to work in addressing these issues in partnership with external organisations. This means that the Council is able to target its resources in the most effective way to support the needs of the private housing sector.
- 113 The Council has a clear housing strategy in place for the private sector. A separate private sector housing strategy was formulated through effective consultation involving questionnaires and workshops. The strategy has considered the use of a wide range of powers available to the Council, and sets out a clear framework within which to operate. However, the Council has yet to use these powers in a fully effective way, for example, in targeting vulnerable households living in non decent housing.
- 114 The strategic housing service is working well with private sector landlords. There is a private landlords' forum in place which is well supported by officers and meets on a regular basis to provide advice and encouragement to private landlords. This positive relationship is encouraging landlords to let properties to homeless clients by linking them with the Basement private tenancy and rent guarantee scheme. Regular newsletters are sent to private landlords and meetings have included presentations by external specialists on subjects of interest identified by the private landlords, for example, on legal issues. This work is helping to maintain contact with the private sector and to build on the relationship encouraging effective use of the local housing stock.

## Is the service delivering value for money?

- 115 This is a weak area for the Council. There is an absence of information showing how costs compare with others, and a lack of leadership in focussing on value for money issues. The Council lacks effective strategies to set a framework to ensure that cost and quality considerations are embedded in all procurement decisions. There is a lack of effective performance management ensuring that value for money is achieved. There are some positives, for example, there is a new procurement strategy being developed and an extra staff capacity provided for procurement. There have been some successes in attracting external funding to support Council priorities.
- 116 There is a lack of leadership being demonstrated by Councillors in driving forward the value for money agenda. Councillors are not aware of any systematic approach to addressing value for money issues. This means that officers do not receive clear messages about the importance that the Council places on the corporate approach to value for money.

- 117 The Council lacks an embedded value for money strategy that sets out how services should be procured and how cost and quality considerations should be balanced. There is now increased work being undertaken as part of the recovery plan on procurement but this has yet to be translated into service delivery changes that would achieve improved value for money outcomes.

### **How do costs compare?**

- 118 The Council does not have a comprehensive approach to dealing with value for money issues and there is a lack of cost comparison information about strategic housing services. Whilst there is now an increased emphasis on providing good basic financial information to service heads, there has been a lack of capacity in the Council to provide any input beyond basic information. This prevents the service understanding how it compares with other providers and prevents any demonstration of the effectiveness of current service provision.
- 119 The Council lacks benchmarking information about the cost and quality of services being provided by external partners like the CAB and BDHT. Although it has contractual arrangements and service level agreements in place, these are general in form and monitoring arrangements are not comprehensive. The Council cannot therefore accurately determine whether it is achieving good value for money in these areas of operations or not.
- 120 There are some emerging signs of a more robust approach to procurement in the Council. For example, a new procurement strategy has been produced and two new procurement officers have been recruited. However, the impact of these moves has yet to be realised and embedded into service delivery improvements.

### **How is value for money managed?**

- 121 Value for money considerations are not well managed within the Council. For example, the Council has entered into contractual arrangements with external providers of key strategic housing services without there being a fully operational means of ensuring that this provides cost effective quality services. Service Level Agreements do not fully set out the nature of the service that should be provided and performance monitoring and management arrangements of external providers are overly reliant on the submission of figures from these bodies, rather than more independent means of assessment of quality and cost.
- 122 There is an absence of innovation within strategic housing services to achieve value for money. For example, the lack of accurate cost information means that the respective merit of homeless prevention work cannot be weighed against the cost of a homeless application. This lack of qualitative data means that for example bids to the Council for a 'spend to save' scheme cannot be backed up by good baseline data about the respective merits of different approaches to homelessness.

- 123** The Council has missed opportunities to maximise the amount of financial contribution that it could have achieved with more robust affordable housing policies being in place. Although some commuted sums have been received through planning gain, this has not been comprehensive due to the absence of policy in key areas.

## Summary

- 124** The strategic housing services delivered by Bromsgrove District Council provide a 'poor' service. The quality of service is undermined by the lack of clear and comprehensive service standards, and an accompanying vision about how services should be delivered. The quality of hostel accommodation and associated support services are poor. There is a lack of leadership in ensuring a pro-active stance is taken on diversity issues. The Council has taken little action to help ensure a balanced housing market exists in Bromsgrove and this is resulting in lengthening stays for families in unsuitable temporary accommodation. There has been a longstanding poor approach to the deliverability of affordable housing in the district and limited actions to use all possible options to add to the stock of social rented housing. The private sector housing activities have yet to achieve tangible outcomes, in particular for vulnerable households. The corporate approach to demonstrating effective value for money is weak with an absence of cost information and a clear understanding of how costs compare with other providers.
- 125** There are some strengths in the service. There are clear access arrangements with good quality offices at the Hub customer contact centre and at partner organisations. Housing advice, homelessness and prevention services are delivered competently and in line with legislation. A clear fit for purpose housing strategy is in place, which has been formulated through effective consultation arrangements and based on good baseline stock condition and housing needs information. There are positive outcomes for the users of housing advice services, the Disabled Facilities Grant service is effective and financially well supported and there has been a focus on avoiding the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for families.

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

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

- 126 The service track record in delivering improvement is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. The track record on delivering affordable housing is poor, there has been a lack of attention in dealing with poor hostel accommodation and there are long term planning issues restricting the deliverability of additional social housing for vulnerable clients groups.
- 127 There has been some sustained focus on ensuring that bed and breakfast is not used for families and officers within strategic housing have worked effectively to maintain a collective focus on housing issues post LSVT. This has resulted in some good small scale development of affordable housing.
- 128 There is a mixed picture of performance over the last three years on strategic housing related performance. The length of stay in hostel accommodation is getting worse and this remains a key challenge to the Council. However, there has been a successful focus on minimising the use of bed and breakfast, rates of homelessness applications are falling, there is little repeat homelessness, and there is rapid processing of homeless applications.
- 129 The Council faces long term challenges around planning issues, which are restricting the delivery of additional units of affordable housing. These challenges will require long term solutions, but the track record so far in addressing these concerns has not been effective. Outcomes for people in Bromsgrove seeking rented social housing are very limited with many larger houses for sale being developed at the expense of the social rented market.
- 130 There has been a poor track record on the delivery of affordable housing in the district. The outcomes of housing development in the last ten years has been substantial numbers of large detached general needs housing for sale, with little pro-activity on supporting the needs and aspirations of people requiring social housing for rent.
- 131 The Council does not have a good track record on delivering other housing option solutions to assist vulnerable people and those in temporary accommodation. For example, the lack of support for people over 25 years to access the private rented sector has been apparent for many years, and the pressure on the unsuitable hostel accommodation has been well known - however, neither of these areas have yet to receive a defined long term solution.
- 132 There has been an increased focus by the Council in providing accessible services. For example, the development and implementation of the customer service centre has been a success enabling users of Council services to have a 'one stop shop'. This ensures that users of all Council services have one point of contact where they can be signposted to a range of other services and obtain more joined up service provision.

- 133** The transfer of the Council owned housing stock through the Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) process has been a success for the Council. It was clear that the Council, within its own financial constraints, could not ensure that the public sector housing stock could meet the Decent Homes Standard. Therefore it has been able to transfer the Council housing to BDHT which has a Business Plan that ensures that these needs will be met. This was a successful process at a time of considerable challenges to the Council, and officers within strategic housing played an effective role in ensuring that the transfer took place.
- 134** There has been effective work undertaken by officers within strategic housing to ensure that key housing issues remained on the Council's list of priorities once LSVT was completed. It is a positive feature that the strategic housing function was resourced to ensure good baseline information on both stock condition and needs analysis, and this has helped contribute towards the achievement of a fit for purpose housing strategy. This ensures that housing issues have a defined framework for delivery and provides clarity to external partners about the future direction of housing in Bromsgrove.
- 135** Staff in strategic housing have been effective and opportunistic in identifying and delivering on infill sites and garage sites, to help address the development of affordable housing in the district, They have been constrained by the moratorium that is in place on the development of larger sites of general needs housing where it would be accepted elsewhere that a proportion of properties would be social housing, and by the lack of leadership on this issue. Staff have therefore been pragmatic and innovative in helping to address needs in other ways. This has helped to increase the delivery of affordable housing.
- 136** There has been a sustained focus on bringing service user benefits over the last three years in some key areas. For example, homelessness presentations are reducing as a result of an increased focus on prevention, there has been no use of bed and breakfast for families, improved strategic plans and actions, and increased multi-agency working to address the needs of vulnerable people. This is showing an increasing focus within the Council on meeting the needs of all sectors of the community.
- 137** There has been a sustained focus in ensuring that financial commitment to homelessness prevention has been maintained through a challenging period for the Council. The Council funds most of the prevention work itself, with core funding of £71,000 per annum provided to the CAB, enhanced by £33,000 per annum specifically provided for the prevention service at the CAB. The remainder of preventative services are funded through the Council utilising the £42,000 ODPM homelessness grant. The Council has co-ordinated and lead the Homelessness Strategy steering group since its formation on 2000 and has built up a strong and widely representative group. This shows a commitment to the support needs of vulnerable people in the district.
- 138** The Council has been effective in improving its housing and Council tax benefits performance. This has an important link to the needs of vulnerable people or homeless applicants, and external partners were positive about the improvements in performance that have occurred, leading to better outcomes for vulnerable people in the district.

## How well does the service manage performance?

- 139 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in the way in which the Council manages performance. There are overarching constraints that limit the ability of strategic housing services to operate effectively. The aims and priorities set in corporate plans are not yet fully embedded into service plans to improve the things that matter most to users and communities. Aims and future plans are not fully coordinated, robust and deliverable. There is a lack of a comprehensive performance management system linking corporate priorities through to individual plans, a lack of challenging targets and a lack of focus on delivering value for money. However, there are some strengths in the service. There is a good level of self awareness at officer level, a good use of consultation to feed into strategic plans and some good examples of learning taking place.
- 140 The Council is not providing a clear vision for the district to enable officers to work within agreed aims and priorities. For example, the Corporate Plan document lacks a focus on performance outturn and specific targets. There is no reference to aiming to be among the best 25 per cent and on affordable housing no target is set at all. This limits the ability of the Council to monitor progress against the corporate plan and to ensure that the best use of resources is made.
- 141 There is a lack of clear vision and challenging targets across the Council linking the content of the Housing strategy with other plans and strategies. For example, the targets contained in the housing strategy for affordable housing are not included as specific targets within the corporate plan. Another example is the lack of an agreed strategy with set timescales and milestones for the future of hostel accommodation which all stakeholders agree is unsuitable. This indicates that strategic housing are working in isolation from other parts of the Council. This lessens the effect that pro-active work undertaken during the development of the housing strategy has on meeting the needs of all sectors of the community in Bromsgrove.
- 142 There is a lack of a comprehensive performance management system linking corporate priorities through to departmental and individual plans. Performance management is undertaken within departments at too low a level to ensure an effective strategic approach. There are, for example, timing issues around the wholesale completion of Personal Development Reviews and their links with the corporate and service plans within the Council. This limits the effectiveness of performance monitoring and management arrangements.
- 143 There are some gaps in performance management within strategic housing. For example, there is a lack of effective reporting on the outturn of development of affordable housing, the performance on providing grants within the private sector housing strategy and the performance on DFGs. This limits the ability of the Council to identify trends and take action when under performance is apparent.

- 144 The Council has an over reliance on individual officers within strategic housing to ensure that there is a cohesive approach to meeting the priorities within the housing strategy. Officers are not fully supported by members in ensuring that there is a good linkage between departments in, for example, addressing the poor condition of hostel accommodation, or ensuring that all opportunities to provide affordable housing are responded to. This adds risk to the ability of the Council to emerge from intervention and to meet the emerging priorities from the housing strategy.
- 145 There has been a lack of focus on delivering effective strategic housing services as the focus of attention in the Council has been on meeting the expectations and challenges of the recovery plan. This has distracted attention away from issues outside that plan. This has been recognised by the Council and work put in hand to address this. For example, Officers have held members briefings, there have been presentations on strategic housing at the Council's performance management board and as a consequence the profile and priority given to housing has recently increased.
- 146 There are a lack of formal mechanisms to enable strategic housing and planning to jointly track and monitor the delivery of housing in the district. Whilst there are ad hoc discussions on specific schemes there is no established forum to systematically assess progress in delivering the housing required in the district. Although there is now some increased assessment and monitoring through the Council's performance board, this remains an area of weakness in assessing progress against targets in the housing strategy and in helping to balance the housing market in Bromsgrove.
- 147 There is a lack of focus on performing as well as the best local authorities. Plans are, in general not specific about setting targets that would bring the Council to the same level as top performers. For example, the Planning and Environmental Services Business Plan for 2006/07 does not contain any reference to how all other local authorities are performing and there are no comparative figures to determine how well strategic housing, or other services, are performing. This prevents there being a clear understanding about what needs to be improved and what is currently working well.
- 148 Existing plans and strategies do not contain appropriate consideration of value for money issues. For example, plans set out the overall cost of services and future budgetary provision, but lack a clear view about the balance of cost and quality of services being provided. There is a lack of specified outcomes for users of services and little consideration of alternative providers of services. This limits the effectiveness of the Council's approach to performance management, and prevents an adequate assessment of the impact of investment in individual elements of service delivery.
- 149 There has been limited involvement of user input in helping to shape service delivery in strategic housing. There is some feedback now being obtained from, for example, users of the DFG service, but this has yet to be fully embedded in the way in which service are delivered. Equally there is little feedback being obtained from people living in temporary accommodation about the things that are working well and those areas that are not.

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These are missed opportunities for the Council to ensure that services are meeting the needs and aspirations of users.

- 150 There are some gaps in ensuring that there is consistent and cohesive planning of strategic housing services between the Council, CAB, and BDHT. Whilst there is considerable officer interaction between the Council and individual partners, there are some barriers to effective communication between all three organisations. This is preventing their being a more seamless level of service delivery on the homelessness prevention and advice service.
- 151 There is a lack of learning among Councillors on strategic housing issues. Whilst Councillors are able to articulate the problems that the Council face, for example, in delivering additional units of affordable housing in a rural environment, they have not been pro-active in identifying or visiting other local authorities who have been successful in this area. Neither have they been instrumental in determining how other local authorities have responded to the provision of temporary accommodation for homeless people in an effective way. This shows a lack of innovation and a lack of leadership to strategic housing services.
- 152 The Council has a weak approach to informing service users and partners about performance on strategic housing issues. For example, the changes in the waiting list, the length of time that people are living in unsuitable temporary accommodation and the lack of affordable housing are issues that the Council does not well publicise. External partners, potential and actual service users are not well informed about the performance of the Council in relevant areas and this limits their ability to influence service delivery or to complain the Councillors about under performance.
- 153 The Council is not effectively monitoring the service standards that do exist. For example, there is no monitoring of waiting times at the customer service centre, or in responding to letters, or answering telephone calls. Customers are routinely redirected from the main Council offices to the customer service centre but it is not well controlled with an absence of signposting or a check on how many actually arrive there. This shows a lack of attention in providing an accessible service to users.
- 154 There are some gaps in monitoring of the performance of the CAB. For example, although some basic figures about the provision of advice and prevention services are provided these are not sufficiently specific to ensure that the CAB are meeting the requirements of the SLA. There is also a lack of ethnic monitoring on the service provided.
- 155 Performance management of the DFG process is not measuring or reporting on the whole customer experience. For example, figures are only showing the time taken to complete DFGs from the point of referral rather than the point of initial contact which would be more relevant to users. This prevents the Council from understanding the overall effectiveness on dealing with vulnerable older people, or people with disabilities.

- 156** Officers in strategic housing have a good level of self awareness about the strengths and weaknesses of the service. They are clear about where improvements are required and have put together service plans which seek to address areas of weakness and bring about continuous improvements. However, officers are working in isolation without fully effective support from Councillors in meeting the needs of all sectors of the community. This is restricting the ability of officers to implement improvements as they lack a mandate from Councillors, and lack confidence that Councillors will support them being innovative in addressing key weaknesses.
- 157** The Council has made good use of a mock inspection to determine the performance of homelessness services in the district. This work was undertaken by external consultants in 2005 and was paid for by BDHT. Critical issues were identified through this work, for example, the fragmentation of homelessness and advice service being located within a number of different offices, locations and organisations. The Council, BDHT and the CAB have responded effectively to the mock inspection by developing a joint action plan to make changes to ensure that service delivery is clearer and more cohesive. The Council has also made good use of the mock inspection report in developing its own service delivery action plan.
- 158** The Council is responding to the items contained within the mock inspection report. For example, it is now putting in additional contact arrangements and support in place for people in temporary accommodation. This will assist vulnerable people living in temporary accommodation to have a better understanding of how long they will have to remain, and access to better support services.
- 159** There has been a good use of consultation to inform strategic housing plans and the development of the housing and homelessness strategy. There has been wider ranging and extensive consultation which has enabled the Council to have a good cross section of views on what matters to the people of Bromsgrove. This has been used to a good effect to inform the housing strategy, and will ensure that key housing issues are addressed.
- 160** There are some good examples of where officers have been able to learn from other top performing local authorities. For example, officers have been involved in learning from Wychavon District Council on how innovation could be used in providing homelessness prevention services. This is helping to ensure that officers have a good understanding of what works well in other places, and has contributed towards planning for the production of the housing strategy.
- 161** There are some important initiatives due to be implemented shortly which will improve the support and prevention work of the Council. A new housing initiative officer post has been funded and will commence in April 2006. Plans are in place to provide, through joint funding with Supporting People services, a further floating support and prevention service for over 25 year olds and for people in temporary accommodation. This shows an increased emphasis on the needs of vulnerable people in Bromsgrove.

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

- 162** Overall this is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. There is a lack of leadership in taking difficult decisions on strategic housing matters, for example, on affordable housing and on the poor hostel accommodation. There is limited evidence of effective financial and human resource planning taking place, with staff capacity being limited in some key areas, like human resources and planning. There are some strengths in the service, for example, there are increased resources being devoted to strategic housing services, and officers have a good range of skills, experience and commitment to deliver effective services. The new leader is making a difference in resolving tensions between members and improving the relationship with officers.
- 163** There is a lack of strategic thinking and leadership at the highest levels in the Council. Officers working within strategic housing have not been provided with clear leadership, vision and support for some time. They have been working in isolation to address key housing issues in the district without an appropriate level of Councillor support. This has impacted upon their ability to deliver, for example, additional affordable housing or to address the poor condition of hostel accommodation.
- 164** Councillors are not playing a fully effective role in influencing regional housing issues. For example, there is little member involvement in the work being done to link strategic housing issues across the South Housing market area, involving neighbouring local authorities. This lack of pro-active involvement in influencing regional housing issues prevents particular issues relevant to the people of Bromsgrove being fully considered.
- 165** The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) is not providing effective leadership, around the housing agenda, for the needs of all sectors of the community. There is very limited involvement of housing associations on the LSP, and what involvement does exist is at a lower operational level, and for example, the largest social landlord in the district, Bromsgrove and District Housing Trust, is not a part of the LSP. This is a missed opportunity for housing issues to play a substantive part of the LSP and for the needs of vulnerable groups in the district to be adequately represented.
- 166** The Council is collectively too inwardly focussed and this is preventing improvements to service delivery taking place in some areas. The recent focus of attention has been on 'recovery' from intervention by the ODPM. Whilst this is entirely understandable, this has led to the Council being introspective, and there have been other impacts on service delivery. Officers are reluctant to bring forward suggestions about what is working well in other places, and are hesitant about taking forward ideas about service improvements. This is preventing better service delivery improvements being out into place.

- 167 The Council has a system of Personal Development Reviews in place that attempt to link individual and corporate targets into service plans. Within strategic housing these have been completed for all staff, however, this is not the case across the whole Council, where around 60 per cent have been completed. This limits the cohesive nature of performance management and monitoring and prevents senior officers from ensuring that there is a good framework of plans in place where departments are reliant on one another.
- 168 There are some capacity issues in key areas of operation to support strategic housing services. For example, there has been a lack of workforce planning, and substantive changes to structure as the Council seeks to implement the recovery plan. During this the last year there has been a lack of capacity in the HR function to support staff and there is also a lack of capacity in the planning function which is limiting the ability of the Council to effectively address gaps in planning guidance and taking a more strategic approach to housing and planning issues.
- 169 The Council has limited capacity in the planning function, at this stage, to work collaboratively with strategic housing services to address long term issues like affordable housing. The effect of the current moratorium on the development of larger sites is having a substantive effect on the lack of opportunities to develop affordable housing in the district. The solution to this will require long term and effective planning support and input.
- 170 The Council does not yet have a robust, modern approach to procurement to ensure that it is achieving effective value for money. There are some positive recent additions to capacity in this area and a new procurement strategy is in draft form, but this has yet to be embedded into the Council's overall means of service delivery. Strategic housing services have maintained a good collaborative working relationship with key external partners, but this has not been within a set Council wide framework of effective procurement.
- 171 Officers within strategic housing have maintained a focus on improvement in difficult and challenging circumstances. They have used limited capacity to ensure that strategic housing issues have remained on the Council's agendas. As a result of this they have been able to convince Councillors of the need to strengthen the capacity of the service and three new posts have been agreed within the strategic housing function. This will enable officers to provide a greater strategic focus on the delivery of affordable housing, support for people in temporary accommodation and build on the current housing strategy to be more innovative in delivering housing solutions.
- 172 The officers within strategic housing have a good range of skills, experience and commitment to deliver effective services and continuous improvement. This was self evident in the quality of analysis and information provided within the self assessment and the successful development of a fit for purpose housing strategy.
- 173 The Council has been through some challenging times, with considerable staff turnover and changes to structure. It is therefore positive that current staff are maintaining low sickness levels. Sickness absence is running at around three per cent. This is ensuring that the Council has sufficient capacity in key areas to maintain service provision whilst new structures are embedded.

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- 174 There have been some substantial improvements in the relationship between members and officers over the last six months. It is clear that the new Leader of the Council is making an impact on improving member/member and member/officer relations, but there are still some areas that are seen as being barriers to further improvement.
- 175 The Council have been successful in attracting some small scale inward investment to support improvements in service. For example, some funding has been obtained from the ODPM to support homelessness prevention work, and BDHT have been supportive in paying for the mock inspection of homelessness services, and in jointly funding the out-of-hours homelessness service. This is helping the Council to maximise service delivery to vulnerable people in the district.

### Summary

- 176 The Council has 'uncertain' prospects for improvement. There is a lack of overall leadership for strategic housing services, with a reluctance to take a more pro-active stance of the delivery of affordable housing in the district. There is a lack of effective leadership on the diversity agenda with an absence of policy and plans to support service delivery to all sectors of the community, and the existing corporate plan does not support and link to the aims and priorities in the housing strategy. The Council's track record on bringing forward improvements in service for Homeless households is weak, with an absence of strategy for the future of hostel accommodation. There is a lack of an overarching performance management system that is embedded into the Council to link corporate priorities through to service and individual plans.
- 177 There are some strengths in the Councils approach to improvements. Strategic housing officers have a good range of skills, experience and commitment to the delivery of effective services, and has worked well to ensure that strategic housing services have remained a priority for the Council post LSVT. The production of a clear fit for purpose housing strategy is positive, with some good examples of learning and self awareness being evident. Additional financial resources should mean that the service will have enhanced capacity to do more in the future.

## Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

**Table 2 Performance Indicators - Bromsgrove District Council**

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>2003/04</b>	<b>2004/05 target</b>	<b>2004/05 actual</b>	<b>2005/06 target</b>	<b>2005/06 current performance</b>	<b>Status of current performance</b>
BV 183A Stay in B&B	0 weeks	3 weeks	1 weeks	0 weeks	0 weeks	Improving
Bv183b Stay in Hostels	9.28 weeks	6 weeks	8.61 weeks	8 weeks	18 weeks	Declining
BV202 Rough sleepers	0	Less than 10	0	Less than 10	0	Same
BV203 % change in average no of families in TA	n/a	Minus 12%	Minus 5.23%	Minus 3%	Up by 31%	Declining
BV213 Advice resolving situation	n/a	n/a	n/a			
BV214 Proportion of Statutory homeless accepted within last two years	n/a	n/a	n/a	3%	3.3%	On target
BV 64 Long term empties returned to use	3	3	3	3	3	On target

## Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
  - BDC Progress Assessment report issued by the Audit Commission - December 2005;
  - Housing needs study report – 2004;
  - Housing strategy 2006-2011;
  - BDC Service Business Plan 2006-2007 - Planning and environment services;
  - 2004 Private sector stock condition survey;
  - homeless service action plan;
  - Bromsgrove homelessness services - mock inspection report;
  - corporate recovery plan;
  - equal opportunities policy;
  - procurement strategy;
  - homelessness strategy;
  - housing agency service level agreements; and
  - community plan.

## 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:
  - tour of the district in conjunction with officers of the Council;
  - visit to Citizens Advice Bureau offices;
  - visit to Bromsgrove and District Housing Trust offices;
  - visit to homeless hostel and bed and breakfast establishment;
  - visit to the Hub customer service centre;
  - visit to Bromsgrove Tourist Information Centre;
  - inspected main reception at Council offices; and
  - telephone interviews with users of CAB service.