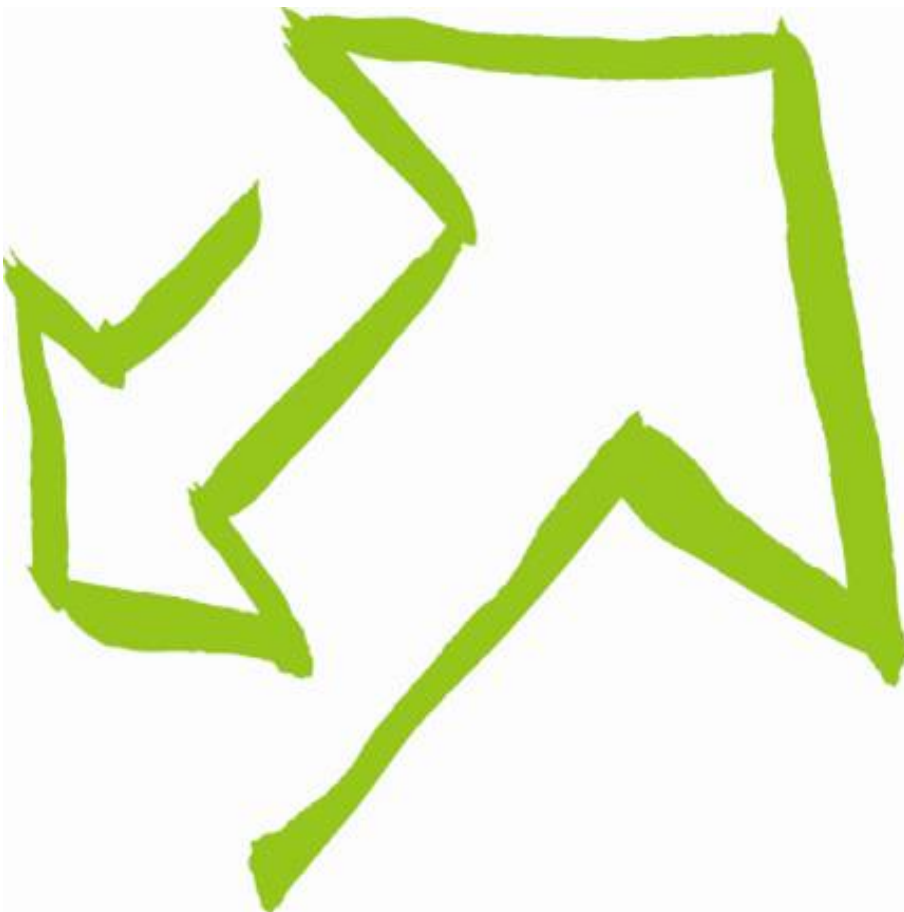


Strategic Inspection

Birmingham City Council

January 2009



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Local Authority Inspections

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

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

For housing associations our inspection role and remit is set out in sections 41(A) and 41(B) of the Audit Commission Act 1998 (as amended by section 109 of the Local Government Act 2003), 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 association;
- 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.

We are committed to working in partnership with other regulators, and the Audit Commission and the Housing Corporation are working together to improve the performance and efficiency of housing associations. Our shared objectives are to ensure that associations provide services for the diverse range of customers in their areas of operation, high standards of customer services and access, and value for money for both customers and the taxpayer.

The Housing Corporation is the statutory body which regulates housing associations to ensure that they are well governed, well managed and financially viable, as set out in its Regulatory Code. Its lead regulation staff work with housing inspectors to ensure that there is adequate information provided for the inspection and that the inspected body implements recommendations in the inspection report. The overall findings of the inspection are also used to inform the Housing Corporation Assessment (HCA) which determines eligibility for further public investment and may influence the Housing Association's future business prospects.

Summary

- 1 This inspection focused on how well the Council makes use of existing housing stock as part of its overall strategic approach. In this context, we have assessed that the strategic housing service provided by Birmingham City Council is a good, two-star service, which has excellent prospects for improvement.
- 2 Services are effectively publicised and promoted. Customers are able to access them in a range of ways, and partners work effectively with the Council to provide joined up services for vulnerable people.
- 3 The Council has developed a clear vision for what it wants to achieve supported by a comprehensive housing plan, supporting strategies and action plans. These are based on a good understanding of housing need through appropriate research, which also enables the Council to plan to meet the needs of diverse communities. Partners are fully engaged in developing and delivering priorities.
- 4 A thorough understanding of the main causes of homelessness has resulted in an effective housing options service, which makes use of a wide range of tools, and is increasingly preventing people from becoming homeless. Plans to increase choice in lettings across the city are well advanced.
- 5 The Council is making improved use of existing homes by reducing the number of empty properties within the city, and enforcing standards in the private rented sector. Its approach to affordable warmth is having a significant impact through targeted advice and assistance, and work with partners is helping to reduce health inequalities. Aids and adaptations cases are prioritised effectively and recycled, and the Council has implemented a range of funding options to help more people benefit from improved housing conditions.
- 6 However, some aspects of intervention in the private sector are underdeveloped, and despite clearing a significant backlog, people are still waiting for a long time to have major adaptations completed to their homes. The quality of advice regarding homelessness and housing options is inconsistent, and gaps in diversity information means that the Council cannot yet demonstrate that all services are delivered fairly and consistently.
- 7 The service has excellent prospects for improvements. A focus on delivering agreed plans and priorities has resulted in a wide range of improved outcomes for service users, and improved performance in key areas. The service benefits from strong leadership, which is driving improvement, supported by an effective performance management framework.
- 8 A good understanding of costs and how they compare is leading to efficiencies and improved value for money of services. Effective procurement arrangements, success in attracting external funding, and strengths in partnership working are also increasing the resources available to deliver priorities and improved outcomes for service users.

Summary

- 9 There are some gaps in what is monitored and reported to drive further improvement, and the Council cannot demonstrate sustained progress against the Equality Standard for Local Government. The Council is investing in skills and IT to support improvement, but IT is not yet effective in all areas of its work.

Scoring the service

- 10 We have assessed Birmingham City Council as providing a 'good', two-star service that has excellent prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹

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

Source: Audit Commission

- 11 We found the service to be good because of a range of strengths, which include:
- services are well publicised and promoted and effective translation and interpreting arrangements are in place;
 - there is a wide range of ways for customers to access services, which take account of the needs of diverse communities and vulnerable people;
 - services are planned and shaped based on knowledge of the needs of diverse communities;
 - priorities are informed by a robust and comprehensive research base which is used to target interventions where they will have most effect;
 - a range of tools are used to effectively prevent people from becoming homeless and increase their housing options and choice;
 - housing conditions for vulnerable homeowners are being improved through a targeted affordable warmth programme;
 - aids and adaptations are prioritised and recycled effectively;
 - the Council is effectively tackling and reducing the number of empty homes in the city;
 - intervention is improving housing conditions for tenants in the private rented sector and they are protected from harassment and illegal eviction;

¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

Scoring the service

- there is a strong focus on understanding and managing costs which is realising efficiencies;
- procurement practice is improving value for money for the Council and service users; and
- the Council is stretching resources by offering a range of different funding options for people who require improvements or adaptations to their homes.

12 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:

- the quality and availability of services provided through the Neighbourhood Office network is inconsistent;
- there are gaps in diversity and satisfaction monitoring which limits the Council's ability to ensure services are delivered fairly and consistently to all service users;
- people are waiting a long time to have major adaptations completed to their homes; and
- work to proactively identify HMOs which require a license is underdeveloped.

13 The service has excellent prospects for improvement because:

- it has delivered a range of improved outcomes for customers, and improved performance, in line with its strategies and plans;
- improvement and investment plans address known weaknesses;
- the Council is improving the value for money of its services and resources are aligned to priorities;
- there is an effective performance management framework which is supported by clear leadership;
- the Council uses learning from its own experience and that of others to inform service improvement;
- risks to delivery of objectives are minimised;
- partnership working is a strength and is increasing the Council's capacity to deliver improvements;
- the Council is successfully attracting external funding to help deliver its priorities; and
- the Council is investing in skills and IT to deliver its ambitions.

14 However, there are some barriers to improvement. These include:

- there are gaps in the performance management framework, which include satisfaction and diversity profile information about service users, and the total time that people wait for adaptations to their homes;
- the Council is not maximising opportunities to monitor the accessibility of front line service provision; and
- the use of IT to support service improvements is not yet fully effective in all areas.

Recommendations

- 15 In order to rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve the focus on customers by:

- working with them to develop specific service standards for each element of the strategic housing service, and regularly monitor and publish the results;
- regularly assessing satisfaction across each element of the service and standardising the way that this information is captured and reported;
- refocusing existing customer surveys, such as the annual Neighbourhood Office Survey and for private sector intervention, to capture the full customer experience of the services provided; and
- implementing methods of testing, reporting and responding to the quality and consistency of access to services.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- Customers know what level of service they should receive and when they should receive it; and
- Appropriate tools are in place to ensure that the quality and timeliness of service delivery is consistent and meets expected standards.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by August 2009.

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

Recommendations

Recommendation

R2 Improve the focus on meeting diverse needs by:

- ensuring that data relating to service take up and customer satisfaction is analysed across all six equality strands and that action is taken to address any inequality; and
- improving completion timescales for major adaptations.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- services are delivered fairly and consistently to all service users; and
- completion times for major adaptations meet national guidelines

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by August 2009.

Recommendation

R3 Increase the impact of work in the private sector by:

- developing and implementing appropriate means of proactively identifying high risk HMOs within the city.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- Improved housing standards in the private sector.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by April 2009.

Recommendation

R4 Improve the focus on value for money by:

- including assessments of customer satisfaction, feedback and diversity monitoring alongside analysis of costs and performance.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- An improved understanding of value for money and ability to ensure that inequality in service provision is addressed.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by August 2009.

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

Dates of inspection: 9 - 17 October 2008

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Report

Context

The locality

- 17 Outside London, Birmingham is the country's largest city and is the largest local authority, with an estimated population of over one million people.
- 18 Approximately 30 per cent of the city's residents are from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities, with the largest communities from southern Asia. The ethnic diversity of the city is increasing with new arrivals from Africa and Eastern Europe. Birmingham has a high proportion of young residents, but also has a growing population of older people.
- 19 Data relating to crime, health, education and employment vary widely across the city. Four wards compare to the most deprived ten per cent in the country, and the City has 19 of the 20 most deprived estates in the West Midlands. One ward has the country's highest rate of worklessness.

The Council

- 20 The Council has a political structure of a leader and cabinet with a Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition. The Labour party has 36 seats, the Conservative party has 49, Liberal Democrats hold 32 seats, and Respect has 3 seats.
- 21 Under the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) 2007/08, the Audit Commission rated the Council as a three star authority (out of a possible four), with two out of four for housing. In terms of direction of travel, the Council is judged to be improving well.

The service

- 22 In 2007, the Housing Directorate merged with the Constituencies Directorate. The new directorate has 1,721 staff in housing and 4,285 in constituencies.
- 23 This inspection has focused on the effectiveness of the Council's strategic housing functions in making best use of existing homes to meet housing need within the city.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 24 The Council Plan 2007-2010 identifies six strategic outcomes the Council is seeking to achieve:
- succeed economically;
 - stay safe;
 - be healthy;
 - enjoy a high quality of life;
 - make a contribution; and
 - raising our game.
- 25 The Council shares its vision for the City with the Local Strategic Partnership. It is to 'create a global city with a local heart - a cleaner, greener, safer city that is a magnet for business investment and job creation'.
- 26 The City Housing Partnership is recognised as the delivery vehicle for strategic targets for housing, and it has developed its own, complementary vision for housing in the city to 'provide a platform that enables people to thrive and choose to live in Birmingham'. The Housing Plan 2008+ sets out the aims of the partnership and what it wants to achieve.
- 27 The housing strategy, assessed as 'fit for purpose' and which covered the period from 2005 to 2008, set out priority themes, which for the strategic housing service included:
- reducing the level of homelessness;
 - eliminating the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for homeless households with dependent children and sustain government target that no families remain in this type of accommodation for more than six weeks;
 - working with the social care and health directorate and RSL partners to develop extra-care and special care housing for older people;
 - delivering annual Disabled Facilities Grant programme and develop alternative models of assisting home owners to adapt their properties;
 - supporting homeowners to adapt their property through the House Proud service;
 - considering the use of selective licensing of private rented accommodation in areas of low demand or areas affected by antisocial behaviour;
 - establishing an HMO licensing scheme following the implementation of the Housing Act;

How good is the service?

- delivering the HomeWorks service – a reactive client-themed programme that offers an appropriate level of support to all residents;
- delivering and evaluating two Kick Start pilot projects; and
- delivering affordable warmth programmes in all wards by 2015 to address fuel poverty target.

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

Access and customer care

- 28** Strengths and weaknesses are balanced. Published information for customers is widely available in a range of formats. Access arrangements are tailored to reflect the needs of diverse communities, and the Council responds positively to the feedback it collects, such as complaints. Customers are able to access services in a range of ways, and partners are helping to deliver joined up services. However, office opening times vary widely and not all have been shaped by customers. In addition, the quality of information, advice and signposting is inconsistent. There are gaps in the way that satisfaction is monitored and the service lacks comprehensive service standards.
- 29** Good quality customer information is widely available for most services. Leaflets are in place for key service areas, and there are comprehensive guides for people who are thinking about renting a private sector property, who are living in student accommodation, or who are using the Urban Choice³ pilot scheme. Information is available through Neighbourhood and partner offices, GP surgeries, community and faith centres, and on the Council's website. The Council is also making positive use of different types of advertising, for example, on public transport and in cinemas. This is helping the Council to ensure that residents know what services and support are available to them.
- 30** However, there are some areas where the quality of information could be improved. For example, there is information for customers about how to apply for a Disabled Facilities Grant, but it does not clearly set out what will happen after an application has been made. Also, the service does not provide owners of empty homes with comprehensive information about the assistance available. This is important for ensuring that access to advice and support is fully maximised.
- 31** Effective arrangements are in place for translation and interpreting. Straplines on key published documents and on the website advise that information is available in large print, audio or community languages, and can be requested in Braille. Staff are knowledgeable about how to use the telephone interpreting service and are aware of how to call upon the different language skills of colleagues. Staff with language skills are deployed to the offices where they are most needed. There is also a focus on ensuring that key information or decisions are explained verbally as well as in writing. As a result, service users are able to receive information or communicate in the way which suits them best.

³ Urban Choice is the name of the Council's Choice Based Lettings pilot scheme

- 32** The quality of access arrangements by telephone is mixed. Calls are answered within target time and where customers need to leave a message, they are responded to promptly. Out of hours calls are answered promptly and dealt with appropriately and sensitively. However, it is sometimes difficult to get through to the service if customers get in touch initially with the Council's contact centre, which may prevent people from accessing the services they need.
- 33** There is a strong focus on ensuring that access to services is not geared solely to those people who are willing and able to go through traditional means, such as visiting offices or telephoning. Home visits are available and caseworkers provide outreach services to community organisations or cultural centres. Positively, health professionals who visit people in their homes have been trained by the service to recognise and refer people to schemes that can tackle housing conditions which are contributing to ill health. This helps to ensure that services reach all sections of the community.
- 34** There is a joined up approach to enabling access to housing and related services. Key partners who provide specialist advice, for example, benefits and debt advice, advice for young people at risk of homelessness, and for people experiencing domestic violence, have a presence in many of the Neighbourhood Offices. The Council also works with other partners to provide a single managed pathway to housing and related support through its Vulnerable Persons Unit. As a result, the service is better placed to meet the needs of people who require help and support from more than one provider.
- 35** In addition, the service is working to increase the accessibility of housing and support services for diverse communities. The Council has established a centre which provides tailored information, advice and support for migrants and newcomers, and employs four dedicated housing advice caseworkers who provide outreach services to specific communities. Some neighbourhood offices have shaped their opening hours to suit local communities, for example, increasing opening times at the beginning of the week to accommodate prayer times at the end of the week. This is enabling access to housing advice and support services which language or cultural barriers may have prevented.
- 36** However, there are weaknesses in relation to how easily customers are able to access services. Office opening times and days vary across the city, and not all offices display information about the nearest place to access advice when they are closed. Some offices have shaped their opening times in response to feedback from customers, but it is not clear that this has happened on a consistent basis. This is important given the high level of use of Neighbourhood Offices to access advice and support.
- 37** The physical quality of the Neighbourhood Offices is mixed. The service has recently completed a programme of reasonable adjustments to ensure that offices are accessible to people with disabilities, and that signage is clearly visible. Most offices have customer waiting areas with toilets and play facilities for children. However, private interview facilities are not well advertised and not always offered, and some layouts mean that customers have little privacy when explaining the reason for their visit. The Council is aware of these issues and has started to address them through its Customer First and Working for the Future transformation programmes.

How good is the service?

- 38** The quality of advice provided through the Neighbourhood Offices does not always meet the standards expected. On occasion, there is a lack of focus on the needs of vulnerable customers. For example, a customer fleeing domestic violence was variously advised to present in their home town and, in another scenario, was told no-one was available until the next day to assess their situation. They were not proactively signposted to self referral emergency accommodation, despite this information being clearly presented on the Council's website. Lack of consistent advice and signposting means that some customers may be deterred from accessing services.
- 39** Opportunities to test the quality of service delivery are being missed. Satisfaction monitoring is not routinely and systematically completed across all elements of the service, and reporting arrangements are underdeveloped. Some surveys are not sufficiently focused on the experience of the customer such as those for private sector housing services. Some senior managers have been conducting mystery shopping, but this is on an informal basis and could not be evidenced, and the service has not yet influenced the Council's external mystery shopping of Contact Birmingham⁴. This means the Council can not be clear about the quality of services it is providing.
- 40** In addition, gaps in service standards act as a barrier to providing consistent and high quality services. Published standards for strategic housing services are not in place across all elements of the service and are generally limited to general access issues such as telephone answering. They have not been developed with customers and do not clearly set out what standard of service customers should expect to receive and the timescales they should receive it in. This limits the ability of the Council and customers alike to challenge the quality of front line service delivery.
- 41** However, the Council is responsive to the feedback it does collect. Complaints are encouraged and monitored effectively to see how service delivery could be improved. Examples include implementing a fast track procedure for payment of contributions for affordable warmth to minimise delays to completing the works, and making more regular contact with people who are homeless at home. Satisfaction survey analysis has also resulted in changes, such as improved information and advice for users of the homelessness service.

Diversity

- 42** This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. Diversity is reflected in service plans and targets, and housing priorities have been informed by a sound understanding of the needs of diverse groups. Partnership working is delivering improved outcomes for vulnerable groups and there is a robust approach to completing Equality Impact Needs Assessments. However, there are some weaknesses in terms of progress against the Equality Standards for Local Government, and compliance with the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice for Housing. There are also gaps in the Council's knowledge about the profile of service users which means that it cannot demonstrate that services are delivered fairly and consistently to all groups.

⁴ Contact Birmingham is the Council's customer contact centre

- 43 The Council's priority of meeting the needs of diverse communities is embedded within its delivery plans. Through its research and involvement of stakeholders, the Council has updated its corporate equality scheme to reflect new provisions in legislation, and has developed a community cohesion strategy, which supports its objective of an inclusive and diverse city. It is also supporting work being undertaken to tackle worklessness. Themes and actions from these high level plans are cascaded through the Council Plan into directorate and service plans. They are also reflected in the objectives of the Local Area Agreement and the City Housing Partnership. This ensures that staff and partners understand what is expected of them, and how they contribute.
- 44 However, there are some weaknesses in the Council's approach. The corporate equality scheme does not reflect how the Council is working to eliminate inequality based on age, which is a missed opportunity to pull together and promote the work it is doing in this area. Similarly, the Council has not sought to validate the progress it has made against the Equality Standard for Local Government (ESLG). The Council reports that level three of the standard was achieved in 2004/05, but this has not been externally verified since the standard was amended in 2006 to incorporate all six equality strands, and so its progress against the standard is unclear. It is planning to verify progress in March 2009.
- 45 Strategic housing plans and strategies are shaped by a sound understanding of the needs of diverse groups. This is informed by community profile information, specific research into housing needs which includes Gypsies and Travellers, older people, and LGBT⁵ people; and also draws on research and information from wider services, such as Supporting People. This knowledge is used to inform priorities within the current Housing Plan, for example, tackling overcrowding within BME communities, and within the previous plan, with outcomes including a development programme for extra care housing and a floating support service for Gypsies and Travellers. This helps the Council to plan for meeting the needs of the increasingly diverse population of the city.
- 46 Steps have also been taken to ensure that the housing needs of vulnerable people are assessed and met. The Vulnerable Persons Unit provides a single point of access for referrals from statutory agencies working with looked after children, people awaiting hospital discharge, young offenders, people who misuse substances, people with mental health needs, people falling within multi-agency public protection agreement arrangements, and people who wish to leave the 'gun and gang' culture in the City. This is supported by appropriate protocols and ensures that vulnerable people receive assessments of their housing related support needs and appropriate housing options advice.

⁵ Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender

How good is the service?

- 47 Partnership working is delivering improved outcomes in this area. Joint working has delivered improved services for rough sleeping, a Sanctuary scheme and a newly implemented single referral pathway for survivors of domestic violence. Working in partnership with the NHS is helping the Council to target interventions for vulnerable people living in poor housing in the private sector. Joint working with Urban Living⁶ is also delivering a number of community cohesion initiatives within regeneration programmes. Close working with partners is increasing the capacity of the service to meet a wide range of needs.
- 48 Expertise of partners and other external agencies is also used effectively to train staff. In addition to standard training around equality and diversity, such as awareness raising about race equality, HIV/AIDS, and cultural diversity, partners are delivering a wide range of more specialist training for staff, such as domestic violence, Alzheimer's awareness, and alcohol awareness training planned for November 2008. This is helping to ensure that staff have a good understanding of the different needs of service users.
- 49 The Council's approach to identifying and removing potential barriers to accessing services is robust. It has developed a comprehensive toolkit for staff to complete Equality Impact Needs Assessments (EINAs), which includes support and challenge from stakeholders. Programmed assessments cover all six equality strands and make use of existing data to model and test new and existing policies, and also identify where data needs to be collected in future. Key areas, such as the Housing Plan 2008+ and homelessness strategy, Independent Living service, and the revised allocations policy have been assessed. Assessments are resulting in changes to policy and service delivery where necessary, such as programmed investment in homelessness centres to ensure that they are fully accessible.
- 50 However, the service cannot demonstrate that services are delivered fairly and consistently to all parts of the community. Customer profile information, which currently excludes disability or sexuality information, is being collected mainly for Council tenants only. Only a few strategic housing services are collecting full profile data for service users, and there is a lack of ongoing satisfaction monitoring across all elements of the service. Opportunities to collect this information, and ensure that different groups of people are equally satisfied with services, are being missed. This limits the ability of the service to effectively monitor and tackle inequality in service provision.
- 51 The service is not fully compliant with the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice for Racial Equality in Housing. The Council has self assessed as compliant based on partial compliance with some elements of the guidance, but acknowledges that there are areas where there is still work to be done. However, the self assessment is regularly reviewed and the service is making good progress towards meeting all aspects of the Code.

⁶ Urban Living is one of nine Housing Market Renewal Pathfinder areas in the UK set up and funded by the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG). It covers substantial areas within Birmingham City Council and Sandwell MBC, who are the two local authority partners.

- 52** The Council is taking positive action to address imbalances within the profile of its staff. BME communities and disabled people are under represented in the workforce, but placement schemes, such as the Ability Plus scheme and Young Persons Positive Action Training Scheme are resulting in permanent employment with the Council. The Bridges into the Future scheme, for example, has provided 57 training places over the last six years, leading to professional qualifications in housing. This approach is providing valuable opportunities for training and skills development to under represented groups within the community.

Strategic approach to housing

- 53** Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. A comprehensive research base provides a robust basis for identifying and tackling imbalances in the housing market, and has been used to inform the Council's and partners plans and strategies. Actions are targeted at areas in most need, supported by the use of IT. Joint working with partners is effective, and service users and stakeholders are fully engaged in developing and delivering priorities. Work to review and update key elements of the planning framework is underway.
- 54** The Council has developed a comprehensive research base which draws upon a wide range of intelligence about housing need, demand and capacity of the housing market. A strategic housing market assessment completed in 2008 builds on studies already completed which include housing demand and aspirations across diverse communities, a strategic housing land availability assessment, and the condition of homes in the private and social rented sector. Secondary data about housing markets is drawn from a wide range of sources, and includes consideration of neighbourhood factors such as crime, health and educational attainment. This provides a robust basis for identifying and tackling imbalances in the housing market.
- 55** Priorities and work to address these imbalances are fully integrated with departmental, corporate and partnership objectives. The Housing Plan 2008+ provides a clear framework to help achieve the priorities and targets, and has informed the priorities and outcome based targets within the Local Area Agreement (LAA), Sustainable Communities Strategy and Council Plan. This has resulted in a good understanding across services, departments and partners of the role of housing in delivering the long term vision for the city.
- 56** The research base has enabled the Council to refresh and update a range of supporting strategies. These include those for homelessness, empty homes and the housing development plan. It has also been used to develop new ones which are required to meet the challenges identified, such as for combined activities in the private sector, reducing the use of temporary accommodation, and tackling overcrowding. Work is underway to develop remaining strategies and plans relating to older people and sustainability, which pull together existing thinking and plans into a more cohesive approach.

How good is the service?

- 57 The research base is helping the Council to target actions appropriately. The use of tools such as GIS⁷ and a model for assessing the sustainability of local housing markets means that supporting strategies and action plans are targeted to where they will have most impact on housing need. A positive example of this is the use of mapping to identify that many BME households are living in overcrowded conditions. This has resulted in the development of an overcrowding action plan, part of which is a geographically targeted deconversion programme to provide larger units of family accommodation.
- 58 The Council recognises that elements of the planning framework require review in order to maximise delivery of affordable housing, and this work is underway. It has already reviewed and implemented a firm policy regarding the use of commuted sums, and lowered the site size thresholds for affordable housing in 2007, which has helped to ensure that on-site provision is obtained. However, the Supplementary Planning Guidance for affordable housing, adopted in 2001, lacks a clear focus on what is required from developers. This has meant considerable room for negotiation in terms of contributions regarding viability, which the Council is now addressing through adoption of a standard viability tool, in order to maximise the number of units secured.
- 59 The Council actively seeks the views and involvement of stakeholders, partners and residents to inform its strategies and plans. Partners and stakeholders, including the voluntary sector, were invited to join Expert Reference Groups (ERGs), as part of the City Housing Partnership, which effectively led the development of the Housing Plan 2008+. Residents views are also captured through existing neighbourhood consultation fora, as well as targeted focus groups. ERGs have subsequently developed to become the delivery agents of agreed targets and actions. This approach means that priorities and plans reflect the needs of the wider community, and has increased the capacity of the Council to deliver its housing objectives by securing the long term commitment of partners.
- 60 There is effective joint working with partners, stakeholders and colleagues across different services. Regular newsletters, bulletins and internal and external meetings at senior and operational levels, across services, contribute to a shared understanding of priorities and needs. There are a number of examples where this has helped to identify opportunities and funding to deliver shared aims. Examples include remodelling sheltered bedsits to provide supported accommodation, training health professionals to identify poor housing conditions, and working with housing association development partners to identify opportunities for purchasing unsold stock from builders.

⁷ Geographical Information System which allows data, either as a single or multiple set, to be mapped or plotted

Making best use of existing housing

61 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. The Council has developed an effective approach to preventing homelessness, and uses a wide range of tools and skills to support this. The use of temporary accommodation, and the length of time that people spend in it, is reducing. Plans to increase choice in lettings are well advanced. Targeted intervention is improving housing conditions for vulnerable homeowners. The Council is reducing the number of empty homes in the City. Some weaknesses remain. The effectiveness of monitoring and managing standards in Houses in Multiple Occupation is mixed and despite tackling a backlog of aids and adaptations, people are still waiting a long time for work to be completed. In addition, some aspects of the Council's approach to improving standards in the private rented sector are underdeveloped.

Housing advice, homelessness prevention and housing options

- 62** The Council has developed an effective approach to preventing homelessness which is a high level priority within the Council Plan 2008-13 and an LAA target. It has a thorough understanding of the main causes of homelessness and, through its Home Options approach, is using appropriate tools supported by strong partnership working. This involves working with a range of agencies such as St Basil's which works with 16-25 year olds, Birmingham and Solihull Women's Aid and the private rented sector. Homelessness was prevented for 1017 households in 2005/06, for 4827 in 2006/07 and 6316 in 2007/08 against a target of 5000. The approach is successfully delivering improved outcomes for local people.
- 63** The home lettings scheme has been particularly successful in helping families to access housing in the private rented sector. The scheme, which provides a recyclable bond to landlords, data credit referencing and floating support has helped 1421 households in 2007/08. Staff are also proactive in negotiating more affordable rents with landlords. As well as preventing homelessness, the scheme has increased housing choice.
- 64** Income maximisation is playing an important part in preventing homelessness. During 2007/08 the Council's Income Maximisation Unit secured £28 million in unclaimed benefits for service users and staff are proactive in referring people for Discretionary Housing Payments totalling £801,000. The focus on income maximisation is supporting homelessness prevention activity.
- 65** Positive progress has been made in tackling rough sleeping supported by strong and effective partnership working. The number of rough sleepers has reduced from 56 to six with ongoing work between Midland Heart, St Basil's and the Council to maintain a sustained focus on this issue. This includes working to address move-on issues from hostels to free up bedspaces for those in acute need. This is delivering improved outcomes for some of the most vulnerable people in the City.

How good is the service?

- 66 There is a strong focus on reducing temporary accommodation use with good progress made to date. A corporate and LAA target has been set to reduce the numbers in temporary accommodation to 420 by 2010 in line with the government's 50 per cent reduction target. Prevention work is minimising use and proactive housing options advice is minimising the length of stay for those that are placed. The government's target for bed and breakfast use has been met with an average stay of one week in 2007/08. The average stay in other temporary accommodation has fallen from 9.8 weeks in 2005/06 to 6.69 weeks in 2007/08. At the end of September 2008 there were 497 households in temporary accommodation with an end of year target of 480. This is ensuring more positive outcomes for households homeless in an emergency.
- 67 The quality of temporary accommodation is mixed. Some schemes offer high quality self contained accommodation, but the Council and its partners recognise that older schemes, in particular, are in need of refurbishment, for example, where there are shared facilities. A successful bid for Places of Change funding is being directed into tackling these issues, and the Council has, through its enabling role, already provided improved refuge accommodation for survivors of domestic violence. Nonetheless, until planned investment programmes are completed, the quality of accommodation is not consistent for all people.
- 68 In addition, there is insufficient focus on safeguarding vulnerable people placed in certain types of temporary accommodation. There is sound awareness of the issues in relation to people placed within the Council's homelessness centres. However, young people are, on occasion, placed into Bed and Breakfast accommodation without Criminal Records Bureau checks or an assessment of safeguarding issues, potentially placing them at risk.
- 69 The Council has responded appropriately to a recent legal decision on homelessness applications. Following a Court of Appeal decision, procedures have been reviewed to ensure that applicants who are 'homeless at home' are given the same priority for rehousing as those in temporary accommodation. Housing options advice has been provided to around 700 existing 'homeless at home' households in the past year and the number in this category has reduced from 400 to 300 in September 2008.
- 70 Partnership working has enabled an innovative project to meet the long term housing needs and aspirations of young homeless people. The Council has supported St Basil's and Family Housing Association in developing Trinity Court, a 'pathways to home ownership' scheme. This enables young people who have been homeless to start work and have a contributory savings plan where St Basil's contributes £10 per week of their rent into a savings fund for a three year period. At the end of this time, the young person has a lump sum with which to broaden their housing options. As well as increasing choice, the approach is helping to break the cycle of homelessness and unemployment.
- 71 Effective arrangements are in place for managing requests for homeless decisions to be reviewed. The process has been revised after looking at the practices of strongly performing authorities and identifying that 80 per cent of requests are on the suitability of the offer made. As a result, homeless staff now take a more proactive approach by contacting applicants directly with an offer to explain the amenities available. Offer acceptance has increased by eleven per cent since this approach was adopted and expenditure on legal costs has reduced by £140,000.

- 72** The Council is not consistently meeting its own target for decision making for homelessness. Only 50 per cent of customers received decisions within 33 days in 2005/06 and, while this rose to 90 per cent in 2006/07, it fell to 85 per cent in 2007/08 and 63 per cent for the period April to August 2008. Staff are proactive in following up requested information and evidence to complete their enquiries, but this means that some homeless applicants are waiting longer than necessary to find out what decisions has been made about their status.
- 73** Referral arrangements for external money advice services are underdeveloped. Although customers are sign-posted to in-house and external money advice services, there are no formal referral protocols in place and no monitoring of outcomes. While work to address this is taking place, the Council cannot currently demonstrate the impact of these referrals on homelessness prevention.

Making best use of social rented homes

- 74** There has been slow progress in implementing a city wide choice based lettings (CBL) scheme, however, momentum has increased and plans to introduce a city-wide scheme, Urban Choice, are well advanced. Following a successful pilot the scheme is due to roll-out to all parts of the City in March 2009 with two large RSL partners, Midland Heart and Family, planned to join at that stage. It is also intended that private landlords will join the scheme following this in 2009. The scheme is increasing choice within the lettings process for customers.
- 75** Nomination rights to housing association vacancies are achieved and, in some cases, exceeded. Performance is closely monitored to ensure that targets are met, that homes are of an appropriate type and quality, and that applicants are treated fairly. Positively, additional nominations have been negotiated so that larger homeless families do not wait longer than necessary for rehousing with 80 per cent nominations received for homes with four or more bedrooms. This is increasing choice for people in housing need.
- 76** The Council is letting vacant council homes more quickly. The average re-let time has reduced from 54.1 days in 2005/06 to 45.3 days in 2006/07 and 35.1 days in 2007/08 which is above average performance. This is making better use of available homes for those who need them most.
- 77** Arrangements are in place to make best use of vacant homes with adaptations suitable for disabled people. The IT system identifies adapted homes and a short-list is held of applicants whose needs have been assessed by an occupational therapist (OT). When vacancies arise, the OT assesses which applicant would most benefit from the facilities provided prior to an offer being made. If a home is not suitable for anyone on the housing register referrals are sought from the independent living team and from those waiting for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs). This helps to ensure best use is made of existing adapted homes.
- 78** The Council is taking steps to improve the quality and longer term usefulness of its existing housing for older people. This includes an investment of £1 million to install level access showers, handrails and security measures in all existing category two sheltered housing schemes. At the same time, it is working with Mencap to adapt a scheme of sheltered bedsits to meet the needs of younger people.

How good is the service?

- 79** Appropriate arrangements are in place for reviewing the housing register. The register at June 2008 contained 26,400 applicants, including 9,700 transfer applicants, which has reduced from 30,100 total applicants in March 2007. Applications are reviewed annually on the anniversary of the original application. This ensures that applicants' housing needs and preferences are kept up to date and enables more efficient housing allocations.
- 80** The approach to quality checking assessments of housing applications and allocations is robust. Sample checks are undertaken to ensure that assessments and allocations, including management moves, have been conducted according to the allocations policy and agreed procedures. Recommendations for improvement are made to the appropriate line manager along with identification of possible training needs. This helps ensure applications are dealt with fairly and consistently.
- 81** An incentive scheme is in place to encourage tenants who are under-occupying their homes to move to smaller accommodation, however, its success has been declining. The number of family size homes freed up by the scheme has fallen from 282 in 2005/06, to 249 in 2006/07 to 199 in 2007/08. The Council has recognised that this is an issue and is developing an enhanced under-occupation scheme which links with its plans to address overcrowding in the City.

Making best use of the private sector

- 82** Targeted assistance is improving living conditions for vulnerable homeowners. Promotional activity and resources are focused on areas with the greatest need, based on information from the private stock condition survey. Full surveys and specifications against the decent homes standards are completed at no cost to residents, with advice provided on funding sources, such as interest free loans against the property, or consideration of grant assistance where this is not possible. During 2007/08, 1,137 owner occupiers were assisted to make their homes decent with a further 513 made decent up to September 2008.
- 83** The approach taken by the Council has included a strong and successful focus on delivering affordable warmth works. Its information on the private sector shows that the main cause of failure against the Government's decent homes standard relates to thermal comfort issues. In response to this it has directed resources to improve affordable warmth in homes in targeted areas. This has been delivered in partnership as part of the Government's Warmfront programme. The Council has funded intensive promotional activity, an extension to the national grant criteria and 'top-up' funding where works required exceed the maximum grant available. There have been some recent delays in processing 'top-up' funding requests but overall the Council's approach is having a significant impact on the sector. Approximately 5,800 homes had affordable warmth works completed during 2007/08 directly as a result of the Council's intervention.

- 84** The Council is also working positively with partners to reduce health inequalities linked to housing conditions. It is working with an energy provider and the NHS to assist people whose health is adversely affected by lack of adequate heating in their homes. Since the scheme started in 2001, training has been provided to 2,220 frontline health professionals, who have referred almost 8,000 households across all housing sectors, of which, approximately 5,000 have had works completed to their homes. This has been achieved through a mix of funding sources, including the Council's capital programme, energy provider funding, and funding from a range of charitable organisations. This is helping ensure that residents' health is not being affected by inadequate heating.
- 85** There is a robust approach to the prioritisation of applications for aids and adaptations. Applications are assessed at an early stage by the Occupational Therapy service, which ensures that high and medium priority cases are dealt with as a priority for DFG funding. Assessment enables low priority cases, which do not qualify for DFG, to be signposted to a scheme which provides advice on alternative funding, with technical and management services provided free of charge by the Council. This approach ensures that all applications are directed to the most appropriate service for provision of assistance.
- 86** The length of time that customers wait for adaptations is mixed. Minor adaptations, which cost up to £1,000, are completed quickly taking an average of 11 days to complete from receipt of referral. However, there are still significant delays in the time taken to carry out major adaptations. The average time from referral to completion of works in 2007/08 was approximately 545 days. From April to September 2008 the average time was 374. These times do not include the wait for an OT visit. The overall waiting times are above government guideline targets and mean that vulnerable people are not receiving much needed adaptations in a timely manner.
- 87** In addition, monitoring arrangements are not comprehensive. The time from initial enquiry to the OT visit is not currently being monitored by the Independent Living team. There are some contradictory figures for performance during 2007/08. The Council is not routinely tracking what happens to mandatory DFG applications when they are referred to housing associations for completion. This limits its ability to advise customers on how long they are likely to have to wait before work is completed, and means that the Council cannot be sure that customers who are eligible for mandatory DFGs are receiving the service in a timely way.
- 88** Targeted intervention is reducing the number of empty homes in the city. Work is guided by a strategy and specific research on the amount, type, location and turnover of empty homes across the city, as well as monthly intelligence from Council Tax records. A dedicated team of officers responds to complaints, including those referred through protocols with the police and fire services, and also target advice, information and enforcement action. Intervention tools include the use of reduced Council Tax discount, voluntary acquisitions, compulsory purchase and enforced sales. There is awareness of powers relating to empty dwelling management orders although arrangements for utilising these are not yet fully developed. Overall, the Council's approach is helping to increase the supply of homes, and is also helping to improve neighbourhoods by tackling empty homes which are attracting vandalism or nuisance.

How good is the service?

- 89** The Council is working positively with housing associations to bring empty homes back into use. In the housing market renewal area, the Council has supported (using section 106 commuted sums) RSLs to purchase and refurbish empty homes to decent homes standards. The scheme is still developing and only five homes have been purchased to date but this is an additional tool in increasing the availability of affordable, decent homes for social rent as well as preventing problems caused by empty private homes.
- 90** There are some areas where the Council's approach could be improved. Although it is focused on tackling long term empty properties, it is not routinely targeting advice and information at owners of properties which have been vacant for less than five years, for example, through automated mail shots. This means that the number of empty homes brought back into use may not have been maximised.
- 91** The effectiveness of arrangements to monitor and manage standards in houses of multiple occupation (HMOs) is mixed. The Council has licensed almost 80 per cent of the high risk HMOs identified within the city, and the remainder are currently subject to enforcement action. It also has a robust approach to administering licenses, with all plans checked by the fire service, and it is meeting target times for processing applications. However, work to identify licensable HMOs is still underdeveloped. For example, about 250 potentially licensable HMOs have not, despite efforts, been conclusively dealt with due to an inability to gain access or contact owners, and information on multiple council tax and housing benefit claims is not systematically used. It has not met its own targets for inspecting high risk HMOs. As a result, it is not maximising the impact of work ensuring HMO standards.
- 92** The Council takes a balanced approach to advice and enforcement issues. It advises both tenants and landlords and will seek negotiated solutions where possible. Disrepair complaints from private tenants are responded to promptly, with confirmation of the action taken, and follow up inspections to ensure that work is completed. It also signposts to the Private Tenancy Unit, which supports complainants on a range of issues including illegal eviction and harassment, and also plays an important role in advising potentially homeless households. The unit is well used dealing with approximately 2,000 enquiries a year and has taken successful legal action to prevent illegal eviction and harassment. These services are helping ensure minimum management and maintenance standards in the private sector as well as preventing homelessness.
- 93** Joint working with external partners is helping to improve standards of accommodation in the private rented sector. Close working with private landlords, through an effective forum, has resulted in improved information for customers, for example, the revised Private Tenants' Handbook. In addition, 550 private landlords and lettings agents have signed up to the city's landlord accreditation scheme, which through adoption by the University of Birmingham, has improved standards of accommodation for students in the city. This is helping ensure that reasonable standards of accommodation are provided to private sector tenants.

- 94 Some aspects of work in the private rented sector are underdeveloped. The accreditation scheme has not yet been used to improve standards in the non-student private rented sector. Support for private landlords to encourage them to improve their properties is limited. Affordable warmth grants are not being actively promoted in all of the Council's private rented sector services. The recently produced landlord newsletter has publicised some of these issues but the approach to driving up standards in this sector is not yet comprehensive.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 95 Strengths outweigh weaknesses. The Council has explored and tackled high level costs which has released significant resources. It has a good understanding of the costs and performance of each element of strategic housing and has compared this to other providers. Some comparisons are at an early stage, and lack a customer perspective, but the Council can show where it has taken action to improve its practice as a result of analysis and comparison. A sound understanding of value for money is embedded within the Council's plans for service delivery and is driving improvement.

How do costs compare?

- 96 Use of high level cost information has led to a significant reduction in back office costs. An assessment completed in 2006/07 highlighted higher than average costs for IT, legal services and central recharges. Action was taken to tackle all of these areas, which has resulted in a 25 per cent reduction in annual IT servicing costs, reduction in legal costs of £2 million and an agreed reduction of between £2 million and £3 million in central recharges. This is important given the service's ambitions to provide excellent services within a context of reductions in both the General Fund and the Housing Revenue Account.
- 97 There has been positive work to explore the costs of delivering services in relation to performance. Analysis has been completed for all elements of the service which attribute a cost per unit of output and this has been compared with outputs and performance of other authorities. The service is then ranked in terms of cost compared to performance. This has provided a useful starting point to explore the reasons for any difference in relation to context and policy choices.
- 98 Comparison of cost and performance for front line services is showing a mixed picture compared to other authorities. There are some areas, such as use of hostels and bed and breakfast accommodation, which are ranked as high performance and low cost areas, which compare favourably to others, but other elements of the service do not compare so well, for example, adaptations and independent living and homelessness prevention which are ranked as low performance and low cost services. Outcomes from cost and performance reviews within strategic housing services are limited so far, as many have only recently been completed.

How good is the service?

- 99** However, the service is responding positively to cost information to explore context and opportunities for learning and improvement. This is completed regardless of the initial ranking, and has led to adoption of practice from elsewhere. For example, within the homelessness centres service, which was ranked as high performance and low cost, the service realised that compared to practice with comparator authorities, it could do more to maximise income recovery. As a result it changed its approach, and has increased the level of income collected by £444,000 between 2006/07 and 2007/08.
- 100** Cost and performance analysis is subject to effective challenge. Managers are required to respond to the findings and recommendations of the analysis to a value for money (VFM) Steering Group, which consists of VFM representatives from across the service. Responses provide contextual information about the reasons for differences in costs and performance and planned or current actions to address differences. This approach ensures that wider context and policy choices can be considered alongside the initial analysis, and ensures that further action is taken in response.
- 101** It is a weakness that the customer perspective of the quality of services is not included in reviews of cost and performance. For example, there is no assessment of customer satisfaction or complaints with the service alongside the analysis of performance. This is an important element of determining the overall value for money of the service.

How is value for money managed?

- 102** The Council's ambitions for the service are underpinned by a sound understanding of VFM. It recognises that within the context of reducing resources, a clear framework for achieving VFM is essential to delivering its priorities and ambitions for excellent services. Key drivers are in place through its VFM strategy, which is driving exploration of costs, and which links into a Housing Transformation Programme, which provides a framework for releasing resources to meet priorities. They provide a robust framework for delivering improved services by exploring and managing costs and productivity to enable investment in priority areas.
- 103** The Housing Transformation Programme is delivering significant efficiencies. It has already delivered approximately £7.5 million of the planned £9 million efficiencies for 2008/09. The programme is based on the assumption that investment is needed to secure efficiencies which can then be released to support priorities and planned improvement. Significant gains have been delivered outside the scope of this inspection, for example, within the management of maintenance contracts, but the strategic housing service is benefiting from investment through the programme, such as establishment of key posts and investment in integrated IT systems.
- 104** A focus within the service on managing costs has resulted in efficiency gains. A reduction in overall expenditure of 32 per cent between 2005/06 and 2007/08, which equates to almost £5 million, has been achieved through rationalising service delivery to improve performance. A clear example of this is the reduction in cost to the service of temporary accommodation from £1 million to £110,000 by focusing on implementing a more effective housing options service. Other examples include reducing costs and improving processes to deliver aids and adaptations, which has resulted in contract cost savings and removal of a three year backlog of work. This has released resources for service delivery and improved outcomes for local people.

- 105** A good understanding of VFM is also resulting in practical savings for customers. The House Proud scheme absorbs the costs of removal, storage and re-use of products such as stairlifts which results in a reduction of the costs of work to customers. In addition, the Council has negotiated agreements to limit the cost of cavity wall insulation to £99, which is grant funded for vulnerable people and those aged over 60, but which is also available at this cost for people in employment. This is reducing the financial burden on service users.
- 106** The Council is stretching available resources for vulnerable households through the use of a wider range of financial assistance. The private sector policy has been revised to allow improved targeting of resources through loans, rather than grants, at the properties identified through the stock condition survey as being in the worst condition. During 2007/08, 1137 owner occupiers were assisted to make their homes decent, and the House Proud scheme supported delivery of 279 adaptations through alternatives to grant funding, which included loans, private finance and charitable funding, which combined, amounted to just over £1 million. This approach enables the Council to make its own resources go further and assist more people.
- 107** The Council makes effective use of external funding and inward investment to help it to deliver its priorities. Examples include securing £7 million for the Places of Change programme, with one scheme underway and a further three in the pipeline, and £12 million from the Government Office for the West Midlands to support delivery of the regional Kick Start initiative. Neighbourhood Renewal Funding of £3 million has delivered, through the City Housing Partnership, a range of projects and initiatives which have benefited communities and helped to address priority areas within the housing strategy.
- 108** Modern procurement methods are maximising resources. This is well developed at a corporate level, with savings of approximately £190 million, but is also evident within the strategic housing service. Savings of £3 million per year have been identified within procurement of commodities, such as paper and printing, and also the use of agency staff. Effective procurement processes have helped to secure competitive pricing of aids and adaptations, and joint procurement with other authorities for the Kick Start programme has reduced costs for each partner. Resulting savings mean that resources can be used to support targeted improvements in service delivery.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 109** This is an area where strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. The Council has a strong track record of delivering agreed objectives within its plans and strategies, and can demonstrate a range of improved outcomes for customers as a result. This is reflected in steadily improving performance in most areas over the last three years. It has also delivered significant efficiencies over time. However, progress against some aspects of diversity has been slow, and the Council has not fully addressed weaknesses in relation to the quality and consistency of housing advice.

How good is the service?

110 The Council has had a clear focus on delivering agreed priorities within the previous housing strategy and supporting plans. This has resulted in a number of changes to the way services are delivered, and implementation of new services, which have benefited service users and residents. They include:

- improved arrangements for prioritising aids and adaptations and tackling a significant backlog of cases which is now helping to reduce the length of time that people have to wait for work to be completed;
- development of a programme of extra care schemes, one of which has already completed;
- implementing a wider range of housing options across the City which has helped to prevent people from becoming homeless;
- housing options which are increasingly focused on the needs of diverse communities, such as introduction of the Refugee Home Options Team;
- reducing the level of rough sleeping and increased the numbers of young people prevented from becoming homeless; and
- delivery of targeted affordable warmth programmes which have focused on homes which are in most need.

111 The Council has also improved performance in line with its stated priorities which is helping to make best use of existing housing. It has:

- reduced the length of time that people spend in bed and breakfast accommodation from 1.4 weeks in 2005/06 to 0.94 weeks in 2007/08;
- reduced the lengths of time that people spend in temporary accommodation from 9.8 weeks in 2005/06 to 6.6 weeks in 2007/08;
- increased the numbers of empty homes brought back into use from 100 in 2005/06, to 156 in 2006/07 and 237 in 2007/08;
- reduced the time it takes to re-let its homes, from 54 days in 2005/06, to 45 days in 2006/07 and to 35 days in 2007/08;
- increased the number of owner occupiers assisted to make their homes decent from 950 in 2006/07 to 1,137 in 2007/08; and
- increased the number of actions it has taken to tackle poor housing conditions in HMOs from 100 in 2006/07 to 217 in 2007/08.

112 The Council has worked effectively with its partners to deliver planned improvements. The City Housing Partnership was a driver for delivery of the Decent Homes Floor Target Action Plan, which has increased the number of decent homes across tenures in the City. It has also been effective in supporting delivery of key targets within the NRF programme, such as the Summerfield Ecohomes project, the Health at Home programme and the establishment of a refugee resource centre. Multi-agency working has also seen a significant reduction in the level of rough sleeping, a key target for the City, and more recently, the implementation of a single referral pathway for survivors of domestic violence. This has improved outcomes for people in housing need.

- 113** A strong focus on managing costs has enabled the Council to deliver efficiencies. Significant savings have been generated through tackling back office costs, and high costs associated with the use of temporary accommodation have also been reduced through implementing a more focused home options service. This has enabled investment in key areas, such as investment in IT to support more streamlined ways of working within the private sector. This approach has enabled the Council to fund its ambitions for the service.
- 114** However, lack of qualitative analysis alongside cost and performance comparisons means that the Council is unable to fully determine the value for money of its services, and the impact on value for money of the actions it has taken to secure efficiencies and performance improvement over time.
- 115** The Council has responded positively to the needs of the city's diverse communities. Its research base, and knowledge of changing communities, has enabled it to develop new services in response to different needs. Examples include support and services for vulnerable people, activities to promote community cohesion, and targeting improvement and development programmes to meet the needs of BME communities and older people. This is delivering improved outcomes for a range of people with different needs.
- 116** However, there has been slow progress in some aspects of equality and diversity. At a corporate level, the Council has not sought to validate its progress against the ESLG since it was refreshed in 2006. In addition, the Council is not fully compliant with the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice for Housing, but good progress is being made against all aspects of the revised guidance. The service has also recognised that it needs to do more to ensure that service delivery is fair to all customers. It has been developing its customer profile information but gaps remain which means it cannot be sure that it is maximising the impact of its work in this area.
- 117** Some weaknesses remain in key areas. Increased resources has seen recent improvement in managing standards in HMOs, but this is against a backdrop of failure to meet targets for inspection of high risk properties. In addition, although the Council responded positively to previous inspection recommendations to improve the quality and consistency of front line advice, the quality of advice and accessibility of services through the Neighbourhood Offices remains inconsistent, and the length of time that people are waiting for a decision about homelessness is also failing to meet targets. Some people are experiencing a poorer service as a result.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 118** This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. Clear vision and effective leadership, supported by an effective performance management framework, is driving improvement. Risk to delivery of objectives is minimised and resources are aligned to priorities. The Council learns from its own experience and that of others. However, there are some gaps in terms of what is monitored and IT does not yet fully support performance management activity, although plans to address this are at an advanced stage.

How good is the service?

- 119** The Council has a clear vision of what it wants to achieve and this is used effectively to drive service delivery and improvement planning. Long term objectives are informed by national and regional priorities based on a comprehensive research base and engagement with partners, stakeholders and residents. Priorities have been translated into an outcomes based framework, which has informed financial and resource planning for delivery through key housing strategies and service plans. As a result, strategic housing plans and resources are aligned to delivery of the Council's priorities, and reflect the needs of communities.
- 120** Service and improvement plans are focused on delivering agreed priorities and address known weaknesses. The housing strategy, and supporting strategies and plans, provide a clear framework for what the service aims to achieve and are supported by complementary plans to achieve excellent services. Plans contain specific targets, supported by performance indicators and milestones, which provide an effective means of monitoring and reporting progress against priorities.
- 121** The Council has an effective performance management framework. High level priorities inform all strategies and plans, which in turn are translated into team and individual objectives and targets. Monitoring and reporting is tailored appropriately to reflect the different levels at which it takes place. For example, from individual performance meetings upwards through to elected members, and for partners, through performance and governance arrangements for the City Housing Partnership. As a result, staff, managers and partners understand what they need to do, and there is clear accountability for performance at all levels within the service.
- 122** However, there are some gaps in terms of what is monitored and reported. The Council is aware of gaps in its diversity monitoring, and is systematically identifying and addressing gaps through its EINA process. However, there is not a similarly strategic approach to collecting customer satisfaction information, which is responded to, but is collected at different frequencies and in different formats. In addition, service standards are in place for most services, but some lack sufficient detail. This is important as it limits the Council's ability to plan and monitor improvement and effectiveness in relation to how service users experience service delivery.
- 123** In addition, IT is not fully supporting performance management activity. There are a number of action and improvement plans, supported by a range of performance indicators, which must be updated and reported manually, which is time consuming in terms of staff resources. However, the service has recognised this and is now at the testing phase of a balanced scorecard approach. The scorecard enables grouping of actions to priorities, down to a very detailed level, and will take much of the manual effort, and risk of error, out of performance management.
- 124** Risk management arrangements are comprehensive and embedded within the Council's approach to service and improvement planning. Regularly refreshed risk maps are in place across the service and assessment of risk is built in to improvement plans and performance monitoring and reporting. This enables the Council to take corrective action and minimise the risks to delivery of its priorities.

- 125** Effective tools are in place to align resources to priorities. Budget setting is linked to priorities and outcomes, and capital receipts are directed appropriately using a Stock Options Appraisal tool. In addition, in response to recognition that priorities would be competing for reducing levels of resources through the General Fund and Housing Revenue Account, the service has developed a transformation programme which provides for increased investment based on achievement of efficiencies. The programme is ambitious, aiming to release efficiencies of £77 million through £39 million investment over the next ten years. It has already delivered significant cashable efficiencies, which are being directed into priority areas, and by informing service planning, has ensured that plans are fully resourced.
- 126** The Council is committed to continuously improving its services and makes use of a wide range of tools to help it achieve this. It invites and responds positively to external scrutiny, such as peer review for the homelessness service, and uses internal audits to identify and redress any weaknesses. It has also developed a 'star chamber' process which calls in managers of areas which are reporting underperformance against targets to provide challenge but also support to remove any barriers to improvement.
- 127** The Council learns from its own experience and that of others to improve services. It is responsive to customer feedback, such as complaints and surveys it conducts, and has captured the expertise of partners to develop its priorities and plans. It evaluates the impact of pilot projects, such as Kick Start and Urban Choice, to refine its approach, and has evaluated the effectiveness of key partnerships such as the City Housing Partnership. Investigation of how other organisations provide services was also a requirement in the development of 'three-star' action plans. This resulted in a range of exchanges and visits which have been used to inform improvement plans. This approach is helping ensure improvement plans focus on the right things and that efficiencies are achieved through utilising successful practices being used by others.
- 128** Effective leadership is driving improved performance. Priorities are communicated effectively and the organisation has worked hard to build a culture of co-operation and accountability. Tools are in place to challenge performance, but also to support delivery, and staff are positive about the benefits of challenge to help them overcome any difficulties they are having to deliver their objectives. Members also play an active role in this through their scrutiny function. Support is a key element of the culture, but it is also balanced by a willingness to take difficult decisions to tackle underperformance. This increases focus and direction in delivering priorities increasing the likelihood of success in delivering improvements.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 129** This is an area of strength. The Council is directing investment to develop the skills it needs to deliver its priorities. Partnership working is a strength and is contributing to a wide range of improved outcomes for customers. Procurement practice and joint working is helping to get more out of the Council's resources, supported by success in attracting external funding to support priorities. IT is not yet effectively supporting all areas of its work, but investment and delivery plans to improve this are underway.

How good is the service?

- 130** Investment in staff resources and skills is informed by a strong understanding of priorities and what is needed to deliver them. The Council has increased its staffing capacity in priority areas such as tackling empty homes and managing standards in HMOs which is reflected in improving performance in those areas. The human resources function is also supporting capacity by developing learning and skills programmes which focus on needs identified through appraisal. It draws on external expertise where required, such as developing training for housing standards and enforcement with the University of Warwick. This ensures that there is sufficient operational staff capacity and skills to deliver objectives.
- 131** The Council also has a strong approach to ensuring it has the skills and people it needs in the future. Staff are encouraged to build their skills and knowledge base through placements and secondments, professional development and qualifications. The Council has also implemented an assessment centre process for managers that identifies where they need additional support and coaching to better manage their own and staff performance. Approximately 250 managers have completed assessment centres and are now engaged in tailored development programmes, that , for high performers, includes a focus on leadership and executive coaching. This helps ensure that staff have the capacity to deliver improved services.
- 132** Partnership working is contributing to improved outcomes for service users and communities. Joint working through the City Housing Partnership has delivered a range of projects and initiatives which have improved outcomes for communities, such as increasing the numbers of decent homes across tenures. Partners have also helped to streamline access to services for vulnerable people, and their expertise has contributed to reductions in rough sleeping and homelessness. Securing the commitment and expertise of partners is enabling the Council to maximise the impact of its plans and resources.
- 133** Procurement activity is resulting in significant cost savings. This is already apparent within cost reductions for commodities, but also through joint procurement with other authorities resulting, for example, in savings of approximately £150,000 on the Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment. The Council is also applying effective contract negotiation which is resulting in savings to the service and to customers. Effective procurement practice is releasing resources which may not otherwise be available, and supports delivery of priorities and service improvements.
- 134** Financial management and planning is effective. Capital and revenue budgets are aligned to priorities and are monitored and reported on a monthly basis. An annual review of the research base enables the service to assess whether its plans are focusing on the right things, and allows budgets and plans to be adjusted accordingly. The Housing Transformation Programme is a key feature of this, as it guides investment to release efficiencies, which means that the service can do more for more people than if it relied solely on existing funding streams. A prudent approach to planning, taken on the basis of cashable efficiencies, provides assurance that sufficient resources are available to future improvements.

- 135** The Council successfully attracts external funding from a range of sources to help deliver its priorities. This includes significant levels of funding from CLG⁸, the Housing Corporation and the Government Office for the West Midlands to support national and regional priorities and funding from charitable sources. The Council has a good understanding of where and how external funding can support priorities, but also takes steps to plan for when funding streams end and has for example, mainstreamed activity from the NRF programme. This increases the Council's capacity to meet its objectives.
- 136** The use of IT to support service delivery and improvement is not yet fully effective. There are some positive examples of IT streamlining service delivery, such as a shared case management system with partners for housing options and advice, the use of GIS to inform a targeted approach to service delivery, and mobile working for housing advice and homelessness caseworkers. However, there are areas, such as front line service delivery, performance management and private sector housing activities which do not benefit from integrated IT systems. The Council has recognised this and has invested in new technologies such as customer relationship management software, the balanced scorecard and a new IT system for private sector activities, which includes the use of mobile working. Although not yet in place, it is clear that the Council is investing in IT to achieve more efficient and effective services.

⁸ Government department for Communities and Local Government

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 1 Performance indicators

Performance indicator	Best performing 2007/08	AIB 2005/06	AIB 2006/07	AIB 2007/08 *
BVPI 64 Vacant private homes returned to use or demolished	112	100	154	237
⁹ HSSA Number of homes vacant for six months or longer	N/a	7703	6370	6088
HSSA Number of homes improved through the use of Disabled Facilities Grants	N/a	799	1219	1219
BVPI 183a Average length of stay in B&B in weeks	N/a	1.4	0.9	0.9
BVPI 183b Average length of stay in hostels in weeks	0	9.8	7.2	6.6
BVPI 202 Number of people sleeping rough	N/a	56	6	6
Number of those threatened with homelessness for whom advice and support prevented homelessness	N/a	1017	4827	6316

* unaudited figures

⁹ HSSA - Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix

Appendix 2 – 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:
 - focus groups with staff and partners;
 - telephone interviews with customers;
 - interviews with staff and Councillors;
 - viewing temporary and supported accommodation;
 - review of Council's website and leaflets; and
 - mystery shopping.

Appendix 3 – Positive practice

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

Streamlined assessment and support through a Vulnerable Persons Unit

- 1 The Council works with other partners to provide a single managed pathway to housing and related support through its Vulnerable Persons Unit. It provides assessment, case management and a pathways approach for groups such as looked after children leaving care, offenders and young offenders, Drug Intervention Project clients, and Multi Agency Public Protection Agency clients who may encounter difficulties in accessing accommodation and support. There is a single point of access for referrals from statutory providers which is supported by a series of working protocols, which helps to ensure that provision of support is streamlined and targeted appropriately.

Tackling worklessness through Bridges into the Future programme

- 2 As part of its Local Area Agreement commitment to tackling worklessness, the Council has implemented a three part programme called 'Bridges into the Future' which provides training, development and work opportunities for disadvantaged communities. The scheme has so far secured full time employment for 37 young people from BME backgrounds.

Use of GIS and Sustainability Modelling tool for local housing markets

- 3 The Council has developed IT based tools to help it target action and model the impacts of changing health, community and economic conditions on local housing market areas. Both make use of existing data from the research base as well as information that is readily available from other sources, for example, from the Office for National Statistics. GIS is used to map and explore the geographical nature and density of housing needs and issues in relation to local housing markets, which, linked to an assessment of sustainability, enables the Council to review its plans and target action and resources appropriately.

Partnership working to reduce health inequalities

- 4 Close working with partners is enabling the Council to target actions to improve housing conditions which are contributing to poor health of residents. It is working with an energy provider and the NHS to assist people whose health is adversely affected by lack of adequate heating in their homes. Since the scheme started in 2001, training has been provided to 2,220 frontline health professionals, who have referred almost 8,000 households across all housing sectors, of which, approximately 5,000 have had works completed to their homes. This has been achieved through a mix of funding sources, including the Council's capital programme, energy provider funding, and funding from a range of charitable organisations.

Accreditation scheme for private rented sector landlords

- 5 The Council is working closely with external partners to improve standards of accommodation in the private rented sector. Approximately 550 private landlords and lettings agents have signed up to the city's landlord accreditation scheme, which through adoption by the University of Birmingham, has improved standards of accommodation for students in the city.

VFM cost and performance analysis tool

- 6 Improved understanding of costs and performance, and how they compare to others, is supported by use of a VFM matrix. The matrix was developed in-house, and plots cost and performance to a detailed level for each element of the strategic housing service. This is used as the basis for more detailed exploration of working practices and is used to capture learning from benchmark authorities.

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