

CANNOCK CHASE COUNCIL

CABINET

14 JUNE 2007

REPORT OF THE DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

PORTFOLIO LEADER – HEALTHIER COMMUNITIES, HOUSING & OLDER PEOPLE

AUDIT COMMISSION INSPECTION OF STRATEGIC HOUSING

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide the Cabinet with the final report from the January 2007 inspection of the Council's Strategic Housing functions by the Audit Commission. The report also contains the detailed Improvement Plan, which sets out how the Council will address the eight recommendations within the Inspection Report.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That Cabinet note the Inspection Report and the eight recommendations.
- 2.2 That the Strategic Housing Inspection Improvement Plan be agreed
- 2.3 That the funding of homelessness prevention schemes and furniture in Council-owned temporary accommodation for homeless families as identified in the report be considered as part of the Council's Delivering Change process for 2008-2011.

3. Key Issues

- 3.1 The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent efficiently and that public services are delivered to a high-quality. Within the Audit Commission, the Housing Inspectorate inspects and monitors strategic and operational housing performance of Local Authorities, Arms Length Management Organisations and Housing Associations.
- 3.2 The Audit Commission undertook an inspection of the Council's Strategic Housing Services during the week commencing 15th January 2007. The inspection covered the development of the Housing Strategy, helping to provide more affordable housing, meeting housing needs, the housing options and homelessness service, and improving housing conditions in the private

sector. The inspection was based on the Audit Commission's 'No.2 Strategic Approach to Housing' key line of enquiry – known as KLOE 2.

- 3.3 The Inspection Team published their Inspection Report on the 10th May 2007 – this is attached at Annex 1 to this report.
- 3.4 On a scale from zero to three stars, the Audit Commission Inspection Team scored the service as a fair one star service, with uncertain prospects for improvement against the judgements within KLOE 2.
- 3.5 The star-score outcome of the Inspection process fairly reflects the Self Assessment undertaken by the Council prior to the Inspection, as the service was restructured 2 years ago and again last year when it took responsibility for homelessness, and has come along way in a short period of time and tackled complex issues. However, there was disappointment that when making their judgement for improvement, the Audit Commission were unable to take into account the significant building blocks for improvement such as increased amounts of funding for affordable housing, and funding for decent homes in the private sector which the Council has put in place over the last 6 months.
- 3.6 The Inspection Report contained eight recommendations that contain practical pointers for improvement and each has a key date when these should be achieved. A draft Inspection Improvement Plan produced in response is attached as Annex 2 to this document.
- 3.7 Most of the Inspection Team's recommendations can be delivered within existing resources. The exceptions are "mainstreaming" (that is, meeting the costs from the General Fund) the funding for key homelessness prevention schemes at an annual cost of £46,000; and the cost of providing homeless families with access to furniture in emergency temporary accommodation to ensure a continued reduction in the use of inappropriate and expensive B&B accommodation, estimated at £6,000 per year. If mainstreamed, a contribution towards these costs would be made from the annual Government homelessness grant and the £3,240 savings on the rent of two Council flats previously used for temporary accommodation could also be off-set against the costs.
- 3.8 The Audit Commission note that the Council is delivering a good Homelessness service and has adopted some 'best practice' examples, such as the Safe As Houses sanctuary scheme and a Private Sector Tenancy Support Officer. However, the Council is criticised for having the delivery of core homelessness prevention services reliant on insecure annual grant funding from Government. It is recommended that a bid for additional annual funding of £48,760 is considered as part of the Council's growth options within the Delivering Change process for 2008-09 to 2010-11, whereby all Policy Options of the Council, for all services, are evaluated against their contributions towards the aims and objectives of the Council. Should this be a growth option within the Delivering Change Process, it would decouple expenditure on homelessness prevention from the grant funding and meet the expectations of the Audit Commission.
- 3.9 In the event that the Policy Option is unsuccessful and the receipt of the Homelessness Grant is no longer forthcoming, then the viability of the Homelessness Prevention Schemes would be at risk.

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Section 1

Background

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively and delivers high-quality services to the public. Within the Audit Commission, the Housing Inspectorate inspects and monitors the performance of Local Authority Housing Departments, Local Authority Supporting People Teams, Arms Length Management Organisations and Housing Associations.

Inspections are carried out by the Housing Inspectorate using powers under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles.

The Council submitted a Self Assessment against KLOE 2 prior to the Inspection. The Inspection Team used the Self Assessment as the basis of focusing their on-site inspection work.

The Audit Commission undertook an inspection of the Council's Strategic Housing Services and an Inspection Team was on-site during the week commencing 15th January 2007. The inspection covered the development of the Housing Strategy, helping to provide more affordable housing, meeting housing needs, the housing options and homelessness service, and improving housing conditions in the private sector. The inspection was based on the Audit Commission's 'No.2 Strategic Approach to Housing' key line of enquiry – known as KLOE 2.

The Inspection Team published their Inspection Report on the 10th May 2007 – this is attached at Annex 1 to this report.

The Inspection Report sets out the findings of the inspection and in particular it scores the service. On a scale from zero to three stars, the Inspection Team scored the service as a fair one star service, with uncertain prospects for improvement against the judgements within KLOE 2.

The one star score of the Inspection process fairly reflects the Self Assessment undertaken by the Council prior to the Inspection. This reflects the fact the service was restructured 2 years ago and again last year when it took responsibility for homelessness, has established clear priorities for the service, secured improvements in homelessness and has plans in place to tackle what are complex housing issues. However, there was disappointment that when making their judgement for improvement, the Audit Commission were unable to take into account the significant building blocks for improvement such as increased amounts of and funding for affordable housing, and funding for decent homes in the private sector which the Council has put in place over the last 6 months. The uncertain prospects reflects the view of the Inspection Team that significant outcomes for residents had not yet been demonstrated and many schemes had only been in place under 2 years. The Commission were clear to explain this meant that the Council might improve but this could not be demonstrated with evidence at this stage.

The Inspection Report also contained eight recommendations that contain practical pointers for improvement and each has a key date when these should be achieved. They cover not only the strategic housing functions but also cross cutting issues of customer access, diversity, performance management and value for money.

Section 2

Details of Matters to be Considered

Following the Inspection, the next step for the Council is to implement an Inspection Improvement Plan to ensure that the recommendations from the Inspection are delivered. The Strategic Housing Inspection Improvement Plan is attached as Annex 2 to this document. It covers actions that are challenging but deliverable not only for Strategic Housing but for the Council as a whole. Initial feedback from the Lead Housing Inspector for the West Midlands is that this Improvement Plan and the actions within it meet their expectations.

Most of the Inspection Team's recommendations can be delivered within existing resources, with the exception of two elements within the homelessness functions of the Council. Firstly, the Inspection Team praised the prevention approach adopted by the Council and have been impressed with the reduction in homelessness within the District. They cite the key reason for this reduction as being the prevention schemes the Council and its partners have put in place because of the 2003 Homelessness Strategy. Their criticism was that the funding for these key schemes relies on insecure annual funding from Government and not more secure funding from the Council. In order to "mainstream" the funding for key homelessness prevention schemes, it is estimated that an additional cost of £46,000 in revenue funding is required on an annual basis at current costs.

Secondly, the Inspection Team acknowledged the reduction in expenditure on temporary accommodation for homeless families and a reduced use of Bed & Breakfasts. If the Council is to continue to reduce the use of inappropriate and expensive Bed & Breakfast accommodation, it will need to provide furniture in Council-owned temporary accommodation. It is estimated that an annual budget of £6,000 is required to meet the basic furniture costs of temporary accommodation, namely a cooker, a bed, a chair and a fridge. The estimated cost includes the potential replacement costs.

Contribution towards these costs would be made from the annual Government Homelessness Grant (currently £32,000) and offset against the £3,240 savings on the rent of two Council flats previously used by the Housing Options Team for temporary accommodation for homeless families.

It is recommended that a bid for the additional annual funding of £48,760 is considered as part of the Council's growth options within the Delivering Change process for 2008-09 to 2010-11, whereby all Policy Options of the Council, for all services, are evaluated against their contributions towards the aims and objectives of the Council. Any Homelessness Grant funding received from the Government will contribute towards this additional revenue expenditure. Should this be a growth option within the Delivering Change Process, it would decouple expenditure on homelessness prevention from the grant funding and meet the expectations of the Audit Commission.

In the event that the Policy Option is unsuccessful and the receipt of the Homelessness Grant is no longer forthcoming, then the viability of the Homelessness Prevention Schemes would be at risk.

Section 3

Contribution to CHASE

The Council's vision and objectives includes the aim of Building and Excellent Council. The implementation of the Inspection Improvement Plan will improve the Strategic Housing service in line with this vision.

Youth homelessness and tackling domestic violence are both Flagship Delivery Priorities for the Staffordshire Local Area Agreement (LAA). Implementing these recommendations will assist in the delivery of these key LAA priorities within the District.

Section 4

Section 17 (Crime Prevention) Implications

There are no crime prevention implications arising from this report.

Section 5

Human Rights Act Implications

There are no human rights implications arising from this report.

Section 6

Data Protection Act Implications

There are no Data Protection Act implications arising from this report.

Section 7

Risk Management Implications

The risks of not meeting the Audit Commission recommendations are further inspections and significantly reduced chances of improving the inspection score. This has implications for the Council's future score under the Audit Commission's Comprehensive Performance Assessment process. These risks are mitigated by implementation of the Improvement Plan as recommended in this report.

The Council's homelessness prevention services are dependent on Government grant funding and are at risk of this funding being either reduced or withdrawn. This risk is potentially mitigated by the recommendation to use the Council's Delivering Change process for these services.

Section 8

Legal Implications

The Audit Commission is the driving force for improvement in public services. Its practical recommendations and encouragement of best practice seeks to ensure that public services provide good value for money. By adoption of the Audit Commission's recommendations it will assist the Council in achieving this standard in respect of Strategic Housing.

Section 9

Financial Implications

Additional funding on an ongoing basis is being requested as follows:

	Additional Funding 2007-08	Additional Funding 2008-09
Mainstreaming of Homelessness prevention services	37,820	46,000
Provision of Basic Furniture	6,000	6,000
Less Savings - Flats	-3,240	-3,240
	40,580	48,760

Provision already exists within the 2007-08 revenue budget for the "Implementation of the Homelessness Act"; although this is affected by grant income, however no provision exists for the £6,000 cost of providing basic furniture in emergency temporary accommodation for homeless families.

No provision exists for the mainstreaming of budget as indicated in the table for 2008-09 onwards and under the Council's current processes will require to be considered as part of the Delivering Change Process.

There is provision to consider unforeseen issues during the year by granting a Supplementary Estimate. However, this represents a first call on Delivering Change with compensating savings being required to offset the Supplementary Estimate.

The allocation of resources to priority areas is determined as part of the Councils Delivering Change process. The process allocates resources to priorities for a three year period based upon a thorough review of all service needs.

It is anticipated that the implementation of the other recommendations contained within the Audit Commission report can be implemented from within existing budgets.

Members are recommended to consider the additional funding as part of the Delivering Change process, whereas the cost of the provision of additional funds in 2007-08 can be partly funded from savings of £3,240, following the transfer off "Housing Temporary Accommodation – Flats" back to the Housing Revenue Account. The remaining balance of £2,760 will need to be contained within existing approved budgets for 2007-08.

Section 10

Human Resource Implications

The role of Private Sector Tenancy Support Officer is affected by this report as the recommendation to mainstream homelessness prevention funding includes this post. The post is currently funded through the Government's homelessness grant and by a smaller contribution from the Housing Revenue Account which will cease from 2008-09. It is on a 12-month rolling contract, which should be extended to a longer fixed term contract if funded from the General Fund.

Section 11

Conclusions

That the recommendations detailed in paragraphs 2.1 – 2.3 be approved.

Background Papers

- (a) Audit Commission – No 2 KLOE – Strategic Approach to Housing

[ANNEX 1 - AUDIT COMMISSION INSPECTION REPORT OF CANNOCK CHASE COUNCIL'S
STRATEGIC HOUSING SERVICE – MAY 2007]

Strategic Housing Inspection Improvement Plan

Inspection Recommendation	Responsible Officer(s)	Milestones	Audit Commission Target Date	Performance Indicator	Performance Reporting	Resources Required
<i>RI Strengthen the focus on customers</i>						
Improving access to services by assessing how well the current arrangements meet customer needs, taking customers' views into account, and seeking to meet identified needs	Julie Cope Louise Tandy David Chaplin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establish a Strategic Housing customer focus group ● Consult the customer focus group on access arrangements and information leaflets ● Undertake a review of access to services, incorporating the views of customers, and make recommendations that meet identified needs 	December 2007	SHLPI1 - Hold 2 Strategic Housing customer focus groups per annum	<p>LPI recorded on CorVu and reported quarterly to Head of Service at Manager Meeting and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meeting</p> <p>Progress against milestones reported quarterly to Head of Service at Manager Meeting and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings</p> <p>Exception reporting to the Strategic Housing Group and Directors Management Team</p>	<p>Deliver within existing revenue budgets</p> <p>Review budget implications of customers views on increasing access to services</p>
Involving customers in determining service standards and monitoring performance against these	Julie Cope Louise Tandy David Chaplin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consult the customer focus group on service standards and regularly review performance against the service standards ● Revise service standards following customer feedback ● Introduce service standards for temporary accommodation 	December 2007	<p>SHLPI1 also applies to this recommendation</p> <p>SHLPI2 – Undertake an annual review of Service Standards</p>	<p>LPIs recorded on CorVu and reported quarterly to Head of Service at Manager Meeting and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meeting</p> <p>Progress against milestones reported quarterly to Head of Service at Manager Meeting and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings</p> <p>Exception reporting to the Strategic Housing Group and Directors Management Team</p>	Deliver within existing revenue budgets
Gathering customer feedback	Scott Conroy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Customer feedback form covering all 	December 2007	SHLPI3 – Achieve a	LPIs recorded on CorVu and	Deliver within existing

across all aspects of the service and using this to improve services	David Chaplin	<p>services</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establish a monthly customer feedback and complaints monitoring form submitted to the Service Manager ● Establish a bi-monthly customer feedback, profile and complaints review meetings ● Report service improvement outcomes of customer feedback, profile and complaints review meetings to the Head of Service and Cabinet Member 		<p>30% response rate on all customer feedback forms handed out</p> <p>SHLPI4 – Hold 6 customer feedback, profile and complaints review meetings annually</p>	<p>reported quarterly to Head of Service at Manager Meeting and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings</p> <p>Progress against milestones reported quarterly to Head of Service at Manager Meeting and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings</p>	revenue budgets
Continuing to work in partnership towards significantly improving waiting times for customers needing adaptation work, ensuring that all available budgets are spent	David Chaplin Scott Conroy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Agree performance targets with Staffs CC & Walbrook to reduce DFG referral and waiting times, within a service level agreement ● Agree service improvements with Walbrook Care & Repair to reduce DFG waiting times, such as use private Occupational Therapists and agree a spend profile on the DFG budget ● Review the service level agreement with Walbrook ● Establish a monitoring and review process to assess the outcomes of the DFG service in improving the quality of life and enable independent living for residents 	December 2007	<p>SHLPI5 – 100% of DFGs completed within agreed waiting times for each priority group</p> <p>SHLPI6 – 15% spend within the DFG budget by Q1, 35% by Q2, 65% by Q3 and 100% by Q4</p> <p>[Additional LPIs to be established jointly with SCC on DFG waiting times for Occupational Therapists assessments]</p>	<p>SHLPI6 and the waiting time PI (still to be established) to be reported to the monthly DMT health check</p> <p>LPIs recorded on CorVu and reported quarterly to Head of Service at Manager Meeting and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meeting</p> <p>Progress against milestones reported quarterly to Head of Service at Manager Meeting and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings</p>	<p>Council and CLG funding of £350,000 - which should be increased in line with inflation to cover increasing fees and construction costs</p> <p>Council funding for Walbrook contract of £12,000</p> <p>Deliver within existing revenue budgets</p>
R2 Strengthen the Council's approach to diversity						
Providing clear leadership at Member and Senior Management level to demonstrate a commitment to diversity and to ensure that work to take forward diversity is fully supported and progress	Chief Executive Mike Edmonds Anne Bird	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Achieve Level 1 of the Local Government Equalities Standard ● Adopt a corporate Equality & Diversity Policy ● Adopt a corporate Equality & Diversity Action Plan and a system to monitor it ● Deliver against performance targets on 	September 2007	<p>BVPI2 – Level of the Local Government Equality Standard achieved</p> <p>BVPIII, 11b & 11c -</p>	<p>BVPIs monitored by Cabinet, Scrutiny Committee & the Audit Commission</p> <p>Progress of the PAT reported quarterly to Directors Management Team and reports</p>	Mainly delivered within existing revenue budgets, although there is potential for additional resources being required corporately to deliver

monitored		recruiting staff to align the staff profile to that of the community		% senior management post filled by women, ethnic minorities & people with a disability BVPI16 & 17 - % staff with disabilities or from an ethnic minority BVPI156 - % authority buildings accessible for people with disabilities	to Cabinet & Council when executive decisions are required to implement agreed actions	actions agreed through the Equalities & Diversity PAT
Developing comprehensive customer profile information and using this to ensure that services are appropriately designed and delivered to respond to customers' needs Comprehensively monitor services by diverse needs and use the information to improve services and show that services are being delivered fairly to all groups	Scott Conroy Julie Cope Louise Tandy David Chaplin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Establish a system of collecting customer base information, including use of services by diverse needs ● Establish a monthly customer profile monitoring form submitted to the Service Manager ● Report to bi-monthly customer feedback, profile and complaints review meetings ● Report service improvement outcomes of customer feedback, profile and complaints review meetings to the Head of Service and Cabinet Member 	September 2007	SHLPI4 also applies to this recommendation	LPIs recorded on CorVu and reported quarterly to Head of Service at Manager Meeting and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meeting Progress against milestones reported quarterly to Head of Service at Manager Meeting and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings Exception reporting to the Strategic Housing Group and Directors Management Team	Deliver within existing revenue budgets
R3 Strengthen the strategic approach to housing						
Establishing robust monitoring arrangements to assess that the strategic approaches adopted are delivering the intended outcomes	Scott Conroy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The draft Housing Strategy 2007-10 was confirmed "fit for purpose" by GOWM in 27th March 2007 ● Housing Strategy 2007-10 agreed by Cabinet ● Monitor and review delivery of the Housing 	September 2007	SHLPI7 – Undertake a quarterly review of delivery against the Housing Strategy Action Plan	Progress against milestones within the Housing Strategy Action Plan will be monitored and reviewed quarterly by the Strategic Housing Group and progress reported to Directors	Deliver within existing revenue budgets, with additional £46,000 General Fund resources being requested to replace insecure

		<p>Strategy Action Plan in line with the agreed monitoring process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Update and review key local housing data in light of the findings from the Cannock Chase Housing Needs & Market Assessment 2007 ● Homelessness Strategy 2007-10 agreed by Cabinet ● Empty Property Strategy 2007-10 agreed by Cabinet ● Affordable Warmth Strategy 2007-10 agreed by Cabinet 		<p>milestones to Strategic Housing Group</p>	<p>Management Team</p> <p>Actions are also included in the Strategic Housing Service Improvement Plan 2007-08, which will be monitored and reported quarterly to Head of Service at Manager Meeting and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings</p>	<p>Government grants to fund the delivery of core homelessness prevention initiatives, such as 'Private Tenancy Support Officer, 'Safe As Houses' scheme, and a Domestic Violence Support Worker [as recommended by the Audit Commission]</p>
R4 Make best use of existing housing						
<p>Identifying options and working with partners to provide alternative forms of temporary accommodation to avoid the use of Bed and Breakfast, seeking to eliminate its use in accordance with government targets</p>	<p>Louise Tandy Julie Cope</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Liaise with Housing Associations, relevant voluntary sector organisations, and SCC Supporting People Team to identify potential options to provide direct access temporary accommodation for homeless families 	<p>December 2007</p>	<p>SHLPI8 – 25% reduction in the number of days homeless people are in temporary B&B accommodation from 1st April 2007 to 1st April 2008</p> <p>BVPI183a – Average length of stay in B&B accommodation</p>	<p>SHLPI8 to be reported to the monthly DMT health check</p> <p>Progress will be reported quarterly to Head of Service at Manager Meeting and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings</p>	<p>The direct access accommodation costs will be met through existing revenue budgets for temporary accommodation, with additional £6,000 General Fund resources being requested to provide access to furniture for temporary accommodation, such as a bed and cooking facilities</p>
<p>Gathering and analysing performance information that can clearly demonstrate the impact that homelessness prevention activities are having, and in particular to understand the relationship between the reduced numbers of acceptances and the housing outcomes for those households</p>	<p>Julie Cope Scott Conroy Louise Tandy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Database of all customers of the Housing Options Service was commenced in February 2007 in order to track outcomes of homelessness prevention activities ● Undertake a quarterly review of prevention outcomes from the customer tracking database ● Report service implications of prevention outcome reviews to the Head of Service and Cabinet Member 	<p>December 2007</p>	<p>SHLPI9 – Produce quarterly reports on prevention outcomes to the Head of Service and Cabinet Member</p> <p>BVPI213 – Homeless households</p>	<p>SHLPI9 will be recorded on CorVu and reported quarterly to Head of Service at Manager Meeting and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings</p>	<p>Deliver within existing revenue budgets</p>

not accepted as homeless				receiving housing options advice		
Implementing the private sector housing strategy to provide a comprehensive approach to delivering the service and increasing the numbers of decent homes in the private sector for vulnerable households	David Chaplin Scott Conroy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Private Sector Housing Strategy 2007-10 and Private Sector Decent Homes agreed by Cabinet in June 2007 ● Commence pilot Private Sector Decent Homes Programme <p>1.</p>	December 2007	CLG PSA7 Target includes 70% of vulnerable homeowners & tenants in the private sector live in a decent home by 2010	<p>Milestones and the performance target will be monitored and reported quarterly by the Strategic Housing Group and progress reported to Directors Management Team</p> <p>Progress will be reported quarterly to Head of Service at Manager Meeting and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings</p>	<p>Council capital funding of £500,000 over the next 3 years</p> <p>Regional Housing Pot for Private Sector Decent Homes in 2007-08 of £62,000</p> <p>Regional Housing Pot for Former Coalfields in 2007-08 of £462,000</p> <p>Deliver within existing revenue budgets</p>
R5 Enable the provision of more housing						
Increasing the number of affordable homes delivered to meet agreed targets and establishing robust monitoring arrangements to assess progress and ensure that targets are met	Louise Tandy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Council funding criteria to Housing Associations for new affordable housing agreed by Cabinet in June 2007 ● Commence new affordable housing programme linked to new funding criteria and sale of Council bungalows ● Housing Choices Supplementary Planning Document is approved and implemented ● Continue to work with Planners, Housing Associations, and the Housing Corporation to exploit all opportunities to built new affordable housing throughout the District ● Establish an affordable housing monitoring database and report progress quarterly to the Affordable Housing Group 	April 2007 onwards	<p>Staffordshire LAA target of achieving 18% of all completions as affordable housing in 2007-08, 16% in 2008-09 and 15% in 2009-10</p> <p>SHLPI10 – Provide 100 new affordable housing units in the District per annum</p> <p>SHLPI11 – Provide the % of affordable housing on all sites in accordance with the SPD</p>	<p>SHLPI10 to be reported to the monthly DMT health check</p> <p>Quarterly monitoring of the LAA target by the LEEP Strategy Group and Cannock Chase LAA Local Delivery Board</p> <p>Affordable housing database to be reviewed quarterly to the Affordable Housing Group, the Head of Service at Manager Meeting and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings</p>	<p>Council capital funding of £5.2m over the next 3 years</p> <p>£106 Commuted Sum is currently £746,754</p> <p>National Affordable Housing Development Programme allocated £6,371,857 in 2006-08</p> <p>Financial resource from Housing Associations</p>
R6 Improve value for money and integrate it into working practices						

Establishing cost information across all the strategic housing service functions and comparing these, along with performance, with appropriate comparator authorities to assess value for money and identify areas for improvement	Scott Conroy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collate a breakdown of all service costs ● Identify appropriate benchmarking comparators ● Review costs & service performance against comparator authorities to assess VFM and highlight areas for improvement 	December 2007	SHLPI12 – Review service costs against comparator authorities on an annual basis	LPIs recorded on CorVu and reported annually to Head of Service at Manager Meetings and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings	Deliver within existing revenue budgets
At a corporate level develop a strategic framework for value for money to ensure a systematic approach, and help embed value for money as a way of working in the organisation	Bob Kean	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A corporate strategic framework for VFM is implemented ● Strategic Housing is assessed under the corporate strategic framework for VFM, which includes findings of review of costs & service performance against comparator authorities 	December 2007	SHLPI12 also applies to this recommendation	The outcome of the VFM review will be reported to the Head of Service and Cabinet Member, and to Directors Management Team as part of the Council's corporate VFM process	Deliver within existing revenue budgets
R7 Strengthen improvement planning and performance management						
Adopting a comprehensive approach to improvement planning using a variety of means to identify areas to improve including customer feedback and comparison information from other organisations	Scott Conroy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A SMART Inspection Improvement Plan ● A SMART Strategic Housing Improvement Plan 2007-08, which incorporates the Inspection Improvement Plan and the Housing Strategy Action Plan, along with improvements identified through customer feedback or benchmarking 	September 2007	SHLPI13 – Produce a SMART Strategic Housing Service Improvement Plan on an annual basis	LPIs recorded on CorVu and reported annually to Head of Service at Manager Meetings and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings	Deliver within existing revenue budgets
Making full use of the performance management framework to ensure that performance for key service areas is appropriately reported on and escalated as necessary, and that timely action is taken to address any performance issues	Scott Conroy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● All key service areas have appropriate performance targets and monitoring in place ● Systematically reporting progress against performance targets in line with the performance monitoring identified within this plan ● Poor performance is monitored systematically through exception reporting to Head of Service and Cabinet Member liaison meetings 	September 2007	SHLPI14 – All PIs falling below target will be reported to the Head of Service on a quarterly basis	PIs are recorded on CorVu and reported systematically to the Head of Service at Manager Meetings and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings, which exception reporting where performance falls below target	Deliver within existing revenue budgets
R8 Strengthen capacity in the service						
Assessing the capacity of the	Scott Conroy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● All Strategic Housing staff delivering key 	March 2008	SHLPI15 – Review	LPIs recorded on CorVu and	Deliver within existing

ANNEX 2

<p>strategic housing service to ensure that it is sufficient to deliver and sustain the planned service improvements</p>		<p>functions of the service are permanently employed by the Council</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Assessment of capacity of the Strategic Housing Section to deliver the statutory duties, Housing Strategy Action Plan and Inspection Improvement Plan, incorporating the reviews of VFM, performance, partnerships, training and the actions within the Strategic Housing Service Improvement Plan 		<p>service capacity on an annual basis</p>	<p>reported annually to Head of Service at Manager Meetings and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings</p>	<p>revenue budgets. With the additional of the Private Sector Tenancy Support Officer at £32,000 in 2007-08</p>
<p>Evaluating the outcomes of partnership working to assess the contribution and added value made to the delivery of services</p>	<p>Scott Conroy Louise Tandy Julie Cope David Chaplin</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Undertake a review of all current partnerships using the model developed through the Safe As House Scheme and recognised as best practice by the Audit Commission ● Strategic Housing Manager and Head of Planning & Regeneration evaluate the outcomes of all partnership reviews and recommend withdraw from those that do not increase capacity to deliver or add value or improve efficiency 	<p>March 2008</p>	<p>SHLPI16 – Review all partnerships on an annual basis</p>	<p>LPIs recorded on CorVu and reported annually to Head of Service at Manager Meetings and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings</p>	<p>Deliver within existing revenue budgets</p>
<p>Ensuring that training and development is being effectively planned and used to support the skills needed to effectively deliver services</p>	<p>Scott Conroy Louise Tandy Julie Cope David Chaplin</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Produce and implement a Strategic Housing Training Plan linked to delivery of milestones within the Strategic Housing Service Improvement Plan 	<p>March 2008</p>	<p>SHLPI17 – Review the Training Plan on an annual basis</p>	<p>LPIs recorded on CorVu and reported annually to Head of Service at Manager Meetings and Cabinet Member through regular liaison meetings</p>	<p>Deliver within existing training budget of £3,360 in 2007-08</p>

Strategic Housing Services

Cannock Chase District Council

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

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

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Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

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

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

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

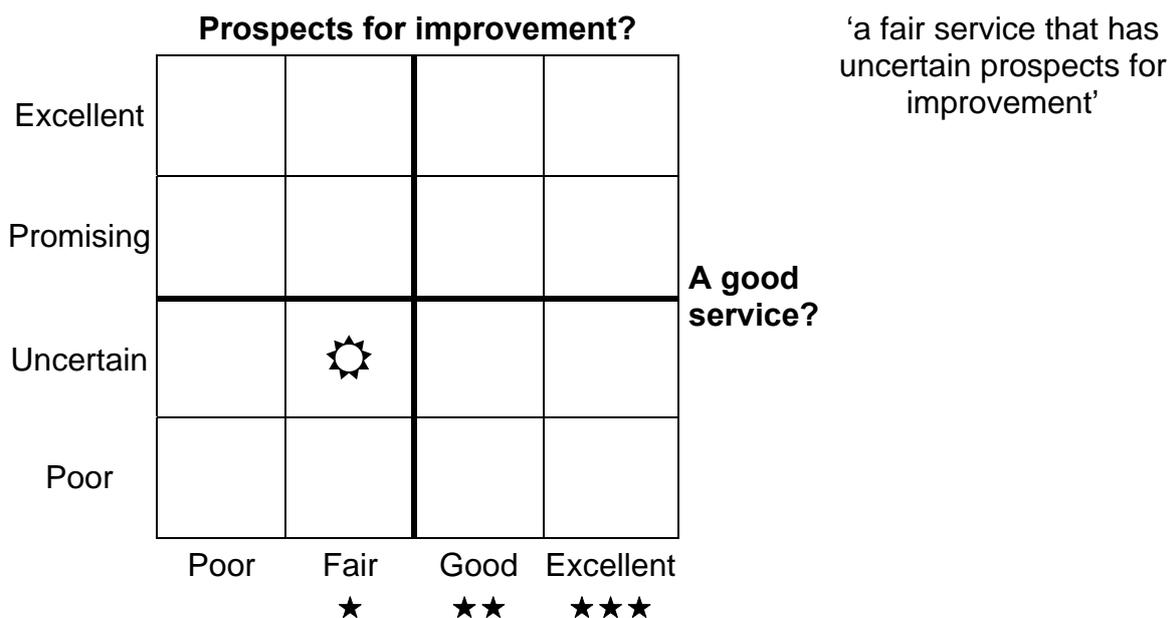
Summary

- 1 The Strategic Housing Service provided by Cannock Chase District Council is assessed as being a 'fair' one-star service with 'uncertain' prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council has a strong focus on providing housing advice and assistance to prevent households from becoming homeless, and has significantly reduced the level of homelessness in the district. There is positive working with private sector landlords, and schemes to help households in housing need find good quality rented accommodation. The Council has a good understanding of the housing market and has responded to this by developing a sound strategic approach to delivering new affordable housing, and improving housing conditions in the private sector to ensure more vulnerable households are living in decent homes. There is effective partnership working to deliver and improve services which is resulting in benefits for customers.
- 3 The Council is not fully customer focussed across all aspects of its services, with a weak approach to diversity and monitoring of services not being effectively used to show that they are delivered fairly to all groups. Limited numbers of affordable homes have been delivered to date, and the proactive approach to tackling housing conditions in the private sector has only recently been introduced. Households requiring adaptations to their homes are waiting an unacceptably long time for the work to be assessed and completed. There is limited information on the costs of services and the Council cannot show whether its strategic housing service offers value for money.
- 4 There have been significant improvements in delivering the housing options service and preventing homelessness but not all services have improved in this way. Improvement plans have been developed to deal with weaker areas of service and the resources identified to deliver these. However, the arrangements for developing improvement plans and managing performance are not sufficiently robust and the Council has not assessed whether it has the capacity in place to deliver improved services as planned. This means that the prospects for improvement are uncertain at this stage.

Scoring the service

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

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 6 We found the service to be fair because of the following strengths.
- Staff offer a good level of customer care and there is a range of good quality information available on most services.
 - Some services have been developed well to meet the needs of vulnerable customers.
 - The Council has a good understanding of the housing market and has developed a sound strategic approach which responds appropriately to the housing priorities of the district.
 - There is a clear focus on preventing homelessness, supported by a range of initiatives, which is resulting in significantly reduced homelessness in the district and associated use of temporary accommodation.
 - The Council works well with the private sector to provide good quality rented accommodation to meet housing needs.

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.

- The Council is clearly committed to enabling more affordable housing and has developed arrangements and identified resources to support this.
- The Council has developed a sound approach to ensuring that resources are aligned to priorities and has been successful in identifying and delivering efficiency gains.
- Partnership working is adding value in delivering housing strategic services.

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

- access to services is limited to traditional office hours, service standards have not been agreed with customers, performance against them is not monitored and customer feedback is not effectively used to improve services;
- the corporate approach to diversity is weak, there is little information on the customer profile and limited monitoring of services means the Council cannot show that services are delivered fairly to all groups;
- the strategic approach is still in its early days and is not fully embedded and able to demonstrate that it is delivering its intended outcomes;
- the Council remains over-reliant on Bed and Breakfast for providing temporary accommodation for homeless households;
- limited analysis of performance information on the homeless service, including, presentations and acceptances means that the Council is unable to effectively demonstrate the impact of its homelessness prevention services on reducing homelessness in the district;
- there has been limited impact in improving properties in the private sector to increase the number of vulnerable households living in decent homes;
- the disabled facilities grants service is not being delivered effectively and vulnerable households wait an unacceptably long time for adaptations to their homes;
- although improving, limited numbers of affordable homes have been delivered to date and monitoring arrangements are not sufficiently robust to ensure that development schemes are delivered effectively and on time;
- the Council does not know the costs of all of its strategic housing activities, and how these compare to others, and cannot demonstrate whether the service offers value for money; and
- there is no overarching strategy guiding value for money strategy in the organisation and the approach to procurement is not fully developed.

8 The service has 'uncertain' prospects for improvement because:

- the Council has significantly improved its housing needs service with positive benefits for customers, and reduced homelessness in the district;
- there are clear priorities for the strategic housing service, supported by a sound service planning framework;
- improvement plans address areas of weakness and are aimed at improving services and performance in key service areas;

8 Strategic Housing Services | Scoring the service

- resources have been identified to support the delivery of the strategic housing priorities;
- the capacity to deliver improved services has been strengthened through restructuring and the refocusing of services; and
- partnerships are effectively used to increase the capacity to deliver and improve services.

9 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include:

- the council cannot show a sustained track record in delivering improvements and value for money across all of strategic housing services;
- the performance management framework is not being effectively used to manage all areas of performance and ensure targets are met and poor performance is tackled in a systematic way;
- improvement planning is not sufficiently comprehensive and is not yet being informed by customer feedback and learning through comparison of services with others;
- the Council has not robustly assessed whether it has sufficient capacity to deliver service improvements or evaluated the impact of partnership working to increase capacity and add value; and
- the approach to training and development is not sufficiently systematic to ensure that capacity is effectively maximised.

Recommendations

- 10 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 Strengthen the focus on customers by:

- *improving access to services by assessing how well the current arrangements meet customer needs, taking customers' views into account, and seeking to meet identified needs;*
- *involving customers in determining service standards and monitoring performance against these;*
- *gathering customer feedback across all aspects of the service and using this to improve services; and*
- *continuing to work in partnership towards significantly improving waiting times for customers needing adaptation work, ensuring that all available budgets are spent.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to allow services to respond more effectively to customer needs; and
- to ensure vulnerable households requiring adaptations receive these as quickly as possible, and that the budget is fully used to maximise the number of households helped.

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

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.

Recommendation

R2 Strengthen the Council's approach to diversity by:

- *providing clear leadership at Member and Senior Management level to demonstrate a commitment to diversity and to ensure that work to take forward diversity is fully supported and progress monitored;*
- *developing comprehensive customer profile information and using this to ensure that services are appropriately designed and delivered to respond to customers' needs; and*
- *comprehensively monitor services by diverse needs and use the information to improve services and show that services are being delivered fairly to all groups.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to ensure that the Council is effectively responding to meet the diverse needs the community; and
- to ensure services are provided fairly and sensitively and in response to known needs.

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

Recommendation

R3 Strengthen the strategic approach to housing by:

- *establishing robust monitoring arrangements to assess that the strategic approaches adopted are delivering the intended outcomes.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- the Council will be able to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategic approach adopted and take early action if intended outcomes are not being achieved.

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

Recommendation

R4 Make best use of existing housing by:

- *identifying options and working with partners to provide alternative forms of temporary accommodation to avoid the use of Bed and Breakfast, seeking to eliminate its use in accordance with government targets;*
- *gathering and analysing performance information that can clearly demonstrate the impact that homelessness prevention activities are having, and in particular to understand the relationship between the reduced numbers of acceptances and the housing outcomes for those households not accepted as homeless; and*
- *implementing the private sector housing strategy to provide a comprehensive approach to delivering the service and increasing the numbers of decent homes in the private sector for vulnerable households.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the use of Bed and Breakfast as temporary accommodation for homeless households is kept to an absolute minimum;
- the Council fully understands and can show the impact its homelessness prevention activities are having, and whether positive housing outcomes are being achieved for all customers in housing need; and
- areas of poor housing will be tackled in a systematic way and the numbers of vulnerable households living in decent homes will increase.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs, but requires significant capital investment. This should be implemented by December 2007.

Recommendation

R5 Enable the provision of more housing by:

- *increasing the number of affordable homes delivered to meet agreed targets and establishing robust monitoring arrangements to assess progress and ensure that targets are met.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- more affordable homes will be available to meet the housing needs of the district.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs but requires significant capital investment. This should be implemented from April 2007 onwards.

Recommendation

R6 Improve value for money and integrate it into working practices by:

- *establishing cost information across all the strategic housing service functions and comparing these, along with performance, with appropriate comparator authorities to assess value for money and identify areas for improvement; and*
- *at a corporate level develop a strategic framework for value for money to ensure a systematic approach, and help embed value for money as a way of working in the organisation.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- to make effective use of resources and demonstrate how services deliver value for money.

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

Recommendation

R7 Strengthen improvement planning and performance management by:

- *adopting a comprehensive approach to improvement planning using a variety of means to identify areas to improve including customer feedback and comparison information from other organisations; and*
- *making full use of the performance management framework to ensure that performance for key service areas is appropriately reported on and escalated as necessary, and that timely action is taken to address any performance issues.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improvement plans will be more robust and developed from a number of different perspectives; and
- to manage performance more effectively and ensure performance improves across all key service areas.

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

Recommendation

R8 Strengthen capacity in the service by:

- *assessing the capacity of the strategic housing service to ensure that it is sufficient to deliver and sustain the planned service improvements;*
- *evaluating the outcomes of partnership working to assess the contribution and added value made to the delivery of services; and*
- *ensuring that training and development is being effectively planned and used to support the skills needed to effectively deliver services.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to identify whether improved services can be delivered as planned and any changes that may be needed; and
- to ensure that the Council's own resources are targeted to support partnership work that most effectively meets priorities.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2008.

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

Dates of inspection: 15 to 19 January 2007.

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Report

Context

The locality

- 12 The District of Cannock Chase is situated within Staffordshire just to the north of the West Midlands. The District covers 7,800 hectares with 3,008 hectares forming part of Cannock Chase, an area of outstanding natural beauty, which lies at the heart of the area. The area includes communities in Brereton, Chadsmoor, Cannock, Hednesford, Heath Hayes, Norton Canes and Rugeley as well as some smaller villages such as Prospect Village and Cannock Wood. Many of the towns developed because of coal mining and 40 per cent of the District can be described as urban.
- 13 The District continues to suffer significant levels of deprivation with the equivalent of six wards falling within the top 25 per cent of deprived wards in England. The Indices of Deprivation 2004 identifies that Cannock Chase is ranked 134 out of 354 local authorities. It is the most deprived Local Authority area in Staffordshire (excluding Stoke-on-Trent). The unemployment rate for Cannock Chase District for 2005/06 is 2.2 per cent.
- 14 The District has a population of 92,900, a growth of 0.4 per cent between mid year 2002 and 2003 population estimates. The age profile of the District remains relatively youthful when compared across the region.
- 15 The BME population within Cannock Chase is very small, representing 1.4 per cent of the total population. However, the ethnic community has grown significantly over the last ten years, from 748 in 1991 to 1,254 in 2001. Mixed race is the largest group with 406 people and Indian the second largest group with 309.
- 16 Life expectancy in general for Cannock Chase residents remains lower than Staffordshire, culminating in higher standardised mortality ratios for all causes. The District has a history of respiratory disease and coronary heart disease linked to coal mining.

The Council

- 17 The Council comprises 41 Councillors of which 16 are Labour, 15 Liberal Democrats, 10 Conservatives and no party has overall control. There is a Cabinet and Leader model of governance supported by a Scrutiny Committee and Select Committees to support policy development.

- 18 The managed service is led by a Chief Executive and two Strategic Directors, supported by Heads of Service, although is currently being restructured to replace this with three corporate directors with responsibility for Governance, Organisational Development, and for Service Improvement. The Council employs 660 staff and the General Fund budget for 2006/07 is £13,735 million with reserves of £0.76 million.

The service

- 19 In January 2005 appointment was made to a new post of Strategic Housing Manager. In September 2005 the strategic housing functions became part of the Planning and Regeneration Service, and the statutory homelessness function transferred to the service in April 2006. In 2006/07 the revenue budget for the service is £869,580 and there is a capital budget of £565,000.
- 20 The Strategic Housing Service is responsible for:
- housing strategy and enabling the provision of affordable housing;
 - homelessness and housing needs; and
 - private sector housing.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 21 The Council has developed its corporate vision as:
- 'By 2015, Cannock Chase District will be recognised as a place where everyone's lives are enriched by a strong cultural identity, vibrant local economy and pride in the outstanding natural environment.'*
- 22 The Council's corporate objectives are captured in the acronym CHASE and are as follows.
- Culture and Sport - increasing participation in culture and sporting activities.
 - Health - developing a healthy community.
 - Access to Skills and Economic Development - a vibrant economy, a job for everyone, learning opportunities for all.
 - Social Inclusion and Housing - reducing inequality, Decent Homes for all.
 - Environment - a clean, safe and sustainable environment.
- 23 The strategic housing priorities are set out in the draft Housing Strategy and, in order of relative importance, are to:
- provide housing choice that meets the needs and aspirations of all residents;
 - house vulnerable people;
 - encourage thriving communities where people want to live and stay; and
 - modernise the housing stock to provide a decent home for all.
- 24 The Housing Strategy priorities are clearly linked to the corporate objectives and reflect national and local priorities.

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

Access and customer care

- 25 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this service area. There is little involvement of customers in determining and improving services and service standards, and customer feedback is not being effectively used to inform service improvements. Service standards are not monitored to assess performance and whether they are meeting customers' needs. Access to services is limited in some areas and the corporate access arrangements are not yet impacting on strategic housing services. However, the Council has increased access to the housing options service, there is a range of good quality information about services and staff offer customers a good level of customer care.

- 26 Access to services in person is limited to normal working hours and is based mainly from the town of Cannock. The housing options service is delivered by the Housing Advice Centre which is situated close to the town centre, with homelessness interviews and the remaining strategic housing services delivered from the Council's main offices and the Bungalow, where Landlord Services are situated.
- 27 The Council has taken some action to increase access to services. A surgery is held fortnightly at the One Stop Shop in Rugeley and there is a drop in centre at Hednesford. The surgery operates on an appointment basis and demand for appointments is high meaning customers may have to wait some time. The Council recognises demand is high, and will make one off appointments where necessary. Home visits are carried out for customers of the private sector grants service and are offered to housing options customers with limited mobility. However the service does not have sufficient capacity to extend its services further on an ongoing basis, which means that some customers may experience difficulty in having quick and easy access to the service.
- 28 The Council offers an out of hour's service for homeless households, accessed through the corporate arrangements for out of hours and emergency services. However this is not actively promoted or captured in information leaflets and customers may not be aware of it, which given the vulnerability of potential customers needing to use this service, is a significant weakness.
- 29 The Council's offices have been assessed as largely Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant, although work is planned to improve the counter services provided in the Rugeley office to ensure compliance. The Housing Aid Centre is limited in terms of space and cramped interview facilities which present some difficulties for customers in wheelchairs, or with pushchairs.
- 30 Access to services by telephone is mainly through the corporate Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) which is being introduced across all services. The Housing Options Service has its own telephone number for customers to call but all other services are routed through the CRM system. The development of the CRM system is through a partnership approach with other Staffordshire authorities and is part of the beacon status award for partnership working for e-government. However, the CRM system is still at the early stages of development, with only waste management incorporated so far. Telephone calls for strategic housing are initially taken through the system but are then referred to appropriate officers to deal with, so there has been little impact on the service as yet in terms of enquiries being dealt with at the first point of contact.
- 31 Access to the website is generally easy with useful information available across strategic housing services. Customers can contact the Council through the website and some on line transactions are offered, such as applying for the private rented housing register. However there is not a comprehensive suite of on line applications for services.

18 Strategic Housing Services | How good is the service?

- 32** The Council has developed a range of attractive information leaflets and packs for its strategic housing services. These are of a good quality and provide useful information for customers, although customers were not involved in their development. There are satisfactory arrangements to provide contact and information in other languages and formats. The Council subscribes to Language Line and makes use of this when appropriate. The availability of these services is included as strap lines in the Service's information leaflets.
- 33** Access to the housing options service has improved with significantly increased numbers of customers since April 2006, when the options approach was introduced. Although promotion of the service is limited by the capacity to carry out these activities, the numbers of enquiries dealt by the housing options service is increasing, especially in relation to telephone enquiries.
- 34** Service standards are in place for most of strategic housing services, but there has been limited involvement of customers and stakeholders in agreeing these. Most of the service standards have been introduced as an improvement action in the 2006/07 service improvement plan, and actions to consult and develop the standards further are included in the 2007/08 plan. A number of the standards are recent and some key areas such as standards for households in temporary accommodation are not in place. The service standards are not yet being monitored and reported on to assess performance and whether they are meeting the needs of customers. Therefore the impact of the service standards at this stage remains limited.
- 35** There are corporate customer care standards through the Customer Charter, setting out levels of customer care that can be expected. To support this customer care training has been provided for all staff in the last year. It is clear that customers of strategic housing services are offered good customer care by staff.
- 36** Customer feedback is not being systematically used to inform service improvement. Satisfaction surveys are in place for a number of service areas which show that in general satisfaction with the services is high. Response rates are low, except for home security grants, which limits the scope for effective feedback on the service. Individual concerns raised through the satisfaction surveys are dealt with, and there is some discussion at team meetings if any particular issues are raised or identified. For example Polish was introduced as a community language following customer feedback identifying this as a need. However there is not a systematic approach to reporting and using customer feedback information and some service areas, such as the temporary accommodation, are not covered. This misses the opportunity for customer views to influence the delivery and improvement of services.

- 37 The approach to using complaints as a means of assessing services and identifying improvements is under developed. The corporate comments, complaints and compliments policy has only recently started to be monitored and only captures complaints that are made to the corporate centre. Complaints that are made to strategic housing services are dealt with by managers and are not referred into the corporate system. Although the arrangements corporately and at service level ensure individual complaints are appropriately dealt with, the lack of a systematic approach to effectively capture and monitor both formal and informal complaints represents a lost opportunity to use customer feedback to improve services.

Diversity

- 38 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this service area. There is little information available on the customer profile and limited monitoring of services by diversity means that the Council cannot demonstrate that it delivers its services equitably. The corporate approach to addressing diversity issues is weak and underdeveloped and the Council has not yet achieved Level 1 of the Local Government Equalities Standard. However, the corporate focus on diversity has recently increased with plans in place to progress diversity issues in the organisation. The Council can show that it has developed some services well to meet the needs of vulnerable customers.
- 39 The Council has limited information on its customer profile. Information on the make up of the population of Cannock Chase is gathered through a number of research exercises and data sources and is used to inform the development of the Council's strategic approach, such as the Housing Strategy. However, detailed information about the customer base and customer's use of services by diverse needs is not systematically gathered and used to inform the development of services, and to ensure services meet individual needs.
- 40 There is limited monitoring of services by diversity. Satisfaction surveys include diversity monitoring information and the homelessness returns include the ethnic monitoring information required by the Government. The private sector housing IT system FLARE also captures information on ethnicity. However, the information gathered is not used and there is no corporate approach to monitoring services. The Council has assessed that it is meeting the requirements of the Commission for Racial Equality Code of Practice in Rented Housing, but is currently reviewing this in the light of the revised Code. The lack of comprehensive monitoring of services hinders the Council's ability to ensure compliance with the Code. It also means that the Council is unable to demonstrate that services are delivered fairly, and the limited use of the findings from monitoring means the opportunities to identify service improvements are not being taken.

- 41 The corporate approach to diversity is weak. The Council has been slow in addressing diversity and equalities issues, despite social inclusion being a key priority for the Council, and the focus at a strategic level on addressing the health issues of the district. The Council has not yet achieved Level 1 of the Local Government Equality Standard. An Equality and Diversity Action Plan was developed in 2005 but progress against this has been slow with few tangible outcomes to date. In recognition of this the Council re-launched the Equalities and Diversity Policy Action Team and a revised action plan has been produced. External consultancy support has been brought in funded through the Government's Diversity in the Districts Project and a draft corporate equality policy and plan developed. The Council is on target to achieve Level 1 of the Equality Standard by April 2007 and plans are in place to achieve level 2 by April 2008.
- 42 Diversity is not embedded within the organisation as a way of working and is not well supported through training. All staff were required to attend customer care training in 2006 of which diversity was a part. However elected Members have had little involvement in exploring diversity issues and the implications of it for the Council's business, and have not received any training on diversity. A dedicated 'interim' budget has been recently agreed by the Departmental Management Team to support diversity training. However the lack of clear commitment at a senior level to driving diversity forward in the organisation has meant that little progress has been made.
- 43 The Council has set targets to align its staffing profile to reflect that of the community, but is achieving mixed success against these. The percentage of the workforce from the BME communities is 1.58 per cent compared to 1.4 per cent in the community, whereas the percentage of women in senior management positions is below the target set. Employees declaring a disability represent 1.58 per cent, which is well below the level in the community.
- 44 The Council has taken a sound approach to developing the Disability Equality Scheme, which was adopted in December 2006 to meet the legal requirements. A Select Committee examined the 'Equality of Access for People with Disabilities' in June 2006 and the scheme was developed in a consultative way with disability groups. The Council is continuing to work with disability groups in the district to identify and respond to barriers in accessing services.
- 45 Engagement with diverse groups has been limited. Although the Council is successfully working with disability groups as outlined above, it has been less successful in engaging with and seeking the views of other hard to reach groups. Efforts to set up a focus group for members of the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) community have not been effective and it has proved difficult to ensure that the Citizen's Panel used for consultation is representative of the community. This means that the Council is not able to benefit from the views of all its diverse communities in delivering and improving services.

- 46 The Council developed a BME housing strategy in 2002 and produced a further one for 2004-2006. This sets out the housing issues facing BME communities and the ways in which the Housing Service tackles these. The strategy is intended to demonstrate the Council's commitment to BME issues in the light of it representing only a small percentage of the population. However as outlined above limited monitoring of services makes it difficult to assess what impact the strategy has made.
- 47 The Council can demonstrate that it responds well to some vulnerable client groups. The Council is part of the multi agency hate group 'CHASE against crimes of hate' led by the Police Service. The Council is a reporting centre and frontline staff have been trained on how to respond if incidents are reported. The multi agency group is active in promoting the service and responsible for monitoring the performance of the scheme.
- 48 The Council works well in partnership to address issues of domestic violence in the district. Domestic violence accounts for a quarter of all violent crime and is the second main cause of homelessness. Victims of domestic violence are supported through the multi agency 'safe as houses' scheme to remain in their own home with additional security measures. Support is also available to help vulnerable clients sustain their tenancies in the both the private and public sector. These initiatives are discussed in more detail later in the report as part of the Council's approach to homelessness prevention.
- 49 However some vulnerable customers do not receive an effective service. Clients requiring adaptations to their homes wait a long time for the work and although the Council is focussed on improving this, vulnerable members of the community are not currently receiving an adequate and timely service to meet their needs.
- 50 The approach to Gypsies and Travellers has been slow to develop. The Council is working as part of the South Staffordshire and North Warwickshire Partnership to commission a needs assessment for Gypsies and Travellers. This has not been identified as a priority area for the Council but nevertheless the arrangements to commission the needs assessment as a starting point have been slow to start in comparison to many other local authorities.

Strategic approach to housing

- 51 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The Council has taken a sound approach to developing the strategic framework for the service. There is a good understanding of the housing market, and of the housing issues that need to be addressed, based on a sound research base. The strategies developed respond appropriately to the housing issues identified. However, the strategic approach is still at the early stages of its development with action plans still to be finalised. A number of the strategies are yet not formally adopted, the Housing Strategy is not yet assessed as being Fit for Purpose and there are few measurable outcomes to date.

22 Strategic Housing Services | How good is the service?

- 52 The strategic development process has been used as a means of strengthening the strategic housing service. The service was brought under a strategic housing manager post in January 2005 and became part of the Planning and Regeneration Division in September 2005. The homelessness service joined in April 2006 and the Housing Options approach adopted, giving a greater focus to the Council's priority to prevent homelessness.
- 53 The process of developing the housing strategy has ensured that Members have a full understanding of strategic housing issues and that strategic planning is linked to resources. Resources of £3.9 million have been agreed from the Council's capital programme for the period 2006-2012 to help fund the strategic housing priorities, along with the capital funding required to bring the Council's own housing stock up to the Decent Homes Standard by 2010. External funding has been sought through the Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme and the Council has successful bid in partnership with other local authorities for Coalfields legacy funding.
- 54 The Council has a good understanding of its housing market, supported by an effective research base. A housing needs study was carried out in 2003 and this is kept updated by regular housing market assessments, including an analysis of house prices and income levels and interviews with estate agents. This is supported by 'The State of Cannock Chase' which is an annual corporate research exercise carried out across a range of factors. Through its research base the Council has identified that affordable housing continues to be the key issue, with the housing needs survey showing that 194 new affordable homes are required each year. The housing need is for mixed tenure and the percentages required for shared ownership, low cost and rent have been identified. The Council has also determined that some housing at the higher end of the market is needed to support economic regeneration policies to keep and attract economic prosperity in the area.
- 55 The Council recognises that the housing market is changing rapidly in the area and is shortly to commission a further housing needs study. This will challenge in particular some of the assumptions around low cost and shared ownership, as these tenures appear to be no longer affordable to local people with housing needs. The information will also be used to support the sub regional work on the housing market and to influence the development of the Regional Spatial Strategy.
- 56 There is joint working with others to develop an understanding of the wider sub regional housing market. The Council is part of the C3 partnership which consists of local authorities which are situated in the central part of the region. The housing market assessment of the sub region is planned for late 2007 which will support the approach to sub regional housing strategy.

- 57 The Council has used its research base to inform its strategic approach. The housing strategy has identified its four strategic priorities, set out earlier in the report, with affordable housing identified as the top priority. The housing strategy and the strategic priorities were developed in a consultative way with partners and stakeholders, and considered at various stages of the process by Members. The housing priorities reflect national and local priorities and are linked to the delivery of the Community Strategy aims and the Council's corporate objectives. The priority for affordable housing is also being reflected in the development of the Staffordshire Local Area Agreement with targets being developed to annually increase the percentage of affordable homes across all housing completions for the three years from 2007 from 10 per cent to 15 per cent.
- 58 There is effective joint working within the Council to deliver the housing priorities. The housing and planning services, supported by corporate research resources and other expertise as necessary, work closely together in the Strategic Housing Group to develop appropriate strategic responses in the housing market to deliver the identified priorities, for example the development of the Supplementary Planning Document.
- 59 The Council is developing its planning policies to support the strategic priority for affordable housing. A Supplementary Planning Document has been developed which proposes to reduce the eligible sites for Section 106 requirements from 25 to 15 units and to increase the percentage of affordable housing required from 25 per cent to 30 per cent. This is due for public consultation and is intended to be introduced from May 2007. Consideration has been given as to whether there needs to be any planning policies in relation to rural housing. However the area has few villages with rural settlements based mainly in three villages, which have an appropriate tenure mix of housing. The research base and consultation with parish councils on planning issues have not indicated that any particular provision is needed.
- 60 There is information available on supported housing needs collected as part of the Supporting People Programme. At a county level the Supporting People Team have prioritised supported housing needs and related these to the districts. The priority needs for Cannock Chase are young people and substance misuse. The most recent supported housing scheme in Cannock was for young homeless families which meets an identified priority.
- 61 The Council has recently strengthened the strategic approach to addressing housing issues in the private sector. This has been informed by information on stock condition provided by a stock condition survey carried out in 2003 and research by the Regional Housing Board. Policies and procedures were developed following changes in legislation in 2003 to enable the Council to make use of the new powers available, but the service has not been operating within an overall strategic framework. Although not yet formally adopted there is now a private sector housing strategy aimed at meeting the strategic priorities.

- 62 Stock condition information has been used to support the strategic approach. This shows the private sector stock to be in generally good condition with 14 per cent failing the decency standard, well below the national average, and 68 per cent of vulnerable households living in decent homes compared to the Government target of 70 per cent. However concentrations of poor housing were identified in ex coalfield areas with homes of non traditional construction.
- 63 The private sector housing strategy, takes into account the stock condition information and national priorities, and focuses activities and resources on delivering decent homes in the private sector, targeted at vulnerable households on an area based approach. A pilot scheme has been developed to implement this which is due to start shortly. The scheme offers decent homes grants and will be rolled out as resources permit on the basis of 'worst first' determined by stock condition and deprivation information. Some areas will include council owned stock and the housing revenue account capital programme will support renewal to enable a multi tenure approach. Sustainability assessments will be carried out to ensure that investment supports those areas with a long term future, although the Council recognises it needs to carry out further work in relation to this.
- 64 The area renewal approach is supported by the wider strategic aims to tackle housing standards through grants for homes failing the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) and enforcement action. The Council has tried to implement a loans scheme as the stock condition survey indicated interest in this. Despite promotion this has not proved successful and funding for loans is being rolled forward into decent homes grants. A much reduced loan scheme through 'Houseproud' is being maintained to offer in appropriate cases.
- 65 The Council has an appropriate and effective strategic approach to homelessness, focussed on prevention. The Homelessness Strategy was developed in 2003 as required and has recently been updated and is in draft form for 2007-2010. The new strategy builds on the previous one as the situation to which it responds remains similar. The priorities in the new strategy have been agreed through the multi agency Homelessness Group, with representatives from Social Services, the Primary Care Trust, the Police and a number of voluntary agencies including the CAB and the Council for Voluntary Service. The group is cross boundary covering Cannock Chase and South Staffordshire. The draft strategy will be subject to further consultation and once in place the action plan will be monitored by the Homelessness Group.
- 66 The strategic approach to housing is not yet sufficiently comprehensive or embedded to be ensuring positive outcomes across the whole service. Strategies for empty homes and affordable warmth are still to be developed, although the service is engaged in activities to support these. Tangible outcomes can be demonstrated by the homelessness strategy but it is too early for the private sector strategy to be showing outcomes. The housing strategy has provided the framework for affordable housing but outcomes are only just starting to be realised, and it is too early to assess the effectiveness of the strategic approach.

- 67 The Housing Strategy has not yet been assessed as 'Fit for Purpose' by the Government Office for the West Midlands (GOEM). There has been liaison during the development of the strategy and the Council is currently incorporating suggested amendments. The strategy is due to be submitted in February 2007 for assessment.

Making best use of existing housing

- 68 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The housing options service and the initiatives for homelessness prevention are resulting in positive outcomes for customers, and reduced homelessness in the district. There is proactive work with the private sector to provide good quality rented accommodation with a number of initiatives supporting this. However, the Council remains reliant on Bed and Breakfast for temporary accommodation in the first instance. There has been limited impact in improving properties in the private sector through the grants schemes and vulnerable households wait an unacceptably long time for adaptations to their homes.
- 69 The Council has a clear focus on effective advice and early intervention, though the housing options service, to resolve customers housing problems and prevent homelessness occurring, The advice given is documented and a 'prevention contract' is used to set out what actions both the Council and the customer have agreed to take. Where it appears that homelessness cannot be prevented the household is referred for a homelessness interview and a homeless application is made. The advice service is supported by a range of homeless prevention initiatives, largely funded through the Department for the Communities and Local Government homelessness grant of £32,000.
- 70 Effective tenancy support is provided for council and private sector tenants, which is being successful in sustaining tenancies. Private sector tenancy support referrals come from a range of sources including the Council's Housing Advice Centre, Social Services, Sure Start, health visitors and private sector landlords. During 2005/06, 24 new clients were accepted onto the scheme and a total of 35 tenants received support throughout the year, enabling them to sustain their tenancies.
- 71 Effective partnership arrangements are in place to support victims of domestic violence. There is a multi agency domestic violence forum and the Council supports the 'Project' which is the women's' refuge in the area. The 'Safe as Houses' scheme is aimed at preventing homelessness and enabling victims of domestic violence to remain in their own homes. The Police assess the level of security needed to provide a safe environment, and the measures offered are from additional locks through to the provision of a safe room. Twenty eight households have been helped by the scheme since its introduction in June 2005. Clients of the scheme complete satisfaction surveys and outcomes are monitored by the Domestic Violence Forum, including whether the scheme is resulting in victims continuing to remain at their home. Satisfaction levels to date are high.

- 72 The Council offers mediation to try and prevent homelessness occurring. The main reason for homelessness is parents and friends no longer willing to accommodate and the mediation service is aimed at tackling this, with particular emphasis on young people asked to leave by their parents. Mediation was being offered through the South Staffordshire Family Mediation service but this was having a limited impact. The service has now been brought in house with a member of staff in the housing advice centre trained to carry out mediation.
- 73 Some use is made of Discretionary Housing Payments, through the housing benefit system, to top up rent shortfall to prevent homelessness. £5,000 has been spent to date against a budget of £17,000 to help some households maintain their tenancies.
- 74 The Council works with partners to access supported housing for vulnerable households. Young people can be referred to the Rugeley Foyer managed by the YMCA and there are schemes managed by RSL partners for care leavers and ex offenders. The most recent scheme, enabled through the Approved Development Programme, is for young vulnerable homeless families who need support before moving to independent living. The Council and partners work together to move households into their own tenancies, with tenancy support on a floating basis if necessary.
- 75 The impact of the Council's housing options approach and homelessness prevention initiatives is reduced homelessness and reduced use of Bed and Breakfast (B&B). Statutory homelessness acceptances have reduced from 345 in 2004/05 to 208 in 2005/06 and for April to September 2006 there were 43 acceptances. The length of time families have spent in B&B has not exceeded four weeks during 2006/07, an improvement on previous years. Expenditure on B&B has also reduced. In 2005/06 spend was £141,000 but for this year it is projected to be within the budget of £56,000. BVPI 213, which measures homelessness prevention, linked to the effectiveness of housing advice, was 2.57 households per 1,000 population in 2005/06 compared to top performing local authorities at five.
- 76 However, the Council is not adequately using performance information to measure the effectiveness of its homeless prevention measures. In particular it is not assessing the impact of reduced acceptances by evaluating the outcomes for homeless households who are not accepted. There is a high number of requests for reviews of decisions, 52 for the period April 2006 to January 2007, and of these ten decisions were overturned. Partner agencies working with the Council on domestic violence indicated concerns that some victims of domestic violence had experienced difficulties in proving their homelessness and being accepted, even though they were being accommodated in the refuge at the time of presentation. Without robust assessment of the decision making process, and the performance information available, the Council cannot effectively link the relationship of those not accepted as homeless to its prevention activities, and demonstrate that the reduction in homelessness is as a result of successful prevention rather than any changes in the decision making processes.

- 77 The Council has taken action to increase the supply of temporary accommodation, but remains over-reliant on B&B. It has recently agreed to use six of its own properties on a flexible basis as temporary accommodation for homeless households. If the household is subsequently accepted as homeless the tenancy is offered for conversion to secure. However, the Council has no arrangements with its RSL partners to assist with temporary housing and it has no direct access to temporary accommodation, relying on this being available in neighbouring cities. This means that B&B accommodation will continue to be used in the first instance for households who require immediate housing. This makes it difficult to achieve the Government targets on eliminating the use of B&B and placing homeless households in the most appropriate accommodation.
- 78 The Council is focussed on improving the arrangements for temporary accommodation. Additional resources have been agreed and a temporary accommodation officer has recently been appointed, whose role is to monitor the standards in temporary accommodation, ensuring it is made best use of, and providing support to households placed in it. However, it is too early to assess the impact of this work.
- 79 The allocations scheme is dated and includes an inequitable approach to housing homeless households. Homeless households are given sufficient priority to ensure they are offered permanent accommodation through the scheme, but currently the scheme allows them to be offered smaller accommodation for their needs in relation to other housing applicants. In practice this inequitable aspect of the policy has not been used for some time and will be removed as part of the current review of the scheme. However, unless the allocations scheme is regularly updated and its impact assessed the Council does not know if it is best meeting the housing needs of the district.
- 80 Limited progress has been made towards increasing choice in the allocation of social housing, through a choice based lettings approach. The Council is considering developing a scheme with neighbouring councils but at the current time housing applicants and the service are not benefiting from a choice based system.
- 81 The Council has nomination arrangements with its RSL partners and nominations are monitored monthly. However, it is not clear whether the monitoring arrangements ensure that the Council is achieving its full take up against the targets as required by the nomination agreements, and whether therefore it is maximising all available lettings for applicants on the Housing Register.
- 82 There is proactive work with the private sector to help meet housing needs. A rent in advance and deposit guarantee scheme is offered by a voluntary agency, the Churches Coalition, based in the Housing Advice Centre. This assisted 57 households in accessing private rented properties during 2006. The Housing Advice Centre maintains a private rented property register with 33 households successfully finding accommodation through this route in 2006/07.

- 83 The Council takes a positive approach to ensuring housing standards in the private sector. A landlord accreditation scheme is in place with 74 properties accredited through the scheme and a further 46 in the process. Landlord Forums are held twice yearly and are well attended. These are supported by training events and there is a Landlords' Accreditation working group. A good relationship has been established with landlords and their views are able to influence service developments. In these ways the Council effectively supports landlords to provide good quality, well managed accommodation for tenants which assists in meeting the housing needs of the district.
- 84 The Council does not have a proactive approach to Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) but takes action to ensure that known HMOs in the district are maintained and managed to an acceptable standard. Numbers of HMOs are limited with 12 identified properties as meeting the criteria, none of which are subject to the mandatory licence scheme. However the Council relies on local knowledge to identify potential HMOs rather than being proactive in using methods such as council tax and housing benefit records. Inspections of HMOs are carried out and actions taken to ensure standards are met but this is not part of a systematic approach. The Council may not therefore be maximising the role that HMOs can play in the housing market by meeting the housing needs of single people in particular.
- 85 Enforcement action is taken where necessary to raise housing standards in the private sector. The Council is signed up to the Enforcement Concordat. Where possible enforcement work is negotiated with owners or landlords rather than serving formal notices, and in general this approach has proved successful. However formal actions have been taken under the various housing acts with one improvement notice served under the new Housing, Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS). There is also a budget available for works in default. This helps ensure that properties in the private sector are free from hazards to improve the safety for owners and tenants.
- 86 The lack of an overall strategic approach to private sector housing has limited the Council's impact on improving housing conditions through the grants service. Grants are available for urgent repairs and home security works but have had mixed success. There is good take up of home security grants with the annual budget of £30,000 being consistently spent. However, take up of the urgent repairs grants has been more variable and the criteria for eligibility has not been sufficiently robust to ensure that the money is targeted at those properties most in need. There has been an underspend against this budget, and following a review this year the criteria has been amended to tackle category 1 hazards under the HHSRS. The budget has been reduced accordingly and the underspend rolled forward to support the introduction of decent homes grants.

- 87 Arrangements are now in place to tackle improving the stock in the private sector in a more strategic and proactive way. As described earlier in the report the private sector housing strategy provides the framework for delivering decent homes for vulnerable households on an area based approach, through decent homes grants. Funding to support this is through a £1 million allocation from the Council's capital programme, over the next six years and £48,000 this year from GOWM and £150,000 for designated coalfield properties. The Council is continuing to seek external funding, and is trying to increase its allocation of coalfields funding. On mixed tenure estates council properties will be improved as part of the overall scheme, which ensures that a holistic approach to improvements is being delivered.
- 88 The Council has funding and arrangements in place to deliver decent homes for its own stock by 2010, but faces significant challenges in being able to maintain homes as decent in the longer term. Stock transfer was rejected by tenants in April 2006 and the Council is now developing its approach based on stock retention. To make best use of its existing stock proposals are being developed which include the disposal of unpopular and difficult to let properties including sheltered schemes which no longer meet modern day requirements. Resources raised will be used to support the housing capital programme to deliver the housing priorities.
- 89 The Council is working in partnership to improve properties through energy efficiency and affordable warmth schemes. Energy efficiency is promoted and monitored through the Cannock Chase Energy Advice Service funded through the Energy Savings Trust. Affordable warmth schemes are channelled through the Home Improvement Agency (HIA) who employs a Health through Warmth Co-ordinator. Over £500,000 a year is attracted through external funding, in particular the Warm Front Scheme, for investment in energy efficiency measures in people's homes to make them more affordable to warm.
- 90 Work is being carried out to bring empty homes back into use. The Housing Advice Centre maintains a database and empty homes are monitored monthly through council tax records. Owners are contacted to see if they will consider renting out the property and if interested an information pack is sent. The arrangements have recently been strengthened with an officer from the private sector team starting to visit and survey empty properties held on the data base. The information gathered will inform the development of the empty homes strategy. At April 2006 there were 506 homes empty longer than six months and during 2005/06, 21 properties were brought back into use against a target of 15. Top quartile performance for 2005/06 was 77, so although the Council's performance is improving it is still well short of top performing local authorities.

- 91 The delivery of disabled facilities grants (DFGs) offers a poor service to customers, who wait an unacceptably long time for adaptations to their homes. Applicants for DFGs wait a long time for the assessment by the Occupational Therapist Service, and further delays have occurred in processing applications through the HIA. This has meant that customers requiring adaptations may have been waiting for over two years for the work to be carried out, and the budget to deliver the service has not been fully spent. The Council, the occupational therapist service and the HIA have worked in partnership to improve the service and this is beginning to result in improved performance. The Council paid for an additional Occupational Therapist for two months during the summer of 2006 which resulted in 74 referrals between August and December, of which 44 have now been approved.
- 92 At January 2007 there were 89 applicants waiting for an Occupational Therapist assessment with the oldest dating back to November 2005. This is an improvement from the summer when the average waiting time was 22 months. All applicants receive an initial visit from the Occupational Therapist Service, and are prioritised for assessment. This approach enables the most urgent cases to be dealt with more quickly. The HIA has also improved performance with the time taken from receipt of the referral to completion of the works reducing from an average of 40 weeks in 2005/06 to 22 weeks this year to date. Spend against the budget is £200,000, with a further £116,000 work in progress and £65,000 waiting approval. This means underspend against the budget of £401,000 but it is a considerable improvement on that being projected earlier in the year. However the outcomes for customers of this service in terms of waiting times remain poor.
- 93 There are regular operational and strategic meetings held between the Council, the Occupational Therapists and the HIA level to consider cases and monitor performance, and these are supported by wider county wide meetings. Staffing issues within the Occupational Therapy Team for Cannock Chase have been resolved, which if maintained, provides sufficient resources to ensure the improved performance on referrals can be sustained. Close working between the Council and the HIA, which includes improved performance monitoring, also supports sustained improvement.
- 94 There is limited monitoring of the outcomes of the DFG service in terms of meeting the broader objectives around improving the quality of life and enabling independent living. However, an exercise carried out by the service recently in response to the inspection shows how DFGs have resulted in customers being able to remain in their homes, with significant savings on health and social services budgets by potentially avoiding residential or other types of care provision.
- 95 The Council maintains a database of adapted council properties and of properties where a DFG has been given. This enables customers to be matched to suitable properties and possibly avoid the need for expensive adaptation work. However, the information could be used more extensively to build up a picture about the availability of adapted homes across tenures in the housing market, and seek to make best use of them.

- 96 Older households are assisted in maintaining their homes by the handyman scheme provided by the HIA with joint funding through the Council. This allows smaller repairs to be carried out quickly and is a more affordable service based on an hourly labour charge of £10. The HIA has also secured funding for trips and falls assessments as part of the handyman service, with referrals for any work as appropriate.

Enabling the provision of more housing to meet needs

- 97 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this service area. The Council is clearly committed to enabling more affordable housing and has developed arrangements and identified resources to support this. The affordable housing schemes developed are geared towards meeting priority housing needs and the Council is proactive in ensuring that the tenure mix is appropriate, and that homes are affordable to local people. However, although improving, limited numbers of affordable homes have been delivered to date and monitoring arrangements are not sufficiently robust to ensure that development schemes are delivered effectively and on time.
- 98 The provision of affordable housing is a key strategic priority and the Council has set a target of enabling the delivery of 100 new homes each year. The target has been set on the basis of the resources available and the impact from changes to planning policy. The target is challenging but realistic in the medium term. However it is not likely to be met in this financial year.
- 99 The numbers of affordable homes delivered through the Council's enabling role has been limited to date. For the period 2001 to 2006 a total of 202 homes were provided. In 2004/05 there were 38 new homes and this reduced to 29 in 2005/06. Total housing completions have averaged 410 annually over the last few years, which is lower than the Structure Plan requirement of 485. However, the Regional Spatial Strategy, currently in development, is suggesting lower numbers of homes to be delivered in the district, and the Council is mindful of this. Affordable housing has formed a relatively small percentage of all housing provided to date but if the new target of 100 is met this represents a significant increase.
- 100 Performance in delivering affordable homes is improving. So far this year, 23 homes had been completed, 36 are due for completion shortly and a further 59 are in progress with intended completions by the end of the financial year. The numbers of affordable housing units for the future are identified at various stages of the development process from outline planning permissions through to on site. The information held in relation to this suggests that there will be a significant increase in the delivery of affordable homes.

- 101 Resources have been identified to support the delivery of affordable homes. £2 million is available for affordable homes as part of the £3.9 million agreed from the Council's capital programme for 2006 to 2012 to deliver the strategic housing priorities. Additionally, there are commuted sums of £700,000 and the Council has recently agreed criteria with its RSL partners for determining how this money will be spent. The Council has also successfully supported bids for Housing Corporation funding of £6.371 million for 2006-2008 through the Approved Development Programme (ADP). 'Right to Buy' sales of the Council's properties have been used to invest in improving the stock but these will now be part of the capital funding for both strategic housing and its own stock, along with any additional resources as a result of the selective sale of housing land.
- 102 The housing and planning services work well together to deliver affordable housing through the planning system. There is effective ongoing liaison and more formal arrangements through the Affordable Housing Group which meets regularly. This ensures that objectives are shared and offers a clear corporate approach for RSLs and developers.
- 103 Section 106 Agreements are being appropriately used to provide affordable housing although their use has not been maximised in the past, and the numbers of homes delivered through this route to date are limited. In the last two years all eligible sites bar one have been subject to Section 106 Agreements based on the Local Plan thresholds. However, a number of sites fall below the threshold and the Council has not therefore been able to pursue agreements, limiting the number of affordable homes provided through this route. Of the 67 affordable homes delivered from 2004 to 2006, 25 were as a result of Section 106 Agreements.
- 104 The Council has taken action to increase the delivery of affordable housing through Section 106 Agreements. The draft Supplementary Planning Document proposes reducing the threshold to 15 units and increasing the percentage of affordable housing required to 36 per cent. It is intended that these arrangements will be effective from May 2007. The Council has assessed that by reducing the thresholds, 85 per cent of all sites will be subject to Section 106 Agreements, a considerable increase on the previous arrangements.
- 105 The Council has sought increased numbers of affordable housing through Section 106 Agreements where possible. On one site, where the land was owned by the County Council, 30 per cent affordable housing has been agreed which will deliver 90 affordable homes. The Council has also worked across boundaries with a neighbouring authority to negotiate Section 106 Agreements with the nominations rights as a result split on a 50:50 ratio. Two schemes are in the pipeline delivering a total of 75 units for Cannock Chase.
- 106 The procedures and likely requirements on developers for Section 106 Agreements are covered in the Council's Supplementary Guidance and have been strengthened further in the new Supplementary Planning Document. Non housing requirements from Section 106 Agreements from other services such as Education are covered by formulas. These arrangements provide greater clarity for developers and other parties to the agreements.

- 107** The Council has a good understanding of the tenure mix that is needed to meet housing needs in the district and is proactive in ensuring that homes are affordable to local people. The housing needs survey identified that there was a need for low cost home ownership. However this is not being provided as the Council has assessed that changes in the market has meant this option is no longer affordable for local people. Intermediate discounted cost for sale has been delivered in one scheme which is set up on a discount in perpetuity arrangement. This helps in maintaining the supply of affordable housing in the district.
- 108** The Council is proactive in ensuring that shared ownership appropriately addresses the housing needs of the area. It has recently agreed arrangements to use its own resources to further subsidise schemes to ensure they meet housing needs and are affordable to local people. The Council revised its approach in the light of experience. A scheme in Rugeley which provided 14 units of shared ownership did not prove successful in meeting needs with only two properties taken up by local people, despite extensive trawling of the Housing Register and advertising. The Council is now working closely with its partner RSL on a scheme at Girton Road delivering 29 shared ownership flats. Local income data has been used to guide prices, equity shares are more flexible and service charges are scrutinised. In this way the Council intends to ensure that the properties will be affordable to local people in housing need.
- 109** The Council has used its enabling role to address defective non-traditional properties in its own stock on the Bevan Lee estate. Funding through the Approved Development Programme is supporting the phased demolition of 105 properties to be replaced with a mixed tenure estate of 128 properties. This is delivering sustainable properties for the future with a gain of 23 additional affordable homes.
- 110** There are positive working relationships between the Council and its RSL partners. Regular meetings are held to consider a range of issues, for example recently agreeing the criteria for the spending of commuted sums to support development schemes. However, although the Council shares information about potential sites with RSLs and uses development briefs to set out the housing requirements on sites, it still plays a reactive role rather than proactively driving affordable housing development through the partnership approach. Similarly, RSL partners are not always involved at the early stages of discussions between the Council and developers so that they can inform the approach to any affordable housing on the site.
- 111** Affordable housing schemes are being delivered to a good standard. Affordable homes are spread or grouped throughout larger developments. Section 106 Agreements are phased so that developers are required to provide the affordable homes at different stages of the development. On average over the last few years 64 per cent of developments generally have been on brownfield sites, above the target of 45 per cent for the district set by the Structure Plan.

- 112** The approach to supported housing is not fully developed. Priorities for supported housing have been identified through the County's Supporting People Team. However, there is a lack of clarity over how schemes will be supported by revenue funding which hinders the ability of RSLs to develop schemes, and has led to limited provision. Nevertheless the Council has recently enabled a supported housing scheme for young homeless families to meet its supported housing need priorities.
- 113** The arrangements for monitoring the provision of affordable housing developments are not sufficiently robust. Affordable housing completions are monitored as part of the Annual Monitoring Report prepared by the Planning Service to track all development activity across the district. The Affordable Housing Group made up of housing and planning officers, considers the progress on development sites and the likely numbers of affordable homes being delivered. However, although there is regular liaison, RSLs are not required to submit progress reports against their schemes on a regular basis to show whether homes are being delivered as scheduled. More effective monitoring arrangements are in place for the Bevan Road scheme where regular meetings are held to discuss the progress of the scheme. The lack of tight and timely monitoring of schemes makes it difficult for the Council to assess whether affordable homes are being delivered on time or whether there is slippage.
- 114** The Council is not using customer feedback effectively. Customer feedback from tenants moving into new affordable new homes is collected by the RSLs but this is not made available to the Council or used to inform future developments. This misses the opportunity to learn from residents living in newly built properties about any issues which could be improved upon in later phases or future developments.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 115** Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. The Council does not know the costs of all of its strategic housing activities, how these compare to others, and it cannot demonstrate whether the service delivers value for money. There is no overarching strategy guiding value for money in the organisation and the approach to procurement is not fully developed. However, the Council has developed a sound approach to ensuring that resources are aligned to priorities and has been successful in identifying and delivering efficiency gains. Effective use is made of partnership working and the housing strategic service can show in a number of cases that the actions it has taken have resulted in improved value for money.

How do costs compare?

- 116** The Council does not have comprehensive information about the costs of all its services. Some costs have been identified for private sector housing services based on the budget information for salaries, time recording and activity levels gathered through the FLARE IT system. This has enabled the costs of certain activities, such as processing a disabled facilities grant, to be established. However, costs for other aspects of strategic housing services are not known.
- 117** Costs that are available for the service have not been benchmarked and compared, along with performance, to those of other local authorities. The Council recognises this work needs to be done and an improvement action is included in the Service Plan to address this. Without this work being undertaken the Council's cannot demonstrate that its services deliver value for money.

How is value for money managed?

- 118** Corporately, the approach to value for money is underdeveloped. Value for money is not yet embedded across the organisation as a way of working, and there is no overarching value for money strategy to provide a framework for the various activities carried out to underpin improving value for money. The Council cannot therefore be sure that it is maximising the opportunities for achieving value for money in a systematic way.
- 119** The Audit Commission has assessed the Council as achieving level two (out of four) in the Use of Resources Framework, which means 'adequate performance'. The specific assessment for value for money as an element within the framework was also assessed as level two.
- 120** However, the Council is focussed on addressing value for money through its approach to managing the Council's resources and delivering efficiency gains. For some years the Council has faced challenges in achieving a balanced budget, and has been required to deliver ongoing savings. This has led to the development of 'Delivering Change' which is proving an effective process for managing the Council's limited resources. 'Delivering Change' guides the annual budget setting process, with service managers required to develop policy options for growth and options for savings. Efficiency gains targets for managers to achieve are built into the process. The policy options are scrutinised and assessed by senior officers and Members and scored against a range of criteria, including for example meeting the corporate priorities. In this way policies which are the most important in delivering the Council's objectives are agreed, and resources are effectively aligned to priorities.
- 121** There are arrangements to support the delivery of efficiency gains. A cross service group, The Reality Check Group, examines the policy options for efficiency gains put forward by service managers and assesses them to ensure they are robust, realistic and deliverable. There is also a Gershon Group which focuses on cross cutting efficiency gains across the organisation through, for example, the development of CRM and the rationalisation of administrative support.

- 122 Efficiency gains have been delivered, along with savings required to balance the budget. For the period 2004/05 to 2006/07, £3.1 million has been achieved as cashable savings. Of this £1.7 million has been required to support the budget, leaving £1.4 million efficiency gains for investment back into services. This exceeds the government target which required £400,000 annually. For the three years up to 2009 a further £515,000 has been identified through efficiency gains. The efficiency gains delivered include reduced staffing levels through combining posts and functions, IT purchases and printing costs. Front line services that have benefited from investment as a result of efficiencies gains include street sweeping and recycling.
- 123 In strategic housing services, savings have been made of £41,800 of which £9,670 are efficiency gains. These have been achieved through salary, training and equipment budgets. However strategic housing has also increased the resources for its service by successfully bidding through the 'Delivering Change' process for the new post of temporary accommodation officer.
- 124 The approach to procurement is not fully developed and the procurement strategy is outdated and no longer reflects the approach the Council is taking. The Council is exploring more innovative and effective forms of procurement. It is minimising the tendering of services and associated costs by making use of the framework agreements developed by the Office of Government and Commerce for public bodies to use. Some county-wide procurement arrangements have been set up to secure better value for money, for example in obtaining specialised audit work and for stair lifts provided through the DFG service. However, the lack of a clear procurement strategy, which also supports the Council's wider objectives in the community, means that effective procurement is not yet being delivered across the organisation.
- 125 Partnerships are effectively used to add value and are embedded in the organisation as a way of working. There are a number of examples in strategic housing services where working with partners demonstrates added value. These include the additional services offered by the HIA, the rent in advance scheme run by a voluntary organisation, the Safe as Houses scheme for victims of domestic violence and the delivery of the home security grants service with the Police. In the example of the Safe as Houses scheme an exercise has been carried out to show how the scheme offers value for money. The scheme has assessed that through the prevention of homelessness and savings on temporary accommodation, for every £1 that is spent there is a saving of £4.78. Other schemes have not been subject to such assessments and cannot demonstrate so clearly the added value they bring. However, it is evident that the Council is making good use of partnerships to add value in delivering customer focussed services.

- 126** The Council cannot show that it is achieving value for money across all of its strategic housing services. Some services can demonstrate value for money but assessments have not been made for others. The arrangements with the HIA are based on an annual payment of £12,000 which was set in 2004/05, and has been maintained at that level. The fees charged for DFGs have also reduced since the HIA arrangements were introduced from 14 per cent to 8.5 per cent. This means that less is being spent on fees and more resources are directed at improving resident's homes. The HIA adds value through attracting other funding sources which the Council benefits from, including the work around affordable warmth. However, there have been performance issues in the HIA with delays in processing work which needs to be taken into account when assessing the value for money offered.
- 127** The costs of B&B have been reduced following a significant overspend against the budget in 2005/06. A review of the B&B establishments used was carried out and reductions in rates were negotiated. This along with the reduced use of B&B has resulted in reduced expenditure. The Council has also taken action to use its own stock as temporary accommodation to minimise the use of B&B, which is more cost effective.
- 128** The Council has difficulty in demonstrating how effectively the housing options service is delivering value for money. Homelessness prevention activities are reducing homelessness and the knock on costs of providing temporary accommodation. However, there has been little assessment of how the various schemes each contribute towards preventing homelessness, and which prove most effective and offer best value for money. This limits the Council's ability to effectively target its own resources in supporting the different initiatives. Similarly, although the Council has explored costs to ensure that shared ownership is an affordable housing option for local people, it has not explored more generally how its understanding of building costs and land values will ensure that value for money is achieved in delivering the maximum numbers of affordable homes through both Section 106 Agreements and its own resources.

Summary

- 129** We have assessed that the Council is delivering a fair 'one-star' service.
- 130** There is a range of good quality information for most services and some services have been developed well to meet the needs of vulnerable customers. The Council has developed a sound strategic approach which responds appropriately to deliver the housing priorities of the district. There is a clear focus on providing more affordable homes and the Council works well with the private sector to provide good quality rented accommodation to meet housing needs. An emphasis on homelessness prevention is resulting in significantly reduced homelessness in the district. The Council has developed a sound approach to ensuring that resources support priorities and can demonstrate efficiency gains. Effective partnership working is adding value in delivering housing strategic services.

- 131 However, many aspects of the service are not customer focussed with limited opportunities to access services outside normal working hours and there is little use of customer feedback to improve services. The Corporate approach to diversity is weak, there is limited monitoring of services by diverse needs and the Council cannot demonstrate that it delivers its services equitably to all groups. Customers requiring adaptations to their homes through the DFG service wait an unacceptably long time to receive the work. The strategic approach is not yet sufficiently embedded to be delivering tangible outcomes, with low numbers of affordable homes delivered and limited impact on improving conditions in the private sector to increase the level of decent homes for vulnerable households. The Council remains reliant on Bed and Breakfast in the first instance to provide temporary accommodation for homeless families, and there is little analysis of performance information on homelessness presentations and acceptances to effectively show the impact of its homelessness prevention services on reducing homelessness in the district. The Council's approach to procurement and delivering value for money in underdeveloped.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 132 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The Council is delivering a significantly improved housing options service, which is positively benefiting customers and with improved performance in reducing homelessness in the district. However, the Council cannot show a consistent track record in delivering improvement across all of the strategic housing services. Some areas are only just beginning to show improvements with few tangible outcomes for customers to date and limited improvement in performance.
- 133 The Council can show that it has delivered a number of improvements to services that are resulting in positive benefits for customers. The focus on preventing homelessness has a well established strategic framework and has led to a number of improvements including:
- improved access to information and housing advice;
 - proactive help for households to find private sector accommodation; and
 - supporting vulnerable customers through tenancy support and the 'Safe as Houses' scheme.

These improvements are delivering a better service to customers and are proving effective in reducing homelessness in the district.

- 134 However, delivering service improvements in some areas has been slow. Little progress has been made to ensure that the diverse needs of customers are identified and addressed, and plans to improve diversity at a corporate level have not been implemented on time, impacting on the ability of the strategic housing service to move forward. The proactive approach to improving the conditions of homes in the private sector is in its early stages and is not yet resulting in improved services for customers. The Housing Strategy has not yet achieved 'Fit for Purpose'.
- 135 Progress against delivering improvement actions in strategies and plans is generally sound. Most of the actions in the previous housing strategy have been achieved, although some only partially. Steady progress is also being made against the Service Improvement Plan for Strategic Housing Services for 2006/07. This is resulting in a number of improvements such as a wider range of up to date information leaflets, as well as actions to underpin further service improvements such as securing resources to support the service.

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- 136 Performance has improved across a number of key service areas but the Council cannot show consistent and sustained improvement in performance across the service. Significant improvement has been achieved in reducing homelessness acceptances with year on year reductions since 2004/05, and improved decision making time. The use of B&B accommodation was remaining stable but has reduced this year to date, although is well short of top performing authorities. Performance in returning empty homes to use is also improving. However, waiting times for customers for adaptations to their homes is only recently improving and still represents poor performance. The number of affordable homes delivered is only starting to increase and will not meet the target set for this year.
- 137 The process for collecting and analysing customer satisfaction levels is not sufficiently robust to show any trends. The Council cannot therefore relate changes in satisfaction levels to any improvements made to services.
- 138 The Council does not have sufficient information to demonstrate that it has delivered and is sustaining value for money over time. However, it is clear that value for money has been taken into account in delivering a number of services such as the arrangements with the Home Improvement Agency, reducing the costs of B&B accommodation and seeking other forms of temporary accommodation.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 139 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The performance management framework is not being effectively used to manage all areas of performance and ensure poor performance is tackled in a systematic way. Improvement planning is not sufficiently comprehensive and is not yet being informed by customer feedback and learning through comparison of services with others. However, there are clear priorities for the strategic housing service, supported by a sound service planning framework. Improvement plans address areas of weakness, and are aimed at improving services and performance in key service areas.
- 140 The Council has developed a clear vision and strategic priorities for the strategic housing service. These are linked to the corporate priorities which in turn reflect the Community Plan. There is clear direction for the service supported by a strategic framework which has enabled a better understanding of the strategic housing role and a commitment to deliver it. Members are clear about the Council's strategic housing functions and the aims to deliver more affordable housing and providing decent homes for vulnerable households. This clarity has strengthened leadership of the service.

- 141** The delivery of the strategic housing priorities is supported by a sound framework for service planning which enables the priorities to be cascaded down through the organisation. The strategic housing service produces a business plan, which is updated annually, and identifies the improvement priorities for the service and how they contribute to the wider corporate objectives. The improvement priorities are developed into improvement actions as part of the annual service improvement plan, which are translated into work plans and feed into the appraisal system for individual staff members. In this way staff are clear about their individual roles and responsibilities and how these contribute to the organisation's goals.
- 142** Improvement plans address areas of weakness and provide a firm foundation for improving the service. The improvement plan for 2006/07 is clearly set out detailing responsible officers and time scales, but is not fully SMART as it does not clearly identify the resources needed to deliver the actions. The improvement actions have been developed to enable the delivery of the business plan priorities, and have also been identified through an assessment of the service against the Audit Commission's Key Lines of Enquiries (KLOEs). The Improvements planned address service weaknesses and include actions to continue to tackle priorities, such as reducing homelessness and improving the number of decent homes in the private sector for vulnerable households. However, the development of improvement plans is not yet benefiting from customer feedback and comparison of services with others. The Council recognises this and is including these areas as improvement priorities for the 2007/08.
- 143** The housing strategy action plan forms a sound and comprehensive improvement plan for the service for 2007/08 onwards, and continues to address the key areas for improvement. The plan was in draft at the time of inspection but brings together the actions from the various strategies capturing them in a systematic way in a comprehensive document. The plan is being developed as SMART, including identifying the resources needed to implement the plan. Improvements identified include implementing the pilot scheme for the area based approach to renewal in the private sector and agreeing options to reduce the use of temporary accommodation. The action plan will be reviewed annually and monitored by the Strategic Housing Group and the Select Committee for Housing and Social Inclusion, which includes stakeholders.
- 144** The Council is effectively using its business planning process to improve value for money and deliver efficiency gains in the future. Managers are expected to identify value for money issues and ways of addressing these as part of the development of the service business plan. From this year the process is being strengthened with each of the council's services subject to review and challenge by peer managers, senior managers and Members. Service managers are expected to identify the costs of their services and compare them against a family group of comparator authorities. Two service areas have been assessed and strategic housing will be reviewed in 2007/08. The Council intends that this process will enable it to gain a realistic and robust assessment of whether services offer value for money.

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- 145 Value for money will also be addressed over the next two years through business process re-engineering. This is running alongside the corporate approach to improve access to services through the development of the CRM system. As part of the process to split the front and back office functions more effectively each service area will be subjected to process re-engineering aimed at delivering it in the most effective way.
- 146 The performance management arrangements are not being effectively used to manage all aspects of performance. The framework for monitoring and managing performance is sound but the arrangements for ensuring this is effectively used are not sufficiently robust. Key performance indicators are selected for monitoring by particular groups within the Council. There are monthly performance reports to the Directors' Management Team, and quarterly reports to the Scrutiny Committee and Cabinet. Explanations are required, and if necessary an action plan, for areas which are not performing well or meeting targets as expected. For strategic housing, the performance indicators reported are the time spent in bed and breakfast and the time taken to process homelessness decisions. Other areas of service such as affordable housing delivery, the key priority for the service, and the delivery of the adaptations service which performs poorly, are not part of this formal reporting framework. This means that Members and the Directors' Management Team may not be aware of performance in key areas of service.
- 147 The performance management arrangements at a service level are not adequately supporting the performance management framework to effectively manage performance. Performance information against a more comprehensive range of indicators is monitored at a service level. This includes BVPIs and local performance indicators, such as the number of affordable homes delivered and spend against the disabled facilities grants budget. Performance is updated quarterly although some indicators are collected annually. Performance is discussed by service managers at team and one to one meetings but there is no formal exception reporting to identify areas of concern and escalate these as appropriate. The two performance indicators identified above seem unlikely to meet their target by year end but will not necessarily be subject to scrutiny through the performance management framework. The Council cannot therefore be confident that it is meeting its objectives in its priority areas.
- 148 The Council's approach to tackling poor performance is not systematic. For example, the use of B&B is monitored at senior management and Member level and overspend against the budget was a serious concern during 2005/06. Action has been taken and the budget tightly monitored resulting in the expenditure being brought under control and within budget. Action has also been taken to improve waiting times and the delivery of the disabled facilities grants service. However, the performance of this service has been weak for some time and the Council only started to effectively address this last summer. Although this service is now showing improved performance it remains weak, and the performance management framework did not operate effectively to address the issues in a timelier manner. This means that the performance management framework is not being maximised in supporting the continuous improvement of services.

- 149 There are arrangements that support performance management in addition to the performance reporting framework. The strategic housing group considers performance on affordable housing, and the work of this group is reported to the Directors Management Team. Service business plans presented to Directors and Members include performance information and Select Committees looking at specific areas of policy consider performance. Portfolio Holders are also starting to take greater responsibility for performance, receiving and considering reports and taking summary reports to Cabinet where necessary. Affordable housing delivery is monitored by Members through the Annual Monitoring Report which covers all development activities. In these ways the Council increases its understanding of how it is performing to support its performance management framework.
- 150 There are sound arrangements for managing budgets. Service managers are responsible for their budgets supported by the service accountant. Monthly budget reports are produced, along with exception reports which flag up any areas that need to be addressed. High risk budgets are monitored at a corporate level. The capital budget is monitored by the Capital Programme Monitoring Group. However, despite these arrangements there has been underspend against the disabled facilities grants budget in recent years, with the remedial action needed to tackle this only recently taken.
- 151 The arrangements for managing risk have been strengthened with strategic and operational risk registers in place, and action plans developed to minimise risks. A reporting framework is being developed with monitoring by the Directors Management Team, Audit and Governance Committee and Cabinet.
- 152 The Council recognises the value of learning from its own experience and from others. It has used its experience of developing shared ownership schemes to tailor these more appropriately to meet the changing needs of the district. It also works with others to share expertise and seek advice. However, there is not a systematic approach to learning from customer feedback and other performance information to inform and support service improvements.
- 153 The Council is self aware of its own weaknesses and where it needs to improve. The self assessment completed for this inspection provided an honest assessment of the service and identified the areas needing improvement. The Council is keen to learn from external views and acts upon reports, such as those from internal audit, to make service improvements.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 154 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. Resources have been identified to support the delivery of the strategic housing priorities. The capacity to deliver improved services has been strengthened through restructuring and the refocusing of services, and partnerships are effectively used to increase the capacity to deliver and improve services. However, the Council has not robustly assessed whether it has sufficient capacity to deliver service improvements or evaluated the impact of partnership working to increase capacity and add value. The approach to training and development is not sufficiently systematic to ensure that capacity is being effectively maximised.

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- 155 The Council has sought to ensure that the resources are in place to deliver the strategic housing services. Resources are aligned to priorities through its 'Delivering Change' approach and have been allocated to strategic housing in accordance with this. For the period 2007-2013 the Council has agreed that £3.902 million will be made available from its capital programme for strategic housing services. This is divided between affordable housing, private sector renewal, disabled facilities grants and home security grants. Further potential resources are available through the selective sale of its own housing stock and land, in addition to any Right to Buy receipts.
- 156 The Council has also successfully attracted external funding to deliver services. There is funding of just under £200,000 for decent homes for vulnerable households and to deal with housing conditions on the ex coalfields estates. Bids to the Housing Corporation's Approved Development Programme have resulted in £6.371 million for affordable housing in the district for 2006-2008. The Council's Supplementary Planning Document once adopted will enable increased affordable housing provision through section 106 Agreements. The resources in place or secured will allow the Council to adopt its area based renewal approach in the private sector and support improved delivery of affordable housing. The Council's projections for affordable housing based on the resources available and an assessment of sites at various stages of development suggest that the target of 100 new affordable homes a year will be met from 2007/08 onwards.
- 157 The Council has increased its capacity to deliver an improved strategic housing service through restructuring and refocusing the service. Over the last two years the strategic housing functions have been brought together under a dedicated service manager, and positioned within the Regeneration and Planning Service to achieve a clear co-ordinated approach. The private sector team have been developed to form two teams with one focusing on proactive work to enable the strategic approach to area based renewal to be delivered. The service is now in a stronger position to deliver improved services.
- 158 The Council has taken action to address capacity difficulties in the private sector service. Limited capacity in the private sector team due to recruitment difficulties has meant slow progress in moving from a reactive to a proactive service. External management support was brought in to support the private sector team in July 2006 which has resulted in the service being strengthened and redirected. However, despite several attempts, it has not proved possible to recruit the appropriate skills at management level on a permanent basis. The Council is therefore transferring the operational aspects of the service to the Environmental Health Service where appropriate management arrangements can be put in place as part of delivering the wider service. The strategic function of the service will remain with the strategic housing service.

- 159** Capacity to deliver the service and future improvements is limited with some services and posts reliant on external funding sources. The Council recognises this as a risk but is committed to its strategic approach which clearly sets out the support needed if the priorities are to be delivered. The appointment to the new post of temporary accommodation officer shows that the Council is prepared to make resources available to deliver improved services. However, if posts currently dependant on external funding require mainstreaming the Council faces difficult decisions and in the meantime there is uncertainty for the service, and in particular for staff whose posts are funded in this way.
- 160** The Council has not robustly assessed the capacity it needs to deliver the service, or whether it is making best use of its existing capacity. The value for money exercises and the business process re-engineering planned across the Council will assist with such an assessment. However, currently it is difficult for the Council to judge if the capacity is in place to effectively deliver some of the improvements, especially where these potentially result in increased workloads such as the expansion in delivering affordable housing schemes.
- 161** The Council works well with partners to increase its capacity to deliver the strategic housing service. Partners are supporting the delivery of services and adding value across a range of areas including the private sector grants service, through the Home Improvement Agency, working in the private sector to increase access to rented accommodation and joint working to provide an effective response to victims of domestic violence. External funding for energy efficiency work has also been secured through the Home Improvement Agency.
- 162** Partnership working is embedded in the organisation and supported by the Council's Partnership Development Unit which brings together officers from external services such as the Police and the Health Service to work as a team. This provides support to strategic housing services in a number of ways including assisting with the research base and delivering home security improvements through the grants system. The Council has been awarded beacon status for its partnership working. However, although clearly adding value the Council has not evaluated the outcomes from partnership working to demonstrate the added value and additional capacity they bring to delivering services.
- 163** Joint working with other councils is also increasing capacity through the sharing of tasks and expertise. Working across the region in various partnerships is assisting the Council in understanding the housing market, tackling common problems and developing the strategic approach to meeting housing needs.
- 164** There is a range of Human Resources policies which effectively support the capacity of the organisation. Policies are updated as necessary and are reviewed on a cyclical basis. Personal Development Reviews (PDRs) are carried out annually and are monitored centrally to ensure they are completed. Reviews assess performance, set objectives and identify development needs. All 2006 reviews have been carried out.

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- 165** There is an absence management policy based on a staged approach, and the Council offers a range of options to assist employees returning to work, such as phased returns and flexible working. Health activities such as concessionary membership of health clubs are promoted and there is a 'Work Fit Group' looking at sickness prevention initiatives. Sickness levels across the organisation to December 2006 were an average of 11 days, a slight improvement on the previous year, but above the average for district councils at ten days.
- 166** Training is provided to support staff capacity but this is not yet delivered in a comprehensive and strategic way to meet the business needs of the organisation. Training and development needs are identified through the PDR system and co-ordinated through the Human Resources Division to develop appropriate training courses. The training offered is captured in an annually updated training directory which is available to all staff. Corporate training is provided for areas such as customer care which 84 per cent of employees attended last year. Service areas have their own budgetary provision and strategic housing staff have most recently received training on the new legal duties and powers in the private sector, and also Shelter homelessness training. However, there is not a proactive approach to developing training plans to support service areas.
- 167** The approach to training is being strengthened through partnership working across the county. Following a successful bid for capacity building funding, work has started to build a competency framework along with a management development strategy with training focussing on areas such as leadership aimed at both Members and managers.
- 168** Communication within the organisation has been strengthened. Annual staff surveys are carried out and the findings are considered by Directors and wider management teams. Where issues of concern are identified, such as communication, actions are taken. The Chief Executive holds briefing sessions for all staff on key issues and monthly core briefs are prepared for presentation at team meetings. The approach to developing training around management development and leadership was also informed by feedback in the staff survey.

Summary

- 169** We have assessed that the Council has 'uncertain prospects' for improvement.
- 170** The Council cannot show a sustained track record in delivering improvement across all of the strategic housing services, with few tangible outcomes for customers to date in some areas. The performance management framework is not being effectively used to manage all areas of performance and ensure that targets are met and poor performance is tackled in a systematic way. Improvement planning is not sufficiently comprehensive and is not yet being informed by customer feedback and learning through comparison of services with others. The Council has not robustly assessed whether it has sufficient capacity to deliver service improvements or evaluated the impact of partnership working to increase capacity and add value. The approach to training and development is not sufficiently systematic to ensure that capacity is effectively maximised.

- 171** However, the Council is delivering a significantly improved housing options service, which is positively benefiting customers and reducing homelessness in the district. There are clear priorities for the strategic housing service, supported by a sound service planning framework, and improvement plans address areas of weakness and are aimed at improving services and performance in key service areas. Resources have been identified to support the delivery of the strategic housing priorities and the capacity to deliver improved services has been strengthened through restructuring and the refocusing of services. Partnerships are effectively used to increase the capacity to deliver and improve services.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 1 Best value performance indicators

Performance indicator	All England top quartile 2005/06	Cannock Chase 2003/04	Cannock Chase 2004/05	Cannock Chase 2005/06
Affordable housing completions or acquisitions per 1,000 dwellings (HIP)	2.4%	N/A	N/A	0.7%
BVPI 64 Vacant private homes returned to use or demolished	77	2.0	14	21
BVPI 183a Average length of stay in B&B in weeks	1 week	5.5 weeks	5 weeks (36.47) days	6 weeks (44.69) days
BVPI 183b Average length of stay in hostels in weeks	0	6.3 weeks	7 weeks (50) days	0
BVPI 202 Number of people sleeping rough	0	N/A	N/A	0
BVPI 203 Percentage change in average number of families in TA	-16%	NA	-7.7%	-25%
BVPI 213 Number of households where homelessness is prevented per 1,000 population	5	N/A	N/A	2.57
BVPI 214 Proportion of households accepted as homeless who were accepted as homeless within the last two years	0.32%	N/A	N/A	2.88%

Source: Audit Commission audited figures

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 group of partner agencies;
 - visits to development sites;
 - review of councils website and leaflets; and
 - interviews with staff, councillors and partners.

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)

Assisting households find accommodation in the private sector

- 1 The Council is proactive in assisting households find rented accommodation in the private sector. The Housing Advice Centre maintains a private rented property register which is used by a number of landlords in the district. Thirty three households successfully found accommodation through this route in 2006/07.

Ensuring shared ownership schemes are affordable to local people in housing need

- 2 The Council takes a proactive approach to ensure that shared ownership properties are affordable to local people in housing need. Where a scheme is being developed it uses local income data to guide prices, requires equity shares to be flexible and scrutinises service charges. It has agreed arrangements with RSL partners to use its own resources to further subsidise schemes to ensure they meet local housing needs.