

Inspection report

April 2005



Housing Services

Wychavon District Council

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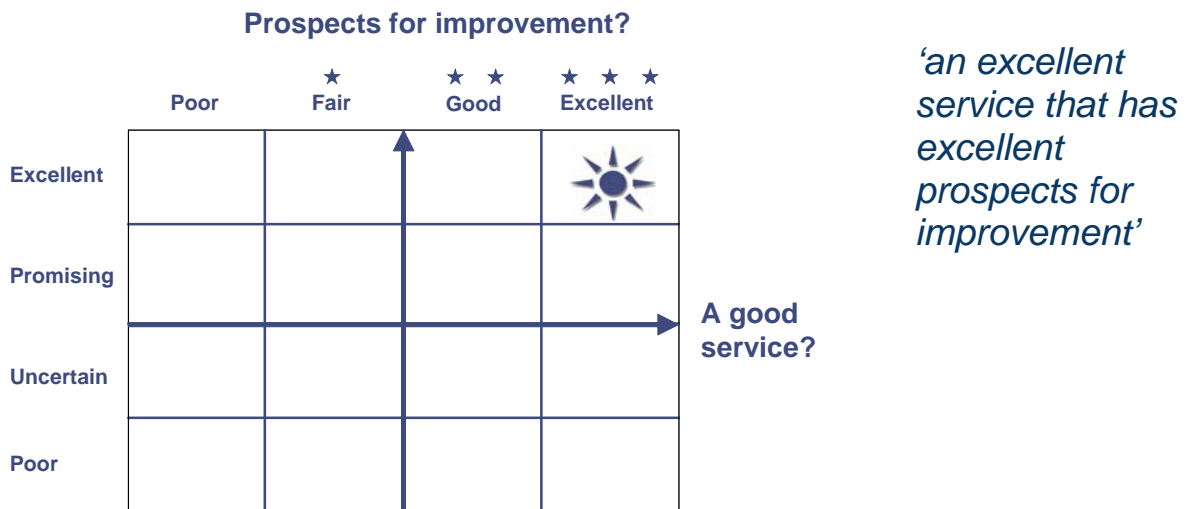
Summary (LA)

- 1 Wychavon District Council is a district council in Worcestershire. The population is just over 113,000, of which 1.2 per cent are from minority ethnic communities.
- 2 The Council is Conservative-led with 31 of the 45 seats.
- 3 The Council employs just over 300 staff across all services.
- 4 The inspection included Housing Strategy and enabling, homelessness and housing advice, and private sector housing activities. In line with Audit Commission housing inspection methodology over-arching areas of access and customer care, diversity and value for money are also included.

Scoring the service

- 5 We have assessed Wychavon District Council as providing an ‘excellent’, three-star service that has excellent prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Scoring chart¹: [Wychavon District Council – Housing Services]



- 6 The housing service is **excellent** because:
- ◆ WDC has high quality Community Contact Centres in each of the three major towns in the district, with extended hours, including Sunday opening at Evesham;
 - ◆ service standards are in place, which are monitored and current performance is better than target;
 - ◆ all public buildings have been audited for Disability Discrimination Act purposes, and all buildings are fully accessible;
 - ◆ welfare benefits and money advice service has levered in over £1 million of extra benefits for vulnerable people in Wychavon;
 - ◆ there is an effective over-arching Housing Strategy in place, based on recently acquired data on housing in Wychavon. The strategy has been assessed as ‘Fit for Purpose’ by the Government Office;
 - ◆ comprehensive baseline information on housing needs and the condition of the housing stock is available following survey work carried out in 2004;
 - ◆ WDC has met its promise to achieve 1,00 additional affordable housing units since stock transfer in 1994;
 - ◆ effective website in place, with good quality information on housing services, application forms and strategic documents;
 - ◆ partnership working has enabled social housing to be developed that is an inclusive element of new, larger developments;

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.

- ◆ WDC has a good understanding and response to the needs of the traveller and gypsy communities;
- ◆ expenditure on Disabled Facilities Grants has increased with quick decisions being made and quick installation;
- ◆ the Council is in the top quartile on housing benefits performance with a responsive, effective and innovative service being provided;
- ◆ the Council's spend to save budget is helping to provide an holistic, person-centred service to homeless people;
- ◆ special information packs being provided to vulnerable people, enabling them to be effectively signposted to sources if advice, help and support;
- ◆ quality furnished temporary accommodation is provided, with high levels of contact and support being provided;
- ◆ the Council is minimising the use of Bed and breakfast accommodation with no family being in B&B for longer than six weeks, since April 2004;
- ◆ there is highly effective work taking place to prevent homelessness;
- ◆ homelessness decision-making is quick, accurate and well monitored;
- ◆ good use being made of customer surveys, that show satisfaction levels with the DFG service and for users of the homelessness service is high; and
- ◆ the use of modern technology with document imaging is making the service much more responsive for customers.

7 However, there are a number of weakness to be addressed, including:

- ◆ there is poor signage on some of the Council's public buildings and homelessness emergency telephone numbers are not displayed on the outside of Community Contact Centres;
- ◆ limited use of benchmarking to demonstrate that services provide effective value for money;
- ◆ there is a lack of awareness about the extent of rough sleeping in the District and actions to address this; and
- ◆ action plans for bringing empty, or unfit private sector properties back into use have yet to deliver significant improvements that residents, or potential service users, would recognise;

8 We judge that the services provided by Wychavon District Council have **excellent** prospects for delivering further service improvements because:

- ◆ the Council has responded effectively to previous inspections to bring about discernible service user benefits;
- ◆ the pace of change and improvement has been rapid and sustained;
- ◆ there is greater ownership and prominence of housing services within the Council than historically;
- ◆ effective learning from others has taken place, which has contributed to improved services;
- ◆ there is strengthened managerial and staff capacity and resources;
- ◆ positive working relationships with key external partners;

- ◆ plans are generally good;
- ◆ low staff turnover, with well trained, experienced and motivated staff in post;
- ◆ good IT systems support service delivery;
- ◆ sound performance and financial frameworks; and
- ◆ clear leadership and support to staff.

9 However, we identified the following weaknesses in relation to the prospects for improvement:

- ◆ some plans lack clear and stretching targets, accountable officers and milestones;
- ◆ there is some lack of co-ordination in involving the voluntary sector in policy and strategic development; and
- ◆ plans and actions for the private sector are not sufficiently challenging, and strategic documents are not fully co-ordinated in this area.

Recommendations

- 10 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. In this context, the inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Access and customer care

- ◆ Improve signage to the Civic Centre and Community Contact Centres by August 2005.
- ◆ Ensure that by June 2005 all Community Contact Centres have an emergency telephone number displayed for homelessness.

Diversity

- ◆ Ensure that all council information leaflets contain consistent straplines to the availability of information in other languages and formats (by October 2005).

Value for money

- ◆ Develop a clear strategy for achieving value for money across all housing services. Make increased use of benchmarking across the service, and ensure that service plans and strategies are more focused on value for money considerations (by October 2005).

Strategy and enabling

- ◆ Produce and publicise a Housing advice strategy by October 2005.
- ◆ Decide the means by which the knowledge about, and extent of rough sleeping can be improved, and review the Housing Strategy to ensure that appropriate actions are put into place (by October 2005).
- ◆ Audit how the Council currently interacts with the voluntary sector, review where gaps may exist and set an action plan in place to improve contact, awareness and communications (by October 2005).

Homelessness and housing advice

- ◆ Ensure that the use of bed and breakfast accommodation is minimised by increasing the availability of temporary accommodation where necessary.
- ◆ Consider the use of alternative sources of housing for those in need, for example, private sector leasing or assisted tenancy schemes (by January 2006).
- ◆ Ensure that external partners working with vulnerable people are aware of the 'spend to save' budget for those threatened by homelessness, and ensure that the budget is used consistently (by October 2005).

Private sector housing

- ◆ Set more challenging targets for private sector housing activities by June 2005.
- ◆ Complete visits to all high risk Houses in Multiple Occupation by January 2006.
- ◆ Revisit the Private Sector Housing Strategy and ensure that targets and actions are consistent with other plans and strategies (by October 2005).

General

- ◆ Address all other weaknesses in this report.
 - ◆ Ensure that this report is submitted to the Board of the Council, setting out proposals for addressing the weaknesses contained within it (by June 2005).
- 11 We would like to thank the staff of Wychavon District Council, particularly, Fiona Narburgh, Maureen Cook, Kath Smith, Gay Lloyd and Elaine Salter, who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

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Report

Context (LA)

- 12 This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission (the Commission) following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

The locality

- 13 Wychavon District Council is in the south east corner of Worcestershire and with an area of 66,300 hectares it is the largest district council in the County. The population of the area is just over 113,000, living in 49,000 households. 1.2 per cent of the population are from minority ethnic communities which is below national and county levels with the main ethnic groups being travellers/gypsies and migrant workers.
- 14 Employment is mainly in the automotive, distribution, food and public service sectors. The proportion of the population in older age groups is increasing and the district has the second highest population of over-65-year-olds in the County. Unemployment stands at 1.4 per cent which is below the national average. Wychavon has a low level of deprivation being in the bottom third of deprived local authorities, with the highest level of deprivation occurring in the northern area of the district in Droitwich.
- 15 All council housing transferred through Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) to two Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) in 1994. There are around 49,500 dwellings in the district with 7097 (14.3 per cent) owned by RSLs.
- 16 There are fewer properties in council tax bands A and B, and more properties in bands E to H than the regional or national average. House prices have risen considerably in the last few years with key issues of affordability and a general lack of affordable housing in rural areas being prominent.

The Council

- 17 The Council comprises 45 councillors. The Conservative Party has control. Currently, a Leader and Cabinet govern the business of the Council.
- 18 The long-term vision for Wychavon is of:

'Healthy, safe, vibrant and diverse communities living in a clean and green environment'.

- 19 The Council's priorities as identified in its five-year strategy 'Wychavon's Way Ahead 2003/08' are:
- ◆ aspire to be excellent;
 - ◆ healthy and safe communities with a good quality environment; and
 - ◆ reaching out to everyone.
- 20 The Council was assessed as being 'good' through the Comprehensive Performance Assessment process in March 2004, with housing being identified as the principle areas of weakness.

The service

- 21 The service under review consists of Housing Strategy and enabling, homelessness, housing needs and advice, and private sector housing activities.
- 22 There were 2635 households on the housing register at 1 April 2004. This figure has remained roughly static for the last four years. There is a common housing register in place, with a pilot choice-based lettings scheme in operation in the north of the District. There are very few difficult to let properties.
- 23 One-hundred and eighty-eight households were accepted as homeless and in priority need in 2003/04. This has increased from a figure of 117 in the previous year.
- 24 Overall the housing stock is more modern than the national average with 54 per cent having been built after 1964 (40 per cent nationally) and with higher percentages of detached and semi-detached properties. Overall unfitness levels are lower than national averages.
- 25 The average SAP rating in the district is 50 – just below the national average. Across all tenures around 21 per cent of the housing stock does not meet the Decent Homes Standard. The main reasons for non-decency is poor thermal efficiency – however, private sector properties already meet the Governments DHS target of 70 per cent decency by 2010 for vulnerable households. The total cost to make all dwellings decent within the district is estimated at £35 million or an average of £3,400 per dwelling.
- 26 There are a substantial number of identified Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) in the district – latest figures show there to be 347 HMOs.
- 27 One-hundred and three mandatory Disabled Facilities Grants were completed in 2003/04, with a total expenditure of £393,000.

How good is the service?

Access and customer care

- 28 The Council displays clear and consistent leadership in the provision of customer-focused housing services. There are high quality Community Contact Centres (CCC) in each of the main centres of population – Evesham, Droitwich and Pershore – and the distance that any resident of the district would have to travel to their nearest CCC is short, thereby making contact and accessing council services quick and convenient.
- 29 Council services are made accessible by the commitment to having extended opening hours, that include evenings and weekends, and opening times are displayed on the outside of all public buildings. Residents who work a standard Monday to Friday week, can therefore still access council services at times convenient to them.
- 30 There is a commitment to provide convenient services. Weekly housing specific surgeries are held at CCCs, and any service users who cannot attend either the Civic Centre or the CCCs will be visited at home. On average, 12 service users covering the entire range of housing services, have been visited at home each week since April 2004.
- 31 The CCCs provide high quality points of access for a complete range of council services. They are all wheelchair accessible, all have automatic opening doors, have hearing induction loops, have translation service posters displayed and can all provide leaflets in Braille, large print or audiocassette. Confidential interview facilities are provided at all CCCs. All offices have interview rooms which are accessible to wheelchair users or people with pushchairs. All CCCs have clean public toilets that are accessible to people with disabilities and wheelchair users. All offices have a small selection of children's toys. When we visited the CCCs there were no queues and visitors were being seen immediately. Having good facilities and adequate staffing levels ensure that customers are seen quickly and conveniently, and for those in vulnerable circumstances can make the need to access support services from the Council less traumatic.
- 32 The CCCs provide an opportunity for residents to obtain 'joined-up' services at one convenient location. For example, the Droitwich CCC provides access to the services of both the District Council and the County Council. In addition, it includes the Citizens Advice Bureau and the Older Persons Forum is located in the same building. Reception staff deal with customer enquiries regardless of their nature or the organisation to which they relate. Monitoring figures show that over 80 per cent of all enquiries are dealt with by the first point of contact. Payment facilities are also located with CCCs and customers are provided with a wide range of payment methods including cash, cheque, credit and debit cards. Similar facilities are provided at the Evesham CCC. This is a one-stop shop which includes Wychavon District Council, Worcestershire County Council, Evesham Town Council and West Mercia Constabulary working together in one building. During our inspection we visited all of the CCCs. We found staff to be friendly, helpful and courteous, with frontline reception staff wearing uniforms, and all staff wearing name badges.

- 33 There are some weaknesses in the Council's approach to customer care. Signage on public buildings is not clear in all areas. For example, the signs at the Civic Centre are small and unclear, and the signs for the Droitwich CCC are also not clear and prominent. The out-of-hours telephone number is not clearly shown on the outside of the CCCs – the number is displayed under the title 'Emergency Duty Team' but this could be confusing for homeless customers. In addition, the out-of-hours number is not a freephone telephone number, which could inhibit the speed and ease with which homeless people in crisis need could contact the Council.
- 34 The Council provides a responsive out-of-hours service. This is provided by an external contractor with a duty officer available at all times. We called the out-of-hours service on five random occasions each time the call was answered promptly, within four rings, and politely. Emergency service operatives have received training from Wychavon Housing staff on key housing issues, and monitoring arrangements are in place. A short synopsis of each call received is provided to the Council for monitoring and recording purposes. However, a relatively low number of out-of-hours calls relating to housing are made to the service, with 13 housing service users contacting the service out-of-hours since April 2004.
- 35 The Council provides good quality imaginative and innovative communications material to residents. They have recently won two awards for letting residents know what they get for their money, for example. There are a wide range of leaflets available from CCC's covering all the main areas of housing services.
- 36 However, there is less attention to detail in the provision of leaflets in general, than in corporate communications. There is no common 'housestyle', some leaflets lack straplines on the availability of information in different formats, some are undated, some lack the Council's website address, and some lack basic contact details.
- 37 The Council has an effective website in place, with good quality information about services and the availability of some basic housing related documents to be downloaded, for example, application forms for Disabled Facilities Grant, Private Sector Housing Renewal Grants, and information on the housing register. Strategic documents are also available 'online', for example, the Housing Strategy, Homelessness Strategy, Housing Needs Survey and Stock Condition Survey. Since April 2004 over 74,000 people have visited Wychavon's website. This is making good use of modern technology and communications and it ensures that residents of Wychavon have rapid and convenient access to good quality sources of help, information and signposting to available services.
- 38 The Council makes good use of monitoring arrangements to determine the level of usage of CCCs and other points of contact. For example, the number of users is monitored, and reasons for contact recorded. Service usage is monitored across the whole Council in an effective way, and this enables the Council to shape services to meet the needs of users.
- 39 The Council has made good use of surveys to help shape service delivery. For example, exit surveys are carried out with all homeless service users, and with all users of the DFG service. This survey work has shown that many customers prefer to be contacted by text for example.

- 40 Investment has been made in modern technology to enhance the accessibility of services. The Council has Document Imaging Processing (DIP) software IT systems in place which speeds the processing of documents for both housing and other council services. It is possible, therefore, for customers to take prime documents into any contact point, have them scanned and immediately available to other, more distant council departments. This works particularly well for the common housing register, where the two LSVT RSLs in the area have access to the system and can rapidly share applicant documents with the Council to speed decision-making on allocations.
- 41 The Council has also been innovative in using Document Imaging software for the processing of housing benefits – there is an arrangement in place for HB applicants in Droitwich who can take their documents into an RSL office on the Westlands estate and have them scanned into the Councils' system, thereby preventing the need to travel into one of the CCC's or the Civic Centre.
- 42 The Council makes effective use of modern technology, via its website and Community Contact Centres, to meet Governments' objectives. Wychavon is in the top quartile of English district councils when measured against BVPI 157 – the percentage of e-enabled transactions. In Wychavon 85 per cent of permissible transactions are e-enabled.
- 43 Clear service standards are in place. These are publicly displayed in CCCs and are freely available. The Democratic, Customer Service and Revenues section has been awarded Chartermark, and the Council is currently applying for Corporate Chartermark across all services. The service charter is a clear and useful document. It sets out the standards that customers can expect to receive and what to do if things go wrong. It also contains information on addresses opening times and contact details.
- 44 The Council is performing better than target on response times for letters, telephone calls and emails as set out in the Council's Service Charter.
- ◆ The target for answering letters is seven days – current performance is 4.72 days.
 - ◆ The target for telephone calls is answering within seven rings – current performance is three rings.
 - ◆ The target for emails is three days – current performance is one day.
- 45 There are some innovative approaches to customer care taking place in Wychavon. The Council now makes extensive use of 'texting' as a means of contacting service users – this is proving particularly effective in contacting younger people and people with a mobile lifestyle. Staff have access to SMS messaging services from their own PC workstations, and this is a cost effective way of making contact with customers. It is also being used effectively in housing benefits to chase customers who may be delaying the provision of vital documents to support HB applications, has been used to keep in touch with homeless customers and other vulnerable people.
- 46 Staff are ensuring that people in vulnerable circumstances, or new to the area, are being provided with sufficient information about the availability of support service. This is through the provision of special information packs which are given to victims of domestic violence, single people, new residents and people in temporary accommodation. Included in these packs are benefit forms, voting registration forms, housing forms and information, and information on the nearest schools, doctors, dentists, and post offices. This will enable people in vulnerable circumstances to signpost to other sources of advice, help and support.

'I have seen the information pack that was sent to one of our residents following her application for housing and I felt that I must write and say how impressed I was with it. The pack was extremely practical and informative. Well done to you and your team' – letter from Women's Aid service.

- 47 Staff show a willingness to engage with service users at convenient locations. Since restructuring staff have been enabled to be more pro-active and have initiated a number of new ways of working that have directly impacted on customers. For example, staff are now able to do many more homes visits where these are needed or requested. They are also able to spend more time keeping in touch with customers in temporary accommodation or who are homeless at home.
- 48 The Council has an effective complaints and compliments system in place, relating to both service specific and corporate issues. Leaflets are on display at all CCCs and complaints do not have to be made in writing. Staff at CCCs will assist customers to complete forms or will take details down in writing for them. The Council also has an email address specifically to deal with complaints. Complaints records show them to be handled promptly, with information about complaints being used to influence service delivery for the future.
- 49 The Council has a good approach to ensuring that service users receive a quality service. However, it does not have an over-arching housing advice strategy to bring together all the plans, actions, partners and possible service points together. The Council has not carried out an audit of advice services to determine whether duplication exists. The Council had recognised that this is a gap, and a target to complete this is included in the Housing Strategy – implementation is now scheduled for 2005/06.

Diversity

- 50 The Council has a competent and coherent approach to diversity, social inclusion and the needs of vulnerable people living in the community. It has raised the profile of these issues across services during the last two years. The Council carried out a social inclusion review and used census data and other information to set out priorities, promises and actions for the future. Services are now recording, analysing and monitoring service usage by ethnicity, disability, age and vulnerability. Diversity monitoring is carried out within the housing register data, in the Housing Needs Survey 2004, Parish Needs surveys, the monitoring of RSL allocations, OT referrals, renovation grants data and by maintaining a database for households with high disabled needs. This enables the Council to respond to the changing needs of its communities, and to ensure that service delivery is appropriate for diverse groups of residents.
- 51 All CCCs have the ability to obtain translation for service users for whom English may not be their first language. Council offices display signs promoting the availability of these translation services and have posters in place, that users can point to in order to identify their preferred language. Since April 2004 four service users have used the translation service. The Council provides the quarterly magazine 'The Wychavon Way' (TWM) on cassette to a number of residents with visual impairments. However, not all Council leaflets contain a 'strapline' indicating the availability of translation service, and this may inhibit service users' awareness of this facility.

- 52 The Council has taken a positive approach to providing training on equalities to staff and members. All staff have received equalities recent equalities training in the last two years. A member workshop session on social inclusion was held with members at the end of 2004, to ensure that the development of the Council's five-year strategy development included consideration of the diverse needs of the community.
- 53 Investment to ensure that the diverse needs of the community are met has been made. The Council has recently appointed a Community Outreach Officer. This officer is working to ensure that contact is maintained with community groups, such as youth groups, older people, and people with disabilities.
- 54 The Council is responding to the aging population and the significant numbers of older people and people with disabilities in the district by providing an effective, responsive and rapid Disabled Facilities Grants service. The proportion of the population in older age groups is increasing and the district has the second highest population of over-65-year-olds in the County. Processing times for DFG applications are short and the work is carried out rapidly. The Council has shown a commitment to the needs of people with disabilities in the district by increasing the level of funding available for DFGs over the last four years, and it is complying with ODPM guidance in completing DFGs within six months.
- 55 A key issue in Wychavon is around the provision of services for travellers and gypsies. The Council has handled the tensions presented by these issues well and positively. Due to the traditional agricultural industries around the Vale of Evesham there are significant numbers of travellers and gypsies both settled and moving through the area. This has presented considerable challenges to the District Council, particularly where there has been no previous connection with the district or the more settled traveller communities. The Council has a good working relationship with the County Gypsy Liaison Officer.
- 56 There is a good understanding of the issues at all levels within the Council, and there are both established sites and unauthorised encampments in the district. Many of the tensions around these issues are outside of the Council's ability to resolve – particularly those connected with national legislation and policy. However, the Council has played a prominent role in complying with legislation, in disseminating good and positive practice, and in influencing the national debate in this area. The Council has run workshops at national conferences on the subject, had meetings with national political figures and institutions, and written to Government departments to explain the issues on the ground.
- 57 There is extensive provision for travellers and gypsies in the Wychavon district, with five public sites and numerous private sites with planning permission. The Council has experienced three major problems in the last year with gypsies with little or no previous connections with the area establishing new sites without first obtaining planning permission. In each case, land was acquired and the unauthorised development was carefully planned many weeks in advance.
- 58 The Council lacks a complete picture of the make-up of the traveller and gypsy community both within Wychavon and in the sub-region. This is acknowledged by the Council. It is waiting, however, for national guidance to be published shortly before setting out to improve its baseline information in co-operation with the County Council and neighbouring local authorities.

- 59 The Council has shown a clear commitment to providing services appropriate to the needs of people with disabilities. All public council buildings have had an audit carried out for Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) purposes, and all actions identified by these audits have been implemented to improve disabled services and access. The Council has confirmed that all buildings now meet DDA requirements and this was borne out by our observations and reality checks. This means that the CCCs and the Civic Centre are very accessible and easy to use for people with disabilities. Some staff at CCCs have been trained in 'signing' for those customers with hearing impairments, and staff have had training on the use of 'typetalk'.
- 60 The Council's staff composition broadly reflects the community – there are 4.1 per cent of staff who have self-declared that they have a disability under Disability Discrimination Act definitions. 0.93 per cent of staff consider that they are of black or minority ethnic origins. This information is based on a staff survey carried out in March 2004.
- 61 The Council has complied with the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 and has a Race Equality Scheme in place, and there is regular reporting on progress against the Council's overall approach to Equalities. The Council assesses itself to be at level one of the Local Government Equalities Standard. The Council intends to achieve level two of this standard during 2005, and there is a clear plan in place to ensure that this is achieved. A number of actions to reach level two have already been completed. Work has also been carried out within the Council in conjunction with the County Council Race Equality Officer to extend and improve understanding of diversity issues across the Council.
- 62 The Council could have done more to reach very small numbers of 'hard to reach' groups. For example, although there are now very significant numbers of migrant workers living and working in the District little appears to have been done to ensure that they are aware of the range of council services available. There are significant numbers of Houses in Multiple Occupation where contact with these groups could be established, but the contact of the Council is more in regard to housing conditions rather than establishing a dialogue with difficult to reach groups or minorities. Although some inspections of HMOs have taken place, not all high risk HMOs are scheduled to be inspected until 2007, and this is a missed opportunity to understand the characteristics of this expanding sector of accommodation in Wychavon.

Value for money

- 63 The Council has put value for money issues, and the provision of cost effective services at the heart of its approach to service delivery. WDC are open to alternative ways to deliver services. The Council is not entrenched in considering traditional methods of service delivery but is committed to considering different ways of meeting its objectives and priorities. The Council was one of the first to transfer its council housing through Large Scale Voluntary Stock Transfer (this was done in 1994), has outsourced all 'blue collar' activity (for example, waste management) and has a leisure trust in operations for leisure centres and facilities. It is the lowest staffed local authority in the west midlands per head of population.

- 64 The Council has a comprehensive financial framework in place to manage and monitor performance. There is a five-year financial plan in place which supports the delivery of Council priorities, with an annual budget setting process where adjustments are made, taking into consideration decisions about programme bids from each department and value for money principles. There is financial support for housing issues, ensuring that the Council is matching resources to priorities. For example the ring fencing of Right to Buy receipts and the funds from the sale of Council land for additional affordable housing, and the increase in funding for Disabled Facilities Grants to address the needs of an increasing number of over-65-year-olds in the district.
- 65 There is extensive communication with residents about the value for money aspects of services in Wychavon. Comprehensive information is provided and the Council makes use of a statistical consultation process – where face-to-face interviews take place where residents are asked to make choices between priorities – to judge what level of service residents would like to see provided. In 04/05 a representative sample of 400 residents were asked a series of questions involving choices on the provision of different levels of service provision. The results were used to inform future spending priorities.
- 66 The Council has a good track record of providing quality information to the public on costs and benefits. The Council has won two recent awards from CIPFA and the LGA on the quality and clarity of financial information being provided to residents.
- 67 The Council has improved housing services in an effective way whilst ensuring that value for money principles were being achieved and maintained. The criticism that housing services attracted during the Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) process in 2003 led the Council to closely scrutinise the way in which housing services were being delivered. The profile of these services was raised and included within the Council's overall priorities. In order to address underperformance the Council has invested in a priority area and increased both financial and non-financial capacity.
- 68 Additional funds were allocated to the service with the management and capacity of the service being strengthened. At the same time, however, the service has made some considerable efficiency and cost savings, for example, in expenditure on bed and breakfast accommodation, and in the use of modern technology to save staff time and speed up processing of housing benefit, homelessness and housing nominations.
- 69 The improvements that we have seen in the service over the last two years have been achieved without the use of potentially expensive external consultants. Staff input has been integral in looking at positive practice from elsewhere and implementing this within Council improvement plans. Staff have made visits to Beacon councils and have made good use of sources of information on best practice being achieved in other local authorities.
- 70 The Council has shown a willingness to provide funding to external bodies to help meet Council priorities. For example, it provides funding to the Citizens Advice Bureau and the Care and Repair service operating in Worcestershire. In addition, a number of relevant services are co-located in the Civic Centre. This has been done to enhance communications and effectiveness, for example, having Care and Repair located in the Civic Centre enables a joined-up approach to the needs of older people and people with disabilities.

- 71 There has been strategic and proactive investment into the provision of a Welfare Benefits and Money Advice service which has levered in additional resources for vulnerable residents in the District. Almost £1 million of additional benefits has been received by residents since April 2004. However, this service is under pressure with some residents and users having to wait a number of weeks to make an appointment with the advisor.
- 72 The approach to achieving good value for money by the Council was confirmed by external partners and stakeholders who told us that the Council regularly and consistently challenged them on value for money issues. The Council is effective in scrutinising partners and stakeholders in terms of their performance, costs and service achievements. For example, regular meetings take place with Wychavon Care and Repair looking at performance, costs and benefits.
- 73 The Council is part of the centre for excellence in procurement in Worcestershire and the Council is currently exploring opportunities to improve procurement of equipment for DFGs. There has been some use of recyclable ramps to provide access to residents homes, the Council supports a local organisation, Roundabout, in the supply of recycled furniture to those in temporary accommodation or other vulnerable people.
- 74 Not all of the Council's housing service plans and strategies have a focus on achieving and providing a value for money service. Although detailed financial information is provided through the Council's financial performance management system managers have yet to thoroughly set out targets to achieve a cost-effective service. There is little cost/benefit analysis undertaken within the Housing Strategy or the latest service plan, and this will inhibit effective monitoring of the service from a value for money perspective.
- 75 Whilst there has been some collection of benchmarking from external sources such as the Housing Quality Network (HQN), and HACAS Chapman Hendy, information is not yet available for all services. The information that is available has yet to be fully incorporated into plans and strategies to ensure that value for money is being achieved. There is limited evidence of benchmarking on costs and benefits in the service inspected here. There is financial monitoring taking place across the services, but little comparison is evident with other providers of similar services. This restricts the Council's ability to determine whether value for money is being achieved in housing services.

Strategy and enabling

- 76 The Council has an effective Housing Strategy in place that provides an over-arching review of housing related issues and sets out the Council's housing objectives, priorities and contains a clear action plan. The Council has worked pro-actively to improve the quality of its strategic housing plans over the last year, and has achieved 'Fit for Purpose' status for its Housing Strategy from the Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM) in November 2004, being the first local authority in West Mercia to do so.
- 77 The Housing Strategy has been summarised into a simple, easy to read format, and sent to users and residents. This sets out key statistics, the Council's priorities and some examples of progress to date. This will enable residents of Wychavon to understand the key issues facing housing services in Wychavon, and how the Council intends to address them.

- 78 The Council has set five key priorities within the strategy. They are:
- ◆ meeting affordable housing need;
 - ◆ promote housing in rural areas;
 - ◆ better choice and quality of existing housing;
 - ◆ reducing homelessness; and
 - ◆ reaching out to everyone in housing need.
- 79 The Housing Strategy and other plans and strategies contain robust up-to-date housing needs and stock condition data. A Housing Needs Survey was carried out by external consultant in 2001 and this data was updated in 2004 following ODPM guidance and definitions. The housing needs information is comprehensive and takes account of the local housing market, house prices, rent levels, census information, affordability, overall housing need, and stock condition across all tenures. The analysis carried out has analysed and assessed inward migration patterns, homelessness levels, employment and wage levels and the housing register.
- 80 Close working at a regional and sub-regional level has been taking place with the Council playing an effective role in influencing the new Regional Housing Strategy. For example, the Council has been working with the County Council Research unit to share Geographical Information Systems (GIS) information mapped across the county area. This data has identified 'travel to work' and 'local labour market' areas and the impact on the local housing market.
- 81 There is good information available to the Council in setting out its Housing Strategy in regard to the condition of the housing stock across all tenures. WDC has a statutory duty to undertake an annual assessment of housing conditions and a Private Sector Housing Stock Condition Survey was carried out by external consultants in 2004. The Council has plans to carry out a rolling programme to update this baseline information on an annual basis. The survey has included Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs). The stock condition information shows that the housing stock is more modern, with a lower level of unfitness than national averages.
- 82 The Housing Strategy has a clear action plan which is SMART. The strategy sets out the Council's priorities, goals, promises, who is responsible for achieving these, and when by. The strategy clearly sets out the cost estimates to achieve priorities, which partners are involved and what the strategic links are.
- 83 There are good, clear links between plans and strategies relating to housing. Actions are co-ordinated between plans, with clear reference to dates, responsibilities, cost estimates, strategic links and the roles of partners in delivering objectives and priorities.
- 84 The Council has met promises made at the time of stock transfer in 1994. The Council has, with the assistance of partners, achieved the target of 1,000 additional affordable homes within ten years of the Large Scale Voluntary Stock Transfer.

- 85 The Council has effectively consulted with the residents and stakeholders during the development of the Housing Strategy. There is clear evidence that a wide range of views were taken into consideration as the Housing Strategy was formulated. Feedback from this consultation was used to help shape the final document – for example, additional measures were included aiming to improve the energy efficiency of the private sector, measures to ensure that people with disabilities could be matched effectively with suitably adapted properties and that greater account needed to be taken of the needs and aspirations of older people. These issues have been incorporated into the final document.
- 86 The Council has effectively considered the resource implications of the Housing Strategy. It has demonstrated how it has prioritised strategic direction and how this links to the allocation of resources. For example, the ring fencing of any right to buy receipts over and above the assumed amount in the Council's base budget for use by housing services. The Council has reviewed its resources in regard to owned land and has been working closely with partners RSLs to determine the potential of other possible development sites. The Council has been successful in attracting some external funding to meet priorities, for example, funding to extend the Home Improvement Agency across the County and funding to assist with education on homelessness in schools.
- 87 There is considerable evidence that the Council has strengthened external partnerships to ensure that the objectives of the Housing Strategy can be met. There is strong partnership working taking place with RSLs, the County Council, Supporting People teams, social services, the Housing Corporation and others. There are well developed RSL liaison arrangements in operation in Wychavon, both involving the LSVTs and other RSLs operating in the district. Regular meetings take place, which are minuted and set out joint action points.
- 88 The Council has solid baseline information and sound planning frameworks in place to support the provision of affordable housing in the district. This has enabled the provision of over 1000 additional affordable homes to be delivered over ten years, with £24.8 million of Local Authority Social Housing Grant (LASHG) having been spent since 1994. General needs housing as well as special needs have been addressed over this period, with for example, extra-care schemes and a scheme for people with learning difficulties having been secured.
- 89 The Council has Supplementary Planning Guidance in place on affordable housing. This includes threshold levels being set on qualifying sites, minimum space standards, and the housing provide support to planners when developing design guides for particular sites, taking into account housing needs within the area. The Council has, in partnership with RSLs been able to provide affordable housing within the district that are integrated into private sector developments in a particularly effective way thereby promoting sustainable development and social inclusion. For example, the development scheme at Plough Road, Tibberton where there are 11 affordable housing units on a site of 50 properties – where the social housing elements are particularly well integrated into a substantial development.

- 90 The Council is playing an active role in influencing the regional housing debate. Staff and councillors are very involved and external partners were very positive about the influence that is now being exerted by the Council in raising, for example, the issue of rural poverty, and the lack of affordable housing at a regional level. The Council has enhanced the role of the Worcestershire Rural Housing Enabler within the District. This post is now based at the WDC Civic Centre, even though it is a county-wide post, which enables WDC staff to have a close working relationship in the development of suitable rural development sites. The Council is actively promoting the production of Parish Plans to ensure local ownership of the tensions between the need for additional affordable homes and local opposition in some places to any new development.
- 91 There are a number of examples of co-operative working between the Council and RSL partners to produce good affordable housing schemes in an area that has very limited development sites within the local plan, and very high land prices. The Council has committed substantial sums in the past through the use of Local Authority Social Housing Grant (LASHG) to support the development of affordable housing on suitable sites. There has been good liaison work undertaken by the Council and they have been actively and prominently involved in negotiations with the Housing Corporation throughout the development process.
- 92 The Council is playing a prominent role in ensuring that development takes place in the right places, and it is working to ensure that opportunities are realised. It has a good understanding of the needs to ensure a balance between having a high threshold level of affordable housing and the possibility of dissuading a potential developer entirely.
- 93 The Council is being effective in working to produce additional affordable housing units in partnership with RSLs. The numbers of additional affordable housing units has increased over the last three years – in 2001/02, 32 units were delivered, in 2002/03, 63 units were delivered, and in 2003/04, 96 units were delivered.
- 94 The Scrutiny and Overview Committee of the Council has carried out detailed work on the provision of affordable housing in Wychavon. A final report was produced in February 2004. This shows a detailed understanding of the issues and sets out an action plan for the future. The actions have been included in the overall Housing Strategy.
- 95 The Council has been able to make use of Section 106 agreements to control the occupancy of new affordable housing developments in rural areas to people in housing need with a local connection. Good use of section agreements have been made on other sites, for example, at Kidderminster Road, Droitwich, and at the Gordon Russell factory site in Broadway.
- 96 Positive features of the Council's approach to working with its external partners are the effective ways in which common issues are being addressed. For example, RSLs are now including the Council at an early stage in business plan development and through regular corporate meetings key concerns are being shared. There are effective external partnership arrangements with the County Council.

- 97 The Council was one of the organisations that helped to establish the South Worcestershire multi-agency action group to fill an identified gap that existed between different public service organisations. There had been insufficient focus on work taking place at a local level in the past between the Primary Care Trust, social services and councils. Although there were shared agendas, for example, Disabled Facilities Grants, falls prevention and hospital discharges, there was a lack of co-ordination. This group has now been successful in getting the right people around the table to address these issues in a more co-ordinated way.
- 98 The Council has some lack of engagement with voluntary sector. Although there are three Local Strategic Partnerships (LSPs) in place in Wychavon, the voluntary sector told us that they were unclear how to engage with the Council at times, and were not clear on the role of the LSPs. This is leading to a lack of co-ordination between agencies dealing with vulnerable people.
- 99 There are some gaps in the Council's knowledge and baseline information on housing needs in the district. For example, the needs and extent of rough sleeping, the extent to which young single people are Sofa Surfing (sleeping at friends, relatives, and neighbours houses) and people in insecure accommodation. This restricts the Council's ability to address the needs of these groups appropriately in terms of service provision for the future.
- 100 In the past, the Council has not been fully effective in delivering rural exception sites. There had been a lack of emphasis on the importance of the subject and although this has now been addressed the time taken for these schemes to turn from an outline suggestion to a finished lettable affordable housing scheme is considerable. The Council has therefore a legacy of this lack of attention and is now trying to catch up to produce additional affordable housing schemes to address the high level of housing needs in the district.

Private sector housing services

- 101 The Council has a clear strategy for dealing with its priorities and objectives for private sector housing. This is set out in a Private Sector Housing Strategy and in the overall Housing Strategy. The Council is using a range of methods to deal with conditions in the private sector and has bought in new and experienced staff to enhance the performance in this area of work for the Council.
- 102 However, many of the actions contained within plans and strategies have yet to be fully embedded to bring about real improvements that customers would recognise. A number of key policy initiatives have yet to be finalised, and targets have not yet been set in all areas. For example, the enforcement policy has yet to be completed, work on energy efficiency in the private sector is embryonic and a number of items in the private sector action plan are described as 'ongoing'.
- 103 The Council has good baseline information on the condition of the private sector housing stock. A comprehensive stock condition survey was carried out by external consultants in 2004. This included information on all aspects of stock condition including the extent of repairs required to bring properties up to the Decent Homes Standards and energy efficiency levels. This information will be updated by means of an annual rolling programme of surveys. This will cost the Council £20,000 per annum, but will help the Council to meet its statutory requirement of assessing the private sector on an annual basis.
- 104 The Council is monitoring the position of RSLs operating in the area and their progress on achieving the Decent Homes Standard. They are doing this through regular liaison meetings with RSLs and monitoring through the use of Housing Corporation performance indicators.

- 105 The Council has recognised the importance of private sector housing and has increased staff resources over the last 18 months with the appointment of a Property Standards and Empty Homes Officer whose key roles are to improve living conditions in the private sector through enforcement and education, and to bring empty property back into use. This is enabling more pro-active work to be undertaken, and has increased the level of co-operative working taking place between departments, for example, links to planning, environmental health and council tax.
- 106 Positive work is being done by the Council on addressing the issue of empty homes. This is an important issue in an area like Wychavon, which has considerable housing needs, high house prices and pressure on the housing stock across all tenures. Staff have established databases on empty homes and are using council tax, and other records to identify and target new and existing empty dwellings. There were a total of 1,513 vacant dwellings (3.05 per cent of the total housing stock) in the district at 1 April 2004. Five-hundred and fifty-five of these had been vacant for more than six months. However, there is no consistent pattern to the types and locations of these properties, with no wholesale abandonment. The main reasons for properties being empty in the district relate to probate or planning problems.
- 107 The Empty Homes Officer is actively working on around 55 empty properties that have been identified as being capable of being bought back into use. Regular mail shots are being made to a database of owners of empty homes offering free advice, support and grant aid, and regular mail shots are being made to landlords. The Empty Homes team now meet regularly with the Council's planning department to ensure that there is effective co-ordination between both sections activities.
- 108 A regular landlord forum has now been established. The first meeting took place in October 2004 and was well attended following poster advertising and direct contact with landlords and private letting agents. Presentations were made outlining the Council's new approach to the private sector, explaining the facilities, grants and loans that were available, and in detailing the Council's range of enforcement powers. This has improved the level of communication with these organisations.
- 109 Positive intervention work is being undertaken in private sector housing activities. There are now a range of actions available for staff including grants, loans, technical assistance and the use of enforcement powers. The Council has been able to use grants to secure nomination rights on private rented accommodation – for example, in Evesham, where use of a group repairs scheme has enabled 19 properties that were in serious repair to be bought back into use with renovation grant funding, a condition of which was a five-year nomination right on all properties.
- 110 The Council has recognised the importance of private sector housing and has increased staff resources over the last 18 months with the appointment of a Property Standards and Empty Homes Officer. This is enabling more pro-active work to be undertaken, and has increased the level of co-operative working taking place between departments – for example, links to planning, environmental health and council tax.

- 111 The Council has supported the provision of a Home Improvement Agency in the District – Care and Repair (Wychavon), which provides advice, support and practical help to people with disabilities, older people and people on low incomes. This agency is part of the Festival Housing Group and is based in Wychavon District Council's Civic Centre in Pershore. This close level of contact improves service to vulnerable people. For example, smaller aids and adaptation work (under £250 in cost) is carried out by the RSLs, but if some more extensive DFG work is required contact with Council officers and the Occupational Therapist service can be rapidly made. This helps to ensure that an effective response is made to the needs of older people and people with disabilities in the district.
- 112 The Council has a positive and effective Disabled Facilities Grant regime in place, which is an important customer service in an area with an aging population. There is rapid processing of new applications taking place with sound monitoring of the DFG programme taking place at regular fortnightly meetings with Wychavon Care and Repair. Service users are not experiencing delays in getting assessment carried out by Occupational Therapists. The Council's performance monitoring framework includes a local performance indicator for the time taken between receipt of a DFG application and the final decision. In 2003/04 this was taking on average eight working days. Expenditure on DFGs has increased over the last three years – from a figure of £259,000 in 2001/02 to a figure of £393,000 in 2003/04, with further increases in expenditure budgeted for in future years. In 2003/04 103 mandatory DFGs were completed. This reflects the Council's priorities and will mean that more people will be able to maintain independent lives in their own homes.
- 113 There is rapid implementation of DFGs once the application process has determined eligibility. Most basic items like stair lifts are being installed within four to six weeks, with more complex work being completed within six months. We found that this was a well run, and valuable service, with very positive comments being made by representatives of the Older Persons Forum in the District. The Council has sought the views of users and potential users of the DFG service by holding a Disability Forum in December 2004, which was well attended. There are a number of service user improvements which have been made as a result of this consultation work, for example, disabled people highlighted the need to ensure that all staff across the Council knew about the range of housing services available. The Council responded by providing training on housing issues to staff in other departments.
- 114 There are effective processes in place to match disabled people to adapted homes. The Housing department are maintaining a register of adapted properties and a register of people in need of specialised accommodation. We found evidence of staff working diligently to ensure that a person-centred approach to issues of accommodation for people with disabilities was in place. Staff were also looking at the future use of accommodation and were ensuring that wherever possible flexible configurations of property layout was taking place, thereby ensuring that adapted properties could in the future be used by a wide range of people with disabilities.
- 115 There are some positive actions relating to the grants regime that the Council has implemented. For example, the grants scheme has been extended to cover 'moving home' grants which enable people to move into more suitable properties and release their existing accommodation. The Council is also in the process of developing a scheme for small home repairs to fill a gap in the market. This will cover work that is bigger than the service offered by Age Concern, but not work that would fall into the level offered through grants. This has been consulted on with residents through the Council's 'talkback' panel and 80 per cent of respondents were in favour of setting up such a scheme.

- 116 There is some positive work being done on Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) in the district, but this is not yet comprehensive. The main HMOs are being used by the food industry and a total of 347 have been identified by the Property Standards Officer. Although a number of these have been visited the target to inspect all 'high risk' properties by January 2007 is not challenging, and the Council have yet to finalise and adopt an appropriate enforcement policy for the HMOs or to complete planned actions on educating landlords more extensively. At the end of March 2005 there were 58 identified 'high risk' HMOs of which 27 had been inspected.
- 117 The Council has not established a sustained focus on achieving improvements in the energy efficiency of the entire housing stock. There has been a limited budget for action in this area in the past with £15,352 being spent on energy grants in 2002/03, but a zero figure being spent in 2003/04. Although there are some plans and actions in place, for example, the Council is part of the Worcestershire Affordable Warmth Strategy, there is not a strong action plan in place to address this work. This limits the Council's ability to deal with this important issue, as 17 per cent of the housing stock has a SAP rating below 30, and requires considerable improvement to meet the needs of older and vulnerable people.
- 118 There has been limited investment into private sector activities, to bring about improvements in the general condition of the housing stock, despite there being 750 unfit private sector dwellings. The budget for renovation grants in 2004/05 at £60,000 is below expenditure of £70,294 in 2003/04. This shows limited expenditure in an important priority area (Housing strategy priority 3 – promoting choice, quality and suitability). The 2005/06 budget provision is to increase Housing Grants to £75,000.
- 119 The Council is only now beginning to make inroads into dealing with vacant or unfit dwellings in the private sector. In 2003/04, 1.6 per cent of unfit private sector dwellings were made fit or demolished as a direct result of action by the local authority (BV62), and in 2003/04 no private sector vacant dwellings were returned into occupation or demolished as a direct result of action by the local authority (BV64). This lack of success in this area is reflected by the low budgetary commitment being made into housing renovation grants through the Private Sector Housing Strategy.

Homelessness, housing needs and allocations

- 120 The Council has raised the performance and profile of its homelessness and housing needs service in an effective and positive way over the last two years. The service is now customer-focused and provides a holistic person-centred approach to dealing with homelessness. The provision of good quality temporary accommodation has been increased considerably since April 2004, and although some use of bed and breakfast accommodation is still made, this is of good quality and staff provide good support to those placed there, and make every effort to minimise its use.
- 121 There are well signposted and clearly identifiable services in place in Wychavon providing good quality housing advice and information about homelessness. An extensive range of information on the options available to priority and non-priority homeless applicants is available from the Council's CCCs, and the Council provides funding towards the provision of Citizen Advice Bureau services in each of the main towns.

- 122 An effective Homelessness Strategy is in place, with a comprehensive action plan which seeks to address legislative needs and positive practice from elsewhere. Whilst the action plan is wide ranging, it lacks SMART targets in all areas, and has not addressed the issue of a small number of rough sleepers who are perceived by external partners to be present in Evesham.
- 123 The Council is responding to the needs of homeless people by reviewing the operation of the Homelessness Strategy at monthly progress meetings. These meetings include senior council officers, members, RSLs, social services, CAB and other external partners.
- 124 There is a high degree of customer care being displayed by staff at the Council in supporting homeless cases. All homeless cases receive weekly support visits and information and support packs are provided to all cases at the outset. A storage agreement and procedure is in place to accommodate homeless customers belongings where needed. The Council will also loan essential equipment to single parents to support them whilst in temporary accommodations. For example, we saw a case where a rocking baby crib, mattresses, sheets and blankets were loaned to someone going into a flat on a temporary basis. The Council has also been pro-active in the use of text messaging to keep in touch with homeless customers.
- 125 There is some impressive prevention work taking place to minimise homelessness, and to minimise subsequently the use of bed and breakfast accommodation. Staff at the Council make good use of a 'spend to save' budget, and some examples of its use have been to:
- ◆ mediate with parents to keep adult children at home, sometimes paying £50 per week as an incentive until a permanent solution can be found;
 - ◆ paying market supplements to private landlords;
 - ◆ paying off rent arrears for homeless families in order to secure an RSL tenancy; and
 - ◆ negotiating effectively with RSLs on other rent arrears cases.
- 126 The Council has ensured that there is sufficient staff capacity to handle challenging cases of homelessness effectively. There are risks associated with complex negotiations between young people, relatives and other family members, but records indicate a good understanding of the issues by staff, and effective communications with external agencies such as social services.
- 127 Although the 'spend to save' budget that the Council utilises to support homeless and other vulnerable clients is a valuable additional tool to prevent homelessness and to provide financial support, there is insufficient clarity over when it will be available and who can access the funding and in what circumstance. External agencies working with vulnerable people were unclear how the funding was allocated and made available, and were unclear what support would be available through this budget.
- 128 There is a good working relationship with partners on homeless prevention and sustaining tenancies. The Council works closely to act as an advocate for people threatened with homelessness. It negotiates with RSLs, private landlords and others in seeking to maintain tenancies wherever possible.

- 129 The Council is surveying users of the homelessness service on a regular basis, and using this information to make improvements to working practices. All users are asked to complete a homelessness exit survey, and these are collated and analysed on a quarterly basis, with action points being developed from comments received from users. For example, the use of texting as the preferred means of contact for many users, and the need to provide furniture in some cases of extreme hardship.
- 130 There is a high level of satisfaction with the homelessness service with over 90 per cent of users being very or fairly satisfied with the service provided. There are many extremely positive comments recorded on exit survey questionnaires.

'I cannot see from a user's point of view any room for improvement – they are quick, efficient, kind, patient and really made a difference when I was in an horrific situation. They really know their stuff! And were able to give me all the information and advice required' – homeless service user.

- 131 Users of the homelessness service provided by the Council are very positive about homelessness officers and the service they received in general from the Council. We carried out a telephone survey of people who had recently been, or were currently homeless and in temporary accommodation, and they were overwhelmingly positive about the treatment that they had received.
- 132 The way in which the Council is applying a person-centred approach to resolving homelessness is proving effective. The incidence of repeat homelessness is being monitored by the Council and since April 2004 there have been no cases of repeat homelessness.
- 133 In the past, the Council has made extensive use of bed and breakfast accommodation. This has now reduced considerably, through the implementation of eleven units of high quality furnished temporary accommodation being provided in conjunction with the two LSVT RSLs in the district. The temporary accommodation is close to all amenities and services. We visited these properties and found them to be well maintained, with good facilities, and people living in the temporary accommodation were very positive about the way in which the Council had dealt with their cases. The Council does not use any hostel accommodation for homeless people.
- 134 People in temporary accommodation are receiving good support from the housing service. They are visited on a weekly basis with notes of visits being maintained and reported to managers. All temporary accommodation and bed and breakfast establishments have been inspected by the Council's Property Standards Officer. Staff maintain detailed file information on all bed and breakfast establishments and provide information packs to potential users, with photographs of the exterior and interiors, what facilities are available, and full contact details. Staff are regularly making use of mobile telephone technology by sending text messages to users to ensure that contact is maintained. This close attention ensures that support needs can be identified and that help can be obtained to deal with other issues such as health needs or emotional support.
- 135 The Council is ensuring that the high quality temporary accommodation does not get 'silted-up' through a lack of suitable services and property to enable people to move to more settled permanent accommodation. In this regard the Council has been successful, with lengths of stay in temporary accommodation being short and diminishing.

- 136 The Council has acted positively in producing good quality temporary accommodation since April 2004, with eleven units of good temporary accommodation being implemented in partnership with local RSLs. These were created to meet the demands assessed at the time, and are generally meeting the needs of the service, and of service users. However, staff feel that there is a need for more units particularly in the north of the district, and the Council have indicated that a flexible approach will be taken to bringing more units on stream as and when required.
- 137 The housing team are working well to provide a holistic approach for people, especially in the prevention of homelessness by carrying out more homes visits, negotiating with families, landlords and RSLs. They have ensured that other agencies and internal staff are aware of what they can do to prevent homelessness and the range of advice and support they can give. The Council have made good use of furniture projects, hardship loans, crisis loans and contact with local charities to help clients furnish where they live. There is substantial documentary evidence of the Council providing a high level of care to homeless people – for example, the use of discretionary housing payments, the spend to save budget, fast tracking housing benefit payments and finding suitable homes in the private sector.
- 138 The service has protocols in place with health and social services for dealing with under-16-to-17-year-olds. There is evidence of effective partnership working on dealing with the needs of this part of the community, and the Council has worked well with external agencies to ensure that suitable and sustainable long-term housing solutions can be provided.
- 139 An appropriate appeals process is in place for homeless applicants. Information on how to appeal is available at CCCs, and an appeals leaflet is sent out with all adverse decisions, and appeals rights are included in every decision letter that is sent out.
- 140 External partners and housing staff would like to see a simplification of what is perceived to be an overly complex points system in operation for the allocation of housing. We did not see any evidence of this being a barrier to users accessing social housing, but it was clear that there was an increased administrative cost and potential delays in making housing allocations. The choice-based lettings pilot that is in operation in the north of the district – Spa Homechoice – has worked well and staff and partners are now keen to roll this out to the rest of the district. The scheme is popular with tenants and prospective tenants of the RSL and has enabled the RSL to let a number of its less popular flats more quickly.
- 141 The Council has learned from other examples of positive practice by, for example, introducing a rent deposit scheme to assist homeless customers and other in housing need to get financial support to obtain tenancies in the private sector. Ten families have been helped to obtain tenancies through this scheme since April 2004. In addition, the Council is working co-operatively with health and social services by providing a hospital discharge scheme, enabling people to be matched-up with suitable properties, and thereby freeing up scarce resources in health services. Twenty-four people have been helped through this scheme since April 2004.

- 142 Effective and timely decision-making is taking place. Files are accurately maintained and annotated enabling a clear picture to be gained as to why a decision has been reached. The quality of decision-making on homelessness cases is monitored by senior managers, and checks are carried out to ensure consistency of decision-making. The Council has sought good practice from other authorities and has reduced the number of staff members able to make decisions on homelessness to develop specialised skills in this area. Staff dealing with homelessness are part of a county-wide group that is sharing good practice and considering issues of consistency. Our file checks confirmed that the Council was acting promptly to obtain information, that good records were being maintained and that decisions were in accordance with legislation.
- 143 The performance of the Council in making determinations on homelessness applications within 33 days has improved. In 2003/04, 83.36 per cent of applications were determined within 33 working days which was well below the performance of the best performing local authorities. Since April 2004 unaudited data shows that 95.32 per cent of applications have been determined within 33 working days, and staff are now focused on ensuring that application processing is rapid and accurate.
- 144 There are some examples where letters to service users are not clear and easy to understand. For example, the letters sent to people on the waiting list are unclear and do not provide housing applicants with sufficient information to make informed choices about their future housing options. This lack of clarity is due to the number of policies and points systems in operation through the joint housing register.
- 145 Prevention of homelessness is also aided in Wychavon by having in place an effective, responsive and innovative Housing benefit service. This service has been improved by initially restructuring and strengthening capacity, and giving the service increased prominence within the Council. Having generic benefits staff means that staff time can be applied to different benefits to cope with peaks in workload. The verification framework for HB has been successfully implemented, and the Council have been innovative by training staff in the two LSVT RSLs in the verification framework, thereby ensuring that quick processing can take place for all applicants.
- 146 The Council is providing a rapid housing benefit service. Processing times for both new claims and changes of circumstances are in the top quartile of English district councils. The average time for processing new claims for Housing and council tax benefit (BV78a) was 29 days in 2003/04. The average time for processing notifications of changes of circumstances (BV78b) was five days.
- 147 Close working between housing and benefits staff means that homeless applicants' housing benefit claims are fast-tracked. Usually these claims will be dealt with within 24 hours, thereby ensuring that people in vulnerable circumstances get clarity about their benefits in the soonest possible time. In addition, some HB applicants have been provided with Discretionary Housing Payments to assist them to maintain tenancies. Since April 2004, nine service users have received DHP's and have been awarded with extra payments of £2042. These payments are made to customers who have an unavoidable shortfall between the level of housing benefits and their rent, and will help vulnerable households remain in settled accommodation, rather than becoming repeatedly homeless.
- 148 External partners are very positive about the quality of the housing benefit service in Wychavon. This helps to ensure that private landlords and RSLs can continue to run their businesses in the knowledge that housing benefits payments will be promptly processed by the Council.

- 149 The Council has been able to effectively recruit and retain benefits staff when other Local authorities have experienced difficulties in this area. This situation has been helped by some joint working with neighbouring councils, for example, using common application forms, and joint training. WDC have also worked closely with other local authorities in sharing staff at times of peak workload, and encouraging staff to develop their skills and experience.
- 150 The views of housing benefit service users are being used to shape service delivery. A twice yearly survey has been undertaken with users and the results of this work used to make service improvements – for example, the use of texting to reach younger people and request documents.
- 151 The Council is investing in a Welfare benefits and money advice service to ensure that residents of the district can maximise their income. This is a very valuable resource in levering in extra income to the most vulnerable sectors of the community and Wychavon are the only local authority in Worcestershire to provide this service. The service is provided to the community by a dedicated officer with interviews being held in convenient locations, or at clients' homes. The amount of extra income being derived from the service is being measured and, since April 2004, an extra £941,150 of additional benefit income has been obtained. However, this popular service means that sometimes people have to wait for weeks for appointments, for example, in a homelessness interview that we observed the client clearly required welfare and benefits advice but was unable to get an appointment for three weeks and was therefore referred to the local CAB for assistance.
- 152 There is effective matching of people to properties through the use of an adapted properties database. The Council is also recording the needs of people with disabilities and endeavouring to match them with suitable properties.
- 153 There are positive working arrangements between the Council and Women's Aid services in the area. There are written protocols in place with Worcester and Malvern Women's Aid, and with the Droitwich Women's Refuge. We visited the Women's refuge and found it to be adequate accommodation for women fleeing violence. Housing staff hold a housing surgery at the refuge every month, and visit on a regular basis. There are good sources of support and advice available on-site and users that we spoke to were positive about the role of the Council.
- 154 Council housing staff have received training on domestic violence in 2004. This was extensive, and included sessions on the legislation, assessing cases of domestic violence and how to engage with external sources of advice and support services. This will help to ensure that both those fleeing domestic violence, and those who wish to remain in their own homes, receive appropriate advice and support, from well trained officers.
- 155 The Council is making use of 'homeless at home' policies in dealing with homeless people, and has done so for a number of years. This is further evidence of the Council working closely with service users to tailor the range of options offered to people in vulnerable circumstances. Home visits are undertaken wherever possible to prevent homelessness, and to maximise the opportunities and possible housing options. These visits are also undertaken to ensure that applications are accurate and to determine any support needs that may be required. For younger people this may involve other relevant members of the household. If homelessness cannot be prevented than household are asked to work with the Council during the interim period whilst suitable accommodation can be found and the person is categorised as being 'homeless at home'. Officers maintain contact through regular visiting, phone calls and text messaging during this time.

- 156 There are a number of supported housing schemes for under-25-year-olds in operation in the district – for example, The Haven in Evesham and the ‘Step out, and Drop in’ project in Droitwich. The Council has a good working relationship with these projects and a Service Level Agreement is in place with these and other provider setting out the relationship with the Council and how services can operate to the benefit of service users.
- 157 There is a lack of awareness on the extent, and needs of people sleeping rough in the district. The Council has not carried out a rough sleepers count, as confirmed by the Housing Strategy Statistical return sent annually to the ODPM. There is however, some anecdotal evidence that this is occurring in Wychavon – external partners, the voluntary sector and frontline staff from the Council told us that there were pockets of rough sleeping in Evesham, where some people regularly slept under a bridge and some people were sleeping in a park. There was also evidence on one homelessness file where the applicant had declared that they had been sleeping rough in Evesham prior to applying to the Council.

‘There are big problems with rough sleeping in Evesham – the police know about it, but it’s been swept under the carpet’ – voluntary sector partner.

- 158 The Council does not have sufficient information available to respond to this issue. The lack of a formal count, or any substantial awareness within the Council on this issue, means that the potential needs of people sleeping rough have not been addressed. The Housing Strategy and Homelessness Strategy do not address the needs of rough sleepers, and again this inhibits the Council’s ability to respond to their needs.

Summary

- 159 The housing service is judged as being an ‘excellent’ three-star service. There are high quality Community Contact Centres in place, which are easily accessible, and have convenient opening hours. The Homelessness and housing advice service is person-centred and gives a high degree of care and support to people in vulnerable circumstances. Good quality temporary accommodation has been bought into use since April 2004. An over-arching ‘Fit for Purpose’ Housing Strategy provides the co-ordination for plans and actions to continue to improve the service and this has incorporated recent and robust baseline information on stock condition and housing needs. The needs of disabled and vulnerable people are supported by a rapid and effective Disable Facilities Grants and housing benefit service. There is impressive work taking place to prevent homeless, good record keeping and decision-making, and the use of modern technology to speed processing.
- 160 However, there are some weaknesses in the service. Some minor aspects of access and customer care could be improved to make the service more visible and consistent. There is a lack of awareness about the extent of rough sleeping in the district, which anecdotally is believed to be present in significant numbers in Evesham. The plans for private sector housing activities are relatively new and have yet to make an impact and deliver significant improvements that residents or potential service users would recognise.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the evidence of service improvement?

- 161 The Council has a culture of challenging areas of weaker performance and bringing about improvements to service delivery. Wychavon volunteered to be involved at an early stage of Comprehensive Performance Assessment, and asked for this inspection to take place. The Council has used the Comprehensive Performance Assessment process to identify areas of concern and then to effectively address weaknesses. The Council has been through CPA twice, first as a pathfinder in 2002, and then through the process for 'real' in 2003. Volunteering for this process indicates the Council's willingness and openness to external challenge and scrutiny.
- 162 There have been discernible service user benefits brought about by the additional strategic planning undertaken in regard to housing services in Wychavon.
- ◆ The length of stay in bed and breakfast has reduced considerably. Since April 2004 no families have been in bed and breakfast for longer than six weeks.
 - ◆ Users have less time to wait for decisions and the number of applications determined within 33 days has significantly improved.
 - ◆ The average numbers of homeless households in temporary accommodation has decreased.
 - ◆ There has been no repeat homelessness during the last year.
 - ◆ A rent deposit scheme has been introduced.
 - ◆ Three-hundred and thirty grants have been made to adapt and improve homes at a cost of £460,000, with rapid and effective administration taking place.
 - ◆ The Council met promises made at the time of housing stock transfer in delivering, with the assistance of partners, the target of 1000 additional affordable homes within ten years.
 - ◆ Ninety-six affordable homes have been provided in 2003/04, with an increasing number being provided year-on-year since 2002.
 - ◆ Good quality additional temporary accommodation has been bought into use.
 - ◆ The 'spend to save' budget has been used to help a number of people to sustain tenancies and prevent homelessness occurring.
 - ◆ Housing benefit performance in is the top quartile for both new claims and changes of circumstances.
 - ◆ The Council has substantially improved its planning performance in the last two years.
- 163 The pace of change and improvement to housing service has been rapid and sustained. The Council has increased financial and non-financial resources available to housing, and increased the profile of the service, and awareness among staff, members and stakeholders of its importance through the use of internal and external briefings and joint training and feedback sessions. The Council has emphasised the importance of partnership working by carrying out these sessions for staff at the two LSVT RSLs operating in the district, and involved all external partners at an early stage of the current Housing Strategy development.

'Housing was not at the top table as far as decision-making went in the past – it is now' – WDC Councillor.

- 164 There is a good track record of responding to previous inspection reports. The Council's involvement as a pathfinder in the CPA process highlighted areas of concern, and high risk of service or function failure in the provision of housing services. The Council has addressed the weaknesses identified in the 'Balancing housing markets' diagnostic section in the CPA report of March 2004. This report particularly criticised the Council's strategic approach to housing, and the Council has responded by ensuring that the current Housing Strategy has achieved a 'Fit for Purpose' status from the Government Office. The Council has also addressed concerns about the quality of plans, partnership working and monitoring arrangements. Actions to address the weaknesses previously identified were incorporated in the new Housing Strategy and into service plans. The close attention paid by the Council to achieving against these plans has ensured that service improvements have taken place.
- 165 Improvements in the strategic approach of the Council to housing were made using wide and varying consultation methods with members, local strategic partnerships, stakeholders, and the public. For example, service users told the Council that they did not understand the multiple points allocation system, and wanted a more transparent way of allocating housing, so the Council introduced a pilot choice-based lettings system and is extending its use across the district in 2005.
- 166 The Council has increased its baseline information to inform this strategic development by carrying out a Housing Needs Survey update and a private sector housing stock condition survey during 2004. Experienced external consultants were used to provide this information, which was prepared in accordance with ODPM guidance. This recent evaluation of key pieces of information has helped to ensure that the Council's strategic thinking was informed by sound data.
- 167 The Council has ensured that improvements are driven in housing by strengthening the management capacity in the department, adding new posts in critical areas for example, an Empty Homes Officer and a Property Standards Officer and restructuring to provide a more person-centred approach.
- 168 The Council has used the CPA process to ensure that learning from others is a key element in bringing about service improvements. Visits have been made to Beacon authorities, key changes to the service have been made after visits to conferences such as the use of credit checking services to identify fraudulent homeless applications, and a wide range of consultation events have been introduced to learn from service users.
- 169 Efforts have been made by the Council to improve its services to match the needs of diverse elements of the community. It has involved the Audit Commission in carrying out support work on the diversity agenda, and has increased the profile of diversity within the Council and externally. The Council carried out a Social Inclusion review at the end of 2003, and published a report on 'Reaching out to everyone'. This report set out the priorities for the Council, highlighted some achievements to date, and used census and other data to set out aspirations, priorities and promises for the future.

- 170 Use of best value principles has been made by the Council in developing service and improvement plans and in challenging how existing services were being delivered. A Best Value Review of housing services was carried out in 2002 and an action plan was devised and fully implemented. More recently, Overview and Scrutiny panels have looked at key housing areas like Disabled Facilities Grants, Housing Strategy and affordable housing. This work has, for example, led to changes in the procurement of DFG work, a greater emphasis on externally influencing the regional Housing Strategy and a raised awareness of the importance of homeless prevention work.
- 171 The Council has obtained external accreditation for its services. Chartermark has been achieved by the Democratic, Customer Service and Revenues Section (which contains the housing service), along with Investors in People accreditation.
- 172 There is a strong emphasis on positive partnership working in the Council at all levels. Quarterly housing strategic meetings take place between the Council's Managing Director and the Chief Executives on the main RSLs operating in the district. External partners were very positive about the openness of the Council and the willingness of officers to engage with them. However, some representatives of the voluntary sector felt that more engagement could take place with them at an early stage of strategy development, and that there was a lack of co-ordination between them and the Council on policy development. There are a number of voluntary bodies operating in the district, dealing with specific, but in some instances, overlapping client groups. Although there is representation of these groups on the Local Strategic Partnership, there was a view that there was still a lack of co-ordination between these groups at an operational level.
- 173 Partners told us that they have seen considerable changes take place in the way in which the housing service operates over the last 12 months. They are now much more pro-active, with more resources and there is now a split between staff dealing with operational and strategic issues. This means that staff are able to devote the time that is needed to these separate functions.
- 174 Partners have seen big improvements in the housing benefits service. The Council is in the top quartile of English district councils in 2003/04 for the speed of processing both new claims for housing and council tax benefits, and for changes in circumstances. This has helped service users by having applications fast tracked, and by the use of the verification framework, to ensure that claims are dealt with both accurately and rapidly.

'Performance on housing benefits has gone up massively' – external partner.

- 175 A strong involvement in the development of supporting people has taken place by Wychavon District Council. Senior officers and members have been working closely with the Supporting People Core Strategy Group on Business Planning and the evaluation of new potential supporting people provision. Wychavon have played a very active role in defining the SP programme, to ensure the provision of housing related support services to meet the needs of vulnerable people in the District.
- 176 There are other good examples of the Council's approach to multi-agency working. For example, the Police Liaison meeting that takes place. This is a multi-agency group comprising of social service, police, environmental health, RSLs and the Council's housing service team. This group is working effectively to reduce the incidence of homelessness through partnership working.

- 177 The Council has responded rapidly to changes in the external operating and funding environment for housing. This has occurred in regard to the withdrawal of Local Authority Social Housing Grant, and in changes in the funding regime for Disabled Facilities Grants.
- 178 There is less commitment and evidence of improvement in private sector housing activities than in other areas. Plans are not fully co-ordinated in this area, and targets are not stretching. Performance in bringing empty and unfit properties back into use has not been high, and the budget for renovation grants in 2004/05 is less than in 2003/04 despite there being significant levels (albeit below national averages) of unfit in the districts housing stock.

How good are the current improvement plans?

- 179 Through the work done by the Council's Overview and Scrutiny Panels and the raised awareness of housing service issues it is clear that the Council has reviewed, challenged and investigated objectives, policies and practices. This has not been done in isolation, however, as the Council has involved internal and external partners in improving strategies and plans.
- 180 The Council has now achieved a 'Fit for Purpose' Housing Strategy, and has used the over-arching plans and priorities contained in this strategy to shape and improve service delivery plans. It is clear that plans and strategies are taking account of national and regional frameworks and are based on sound, robust and recent sources of data and information. Account has been taken of proposed changes in the Housing Bill, for example, the Council has made changes to its Housing Grants policy to include mobile dwellings, and the development of a Houses in Multiple Occupation database.
- 181 Plans within the Council are generally good. The Housing Strategy contains SMART plans which set out the over-arching approach that the Council will be taking for housing services in the future. Some service plans are not completely SMART with some elements not having adequately set out the resource implications and some lacking named officers. It is therefore, necessary to read the Housing Service Plan in conjunction with the Housing Strategy to obtain a complete picture and this could inhibit appropriate monitoring of all of the elements of these plans.
- 182 The Council has been pro-active in ensuring that its approach to the private sector is kept up-to-date, but plans associated with the approach to the private sector are not SMART. Although the Council met the requirements of the Regulatory Reform Order by publishing its private sector renewal policy in 2003, and updated the policy in 2004, the existing action plan does not evaluate the resources required to deliver against the priorities.
- 183 The Council does not have challenging targets within all areas of its approach to the private sector. There are marked differences between plans addressing the private sector. Performance monitoring and measuring success is therefore more difficult to achieve. Plans in this area need to be better co-ordinated with clearer measures of success being established.
- 184 The Council is working well with rural parishes. It has recognised that the involvement of local people in having ownership of key issues will be vital in delivering against plans and strategies. It is therefore, putting considerable effort into the development of Parish plans to enable this local ownership of issues. The Rural Housing Enabler is working on this agenda in the identification of rural exception and development sites, and working with parishes to understand the tensions around a lack of affordable housing and the needs and priorities of rural communities.

- 185 There has been a sustained focus to achieve improvements in service. Plans have regularly been reviewed to assess progress, and staff have been challenged on a regular basis to ensure that actions are embedded.
- 186 However, some plans in the recent past have lacked SMART action plans and some targets have not been stretching. For example, the Homelessness Strategy does not have specific milestones, there is no assessment of resource required, and lead officers are not identified.
- 187 Plans for addressing the needs of the private sector housing stock are limited and targets are not stretching in all areas. For example, the target to inspect all high risk HMOs is set at January 2007. There are differences between the action plans contained in the Housing Strategy and the Private Sector Housing Strategy, and this will limit the effectiveness of performance monitoring and scrutiny arrangements.

Will improvements be delivered?

- 188 There is strong corporate and community leadership evident in Wychavon with clear ambitions and visions for the future. Members and staff are able to articulate the Council's approach and there is a strong view among staff at all levels that 'Team Wychavon' is a reality that they feel part of and support.
- 189 The Council has a sound five-year strategy 'Wychavon's Way Ahead' that sets out the priorities for the next five years. This includes continued and sustained commitment to providing an 'excellent housing service by 2008'. Consultation on how to spend the Council budget has taken place with community representatives to cross-check the Council's priorities against those of residents, and the Council has an ambitious priority of delivering good services at good value, having kept council tax increases at 2.5 per cent plus inflation for the last five years.
- 190 Partnership working has a strong presence in Wychavon. Regular strategic and operational meetings take place with external partners. An example of the Council's commitment to local communities and of working with partners is shown by the building of a new community hospital and health centre, funded by the Council, in Pershore. The Council is also providing clear leadership to the community by working closely with its partner RSLs by providing training and feedback session to their staff on key issues like homelessness and housing needs and demand.
- 191 Staff are well trained, experienced and motivated at all levels. There is low staff turnover within the Council and staff confirmed that they feel valued and supported by the organisation, senior managers and members. There had been recognition of the need to strengthen the capacity of the housing department and this has been carried out. For example, an additional Housing Service manager was recruited to enable more focused work to take place on strategy and enabling, and six new members of staff have been added to the department in the last two years.
- 192 Staff are supported by the provision of good IT systems. Continued and sustained investment has taken place with the introduction of the Document Image Processing systems, text messaging capability, improved databases for Houses in Multiple Occupation and Empty Homes records. Good IT systems have also contributed to the high level of processing performance within housing benefits.

- 193 There is an annual review of staff skills and abilities. This is part of the Council's Personnel Development Review process which also includes quarterly face-to-face meetings between staff and their managers. Staff told us that this process considered training requirements and there was a clear corporate commitment to providing adequate levels of training and development opportunities within the Council. Recruitment and retention of staff in key areas of operation, like housing benefits has been enhanced by some innovative working across local authority boundaries with joint training and recruitment activities taking place.
- 194 The Council has a sound and effective performance management framework in place. The 'signals of success' document gives clear and concise performance management information and enables key pieces of performance data to be presented in a clear and cohesive way.
- 195 There is a robust financial framework in place, and a risk management strategy has been produced by the Council. A risk register has been produced, and heads of service are required to identify risks within their service plans. Robust financial management systems are in place which involve all levels of management, and through to members. There is flexibility in the system for managers to have reports produced on key financial aspects of the services they manage.
- 196 The Council has effective complaints mechanisms in place, and uses complaints monitoring to identify weak areas of performance. Complaints leaflets are on display at CCCs, and customer complaints are regularly reported to Senior Management Team, and to members.
- 197 There are good working relationships in place between staff in housing and the portfolio holder and other Councillors. There are frequent meetings taking place, and the portfolio holder is actively involved in attending regional housing meetings and influencing wider strategic planning. The Council has actively considered getting the right member involvement in these regional housing issues and has also been actively working with all the Worcestershire authorities to ensure that issues like affordability in rural areas are brought to the attention of external organisations. This it has been successfully able to do.

Summary

- 198 The housing service is judged to have 'excellent' prospects for improvement. The Council has already improved housing services significantly since the CPA inspections took place in 2002 and 2003 and has a track record of addressing weaker areas of service delivery. It has responded effectively to criticisms in the CPA reports and acted decisively to strengthen capacity and bring about greater ownership of the service among staff, councillors and external partners. Effective learning has taken place, plans are generally good, and there are very positive working relationships with external partners and stakeholders. There are well trained, experience and motivated staff in post, with little staff turnover, and the support of good IT systems.
- 199 However, there is a lack of focus on providing value for money within plans and strategies, and a lack of effective benchmarking. Some plans lack clear and challenging targets, accountable officers and milestones. Plans for the private sector are not challenging, and strategic documents are not fully co-ordinated in this area. There is some lack of co-ordination in obtaining full involvement of the voluntary sector in policy and strategic development.

Appendices

The purpose of an inspection is to make two judgements. The first is how good is the service being inspected? The second is what are the prospects for improvement? We carried out a range of activities to enable us to reach our judgements.

Performance indicators

Performance Indicator	Wychavon DC 2002/03	Wychavon DC 2003/04	All English district councils top quartile – 2003/04
BVPI 62 - percentage of unfit dwellings made fit or demolished.	3.2%	1.6%	3.75%
BVPI 64 – number of private sector dwellings returned into occupation.	2	0	20
BV183a – average stay in bed and breakfast accommodation.	14 weeks	11 weeks	1.18 weeks
BV183b – average stay in hostel accommodation.	0 weeks	0 weeks	0 weeks
BV78a – speed of processing new housing benefit/council tax claims.	28 working days	29 working days	31 working days
BV78b – speed of processing changes of circumstances for housing benefit/council tax claims.	5 working days	5 working days	7.2 working days

Documents reviewed

Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that Wychavon District Council provided for us. These included:

- ◆ housing services self-assessment;
- ◆ 'Making a real difference' – Housing Strategy 2005/08;
- ◆ Revenues and Housing Approved service plan 2004/05;
- ◆ Homelessness Strategy 2003/08;
- ◆ Housing Strategy statistical appendices;
- ◆ statement of accounts 2003/04;
- ◆ housing services Best Value Review – 2002;
- ◆ overview and scrutiny report – Disabled Facilities Grant;
- ◆ overview and scrutiny report – Affordable Housing;
- ◆ Wychavon report on gypsy and traveller issues – January 2005
- ◆ Community Plan;
- ◆ annual report; and
- ◆ private sector housing stock condition report.

Reality checks undertaken

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. We also followed up on issues relating to the management of the review and the improvements flowing from it. Our reality checks included:

- ◆ telephone survey of homeless applicants;
- ◆ visits to all Community Contact Centres;
- ◆ tour of the District to visit development sites;
- ◆ tested the out-of-hours emergency reporting service;
- ◆ visits to temporary accommodation and bed and breakfast establishments;
- ◆ visit to Women's Refuge;
- ◆ attended Wychavon Housing Consortium meeting;
- ◆ attended South Worcestershire multi-agency action group meeting;
- ◆ observed homelessness interview at Droitwich;
- ◆ attended meeting regarding Home Improvement Agency;
- ◆ home visit to an adapted property; and
- ◆ attended Police Liaison meeting.

List of people interviewed

We met a range of people involved with the service.

Alan Smith	Performance Officer
Andy Poppleton	Welfare and Money Advisor
Adam Russell	Supporting People Team Leader
Brian Norfolk	Head of Corporate Projects
Andrew Bilbrough	Property Services Officer
David Hemming	Community Safety Officer
Elaine Salter	Housing Services Manager
Gay Lloyd	Senior Housing Needs and Projects Officer
Guy Weston	Chief Executive – Spa Housing
Cllr. Mrs. Judy Pearce	Housing Portfolio Holder
Fiona Narburgh	Head of Strategy and Communications
Kath Smith	Housing Services Manager
Jack Hegarty	Managing Director
Liz Dyde	Head of Revenues and Housing
Ian Hughes	Chief Executive – Rooftop Housing Group
Kirstie Eaton	Empty Homes Officer
Liza Handley	Housing Needs Officer
Julia Day	Senior Planning Officer
Cllr. Martin Jennings	Leader of the Council
Margaret Gormley	Evesham Community Contact Centre Manager
Patrick Birch	Supporting People Strategy Group Chair
Cllr. Roy Seabourne	Labour Group Leader
Sonia Rees	Head of Financial Services
Focus Group	Diversities and equalities
Focus Group	External partners
Focus Group	Frontline staff
Focus Group	Voluntary sector partners

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).

Document imaging software

Investment has been made in modern technology to enhance the accessibility of services. The Council has Document Imaging Processing (DIP) software IT systems in place which speeds the processing of documents for both housing and other council services. It is possible, therefore, for customers to take prime documents into any contact point, have them scanned and immediately available to other, more distant council departments. This works particularly well for the common housing register, where the two LSVT RSLs in the area have access to the system and can rapidly share applicant documents with the Council to speed decision-making on allocations.

The Council has also been innovative in using Document Imaging software for the processing of housing benefits – there is an arrangement in place for HB applicants in Droitwich who can take their documents into an RSL office on the Westlands estate and have them scanned into the Councils' system, thereby preventing the need to travel into one of the CCC's or the Civic Centre.

Nomination rights on properties receiving grant funding

Positive intervention work is being undertaken in private sector housing activities. There are now a range of actions available for staff including grants, loans, technical assistance and the use of enforcement powers. The Council has been able to use grants to secure nomination rights on private rented accommodation – for example, in Evesham, where use of a group repairs scheme has enabled 19 properties that were in serious repair to be bought back into use with renovation grant funding, a condition of which was a five-year nomination right on all properties.

Performance monitoring of DFG applications

The Council's performance monitoring framework includes a local performance indicator for the time taken between receipt of a DFG application and the final decision. In 2003/04 this was taking on average eight working days.

Provision of essential childcare equipment for parents in temporary accommodation

There is a high degree of customer care being displayed by staff at the Council in supporting homeless cases. All homeless cases receive weekly support visits and information and support packs are provided to all cases at the outset. A storage agreement and procedure is in place to accommodate homeless customers belongings where needed. The Council will also loan essential equipment to single parents to support them whilst in temporary accommodations. For example, we saw a case where a rocking baby crib, mattresses, sheets and blankets were loaned to someone going into a flat on a temporary basis.

Effective use of a 'spend to save' budget to prevent homelessness

Staff at the Council make good use of a 'spend to save' budget, and some examples of its use have been to:

- ◆ mediate with parents to keep adult children at home, sometimes paying £50 per week as an incentive until a permanent solution can be found;
- ◆ paying market supplements to private landlords;
- ◆ paying off rent arrears for homeless families in order to secure an RSL tenancy; and
- ◆ negotiating effectively with RSLs on other rent arrears cases.

Retention and recruitment of housing benefit staff

The Council has been able to effectively recruit and retain benefits staff when other Local authorities have experienced difficulties in this area. This situation has been helped by some joint working with neighbouring councils, for example, using common application forms, and joint training. WDC have also worked closely with other local authorities in sharing staff at times of peak workload, and encouraging staff to develop their skills and experience.

Welfare benefits and money advisor

The Council is investing in a Welfare benefits and money advice service to ensure that residents of the district can maximise their income. This is a very valuable resource in levering in extra income to the most vulnerable sectors of the community and Wychavon are the only local authority in Worcestershire to provide this service. The service is provided to the community by a dedicated officer with interviews being held in convenient locations, or at clients' homes. The amount of extra income being derived from the service is being measured and since April 2004 an extra £941,150 of additional benefit income has been obtained.