

Strategic Housing Services

Tamworth Borough Council

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Contents

Local Authority Housing Inspections	4
Summary	5
Scoring the service	7
Recommendations	10
Report	14
Context	14
The locality	14
The Council	15
The service	15
How good is the service?	16
What has the service aimed to achieve?	16
Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?	17
Access and customer care	17
Diversity	20
Strategic approach to housing	21
Making best use of existing housing	24
Enabling the provision of more housing	28
Is the service delivering value for money?	30
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	34
What is the service track record in delivering improvement?	34
How well does the service manage performance?	35
Does the service have the capacity to improve?	38
Appendix 1 – Performance indicators	42
Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken	43

Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

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

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

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

Summary

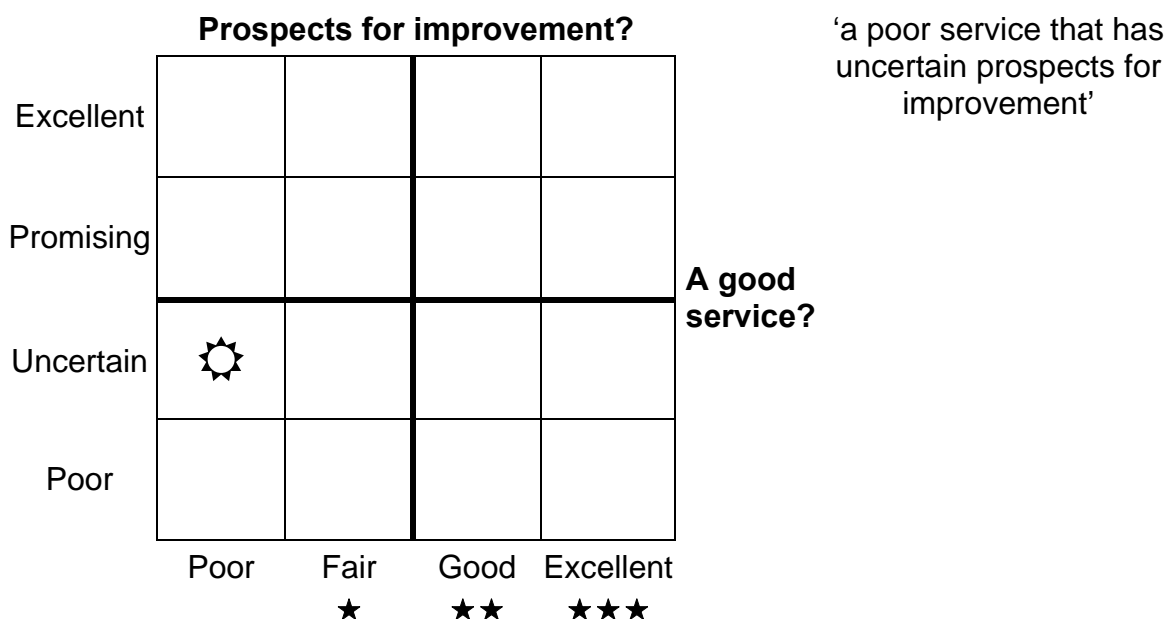
- 1 The strategic housing service delivered by Tamworth Borough Council provides a poor service. Access to services is inconsistent, and the quality and timeliness of housing advice is variable. Not all aspects of the service are well publicised to customers, and a lack of comprehensive service standards means that customers do not know what level of service they should expect. Insufficient leadership focus on diversity means the Council is not meeting legislative or good practice requirements in this area, and cannot show that services are being shaped around the needs of customers, or are being delivered equitably.
- 2 Lack of a sustained focus on the strategic housing service means that the Council is not making best use of existing housing stock. This is important as new supply is unlikely to meet housing need. It is failing to reduce the number of empty homes in the Borough, and is not enforcing standards effectively in the private sector. The Council is not fully compliant with current homelessness legislation. Housing options, advice and homelessness prevention activities are underdeveloped, with some poor outcomes for service users such as lengthy waits for settled accommodation and inconsistent move on arrangements. There is an over reliance on bed and breakfast accommodation, for which standards are not checked, for vulnerable people. The Council lacks understanding of how the cost and quality of the service compares to others, and efforts to identify and challenge areas of high spending, such as spending on bed and breakfast accommodation, are inconsistent, which means that it cannot show that the service provides value for money.
- 3 However, there are some areas of strength in the service. The Council has a good understanding of the housing market, supported by an improved research base. Staff provide a welcoming and friendly service and services are accessible to people with a disability. Service provision for people fleeing domestic violence is effective, and the Council has worked to increase housing provision for people with support needs. The Council has delivered creditable numbers of new affordable homes, and negotiates effectively with developers to help meet housing need. It has a positive approach to joint working which is delivering some improved elements of the service for customers. It is attracting external funding and inward investment, and has a robust approach to procurement, which is releasing resources which it uses to help meet its priorities.

- 4 The prospects for improvement are uncertain. Performance compared to others is mixed and in some areas, such as bringing empty properties back to use and the length of time spent in temporary accommodation, has got worse. The Council cannot demonstrate that it has improved the value for money of the service, and there are examples of weak financial control. Slow progress in diversity and private sector activities prevention mean that improved outcomes for vulnerable customers and people in housing need are not evident, and improvements from the recent focus on prevention of homelessness are at a very early stage. Improvement plans address key weaknesses, but a lack of a sustained focus on this service area means that there have been delays in implementing agreed actions and improvements. The performance management framework has been strengthened, but there are gaps in the way that performance is monitored to inform service improvement. Plans to address the significant challenge to financial capacity resulting from the negative transfer ballot have not yet been finalised, all of which lead to uncertainty in prospects for improvement.

Scoring the service

- 5 We have assessed Tamworth Borough Council as providing a 'poor', zero-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 6 The strategic housing service provided by Tamworth Borough Council is a poor service because:
- the quality of housing advice and accessibility of services to customers is not consistent and some customers are waiting a long time for housing advice;
 - there are gaps in publicity information and leaflets about the services offered, such as Disabled Facilities Grants and home improvement grants;
 - customer feedback is not systematically collected or used to inform service improvement and complaints are not being managed effectively;
 - corporate service standards are not comprehensive and, alongside service standards for dealing with racial harassment, are not being monitored;
 - lack of customer profile information and service monitoring means that services are not being shaped around customers, and the Council cannot show that services are being delivered equitably;

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.

8 Strategic Housing Services | Scoring the service

- the strategic approach to diversity is weak, it is not well understood within the organisation and the Council does not meet legislative requirements;
- the approach and tools available to prevent homelessness are limited, the Council relies too much on the use of bed and breakfast accommodation which is not quality checked, and some people are spending a long time in unsettled and potentially unsuitable accommodation;
- move on arrangements are inconsistent and there is no protocol in place with social services to manage outcomes for young people who are leaving care;
- choice for housing applicants is limited and the Council is not matching the needs of housing applicants to adapted properties;
- performance in delivering Disabled Facilities Grants is weak with some people waiting a long time for adaptations to their home;
- the Council is not engaging effectively with private sector landlords to tackle housing need and monitor standards, and is not maximising the number of empty homes being brought back into use; and
- improved value for money over time cannot be demonstrated as the Council does not have a full understanding of its costs and how they compare to others.

However, there are some strengths, which include:

- staff provide a welcoming and friendly service; offices are accessible to disabled customers and arrangements are in place to meet a wide range of communication needs;
- out of hours housing advice enquiries are dealt with appropriately and, although limited in frequency, housing advice surgeries take place in wider community locations;
- arrangements to support victims of domestic violence are effective and the Council works in partnership to ensure that health and welfare needs of gypsy and traveller families are met;
- the Council has a good understanding of the housing market and has developed a sound strategic approach which responds to housing priorities; and
- the Council is maximising provision of new affordable housing on allocated and windfall sites.

7 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- performance compared to others and within the strategic housing service is mixed and not showing consistent improvement;
- the Council cannot demonstrate a robust track record of improving value for money and there are examples of a lack of effective financial control within the service;

- leadership has not been effective in all areas and the Council has been slow to tackle key areas of service such as diversity, prevention of homelessness and the approach to private sector housing;
 - there has not been a sustained focus on the service area and how it works as a whole to meet need, and there has been slippage in delivering agreed improvement and action plans, which has led to continued weaknesses in service delivery;
 - there are gaps in how performance is monitored and managed to improve services and action plans are not always fully resourced;
 - the appraisal system is not being used consistently to manage staff performance and there are weaknesses in the approach to staff training;
 - capacity to deliver sustained improvements is reduced through vacancies in key posts;
 - the Council is not proactively assessing its capacity to deliver planned improvements and has not sustained its focus on existing plans when new priorities have emerged; and
 - the negative stock transfer ballot poses a significant challenge to financial capacity and the retention strategy is not yet finalised.
- 8 However, there are some strengths in the approach to improvement, which include:
- the Council is attracting inward investment and external funding to help deliver its priorities;
 - the target of achieving a fit for purpose housing strategy has been achieved and the research base has been improved;
 - a creditable number of new affordable homes have been delivered and the Council is meeting threshold targets;
 - there have been some early successes in preventing homelessness; and the Council has increased the provision of supported accommodation for victims of domestic violence and young families;
 - the Council is aware of where it needs to improve and action plans address key weaknesses;
 - risk is well managed and linked to financial management; and
 - ICT is used to improve efficiency and develop more effective ways of working.

Recommendations

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

Recommendation

- R1 Strengthen the focus on providing effective access and customer care by:*
- developing, monitoring and publishing performance against comprehensive service standards which have been developed with customers;*
 - training staff to offer consistent, timely and high quality housing advice at the first point of contact;*
 - reviewing and improving timescales for offering appointments for housing advice;*
 - addressing gaps in the publicity information available for services, to include Disabled Facilities Grant, home improvement grants and private standards and enforcement;*
 - developing methods to collect and use ongoing customer feedback to shape and improve services; and*
 - improving response times and analysis of customer complaints and using this to identify and address weaknesses in service delivery.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- services being delivered consistently and to a standard which meets customers requirements; and
- improved customer awareness of the services which are available to them.

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

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

Recommendation

R2 Ensure that legislative requirements for diversity are met by:

- *updating and publishing the 2003 Race Equality Scheme; and*
- *finalising and publishing the Disability Equality Scheme.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- that the Council complies with statutory duties and has a clear framework for improving outcomes in race and disability equality.

This should be implemented by the end of March 2008.

Recommendation

R3 Improve the corporate approach to diversity by:

- *developing a corporate strategy to embed a diversity culture across the organisation and ensuring that this benefits from appropriate and sustained leadership;*
- *developing and implementing training for staff and councillors which updates their knowledge and understanding of diversity, legislative requirements and good practice and how it relates to their roles and service delivery;*
- *capturing and using customer profile information to monitor equality of service delivery and take action to remove any barriers to access; and*
- *ensuring that service improvement plans address diverse needs.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- services delivered fairly and equitably and which meet the needs of diverse groups within the community.

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

Recommendation

R4 Strengthen the approach to housing options, advice and homelessness by:

- *revisiting the prevention strategy with wider service areas and with elected members to increase the range of tools available to officers to offer an effective housing options, advice and prevention service;*
- *developing co-ordinated arrangements for move on accommodation and agree protocols with social services to better manage services for young people; and*
- *monitoring the suitability and standards of temporary accommodation.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- reduction in the numbers of people who experience homelessness;
- reduction in the length of time people spend in unsettled accommodation; and
- safe and secure accommodation which meet the needs of vulnerable people.

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

Recommendation

R5 Make better use of existing stock by:

- *implementing a matching service for adapted properties;*
- *improving monitoring arrangements and performance for delivery of Disabled Facilities Grants;*
- *reducing the number of empty properties; and*
- *enforcing and monitoring standards in private sector housing stock.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- making improved use of existing adaptations to meet the needs of housing applicants;
- ensuring that the DFG service enables people to live independently in their homes;
- increasing the supply of available housing; and
- maintaining and improving standards in the private rented sector.

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

Recommendation

R6 Improve the approach to value for money by:

- *ensuring information about the cost, quality and performance of all services and how they compare to others is regularly reviewed and used to inform the annual VFM action plan.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- improved understanding of comparative value for money and ability to take action to improve the use of resources.

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

Recommendation

R7 Strengthen performance management by:

- *tackling the silo approach to management of the service and maintaining a consistent focus on the service as a whole and how it is contributing to priorities;*
- *ensuring that action and improvement plans are adequately resourced and co-ordinated; and*
- *conducting appraisals on time and capturing and meeting learning and development needs.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved management and co-ordination of the service;
- improvements delivered within agreed timescales; and
- development of appropriate skills to deliver services effectively.

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

- 10 We would like to thank the staff of Tamworth Borough Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 15 to 19 October 2007

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Report

Context

The locality

- 11 Tamworth is a large town in the south-east corner of Staffordshire. The Borough is compact, covering 12 square miles, and urban, and also serves the needs of surrounding rural villages in the neighbouring districts of Lichfield and North Warwickshire.
- 12 Until the early 1960s, Tamworth was a small market town surrounded by several villages. It was then designated as an overspill town to accommodate people moving out of Birmingham. Within forty years, the Borough's population tripled to 74,531³. This is reflected in the Borough's population density of 2,403 people per square kilometre, compared to 409 for the West Midlands and 246 for England.
- 13 Sustained development means that there are challenges for the authority in terms of opportunities for additional housing development, which are exacerbated by its geographical size and location, such as flood plains in the north and the south of the Borough, sites of special scientific interest, a mainline rail route and only a small amount of open countryside and green belt surrounding the built-up urban area. In addition, the level of sales of affordable housing through the right to buy scheme has outstripped the number of completions.
- 14 Tamworth's Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) population, at 1.9 per cent, is lower than the county average of 2.4 per cent⁴. The 2006 Housing Needs Survey indicates an ageing population with a significant increase of 71 per cent in the over 65 age group to 2021, and linked to this, 8.6 per cent of the population in the Borough have a long term limiting illness.
- 15 The unemployment rate is 4.4 per cent which is below both the national average (4.9 per cent) and the regional average (5.2 per cent). Despite the relatively high levels of economic activity, the Borough has a relatively low-skilled and low-waged economy, which impacts on affordability of housing within the Borough, particularly in terms of the increase in house prices of almost 40 per cent since 2002 in the West Midlands. In terms of deprivation, Tamworth is ranked 145th out of 354 in the 2004 Indices of Local Deprivation⁵, although there are significant variations between wards.

³ ONS 2001

⁴ ONS 2001

⁵ Where 1 is most and 354 is least deprived

The Council

- 16 The Council has been Conservative-controlled since 2004, and currently consists of 30 Members (24 Conservative, 5 Labour, 1 Independent) representing 10 Wards. The Cabinet comprises the Leader, Deputy Leader and four Portfolio Holders, and there are four Scrutiny Committees.
- 17 Tamworth Borough Council employs 415 full time equivalent staff. The Chief Executive is assisted by a Corporate Management Team, with Assistant Directors responsible for specific areas.
- 18 The Council's General Fund budget for 2007/08 is £52 million gross or £12.4 million net cost of services. Projected end of year balances are £2.5 million.
- 19 The Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) in 2004 rated the Council as 'fair'.

The service

- 20 Tamworth Borough Council Housing Service is responsible for managing, maintaining and improving approximately 5,000 Council properties. Housing management services are provided from three area offices. Wider Council services are provided from the main reception at Marmion House in the town centre, where the majority of the Council's services are located.
- 21 In July 2007, tenants voted against proposals to transfer the housing stock to Tamworth Community Gateway. As a result the Council is planning for the long term retention of the housing stock.
- 22 The strategic housing function is split between the strategic planning and the housing management functions. The housing strategy team transferred to the strategic planning service in September 2007, and a full organisational restructure is planned to commence from autumn 2007 following the negative stock transfer ballot.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

23 The Council's vision is that by 2020, Tamworth will become the preferred place for people to live and raise their families. This is supported by seven corporate priorities, which are annually revised. The recently revised corporate priorities are to:

- actively tackle the cause and impact of crime and anti-social behaviour;
- become a cleaner, greener and more floral town;
- deliver value for money;
- become accountable, approachable and visible;
- raise Tamworth's profile within the Heart of England;
- improve health standards, housing and education for the people of Tamworth; and
- enhance the provision for Tamworth's youth.

An additional internal corporate priority is to ensure that staff are valued.

24 The Housing Strategy, which covers the period from 2007 to 2010, sets out five high level priorities, which are to:

- increase the supply of affordable housing, widen housing choice and prevent homelessness;
- address the needs of vulnerable people;
- address the housing needs generated by an ageing population;
- encourage sustainable communities and improve the condition of the stock in the private sector; and
- improve housing and environmental conditions in the private sector.

These priorities are underpinned by a vision for the strategic approach to housing which is to work with partners and the community to widen housing choice, address housing needs and improve the quality of life for residents of Tamworth.

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

Access and customer care

- 25 This is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. Access to services across the range of Council activities is inconsistent, and the quality and availability of advice and information about strategic housing services is variable. Service standards are not comprehensive and the Council is not maximising feedback from customers to inform service improvement. The Council cannot show how it is shaping services to meet the needs of customers. However, staff provide a welcoming and friendly service and there are some positive examples of joint working which have improved the information and service available to customers.
- 26 Overall, access to services is inconsistent. The Council identified this through ongoing monitoring of the different ways that customers contact the organisation, and has recently revised its customer access and service strategy. The updated strategy and action plan provide a firm basis for improving the quality and consistency of customers' experiences of service delivery through a service transformation project, for which resources have been approved. However, until fully implemented, the accessibility of services remains inconsistent depending on how customers choose to get in touch.
- 27 Staff provide a welcoming and friendly service to customers. The Council has worked with other organisations to mystery shop the service provided, and feedback from the latest exercise shows an improvement in the services provided by staff at Marmion House. They have all recently achieved either NVQ level two or three in customer service, and have received a number of compliments regarding their positive and helpful approach to customers.
- 28 Joint working is delivering some benefits in front line service provision. The Council has worked with the County Council to provide a single access route to social services through the Marmion House reception area. There are also examples of joint working between floating support and supported accommodation providers to jointly assess needs and signpost to the most appropriate scheme, and the Council has worked with neighbouring authorities to produce useful customer information directories for homelessness and domestic violence. This approach helps to maximise resources of the Council and its partners.
- 29 However, the quality and accessibility of housing advice and signposting during office hours is inadequate. Some customers are waiting for up to ten days for an appointment to meet with a housing advice officer. Advice provided at the first contact is not always appropriate or customer focused, for example, directing a caller to another authority to present as homeless and not providing any emergency signposting information. Opportunities for timely intervention reduce over time as cases progress and the Council is not maximising the impact it could have in preventing homelessness.

- 30 The Council offers appropriate housing advice and assistance outside of normal office hours, although some improvements could be made. A rota duty officer is available from within the housing advice team, taking referrals from Homelink, the out of hours service provider. The advice offered is sensitive to individual circumstances, but two calls must be made to access the service through the published out of hours contact number and in an emergency situation, and not all customers may have the means to make two separate charged calls. This does not demonstrate a clear focus on customers. In addition, there are examples of where non housing advice related calls are referred to the homelessness duty officer, which impacts on the ability of the service to maintain a focus on assisting those in housing need.
- 31 Availability of appropriate housing advice and intervention services through other providers is limited. There is a weekly housing advice surgery at the Connexions scheme which is directed towards young people, but access to other schemes such as the Pathway domestic violence scheme have been restricted because of limited capacity within the service. Mediation arrangements are underdeveloped. In addition, the Council is not clear about the effectiveness of debt advice and counselling by the local CAB, but no formal discussions or arrangements have been put in place to explore or address this. This reduces the number and availability of options available to people seeking housing advice and support.
- 32 The quality and availability of information about strategic housing services is variable. There are gaps in what written information is available, for example, about Disabled Facilities Grants and private sector housing, and there is a lack of publicity information available in the reception area and in the Area Housing Offices. The Council has, in the past, used some innovative ways to advertise services, such as bus advertising for affordable warmth, but this has not been sustained. Some useful information is available on the website, for example, regarding homelessness and what to do in an emergency situation, and in wider locations such as GP surgeries, but the information lacks specifics in terms of the actual level of service that will be provided. As a result, not all customers may know what services are available to them and how to access them.
- 33 Inconsistent customer focus means that services are not always being delivered sensitively. Examples include lack of flexible finance availability for people placed in bed and breakfast accommodation in a number of different places who may not necessarily have with them the fares they need to travel to work or education. In addition, lack of joint working between housing advice and rental income management means that people have had problems in accessing settled housing because of accumulated rent arrears while in temporary accommodation, which adds further unnecessary disruption to people's lives. This does not provide service users with the necessary support to enhance life chances.

- 34** Service standards for customer care and strategic housing services are not comprehensive. Corporate customer care standards, called Quality Promises, are in place but, with the exception of two service areas, are not monitored, reported or used to inform service improvement. This is primarily because the standards are not fully measurable. Service standards for the strategic housing service are in draft and are being consulted on with customers and stakeholders. However, they lack specific timescales for action which means that in their current form, customers would be unable to assess the timeliness of the service provided to them. This also limits their usefulness in embedding consistent levels of service and driving improvement.
- 35** The Council is not maximising opportunities to capture and learn from ongoing customer feedback. Complaints, for example, are recorded, but are not systematically analysed to capture and embed learning. Sometimes there are considerable delays in responding to complainants, which lessens confidence that the Council is willing to listen and respond to service failures. With the exception of housing advice, there are no ongoing customer satisfaction surveys for strategic housing services. This limits the ability of the Council to understand the quality of the services provided and use customer feedback to improve services.
- 36** However, there are examples of where front line staff teams have used and responded to customer complaints to improve services. During 2006, a number of complaints were received regarding the housing advice service, which were explored and tackled by staff and managers through joint discussions and awareness raising sessions of the issues raised. This resulted in a clear agreement between the services of how to progress enquiries, which has been effective as there have been no complaints about this aspect of the service during 2007.
- 37** A lack of profile information means that the Council cannot demonstrate how it is shaping services around the needs of customers. The Council is not systematically collecting this information, and is missing opportunities to compare satisfaction across diverse groups because not all existing ongoing surveys collect this information. The Council has recognised this as an area for improvement and has included this in its revised customer care and access strategy.
- 38** Customer care training has not been systematically used to embed agreed standards within the organisation. Customer service staff have benefited from NVQ training funded by the Council, and new starters receive basic information as part of their induction, but there are no refreshers for existing staff. This has already been identified as an area for improvement by the Council and is addressed in the revised customer care and access strategy.

Diversity

- 39 This is an area of weakness. Lack of sustained leadership and focus in this area has resulted in an underdeveloped corporate approach and slow progress in key areas. The Council cannot demonstrate that it has kept pace with changes in legislation or good practice, and cannot show that services are being delivered fairly and equitably.
- 40 The lack of a clear strategic approach, combined with lack of sustained leadership and sufficient prioritisation, has resulted in failure to ensure that the organisation is meeting legislative and good practice requirements. The 2003 Race Equality Scheme has not been updated, and the Disability Equality Scheme (DES), although drafted, has not been approved, progressed or published. The Council has made slow progress against the Local Government Equality Standard, achieving level two in 2006, and does not comply with the CRE Code of Practice for rented housing.
- 41 There is insufficient focus on ensuring that services are being delivered fairly and equitably. The Council does not collect profile information for its customers, and key areas, such as allocations and lettings and housing advice, are not analysed across diversity categories which means that the Council does not know if its policies and practices are meeting the needs of all groups. The Council is also missing opportunities to use existing information to address equality in service provision. For example, the 2006 Housing Needs Survey identified that members of BME households are more likely to have a disability, but the DFG process is not monitored in terms of take up. As a result, the Council is not able to determine and tackle any barriers to access.
- 42 Diversity monitoring of the staff profile is not fully effective and the Council does not know if the profile of its staff reflects that of the wider community. It collects diversity information, for example, about the recruitment process, but does not use this information to compare appointments against community demographic information, for example, disability, and does not assess where further action may be needed in terms of action to ensure equality of opportunity in training, promotion or development opportunities. This lessens the Council's ability to tailor its practices to meet the needs of the wider community.
- 43 Diversity is not well understood within the organisation, and is not embedded within its culture. Diversity is not reflected within the corporate vision, priorities or values. Basic diversity awareness training has taken place for staff in relation to their job roles. However, this has been inconsistent, with some staff not having had any training since 2003 resulting in low awareness of changes in good practice and legislation and how they might relate to service delivery.

- 44 The approach to meeting the needs of young vulnerable people is poor and does not meet the requirements of the 2006 Code of Practice for Homelessness. Lack of protocols with social services means that young people who are presenting as homeless are not receiving adequate advice and support from agencies which are, by law, required to work together to protect them and prevent them from becoming homeless. The result of this is that often they are being placed in bed and breakfast accommodation, for which standards are not monitored, without necessary support arrangements.
- 45 The approach to hate crime is mixed. The Council acts as a reporting centre for racial harassment through the Partners Against Crimes of Hate common reporting scheme and has developed service standards which clearly set out its stance and approach. However, some improvement is needed in that it is not monitoring and reporting against the published service standards, and is not using the common reporting scheme information effectively to inform its own approach to identifying and tackling incidents of racial harassment.
- 46 The Council works effectively with partners to meet the needs of victims of domestic violence. Through the Domestic Violence Forum, the Council developed and implemented a Sanctuary Scheme in July 2006. It has increased the amount of temporary accommodation available to families fleeing domestic violence, from three to six units, and has worked with a neighbouring authority to develop a useful directory of information and services which also outlines the type of help that different agencies offer. As a result, the level of service provision and support has increased and is more effectively signposted.
- 47 Partnership working is also helping to meet the health and welfare needs of gypsies and travellers. The Council ensures that health and welfare assessments are completed for travellers on unauthorised sites through a network of local organisations. This is helping to tackle the disparity of health care provision identified in the Lichfield and Tamworth Health Inequalities Strategy.
- 48 Front line services are accessible in relation to diverse needs. All operational offices are DDA compliant, and arrangements are in place to provide translation and interpreting services for customers who require it. There is guidance for staff on how to offer and use alternative means of communication, such as Braille, large print and audio, and the reception area has text magnifiers and a hearing loop available. The reception area and website has been reviewed by stakeholders and recommendations to further improve accessibility have been included in the revised customer care and access strategy.

Strategic approach to housing

- 49 This is an area where strengths and weaknesses are balanced. The Council has a good understanding of the housing market, supported by an improved research base. There is an effective planning framework, and effective working between strategy and planning staff. However, the preventative approach to homelessness is not fully developed and the strategic approach to the private sector is weak.

- 50** The 2007/10 housing strategy provides a clear framework for delivering the service. The Council has worked closely with the Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM) to ensure that the strategy is 'fit for purpose'. It contains clear links to national and regional priorities, for example, development of sustainable communities, and supports sub-regional priorities such as improving housing choice. Delivery is underpinned by a comprehensive and resourced action plan which also recognises where there are weaknesses in service delivery, and identifies the actions and resources necessary to tackle them, which provides a robust basis to achieve agreed priorities.
- 51** The Council has a sound research base to inform its strategies and plans. The 2006 Housing Needs Survey was supported by a Balanced Housing Market assessment which provides comprehensive information on the required level, type, tenure mix and geographical location of affordable housing need, and covers supply and demand from within and outside of the Borough. Wider contextual information, such as land registry and waiting list data, has also been used, all of which has informed the Local Development Framework. This will be further supplemented by the sub-regional Housing Market Assessment (HMA), which is nearing completion.
- 52** However, the research base is not yet informed by an assessment of the needs of all diverse groups. The Council has recent information regarding the condition of the stock in both the public and private sector to inform its approach to meeting the Government's Decent Homes Standard targets⁶. In addition, it has used the county Supporting People Strategy to understand the needs of vulnerable groups. However, it has not yet completed its assessment of housing need for BME communities and gypsies and travellers although these are now underway and are expected to report by the end of the year. This will better inform the strategic approach to meeting the needs of all groups.
- 53** The Council has strengthened its approach to maintaining its research base. It recognised that it had more work to do in order to make better use of existing information. For example, the last analysis of the number of empty homes in the Borough is dated April 2006, and lack of regular updates of wider information sources meant the Council was not able to analyse any trends or the impact of its work. Part of the brief for the HMA was to provide an assessment of how best to keep the research base updated, with a target for the strategy team to update and report its research every six months. This approach means that the Council is better placed to respond to any emerging trends.

⁶ The Council is expected to achieve the Decent Homes Standard in its own stock by 2010. The target for PSA7 requires a year-on-year increase in the proportion of private sector housing occupied by vulnerable people which meets the standard, in addition to achieving 65 per cent by 2006/07, 70 per cent by 2010/11 and 75 per cent by 2020/21.

- 54 Effective consultation arrangements have enabled a wide range of stakeholders and residents to contribute to the development of the housing strategy. In addition to elected members and Council staff from different services, RSLs were consulted through the existing forum and one off events. In addition, focus groups for vulnerable service users, input from the Local Strategic Partnership, and face to face market research with residents have supported strategy development. The annual Tamworth Listens event also captured the views of residents. This approach has enabled stakeholders to influence both the priorities of the housing strategy, and the actions required to deliver it.
- 55 There is a sound planning framework in place to support delivery of affordable homes. The local plan was approved in July 2006, and is supported by interim planning guidance which takes account of recent planning guidance and clearly sets out the Council's requirements for provision of affordable homes on windfall and allocated development sites. The Council is making good progress with its Local Development Framework and has started consulting stakeholders on the core strategy which will set out the future strategic approach.
- 56 The housing strategy team works closely and effectively with planning colleagues. The housing strategy team moved to the strategic planning service in July 2007, as part of interim restructure arrangements, which has led to improved understanding on both sides about how the services impact on each other. The strategy team has benefited from planning colleagues' expertise to take a lead role in negotiating with developers regarding provision based on their understanding of housing need across the Borough, and RSL developers are positive about the wider team in terms of their accessibility and knowledge.
- 57 The Council has been slow to respond to the context of the Borough to inform its thinking about how it can work best to meet existing and new housing need. The size of the Borough, geographical context and history of overspill development on available sites from the 1960s means that the Council is unlikely to meet housing need through the development of new affordable housing, yet key areas of making best use of existing stock, such as preventing homelessness and private sector activities, are underdeveloped in terms of maximising the existing housing stock. This adds to the pressure on the local housing market.
- 58 The strategic approaches to homelessness and to the private sector are underdeveloped. The homelessness strategy has been refreshed and a joint strategy with a neighbouring authority is contributing to the development of initiatives across the sub-region. However, the Council has only recently adopted a preventative approach to homelessness, which is not fully embedded. The private sector renewal policy, which sets out broad strategic objectives, has not been updated since it was approved in January 2005, and so does not reflect the 2006 private sector stock condition survey. There are no overarching targets or outcomes to guide the Council's work in relation to private sector housing activities in relation to meeting housing need, and there are few outcomes to date in this area of the service.

Making best use of existing housing

- 59 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in the Council's approach to making the best use of existing housing. The Council is not fully complying with homelessness legislation and good practice. Housing advice, prevention and options services are underdeveloped and bed and breakfast is used too frequently. It is often the only option available to young homeless people. There is also a lack of customer care in this area. Disabled Facility Grants are not completed quickly, and there is a lack of engagement with the private sector. Arrangements and actions for bringing empty properties back into use are weak. However, the Council has now grasped the need to undertake more prevention work, with the appointment of homelessness prevention officers, the use of a bond scheme to provide deposits to private landlords, and the successful use of an under occupation scheme.

Homelessness and housing advice

- 60 Housing advice, homelessness prevention and options services are not fully developed. The quality of housing advice is mixed, and the Council has only recently changed the approach to making the best use of existing housing by increasing homelessness prevention activities. The approach to mediation, early intervention and the provision of small scale financial assistance are all underdeveloped. This limits the effectiveness of actions to reduce the level of homelessness in the Borough.
- 61 The Council's strategic approach to homelessness is not fully developed. The homelessness strategy for the Borough has been refreshed for 2006/09 and is linked to the Housing Strategy. The Council has also developed a joint strategy with a neighbouring authority and is contributing to the development of initiatives across the sub-region. However, the Council has been slow to adopt and fully support a preventative approach to homelessness, although this is now reflected in strategies and plans. The number of homelessness applications and acceptances has been increasing over the last two years, and whilst the Council has now put in place actions to begin more prevention work, the outcomes are yet to be realised.
- 62 There is an over reliance on the use of bed and breakfast, and other temporary accommodation for homeless people, and the average length of time that people remain in temporary accommodation is increasing. In 2005/06, the average length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation was 3.65 weeks, which increased to 11.84 weeks on 2006/07. There are still occasions when vulnerable people, for example, lone parents with dependent children, are being placed in this type of accommodation for longer than six weeks in breach of the Suitability of Accommodation Order 2003. In 2005/06, the average length of stay in other temporary accommodation was 34.5 weeks, which again increased in 2006/07 to 45 weeks. Although the Council is reducing the number of people in temporary accommodation, the actual amount of time spent is increasing, which means that homeless households have to stay for long periods in unsettled accommodation and that the Council is not maximising value for money in this area.

- 63 Move on arrangements from temporary and bed and breakfast accommodation are inconsistent and un-coordinated. For some groups, for example, those in Council managed supported housing, arrangements work effectively, but for those in other hostel or bed and breakfast accommodation outcomes are less positive. There is a lack of clear protocols to set a framework for how move on accommodation should be provided and how priorities should be determined. This means that the service is not consistent for all service users and some people are remaining for lengthy periods of time in unsettled accommodation.
- 64 People are placed into bed and breakfast accommodation which the Council cannot demonstrate is safe and suitable. It does not formally check or monitor the conditions of the accommodation being used, and there is no formalised action taking place to raise the standard of accommodation through, for example, service level agreements. This puts vulnerable people at potential risk of being placed into unsuitable and unsafe accommodation.
- 65 There is a lack of support and follow up action provided to homeless people moving into temporary accommodation or bed and breakfast. There is an absence of information provided to service users and there are no specific arrangements to provide essential items through support packs or other means. There is no small scale financial support which means, for example, that bus or taxi fares are not available to support immediate transport to the accommodation or to access services immediately after that. This does not provide a high level of customer care to vulnerable people.
- 66 Partnership working to improve long term outcomes for young vulnerable people is not fully effective. There are increasing numbers of 16 and 17 year olds who are coming from care or looked after backgrounds who are presenting as homeless, yet the Council does not have protocols in place with social services to address these concerns. This is a requirement of the 2006 Homelessness Code of Guidance for local authorities. Staff are concerned about this trend particularly when the placement of young people into unsuitable bed and breakfast accommodation is the outcome in many cases. This means that vulnerable young people are not being adequately supported by the agencies responsible for them.
- 67 However, there are also some positive examples of addressing the needs of homeless people and those in housing need. For example, the Council has established a bond scheme which provides an initial rent deposit for homeless people. This has been used on six occasions recently and is an additional tool to enable access to the private rented sector. In addition the council has worked with a local RSL to run a homelessness education programme in all secondary schools in the Borough, which aims to raise awareness of the issues surrounding housing and homelessness and to identify any issues in the family at an early stage. For the academic year 2007/08 the programme has been extended to run drop in advice centres at Tamworth College as well as providing training to college staff. This assists in the Council's approach to homelessness prevention.

- 68 There have been also been some recent successes in the Council's approach to homelessness and housing options. These include the development of a young families' scheme in partnership with Bromford HA, the re-location and increase in size of the women's refuge, the development of a Sanctuary scheme for sufferers of domestic violence, and the production of a homelessness directory in partnership with two neighbouring councils. These activities are contributing towards a more effective prevention approach to homelessness but the outcomes have yet to be fully realised.
- 69 There is a lack of choice in the way that housing allocations and lettings are undertaken by the Council. There is no choice based lettings scheme in operation and this limits the provision of choice and is a missed opportunity to market less popular properties that are available in the district. This particularly applies to some of the Council's sheltered housing. However, the Council is making good progress with partners to develop a sub-regional scheme which is planned to be fully operational during 2008.
- 70 The absence of a formal scheme to match adapted properties to the needs of people with disabilities is a weakness. This was a recommendation made to the Council in 2006 within a report commissioned from Shelter, but this has not been implemented. Although the Council has information about which properties are adapted there are no formal arrangements to advertise these properties when they become available which potentially limits choice for people with disabilities and does not make the most effective use of the existing housing stock.
- 71 However, the Council is effectively using an under occupation incentive scheme to assist in making best use of the housing stock. Tenants who voluntarily move to smaller accommodation are paid £1,000 for the first room vacated, followed by £500 for each additional room. The service makes links between those tenants who apply for the Council's gardening assistance scheme to identify tenants who may be finding a larger property too difficult to manage. In the last year the scheme has been used successfully for ten people. This helps to provide larger accommodation for those who need it.

Private sector housing services

- 72 The strategic approach to the private sector is underdeveloped. The private sector renewal policy, which sets out broad strategic objectives, has not been updated since it was approved in January 2005, and so does not reflect the 2006 private sector stock condition survey. There are no overarching targets or outcomes to guide the Council's work in relation to private sector housing activities in relation to meeting housing need, and there are few outcomes to date in this area of the service. The housing strategy recognises this, and refers to appointing a strategic partner to develop and deliver progress, but this thinking is at a very early stage and has not been fully risk assessed.

- 73 The Council is not maximising opportunities to work with all external partners to support strategic housing objectives. In the past the Council started to interact with private landlords but this has not been followed up over the last two years. For example, the Council does not have a private landlords' forum to engage in exploring how the private rented sector could assist with homelessness. Although the Council has developed a policy and procedure for a private sector leasing scheme this has not been effectively implemented. These are missed opportunities to make better use of the existing housing stock for the benefit of homeless and vulnerable people in Tamworth.
- 74 The Council's approach to bringing empty properties back into use is weak. There are around 700 empty properties reflected in the Council's own figures, but only one private sector dwelling was bought back into use through the Council's own activities in 2006/07. This shows a worsening trend with a figure of 19 being achieved in 2005/06. The Council does not have a specific empty homes policy which limits the ability of the Council to make best use of all existing housing.
- 75 Standards in Houses of Multiple Occupation are not being managed effectively. A licensing scheme was agreed in 2006, but to date, no HMOs have been licensed due to a lack of capacity. Additional funding has been secured and the Council is aiming to fully implement the scheme by June 2008. However, currently, the Council is not adequately regulating the conditions being provided in HMOs and is not using its full range of powers to improve standards.
- 76 The Council's actions in engaging with the private sector are under developed. It does not seek to use all available tools to address poor private sector housing conditions. It does not, for example, provide loans, or small scale financial support to secure improvements in the private sector. The actions that it does take are limited to the provision of Home Assistance Grants, but these are not well publicised and the budget for these was not fully spent in 2006/07. During 2006/07, 43 grants for home repair assistance were provided to a value of £52,000, but the Council has not targeted this activity, and has not fully integrated actions into the context of its wider approach to its strategic housing function.
- 77 Performance in providing Disabled Facilities Grants (DFG) to enable residents to live safely and independently in their homes is weak. There are three applicants who have been waiting since an assessment was completed in 2005 for DFG work to be completed, and eight cases from 2006. The Council's own prioritisation arrangements mean that cases with a lower priority are 'awarded' either a 10 or 15 month waiting time after assessments have been carried out by an occupational therapist (OT), and then cases are completed in date order. This means that only the most urgent cases are done quickly, but the effect and outcomes of this system of prioritisation have not been evaluated.
- 78 The number of applicants receiving DFGs is showing a falling trend which although national information is showing a considerable increase in demand for grants of this nature. In 2003/04, 48 DFGs were completed - by 2006/07 this has fallen to 23. This is concerning given that the 2006 housing needs survey found that 23.7 per cent of households in Tamworth include a member with a disability. This means that the needs of people with disabilities may not be fully addressed within the current arrangements.

- 79 However, there are some positive aspects of the DFG service that are bringing benefits to people with disabilities. For example, the Council has fast tracking arrangements for people who have been determined to have a high priority. In addition, it has taken action to improve performance in the public sector by sharing funding of an OT to give additional capacity in getting assessments completed as part of the DFG process in the Council owned stock. This provides an improved service for people with disabilities to live safely and independently in their homes.

Enabling the provision of more housing

- 80 This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. The Council has delivered a creditable number of new affordable homes and negotiates effectively to secure the type, tenure and density of development it wishes to see. It is meeting challenging delivery targets and is maximising opportunities for development on allocated and windfall sites. It works well with partners. However, guidance for developers requires updating and the Council has not reviewed the use of its own assets in a structured way.
- 81 The Council has taken a pragmatic approach to target setting in this area. In view of restricted supply and size of available sites, target setting overall has focused on meeting the structure plan targets, with affordable housing targets relating primarily to planning obligations and thresholds. As a result, there are no overarching targets for delivery of affordable homes, although performance is monitored on a site by site basis and within the Annual Monitoring Report. This approach has worked well for the Council in terms of its performance to date.
- 82 Despite constraints on the availability of sites within the Borough, the Council has delivered a creditable number of affordable homes. Over the last three years, 255 units have been completed, and although performance against the target of 30 per cent affordable homes on suitable sites has fluctuated, overall completions on suitable sites over the last three years equates to almost 32 per cent. There were 70 completions in 2006/07, compared to 41 in 2005/06, and 144 in 2004/05. Overall, new affordable housing has comprised more than 20 per cent of total completions in the Borough over the last three years. This is positive performance given that land constraints mean that the Council is focused on on-site provision, and has not accepted commuted sums.
- 83 The Council has a clear understanding of the tenure, type, and density of the housing it wishes to see on allocated and windfall sites within the Borough and negotiations are effective. The housing strategy manager now undertakes early stage negotiations, supported by colleagues within the strategic planning service, with developers on individual sites to secure the required tenure type and mix, informed by the 2006 Housing Needs Survey and targets within the interim planning guidance. Negotiations are effective and delivering the required amount and type of units to help meet known housing need.

- 84 Threshold targets, which have been revised, are challenging given the context of the authority. The local plan target of providing 30 per cent affordable on sites of 25 or more units has been increased to 30 per cent on sites of 15 or more units, in line with recent planning guidance. This is important as due to the large scale overspill development in previous years, with the exception of one site, the remaining allocated sites are relatively small, and benefit from the approach to individual negotiations. Success in achieving the revised targets is increasing the supply of affordable homes.
- 85 The use of previously developed and windfall sites are making an important contribution to delivery of new affordable homes. The Council has exceeded targets for use of brownfield sites, and has proactively sought to maximise the use of windfall sites. Over the last three years, 99 per cent of all new housing completions have been on previously developed sites, exceeding the structure plan target of 45 per cent. Windfall sites have also made an important contribution, for example, 131 completions in 2006/07 of which 48 involved Council or RSL led delivery of new affordable homes. This approach is helping to ensure that sites coming forward are being developed to meet housing need.
- 86 The Council works well with partners and developers to identify sites and funding for development. The strategy team works closely with developing RSLs to identify sites for new schemes and supports them in preparing their bids for planning permission and funding. A recent success was the delivery of 27 shared ownership units on a derelict site. A successful funding bid has been made to Supporting People to provide a young persons hostel for Tamworth and Lichfield, and funding has been obtained from the Housing Corporation to develop 60 units of extra care housing through remodelling of a sheltered scheme over the next 18 months. The approach to working closely with partners, developers and funders means that the Council is securing new developments which meet a wide range of housing need.
- 87 In addition, the Council effectively seeks to use its own land to support delivery of new affordable housing. Recently this enabled delivery of 14 social rented homes on a disused garage site. The land was provided at zero cost with Housing Corporation grant funding of £498,000. The units are available for 100 per cent nominations from the Council's waiting list. A further example includes the nominal sale of the site of an unpopular sheltered scheme for development by an RSL, which, with grant funding, enabled 100 per cent affordable housing development of 14 units, with 30 per cent shared ownership and 70 per cent social rented units.

- 88 The Council is actively engaging with partners outside of the Borough to determine how best to meet future development targets and known housing need. It has worked to influence the regional spatial strategy, which is not due for completion until the end of 2007, in recognition of the limited supply of land within the Borough. Based on a previous assessment of sub-regional housing market influence, it is working with local authority neighbours from within and outside the county to explore how joint working and delivery can overcome local constraints. Although discussions are at early stages, its approach is positive in that it is considering all future options for delivery, rather than accept existing geographical constraints as a barrier to future supply.
- 89 The schemes visited during the inspection have been constructed to a good quality and meet Housing Corporation scheme standards. However, the Council does not seek to stretch those standards. In addition, there is no clear focus on building to meet standards for lifetime homes. Although the Council is aware of the need for schemes to remain viable, the lack of focus on lifetime homes is important given the ageing population profile of the Borough.
- 90 Guidance for developers is in need of some improvement. The interim planning guidance currently available contains information on thresholds and planning obligations, but needs to be updated to reflect the revised definition of affordable housing in PPS3. The revised definition is in use already, but developers need to be clear about the Council's expectations from the start of any negotiations. This has already been identified as an area for improvement by the Council.
- 91 Although the Council has made use of its own land, this has not been part of a structured asset management strategy. Identification of sites for provision of affordable housing has been largely reactive to date. The asset management strategy is in draft, and finalisation will incorporate an assessment of assets in relation to retention of the stock and strengthen the strategic approach in this area. The reactive nature of use of assets to date means that the Council can not be sure that it has, or is, maximising opportunities to increase the supply of affordable housing.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 92 Strengths and weaknesses are balanced. The Council has exceeded its corporate efficiency targets and its approach to procurement and joint working is delivering savings. Savings are redirected in line with priorities, and the Council makes use of external funding and inward investment. However, cost analysis and comparison is at an early stage, and the effectiveness of its approach to identifying and tackling areas of high costs, such as spending on bed and breakfast temporary accommodation is mixed. Value for money initiatives at service level are underdeveloped.

How do costs compare?

- 93 The approach to comparing the cost of services is developing, but is at an early stage. The Council has used website based value for money (VFM) profiles to examine the high level costs of its services, which has shown some areas of high cost, and low performance, such as homelessness and private sector housing. The Council planned to explore these areas in more detail as part of its VFM and efficiency action plan for 2007/08, but the negative stock transfer ballot means that it will be focusing instead on landlord services. As a result, its understanding of the reasons why some elements of the strategic housing service are higher cost than others remain limited, and until further analysis is completed, is unable to demonstrate that the services provide value for money.
- 94 In addition to this, the Council's understanding of how the quality of its strategic housing services compares to others in relation to cost is also underdeveloped. Performance indicators combined with the VFM profiles give some insight into this, but a lack of any ongoing qualitative assessment means that the Council does not have an understanding of how customers view the services provided. As a result, it is not able to make informed choices about service delivery in relation to how costs and quality compare.
- 95 The Council is seeking to develop its approach to value for money by working with other authorities. It has, for example, recently completed a baseline cost benchmarking exercise of the strategic housing function through the Staffordshire Housing Officers Group. This provides the basis of a value for money assessment of the strategic housing service, but is at an early stage, and has not yet produced any outcomes.

How is value for money managed?

- 96 The Council has a clear focus on value for money, as a corporate priority and value, but does not have all of the required tools in place to support its approach. In line with the 2007/08 VFM action plan, the Council has identified where it needs to take action to improve its approach, such as development of VFM appraisal objectives for managers for 2007/08, increasing the focus on benchmarking and cost analysis, and completing detailed reviews of high cost service areas already identified by the use of Audit Commission value for money profiles. However, many of the initiatives are at a very early stage, and as a result, VFM is not yet fully embedded within the Council's activities.
- 97 Efficiency gains are being delivered in excess of agreed targets. The Council delivered £407,000 efficiency gains in 2006/07 based on targeted actions in the 2005/06 Annual Efficiency Statement (AES), and is making good progress during 2007/08 against the targets for the 2006/07 AES, with gains to date of approximately £193,000. Savings and gains have been released from a range of activities such as joint and e-procurement, targeting sickness absence, absorbing reductions in the staffing establishment and a five per cent reduction across service budgets, which has released resources to support existing and new priorities.

- 98** Efficiency gains and savings are redirected in line with corporate priorities. This is managed effectively through the budget setting process, where growth and policy bids by managers and Councillors, informed by customer feedback, for example, through the Tamworth Listens events, are scored and prioritised against the level of resources available which includes efficiency gains. This approach ensures that resources are directed towards agreed priorities for service delivery whilst enabling growth and additional services to be provided.
- 99** Procurement activity is guided by a robust strategy and action plan, and the Council uses modern methods of procurement effectively. It has implemented an electronic tendering and procurement system to remove administrative burdens, and centralised the procurement function to a dedicated team, which has also improved the Council's control of spending in relation to authorised limits. Examples of savings include £187,000 through more effective procurement of fleet vehicles and office supplies. In addition, it has externalised some services based on market testing. This approach is resulting in increased efficiency and more effective ways of working.
- 100** Joint procurement with other Council's is reducing costs. The Council has completed joint tenders using its electronic tendering system with other authorities for the HMA and Gypsy and Traveller Needs Assessment, and has signed up to county wide purchasing arrangements for DFG equipment. This has reduced the levels of administration required by partner authorities, and resulted in cost savings of approximately £18,000.
- 101** Partnership working is not only improving efficiency but is also is also benefiting customers. Examples include the joint development and implementation of a sanctuary scheme through the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership, and working with a neighbouring authority to develop a hostel for young people as part of a joint homelessness strategy. In addition, joint reception arrangements with social services is providing a single contact point for customers of both services and is generating income for the Council. This means that the Council is obtaining a greater impact for its investments in these areas.
- 102** The Council is maximising its resources through external funding and investment. It has attracted total funding from a wide range of sources including the Housing Corporation (£1.1 million), Regional Housing Board (£425,000), Supporting People (£224,000), and CLG⁷ (£62,000) totalling approximately £1.8 million to enable delivery of new affordable homes and supported accommodation where there are gaps in provision, develop its work in the private sector and to kickstart the preventative approach to homelessness. This has enabled the Council to develop some schemes and services which would not otherwise have been possible through existing resources.

⁷ CLG - Department for Communities and Local Government

- 103** Progress in identifying and tackling areas of high levels of spending is mixed. This is well established at a corporate level, for example, tackling high spending on temporary staff by recentralising and procuring a new corporate contract, saving £35,000, but this is less well developed at service level. For example, budgeted expenditure on bed and breakfast accommodation has increased from £80,000 in 2006/07 to £174,000 in 2007/08, but has not been robustly challenged or reviewed in relation to the benefits to customers and the organisation of implementing a fully focused approach to prevention of homelessness. As a result, the Council is missing opportunities to maximise all of its available resources.
- 104** The approach to value for money within the service is underdeveloped. Areas which could have a significant impact on costs, for example, use of a spend to save budget, bringing empty properties back to use, and improving move on arrangements for temporary accommodation, have not been fully explored in relation to improving value for money. As a result, the Council is missing opportunities to reduce costs and improve service outcomes for customers.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 105 This is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. Performance is mixed and there has been slow progress in tackling some key areas such as diversity, homelessness prevention and private sector initiatives. The Council cannot demonstrate a robust track record of improving value for money. However, it has delivered a credible number of affordable homes within significant constraints, and made good progress in delivering the 2002 Housing Strategy which has resulted in some service improvements.
- 106 Performance is mixed and not showing consistent improvement. The number of performance indicators which compare well to the best performing Councils has increased, but areas remain where performance has worsened and is equivalent to the worst performing. These include the return of empty homes to use and length of time spent in temporary accommodation. This not only means that outcomes for homeless people are worsening, but that the Council is not making best use of existing stock, which is important given that housing need is unlikely to be met through new supply.
- 107 The Council has been slow to tackle and improve key areas of performance. It achieved level two of the Local Government Equality Standard in 2006, but there has been a lack of progress overall in this area since, and the Council has fallen behind good practice and legislative requirements. It has only recently adopted a preventative approach to homelessness, and is seeing increasing numbers of applications and acceptances compared to a downward national trend. As a result, performance and outcomes experienced by some of the most vulnerable people in the community have not improved.
- 108 The track record of delivering agreed improvements within the strategic housing function is mixed. A clear focus on delivering the 2002/07 housing strategy has resulted in many service improvements to help meet housing need, such as the incentive to move scheme, remodelling of hard to let sheltered bedsits to increase the provision of extra care units, an increase in provision of supported accommodation for young parents and introduction of the tenancy support scheme. However, the licensing scheme for HMOs has not yet been fully implemented, actions agreed to support the affordable warmth programme have not been sustained, and the recommendations of a 2006 review of homelessness have not been fully implemented. As a result, there remain some key weaknesses in service delivery.

- 109 The Council's track record on improving value for money is also mixed. It has exceeded its targets for making efficiency gains and savings, has attracted external resources to deliver additional services, and has delivered services within budgets which have not been uplifted for inflation. It has also used its annual Use of Resources to improve risk management, audit processes and financial control. However, its understanding of costs and how they compare is limited. A lack of qualitative information from customers means that understanding of both cost and quality and the impact of its actions over time is also limited, and there is inconsistent progress in identifying and tackling areas of high spending. As a result, the Council cannot show that it has consistently improved value for money over time.
- 110 A robust focus on meeting agreed threshold targets has delivered a creditable number of new affordable homes. Over the last three years, the 30 per cent target has been exceeded, resulting in delivery of 255 new affordable homes to meet housing need within the Borough. Targets are also being achieved for recently revised, lower thresholds for allocated and windfall sites, which is important given the limited availability of land for development. As a result, the housing needs of more people are being met.
- 111 Average re-let times in Council owned stock are improving. There has been a successful focus on streamlining void procedures during 2007, and average re-let times reduced to 32 days in 2006/07 from 49 days in 2005/06, and is currently at 21 days. This is helping the Council to make best use of existing housing stock.
- 112 There are some early outcomes from the recent focus on strategic housing activities. The Council has achieved its target of developing a fit for purpose housing strategy, and it has improved the research base. There is increasing use of the rent bond scheme to assist homeless people to access housing in the private rented sector, and there have been improvements in the information available and service provision for victims of domestic violence. A homelessness education initiative has also attracted positive feedback from participants. Although not yet impacting on performance at a high level, these initiatives are helping the Council to target and meet different housing needs.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 113 This is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. Leadership has not been effective in all areas and a lack of focus on this service area means that some key aspects of the service are underdeveloped. There are gaps in how performance is monitored and managed and the Council is not maximising learning. Action plans show a positive level of self awareness and address key weaknesses, but are not consistently resourced. Performance monitoring arrangements have been strengthened and risk is managed effectively.

- 114** There is a clear vision for the service which is reflected in the 2007 housing strategy. Linked to the corporate vision, it is to, 'work with partners and the community to widen housing choice, address housing needs and improve the quality of life of residents of Tamworth'. This is supported by clear priorities, based on an improved research base, and supported by a comprehensive and resourced action plan to progress the strategy and address the current weaknesses in the strategic approach and operational service delivery. This provides a clear framework to co-ordinate and improve services to meet known housing need.
- 115** However, leadership has not been effective in all areas. For example, there has been insufficient prioritisation of diversity, which is an area of weakness for the Council and where it cannot demonstrate an effective track record of improvement. In addition, there has been a lack of focus on ensuring that the vision of the Council is clearly linked to activities within the strategic housing function, for example, making the best use of existing stock given constraints on availability of land for development of new housing, which is also an area where there are weaknesses in service delivery. As a result, the Council cannot show that it is meeting the needs of diverse communities or maximising its efforts to achieve its priorities.
- 116** There has not been a sustained focus or overview at a senior level on how the different aspects of the service work together to meet housing need. The strategic housing function is split between different functions and although there are operational meetings between key members of staff, there has not been a consistent strategic focus on performance of all aspects of the service and this, combined with a focus on stock transfer, has resulted in slippage in progressing key areas of work and action plans, and means that some aspects of the service, such as activities within the private sector, are less developed than others. This has reduced the impact of the service overall on meeting housing need.
- 117** There are key aspects of the service which are not being monitored effectively. For example, there is a lack of ongoing monitoring of performance in delivering Disabled Facilities Grants, and the Service Level Agreement with the HIA has not been ratified since it expired in March 2007. The Council is not maximising feedback from customers, or existing trend information from statutory returns for housing advice and homelessness, to inform service and performance improvement. Services are not being monitored by take up across diverse groups. As a result, the Council is not able to target improvement actions and monitor outcomes effectively.

- 118** There is a lack of effective financial control in the strategic housing service. For example, analysis of spend and commitment for DFGs are completed on an irregular basis and are not related to an assessment of need, which could inform future budget setting. The Council has not fully spent its allocated grants budget for 2006/07 for home repair assistance grants, and in addition, sums have been committed for the private sector leasing scheme, but the service does not have the necessary staffing resources in place to enable the scheme to be fully utilised. As a result, financial resources are being committed without a full assessment of how effective they are in helping the service to deliver its objectives.
- 119** Action plans are not consistently SMART⁸. Some, such as the action plan for the revised housing strategy, contain clear references to how actions will be resourced, but this approach is not consistently applied. This is especially important in view of the constraints on financial and staffing capacity to ensure that agreed improvements are sufficiently resourced to be delivered on time.
- 120** The appraisal system is not being used effectively to manage staff performance. It ensures that there are clear links between corporate priorities, service and improvement plans and targets for teams and individuals, which should be monitored throughout the year and assessed alongside learning and development needs annually. However, this is not being applied consistently throughout the organisation, and at October 2007, more than half of the due appraisals had not been completed. As a result, the Council is not ensuring that there is a consistent focus on delivering agreed priorities.
- 121** There are examples of learning taking place at officer level, but this is not always being translated into changes supported by the Council as a whole. For example, officers have visited an excellent rated strategic housing authority to explore the effectiveness of a spend to save budget for preventing homelessness. However, this has not been followed up within the service, for example, support for mortgage arrears or working more innovatively with private landlords, due to lack of political support, which is a missed opportunity to replicate positive action taken elsewhere.
- 122** The Council welcomes external scrutiny to inform its approach to continuous improvement. Examples include using peer review and an external review of progress against the KLOEs and specialist review of the housing options service. The Council also understands the barriers that have prevented improvement, which are largely related to capacity and the focus on the stock transfer ballot, and have started to address this through restructuring. As a result, existing improvement plans show self awareness and address the majority of the weaknesses identified during the inspection.

⁸ SMART - specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and time-bound

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

- 123** The Council has recently reviewed and implemented a revised performance management framework. Implementation of the new framework began in July 2007, with discussion and revision of the Council's vision. Next stages include ensuring that corporate objectives are supported by the service plans, and aligned to budget setting and training. This is in the early stages of implementation, but provides a robust framework for ensuring that the Council remains focused on delivering agreed priorities.
- 124** This is supported by strengthened arrangements for co-ordinating and monitoring action plans and strategies within the framework. The Council has invested in IT based performance management software, currently being rolled out to all service areas, which contains actions and deadlines for service plans, strategies and improvement plans, and is also used to track performance against performance indicators. Exceptions are notified to managers by e-mail, and managers and Councillors are already using the system to report and discuss performance. Although this is relatively new and not fully in place for all service areas, the system provides an improved means of co-ordinating plans and performance.
- 125** Risk is managed through a robust framework. It was developed using positive practice from other authorities, and managers and staff are supported in their roles by a comprehensive set of guidance and templates. A recent example of this is the risk assessment for delivery of the Local Development Framework, which through its link to budget setting, has ensured that sufficient financial resources are available to address gaps in staffing capacity. The links between risk mapping, budget setting, and the Medium Term Financial Plan ensures that action is taken to mitigate any risk to delivery of agreed priorities.
- 126** The Council can show where it has taken some difficult decisions to support delivery of affordable housing. For example, despite local opposition and a potential judicial review of the local plan, land constraints means that the Council has continued to seek provision of new housing on a greenfield allocated site, which will enable delivery of 800 additional homes to meet housing need in the Borough.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 127** Strengths and weaknesses are balanced. The Council is effectively reducing sickness absence to increase its capacity. It is targeting investment in IT to improve services, and is making positive use of external funding and inward investment to help deliver its priorities. Its approach to procurement and joint working are adding to its capacity. However, its capacity to deliver improvements has been affected by vacancies in key posts and a lack of sustained focus on existing plans when new priorities emerge. Although it has invested in developing capacity and skills to deliver improvement, there are weaknesses in the approach to training and plans for stock retention, which poses a significant financial challenge, are not yet finalised.

- 128** The Council is actively managing and reducing sickness absence. The number of working days lost reduced from 12.5 to 10.8 days between 2004/05 and 2006/07, generating a reduction in costs of approximately £60,000. There is a continued focus in this area, which has seen the introduction of mini medicals and appointment of a counselling service provider to tackle the main contributory causes. Although current performance is comparable to the worst 25 per cent of local authorities, the Council has increased its staffing capacity through the actions it has taken so far.
- 129** Investment in ICT is used to make service delivery more effective and efficient. It has invested and implemented an electronic procurement system, which is delivering efficiency gains, and has invested in software to better manage its performance and business planning framework. In addition, an external review of ICT structures has informed the Council's medium term strategy for investment which means that it is able to target ICT investment appropriately to improve services.
- 130** The Council effectively supports delivery of its priorities through external funding and inward investment. In addition to attracting external funding for delivery of additional housing such as specialist temporary accommodation, it is also funding and supporting the voluntary and community sector to help meet its vision and priorities and that of the community plan. It has a clear framework which helps it to maximise the funding available in line with joint priorities, and to date has supported investment of approximately £150,000 per annum. This is resulting in increased organisational and community capacity to deliver agreed priorities.
- 131** The Council's procurement strategy is supported by a robust action plan for future improvements. Annual reviews identify areas of high procurement spend to inform the work of the Council's procurement team, and plans for 2007/08 include recentralisation of invoice processing and introduction of electronic document management. The team have already generated significant savings for the Council, and the Council is benefiting from their expertise by making better use of its resources.
- 132** A positive approach to joint working and procurement is helping the Council to stretch its resources. For example, it has worked with other local authorities to procure the sub regional housing market assessment and gypsy and traveller needs assessment through its electronic tendering system, which has resulted in cost savings for all of the authorities involved. It has also generated income and streamlined access for customers by co-locating the reception service for social service within its own reception area. It is also sharing a corporate health and safety post with a neighbouring authority and has joint funded an OT post with social services to add capacity to the DFG service. The benefits of this approach are that the Council gets increased value out its limited resources.

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

- 133** The Council has responded to customer feedback to plan investment in improved access to services. The Cabinet has approved £500,000 capital funding to deliver an integrated contact management centre, redesign of the reception area and website, implementation of customer relationship management software and rationalisation of telephony systems. The funding has been reallocated from a project which has now been superseded by the current requirements in the revised customer access strategy. The project plan addresses the key weaknesses in current service delivery, and will enable the Council to develop profile information about its customers and target services and improvements accordingly.
- 134** The Council has invested in developing skills to deliver improvement. It set up a service transformation team in 2006, which helps services on a short to medium term basis to review and plan for future improvements, without taking staff away from delivering their day to day roles. Examples of success include the team's work in the benefits service, which has seen an increase in performance. Staff have also benefited from attending training on the application of systems thinking, provided through the Council's membership of the West Midlands Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership. As a result, the Council has dedicated skills and staff resources to deliver future service improvement.
- 135** Job evaluation has not yet been finalised in all areas, which has impacted on the Council's ability to recruit to vacant posts. Vacant posts in housing advice mean that experienced officers are spending time on completing basic administrative tasks, such as administering the housing register, rather than focusing on preventing homelessness. Although it is anticipated that this will be resolved by the end of 2007, this has impacted on the capacity of the service to deliver agreed priorities.
- 136** There are weaknesses in the approach to staff training and development. Some core training courses have not been refreshed for some time, for example, customer care and diversity, and the lack of ongoing staff surveys through the job evaluation period means the Council has not been able to determine if there has been improvement in how well equipped staff feel to perform in their roles. Lack of focus on completing appraisals also means that learning and development needs are not being systematically captured and used to inform training budgets. Although professional qualifications are widely available, the Council is not ensuring that all staff are equipped with the job related skills they require to perform their roles effectively.
- 137** The Council has not been proactive in assessing and reviewing its capacity to deliver improvement, although this is developing. For example, the impact of keeping some posts vacant, which could have been recruited to, was not assessed in terms of the ability of remaining staff to deliver a consistent service. This has been compounded by a lack of sustained focus to deliver existing plans as new priorities and projects emerge, which has resulted in slow progress in some key areas, such as diversity. The Council has recognised this, and in addition to implementing performance management software, has appointed an additional permanent post to manage corporate projects to help it retain a sustained focus on areas for improvement.

- 138** The strategic housing service has not benefited from being a high corporate priority. There have been a number of changes to the structure of the service recently, and lack of clear oversight of the service or how it contributes to the Council's vision have combined to decrease the capacity of the service to effectively meet housing need. There has been a recent focus over the last 12 to 18 months on addressing this, resulting in an improved research base and fit for purpose housing strategy, but the current interim staffing arrangements mean that its capacity in the longer term to deliver its priorities is not clear.
- 139** The Council is seeking to improve the capacity of the service by engaging an external partner to deliver part of the service. However, the Council has not fully evaluated the likelihood of a suitable partner being interested in taking on the work, and what it would do if a suitable partner could not be found. A specification has not yet been formalised and the Council's thinking about the implications for value for money are not clear. This adds to the level of uncertainty about the likelihood of improvement of the service.
- 140** The negative stock transfer ballot in July 2007 poses a significant challenge to the Council's financial capacity. Current forecasts based on maintaining revenue spending and delivering limited investment to meet the Decent Homes Standard will lead to a £12.76 million deficit by 2017/18, which the Council is now working to address through development of its retention strategy. A workplan has been approved which will start with the appointment of a joint project board, including tenants, in November 2007, and there are clear proposals to review service delivery and value for money through to finalisation of the strategy in early 2008. Until the strategy is finalised, it is not clear how the impact of retention will affect the Council's medium to long term financial position.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 1 Best value performance indicators

Performance indicator	All England top quartile 2005/06	District top quartile 2005/06	Tamworth 2003/04	Tamworth 2004/05	Tamworth 2005/06	Tamworth data 2006/07**
BVPI 64 Vacant private homes returned to use or demolished	46.5	38	0	3	19	1
BVPI 183a Average length of stay in B&B in weeks	1	1.12	6.1	4	3.65	11.84
BVPI 183b Average length of stay in hostels in weeks	0	0	0	0	34.57	45.28
BVPI 202 Number of people sleeping rough	0	0	N/a	5	5	5
BVPI 203 Percentage change in average number of families in TA	- 16%	- 17.87%	N/a	6.54%*	-22.8%	40.9%

*Audit Commission audited figures with exception of * - qualified, and ** Council's own data for 2006/07 which has not been audited*

Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
 - focus groups with staff and partners in service delivery;
 - interviews with staff, Councillors and partners;
 - viewing temporary and supported accommodation schemes;
 - talking to residents and staff at schemes we visited;
 - visiting completed affordable housing development;
 - visits to some local offices;
 - review of key strategies and supporting documents;
 - review of Council's website and leaflets; and
 - mystery shopping.