

# **Strategic Approach to Housing**

**Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council**

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## Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

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

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

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

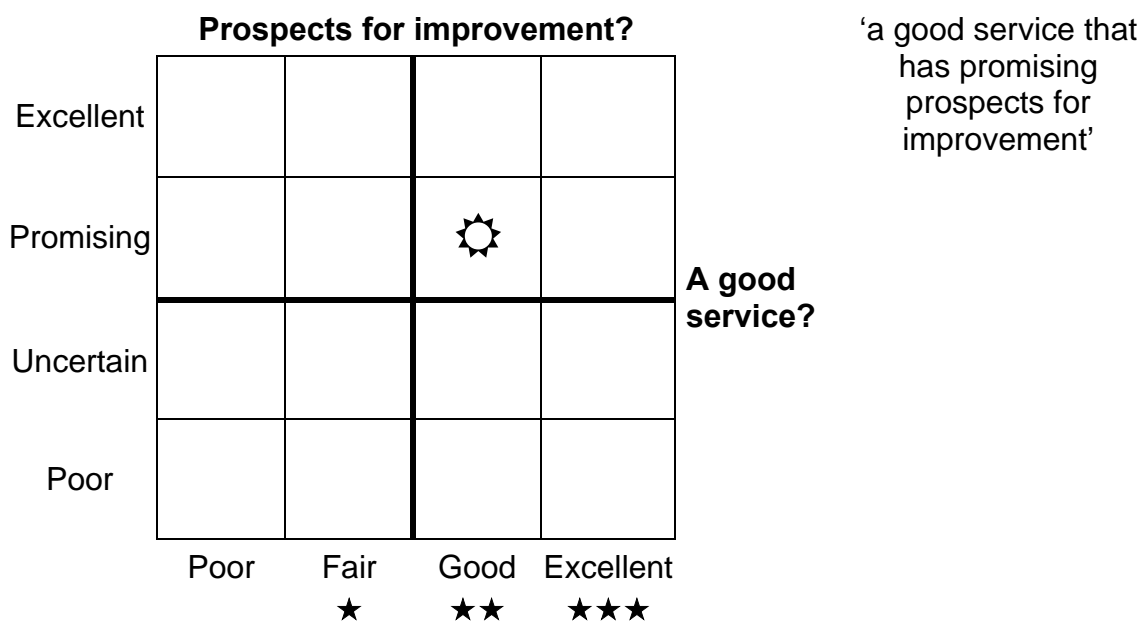
## Summary

- 1 The strategic housing service provided by Wirral Council is assessed as being a 'good', two-star service with promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 The council is achieving significant impact in a number of key areas as it seeks to balance its housing market. It has an effective and robust approach to developing its housing strategies. Its approach to regeneration and delivering improvement against a challenging picture of private sector market failure and dereliction is particularly strong and demonstrating results. It works well with partners at local and sub-regional level and has brought significant investment into the borough. It is also investing heavily in housing as a priority from its own resources. It has taken action to reduce the numbers of empty properties and to enable improvement across the private sector. Its approach to rehousing is developing well through a long-standing borough-wide choice based lettings scheme. It has refocused resources to bring about improvements in its weaker areas, including homelessness services and adaptations.
- 3 There are a number of areas which require improvement. There are inconsistencies in customer care standards and information and the council does not yet have a clear and consistent approach to obtaining and using customer satisfaction information. The council has not, in the past, taken a sufficiently active role in the development of affordable housing across the borough, as this was not an issue until more recently. This has meant that it is behind many other authorities in having a clear strategy for the delivery of new, affordable housing, with targets in place for the type, location and level of new build and for optimising the use of Section 106 agreements. There are also weaknesses in demonstrating value for money.

## Scoring the service

- 4 We have assessed Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council as providing a ‘good’, two-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

**Figure 1 Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>**



Source: Audit Commission

- 5 We found the service to be good because of the following strengths:
- access to services is generally easy and staff are customer-focused;
  - engagement with residents, particularly in the HMRI area, is effective;
  - there is an effective approach to equality and diversity emerging;
  - the approach to developing housing strategies and the information on which they are based is robust and comprehensive;
  - the council understands its role as a strategic housing authority post-transfers and is making good progress on delivering its priorities for housing;

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

- some elements of service are particularly well developed, for example the Homemovers service, the approach to empty homes, HMO licensing, engaging with private landlords and private sector housing group repair schemes;
  - there is strong performance on improving energy efficiency and reducing fuel poverty;
  - the council is taking effective enforcement action;
  - there is strong performance on reducing the levels of properties not meeting decent homes standard across both private and social sectors;
  - the adaptations service is accessible and delivering positive outcomes for service users;
  - there is a strong and clear focus on balancing the housing market through area-based regeneration;
  - the council is improving perceptions of the east of the borough as a place to live;
  - the council is effectively combining funding streams - both capital and revenue - to support its priorities and deliver clear outcomes for local people; and
  - there are several examples of effective procurement being used to deliver value for money on the ground.
- 6 However, there are some weaknesses that require improvement:
- customer service standards and customer information are inconsistent and are lacking in some key areas of service;
  - there is no systematic and consistent approach to gaining and using customer satisfaction information;
  - the council lacks a clear and explicit vision for the whole borough over the longer-term;
  - there is no affordable housing policy to guide the development of affordable housing across the borough and the council is not making optimum use of Section 106 agreements to increase the proportion of affordable housing; and
  - comparative costs are high and the council cannot consistently demonstrate value for money across its housing services.

- 7 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:
- it has a track record of achievement and key performance indicators are demonstrating positive trends;
  - it has responded positively to inspection recommendations and the outcomes of its own reviews;
  - it is addressing gaps in service delivery;
  - it has had a major impact on the regeneration of the Tranmere area over a long period of time;
  - aims and priorities are clear;
  - there is effective balance between national, regional, sub-regional and local priorities;
  - plans are cascaded and staff are clear what is expected of them;
  - performance management is sound;
  - the service is open to learning from elsewhere and embraces positive practice;
  - the council is clear about efficiency targets and achieving value for money and plans are in place to reduce costs over the medium-term;
  - capacity within the housing service is strong - staff are motivated and customer-focused and sickness levels are low;
  - the approach to procurement is well-developed; and
  - the council attracts significant external funding to deliver its priorities.
- 8 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include:
- the lack of a track record in improving value for money over time;
  - the lack of a clearly articulated and explicit vision for the housing market across the borough and clear targets for development;
  - pressures on the budgets for housing as a result of the £30 million savings that the council needs to make; and
  - lack of certainty on the availability of external funding in the future.



## Recommendations

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

### ***Recommendation***

*R1 Develop consistent customer facing service information and customer service standards with customers and monitor their implementation.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- customers will be clear about what they can expect from housing services; and
- the organisation and customers will be clear about whether those expectations are being met.

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

### ***Recommendation***

*R2 Develop a systematic and robust approach to gaining and using customer insight information, for example through customer satisfaction surveys and focus group.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the service will gain insight into customers' views on the services they receive;
- it will be able to test implementation against service standards; and
- it will be able to use this valuable feedback to identify and address gaps in service provision or improvements that customers want to see.

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

**Recommendation**

*R3 Develop explicit and SMART aims for housing across the borough as part of the review and development of the housing strategy through:*

- *completion of the strategic housing market assessment;*
- *the development of an explicit affordable housing policy; and*
- *the development of an explicit corporate approach for the use of Section 106 agreements.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- there will be an explicit strategy in place which seeks to balance the housing market which is clear and unequivocal for all stakeholders;
- the council will deliver an increased level of new affordable housing to meet local need; and
- maximum impact can be achieved from Section 106 gains.

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

**Recommendation**

*R4 Focus resources on proactively preventing homelessness and develop a clear menu of approaches to be used in a range of circumstances.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the levels of homeless presentations and cases of repeat homelessness will be reduced; and
- there will be reduced pressure on the valuable support that is available for homeless clients.

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

**Recommendation**

*R5 Work with RSLs to identify the scale of adaptations work currently being funded directly and establish a mechanism to ensure that there is equity across tenures.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the council will be able to fully assess the demand for adaptations services across the whole borough; and
- it will present the scope for improved partnership working with RSLs on funding and delivering adaptations services.

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

### ***Recommendation***

*R6 Undertake more detailed cost comparisons for housing services, identify where costs are high and the reasons for this and develop an explicit strategy to address the achievement of value for money within housing services.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the service will be able to identify high cost service areas and the reasons for high costs; and
- the approach will enable the service to meet the council's overall targets for service cost reductions.

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

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

Dates of inspection: 19 to 24 February 2007

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# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 11 Wirral Council was formed in 1974. It is situated in Merseyside in the North West of England. The Wirral peninsula is bounded by the River Mersey to the East, the Irish Sea to the North, the River Dee and Flintshire to the West and Cheshire to the South. The area is very diverse and has a mix of industrial, maritime, residential and agricultural areas. Birkenhead is the main commercial, residential and administrative centre.
- 12 The population is stabilising, following a period of decline with 313,100 residents (2005 population mid-year estimates) living in 143,463 households. The council has an ageing population and a profile of increasingly smaller sized household units. Older people aged 65 years and above now make up 18.1 per cent of the population, which is a higher incidence than the average for England of 15.9 per cent and this is predicted to increase fastest in the borough. More than 98 per cent of the population are classified as white, compared to a national figure of 91 per cent.
- 13 There are pockets of affluence in the West of the borough which contrast markedly with areas of deprivation in the East. House prices range from over £5 million in the West to under £30,000 in the East, which continues to suffer from unstable and depressed housing markets. There are high levels of empty homes and a history of disrepair and there are lower than average levels of social housing at 15.5 per cent (compared to 24 per cent for Merseyside as a whole and 21 per cent for the North West). There are also higher than average levels of private rented accommodation. Private sector housing is the borough's single biggest issue and dominates Wirral's housing strategy.
- 14 The borough is ranked as the 48th most deprived district overall, out of 354 nationally, in terms of multiple deprivation, but 6 out of 22 wards fall within the most deprived 10 per cent. The super output area, Church Road in Tranmere, is in the top one per cent most deprived nationally and Bidston ward has the highest rate of child poverty in England.
- 15 Unemployment rates vary significantly across the borough from one per cent to nine per cent in some wards. Average wage levels are generally lower than the national average.

### The council

- 16 The council is made up of 66 councillors. No party has overall control. A leader and cabinet govern the business of the council and there are ten overview and scrutiny committees. The cabinet comprises representatives of the three main political parties and if there is a problem in achieving cross party consensus, the portfolio holder for the item in question has the casting vote.

- 17 The council's overall budget for the year 2006/07 is £247 million and the council employs approximately 12,500 staff.

### **The service**

- 18 The strategic housing service is delivered by the regeneration department. It covers four housing related functions:
- housing strategy and enabling;
  - private sector housing and the housing market renewal initiative (HMRI) pathfinder, NewHeartlands;
  - supported housing services (including Supporting People, adaptations and Wirral home improvement agency services); and
  - homelessness, housing advice and the borough's choice-based lettings scheme, Wirralhomes.
- 19 The revenue budget for the service for the year 2006/07 is £3.573 million and there are 119 staff employed within the service.
- 20 The council's housing strategy statement was designated as fit for purpose in October 2005.
- 21 The council's Supporting People service was assessed as a good, two-star service with promising prospects for improvement in 2003. Regeneration was assessed as a good, two-star service with uncertain prospects for improvement in 2005. The HMRI pathfinder review undertaken in 2006 was favourable.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 22 The council's corporate priorities are set out in its corporate plan:
- Protecting and improving our environment;
  - Promoting and supporting the economic regeneration of Wirral;
  - Providing educational and cultural opportunities for all;
  - Improving the health of Wirral people;
  - Making Wirral safer;
  - Meeting the housing needs of Wirral;
  - Supporting and protecting vulnerable people;
  - Improving transport; and
  - Continuously improving services.
- 23 The strategic housing priorities are set out in the housing strategy:
- Delivering urban renaissance;
  - Providing affordable homes to maintain balanced communities;
  - Delivering decent homes in thriving neighbourhoods; and
  - Meeting the needs of communities and providing support for those who need it.
- 24 The housing strategy aims are clearly linked to the priorities for the borough that are set out in the community strategy and in the council's corporate plan and fully reflect national and regional priorities.

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

#### Access and customer care

- 25 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area of service. Access to services is generally easy and the council is engaging effectively with its service users. Customer feedback has been used to improve services and there are examples of added value services being developed to meet specific needs. However, the overall approach to gaining customer feedback is inconsistent across the service and information for customers about services is patchy - in some areas of service it is clear and comprehensive, but in others it is lacking.

- 26 Access to housing services is generally easy and well sign-posted. The first point of contact for most customers is through the council's network of 13 one-stop shops (OSSs) and information points (IPs) and the housing service has proactively worked with the OSSs through the development of Q&A prompts and staff training to ensure that a range of customer queries can be handled at the first point of contact. Work has been undertaken to analyse incoming calls and queries and to focus on providing the most relevant information, for example, energy efficiency grants. Frontline staff are, therefore, well equipped to deal with a range of housing queries which improves the service to customers.
- 27 There is good access to a range of private sector housing services directly in person or by phone, email, letter or fax, including the handyperson scheme and the empty property service which can also be accessed via a dedicated telephone hotline.
- 28 The council is engaging well with residents of the HMRI area and is providing a high level of support. Service users and stakeholders are involved in making strategic decisions which affect their homes and neighbourhoods through consultation events, residents meetings, study visits and a recent newspaper campaign. Masterplanning projects have produced strong community support for proposals. For example, in Tranmere the clearance survey identified that 90 per cent of clearance residents reported knowing how to access the service and who to contact when seeking advice and information. This has led to greater awareness by customers of the private sector housing service.
- 29 Residents in the Housing Market Renewal Initiative (HMRI) area receive clear information and advice on their options. Urban regeneration officers (UROs) carry out comprehensive consultation with residents involved in clearance and regeneration areas and liaise closely with environmental health officers (EHOs). Residents are then referred to the highly effective Homemovers team, which provides a broad range of in depth support and advice to homeowners and others affected by demolition. Customer satisfaction with this service is measured routinely and statistics in September 2006 show 98 per cent satisfaction.
- 30 The approach to consultation with residents is strong. For example, the council has maintained a positive ongoing relationship with the Wirral federation of tenants and residents following the transfer of the council's housing stock and there has been work undertaken to link into a young women's group to establish what the barriers to accessing services are. The rehousing service is engaging with community groups to promote the service, for example through work with the Asian women's group, the youth parliament and with schools. There has also been extensive public consultation on a proposed waterfront development. This resulted in 300 attendees coming to an event to discuss the development and has raised awareness of the proposal and its potential impact on the area. Consultation is used effectively to improve services and develop strategies.



- 31 The council is just starting to make effective use of customer feedback from surveys across its housing services, although there are still some gaps in the approach. Satisfaction surveys of the regeneration service identified that while there was very high overall satisfaction (over 90 per cent), only 68 per cent were satisfied with the support given during the process. As a direct result, the Homemover initiative was established. The 2004 Mori Tranmere survey identified that communication was a problem. The service has since designed a communication strategy. As part of its annual refresh of the housing register, Wirralhomes has undertaken a postal survey of applicants to gain insight into how effective the system is for them. Key issues arising from the survey about the service are being taken forward through the service planning process. Other customer feedback identified concerns about environmental problems which resulted in the introduction of environmental wardens. Customer feedback is routinely given following community consultation and responded to. This demonstrates that the council is listening to what its customer say and is seeking to improve the things that matter to them.
- 32 The handyman service is accessible. The customer information leaflet clearly explains what the service covers and how much it costs. Charges are low and customers can email or phone to request the service. The service is well promoted; customers are aware of the service and find it easy to access. Access to the adaptations service is easy and the referrals process is effective. Where re-housing may be a better option for customers (or the only option if adaptations works are found not to be feasible), referrals are routinely made to the disabled rehousing service. Customers are therefore offered a range of alternative solutions to meet their needs.
- 33 Access to rehousing and the homeless service is easy. Appointments can be made for the same day for customers presenting as homeless, as several appointment slots are kept open at the end of each day for dealing with that day's presentations. Out of hours calls are initially handled by Social Services but are then directly referred through to the duty homelessness officer. This means that customers can have their urgent needs met quickly. The Wirralhomes scheme means that customers only have to register once in order to access over 80 per cent of social housing opportunities in the borough. A Wirralhomes application is always taken at first point of contact for all rehousing customers, including those presenting as homeless. This means that homeless applicants are automatically registered on the Wirralhomes system and can start registering an interest in properties in the scheme as soon as their application is accepted. This makes it more efficient for the service and less onerous for customers.
- 34 The council has a positive approach to addressing the problem of enabling people with support needs to access move on accommodation. The housing priority panel which includes members from a range of stakeholders has been established to assess the needs of particular clients on a case by case basis and to work together to meet those needs and ensure move-on through a range of support.



- 35 Effective arrangements are in place for customers who would not otherwise be able to secure quality private rented housing. A tenancy bond scheme is in place and has been well received by private landlords. The council is now working to link this scheme in more effectively to the range of floating support that is available for vulnerable customers and to the new tenancy support officer role in the homelessness team.
- 36 There is inconsistency in terms of customer standards and customer information. There are clear standards in some areas, such as the empty property team and these are advertised on the web site. However, there are no clear customer facing service standards or service information in place for the rehousing service to tell people how to access the service and what they can expect to receive. Where there are service standards in place, these are not consistently applied or monitored.
- 37 Customer information for adaptations, the handyman scheme and WHIA is weak. For example the adaptations leaflet explains that the team will send out a DFG application pack once a referral is received from Social Services OT team but there are no timescales to say how long it will take for the OT assessment to be carried out or how long they will have to wait for their DFG application to be processed. This means that customers cannot be clear about the standards of service they can expect - where to go, what the process is and how long things should take - and there are inconsistent practices between services.
- 38 The overall council corporate care standards are not challenging. For example, there is a target of 15 days for responding to queries and, clearly, this is not appropriate for some of the services offered with the housing service, such as homelessness.
- 39 There is little testing of the effectiveness of frontline service delivery. There are no spot checks of the out of hours service, B&Bs used for temporary accommodation are not routinely inspected and there is no mystery shopping of Wirralhomes to test its delivery on the ground. This means that the service currently has limited insight into how accessible and effective the service is from a customer perspective. Following our inspection, the council took action to ensure that B&Bs used for homeless accommodation will now be checked on a routine basis by private sector housing staff.
- 40 The adaptations service does not currently make use of customer satisfaction data. There are plans to introduce a survey and to undertake follow up work six months following completion in line with good practice guidance. While a completion certificate is completed and signed off by the customer, this does not give valuable insight into the customer's view either of the end product or their experience of the adaptations process.
- 41 Web based services are underdeveloped. Although there is information on strategies and policies on the website, customers cannot, for example, apply for rehousing online or for disabled facilities grants. Some information provided to customers is out of date. There is, therefore, limited practical use being made of electronic service delivery and the service is not fully contributing to the delivery of council-wide e-government targets.

- 42 There are also some inconsistencies in the application of policies. For example, an exclusions and suspensions policy has been developed for Wirralhomes, but it is not systematically applied. Each RSL continues to operate its own policy once the shortlist of customers expressing an interest in a property has been handed over. Sometimes RSL fail to tell bidding applicants that they have not been successful and Wirralhomes are not always clear about this when customers follow up the outcome of their expression of interest.
- 43 Council tax payers who live in RSL properties have poor access to mandatory disabled facilities grants (DFGs). The council is not operating a tenure neutral adaptations service. Applications from Wirral Partnership Homes (WPH) are dealt with separately and applications from RSL tenants are routinely referred back to the RSL. Applications from owner occupiers and private tenants are handled through DFGs. Although RSL tenants are not denied the right to apply for a DFG, these customers are systematically referred back to their landlord. This means that the service does not know the true extent of the demand for DFGs in the borough or the level of vulnerable households requiring DFGs in the RSL sector as this is not reviewed or reported at strategic housing partnership (SHP) meetings, nor does it know whether the work has actually been carried out once tenants have been referred back. This may be leading to inequity across tenures in terms of the way services are accessed and delivered depending on the housing status of individuals.

### **Diversity**

- 44 There are more strengths than weaknesses in this area of service. The corporate approach to equality and diversity is now just starting to develop through a consistent strategy and a robust and considered approach to undertaking equality impact assessments. The council is currently only declaring at level one of the local government equality standard, but is confident of achieving level two by the end of the financial year (2006/07). There are some clear examples of effective approaches and positive practice on the ground within the housing service which have been developed on the basis of a clear understanding of customer needs and which are impacting on the accessibility and effectiveness of services to meet those customer needs.
- 45 A strong sense of corporate leadership is starting to emerge on diversity and the council's approach is starting to develop well. It is making use of a 'six pillars' model for diversity which encompasses ethnicity, age, gender, faith, sexuality and disability and it has applied the model across its standardised approach to equality impact assessments (EAls). To date, seven of these have been carried out within regeneration and housing. This is ensuring that there is a comprehensive and consistent approach across all departments and the outcomes can be used to capture and tackle issues at a corporate level, rather than purely through individual responses within services.

- 46 The council has established an effective BME team. This was set up as a result of needs identified through Supporting People research work which identified barriers to accessing services. This team is now identifying wider needs, for example, making contact with BME groups and dealing with a range of issues, such as disrepair. This is enabling wider access and encouraging people who would not usually come forward to do so and to have their needs met. The outcomes from the Supporting People research is also being fed into the council's strategic housing market assessment in order to ensure that the specific needs of harder to reach groups are appropriately reflected in housing strategies.
- 47 The council is working well to address the needs of an elderly and ageing population. A number of initiatives and support services are in place including two new extra care schemes, a handyman scheme, an older persons' forum and a 'friend or foe' anti-confidence trickster initiative. Although there is no explicit older persons' housing strategy, this has been written into the wider strategy for the commissioning of services for older people. Over time, this is to be tied into the development of an updated housing strategy. This ensures that housing needs are considered as part of an overall package of support for this client group, rather than in isolation.
- 48 The council has taken a positive stance on targeting domestic violence. Housing and community safety have worked well together, alongside children's services, doctors, midwives and the probation service to find holistic solutions. There is an internet based referral system between partners. This ensures that there are effective support mechanisms in place for this vulnerable group.
- 49 The council is taking a proactive approach to addressing the needs of gypsies and travellers. It is an active member of the Greater Merseyside Gypsy and Traveller Forum (GMGTF) which consists of local authority officers, voluntary, and service users. This is assisting in the ongoing development of Wirral's gypsy and traveller policies and procedures. Within Wirral there are a number of gypsies and travellers living within 'bricks and mortar' settled accommodation and the council is undertaking a research to understand the needs of this client group. This ensures that the council has a good understanding of the needs of this particular group of customers and can feed this into the development of wider housing strategies.
- 50 There is strong evidence of the council working effectively in partnership with other agencies and stakeholders to enhance its approach to equality and diversity. Examples include the work on teenage pregnancy and the development of floating support, homelessness projects and arts projects in the HMRI area. This ensures that a more holistic and co-ordinated approach to meeting the needs of residents is taken.

- 51 The council seeks to ensure that there is equal access to services. It makes use of Language Line and has recently started to identify and register staff within the council who have foreign language and signing skills. DDA compliance has been audited and in the case of most public access buildings provision has been made to facilitate access (though this is not the case for all buildings, as there is to be a review of the need for all public access points in the near future). There is an effective system in place to support customers who may have difficulty in completing adaptations applications. This means that barriers to effective communication and access are minimised.
- 52 The council is engaging with BME customers effectively in promoting its adaptations and handyperson services. There are translation straplines in seven languages on both the adaptations and handyperson leaflets and publicity for both services is carried out through presentations to community groups, including African and Caribbean groups. An EIA has been carried out of the adaptations service and an improvement plan developed with support from the council through the award of an equality and diversity grant from the council in order to ensure equitable take-up of its services by black and other minority and vulnerable customers. This is ensuring that there is equality of access to these services for all members of the community.
- 53 There are effective systems in place within Wirralhomes to support vulnerable applicants to express an interest in advertised properties. Regular reviews are undertaken to identify where people are not bidding for properties and a detailed breakdown of applicants accepted onto the housing register and allocations of properties made are reported to the CBL sub-group of the SHP. This is ensuring that there is equality of access to rehousing for all applicants.
- 54 The council acknowledges that its overall approach to diversity needs to be accelerated. It has declared at level one of the local government standard and intends to re-assess this financial year to level two. There is a clear action plan in place to address gaps in the corporate approach to equality and diversity. Equality impact assessments have not yet been carried out into some key parts of the service. The private sector housing service has committed to undertake EIAs by end of March 2007 for all its key services. The council is, therefore, currently unable to be sure that all of its housing services are delivered appropriately to meet the diverse needs of all sections of the community.
- 55 While the council's approach to equality and diversity is positive and there is a clear equality and diversity strategy and action plan in place, outcomes are not demonstrable as yet. As described above, seven EIAs have been carried out within housing services, including adaptations and the empty property team. However, these are recent and have not yet been fully analysed. Consequently, the council is not yet utilising all its information to prioritise and influence service improvements.

## Strategic approach to housing

- 56** This area of service has more strengths than weaknesses. The council has a robust research base on which to develop strategies and is focusing its efforts and resources on delivering the things that will make a difference to the housing market in the borough and to the people living in it. It has strong and effective partnership arrangements in place at local and sub-regional level and there is clear evidence that, although strategies are not always sufficiently explicit in the way they are articulated, there is a good understanding among partners and stakeholders of the council's priorities for housing.
- 57** The council has a clear and comprehensive understanding of the housing market in Wirral and how this sits within the wider sub-regional and regional housing markets. The council recognises that there is an imbalance between the east and the west of the borough and understands the scale and nature of the imbalance. It has a clear view that the focus is on making best use of the existing housing stock in order to reduce the need for new housing, in line with the regional spatial strategy objectives. It has, therefore, focused its investment policies on the areas of greatest deprivation.
- 58** Strategies are clear and consistent, focusing on the area's key regeneration issue - securing investment and regeneration in the east of the borough. This message is constantly reinforced across all strategies and action on the ground is aligned with this focus. This includes a 12 year track record of investment in Tranmere through area-based regeneration and, currently, through the HMRI specifically. This investment is focused on bringing properties up to decent homes standard (DHS) and addressing the key issue of empty properties in the area. This is seeking to improve the quality of life and living conditions for local people and to ensure a supply of decent, affordable properties.
- 59** The council has a good understanding of its role as a strategic housing authority following the transfer of its stock to Wirral Partnership Homes (WPH) and Beechwood and Ballantyne Community Housing Association in 2005. It has invested in its staffing infrastructure to reflect the priority that the council has placed on housing within its corporate plan and it is delivering its strategic role effectively.
- 60** The council has a good range of information on which to base its strategies. This includes detailed information about demographics and trends, the housing market, house prices, sub-regional and regional issues, affordability and wage levels. It makes use of a GIS-based mapping tool, the Wirral Area Mapping Project (WAMP), which collects and systematically analyses a range of socio-economic data. It also uses information from analysis of Wirralhomes applicants and on the type and location of properties being advertised through the scheme. The council is also accessing a wide range of data from partners to support the development of housing strategies, for example, RSLs produce information on levels of turnover, hard to lets, numbers of empty properties and DHS levels.



- 61 The council is also making effective use of a broader range of reference data to support the development of its housing strategies. Examples include crime and grime mapping, data capture by neighbourhood wardens, community safety and fire service intelligence. The housing service used council tax data to identify where there are empty properties. This has enabled it to address the issue of empty properties more effectively.
- 62 The council is working well with neighbouring Liverpool and Sefton councils to map housing market intelligence across the sub-region. The LAMP project and NEWMIS project are key examples of this. The NewHeartlands Market Intelligence Service (NEWMIS) is implementing a sustainability model across the three boroughs and seeks to make best use of existing data in order to proactively predict potential market failure. The model also measures the attractiveness or sustainability of the neighbourhood and its housing market. Measures related to the market, the cityscape and the environment such as property type, tenure, developer investment and interest, turnover, void rates, demand, re-let times and stock condition are included. This approach to mapping is supporting the council to build a wider picture of housing need and market analysis in order to develop its strategies more effectively.
- 63 The council has robust stock condition information which is used to inform its strategies. A well-designed private sector stock condition survey was carried out in line with ODPM guidance in 2002. This is updated with reports from EHOs/UROs and by the empty property team. A new stock condition survey is planned for 2007 and there are plans to align the target to the HMRI areas. To fund full decency across the borough, the council estimates that it will need £30 million a third of which is likely to be linked to energy efficiency need where the council has a positive track record of securing investment from utility companies. Enforcement on owners will be used where necessary and the use of equity based funding schemes is being developed to assist poorer home owners. The council also has good information on decency levels across social housing stock and progress against the 2010 DHS target is monitored through the SHP on an annual basis. This data enables the council to monitor the achievement of DHS across all sectors and to identify the impact of its interventions.
- 64 Wirral has responded positively to central government policy. It has developed a local policy to respond to the new financial regime for private sector housing renewal in line with the Regulatory Reform Order (RRO) and is continuing to develop its strategy for private landlords and the private rented sector. It has a strong focus on achieving DHS across all sectors. It is working with RSLs and developers to provide affordable, high quality new homes and to encourage a better mix of tenures in communities in the HMRI area.
- 65 The council is actively involved in regional housing issues and partnerships at political level. This has enabled the council to influence regional policy, learn from others' experience and gain regional data on which to develop housing strategies.

- 66 Although the council has been slow to produce an updated housing needs assessment/strategic housing market assessment (SHMA) as it was awaiting Government guidance in relation to Planning Policy Statement Three (PPS3), this is now well underway. The approach being taken and the draft assessment is robust and has included an assessment of existing research information and statistics alongside primary research with a diverse range of groups - BME, homeless, private developers, estate agents and stakeholders. Once completed, the assessment will be effective in informing revisions to strategies, and, in particular, the development of the new housing strategy, an affordable housing policy and corporate guidance on the use of Section 106 agreements.
- 67 The council's existing housing strategy is robust and achieved 'fit for purpose' rating in October 2005. The strategy includes a SMART<sup>2</sup> five-year action plan which is monitored by the strategic housing partnership (SHP) on a six-monthly basis. Alongside this are sound strategies for private sector housing, homelessness, HMRI, empty properties and land, energy efficiency and Supporting People. A revised, updated private sector housing strategy has been drafted to take account of the Housing Act 2004 and research information. This is strongly aligned to the local strategic partnership's (LSP) neighbourhood renewal strategy and community strategy which both identify improvement of housing conditions as a key priority. It is also aligned to the council's corporate objectives. The council has a well co-ordinated approach to the development of wider regeneration strategies. It considers housing, regeneration, economic development and environmental issues in the round. This ensures that the strategic housing objectives are supported by and reinforce the overall approaches being taken by the council.
- 68 The council has a clear understanding of the funding that is available to support the delivery of its housing objectives. It has a strong track record of securing external funding to support the implementation of its housing strategies, for example HMRI, energy efficiency grants, neighbourhood renewal fund (NRF) and North West Development Agency funding.
- 69 There is a long-standing and effective strategic housing partnership (SHP) in place which is a formal sub-group of the LSP. It is chaired by the chief executive of Wirral Partnership Homes and is well attended by a wide range of partners and stakeholders. It focuses on strategic issues and there is a sub-group for Wirralhomes CBL scheme and a sub-group on Equality and Diversity which report back into the main SHP. Stakeholders, including RSLs, have been involved in developing the housing strategy and in developing specific strategies, such as the empty property and land strategy and the homelessness strategy. This enables partners to contribute effectively to the council's agenda.

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<sup>2</sup> SMART - specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time bound

- 70 The council has a clear and robust strategy that is delivering well against energy efficiency targets. The council has a continued commitment to home energy conservation throughout the borough and across all tenures and regards energy efficiency as a fundamental component of the corporate objective - a decent home for all. Energy efficiency encompasses the affordable warmth strategy, local agenda 21 strategy, neighbourhood renewal strategy and community strategy to achieve the overarching objectives of improving the thermal comfort of homes and affordable warmth for its residents while reducing carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions in accordance with the Home Energy Conservation Act (HECA) 1995 targets. The council has also worked effectively with RSL partners towards meeting energy efficiency targets. It has worked with RSLs to develop a system to map SAP levels (which were not previously monitored) to which all RSLs have subscribed. This is now monitored through the SHP and enables the council and its partners to have a clear view on how all housing tenures perform on energy efficiency.
- 71 The existing housing strategy does not clearly articulate an explicit vision for the whole borough over the longer term. This means that it is difficult for partners and stakeholders to understand what specific outcomes the council is seeking to achieve across the whole borough, and in particular, outside the HMRI area. The council recognises that this gap needs to be addressed and has plans in place to work with the SHP and to consult with residents and stakeholders in order to develop a longer-term vision. This will include 'reality check' consultation with residents through the network of one stop shops.
- 72 The council's private sector strategy is not clearly articulated to partners. Private rented housing landlords from the council's landlord forum are not clear about future council investment priorities in regard to the north end of Birkenhead. They complained of the area being blighted by empty properties and speculative buying leaving properties empty. Landlords confirmed that where the council had invested money in Tranmere and Rockferry they can let more easily and will invest. However they will not invest in north Birkenhead until the council makes a decision about the future of the area.

### **Making best use of existing housing**

- 73 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area of service. The council has a strong approach to making effective use of its powers to intervene in the private housing sector in order to deliver an increasing supply of decent, affordable homes. Progress on empty homes, HMO licensing and private sector renewal is positive. Significant work has been done to remove unsuitable housing and to remodel and market the most deprived areas of the borough. There are some effective mechanisms in place to support people to remain in their homes through adaptations and other support services. The approach to rehousing and homeless prevention is less strong.



- 74 There is a comprehensive homelessness strategy in place from 2003 which has formed the context for the operation of the homelessness service. Although the strategy action plan is not sufficiently SMART and has not been monitored by the homelessness forum, there has been a considerable shift in the use of Supporting People funding to fill some of the gaps in service provision identified at the last review. The homelessness forum was inactive for some time but has recently been re-established and a review of homelessness has been commissioned from external consultants. Members of the homelessness forum are positive about their role in developing an updated strategy and are positive about the way the council is driving the review.
- 75 The council is providing an integrated and seamless approach to rehousing people and has aligned homelessness and housing advice services with Wirralhomes, the borough's well-established choice based lettings scheme as part of its overall approach to rehousing. Homelessness service performance against best value and local performance indicators has improved this financial year. For example, 87 per cent of decisions on homelessness are being made within 33 working days compared to 80 per cent last year and there has been a 24 per cent reduction (year to date) in the average number of households in temporary accommodation.
- 76 There are a number of examples of positive practice within the council which support the homelessness service. For example, Response, which is part of children's services, has made an effective DVD which is shown in schools and other resource centres. The service has also delivered workshops on homelessness for young people and is raising awareness of the true implications of homelessness for young people. The housing employment link project (HELP) is also a key mechanism for assisting vulnerable people, including homeless people to access employment opportunities and secure permanent accommodation to help sustain their employment.
- 77 The council has established an effective housing access panel. This involves councillors, RSL board members and community representatives. It meets bi-annually and is responsible for overseeing the policy direction and implementation of the Wirralhomes rehousing policy and service. It is also the final point of call for appeals, reviews and disputes. There is a well established and effective steering group in place for Wirralhomes. It involves three council officers and a maximum of two representatives from each of the partner RSLs. It meets six times a year as a minimum and takes the lead in developing policies and procedures for the scheme and acting as the second point of call for appeals and reviews. It is also responsible for monitoring the overall performance of the scheme and ensuring that it is delivered equitably. These mechanisms ensure that there is a strong strategic direction alongside operational delivery and monitoring.
- 78 The council makes effective use of discretionary housing benefit (DHB) to support homeless prevention. This means that housing benefit can be topped up to meet rent payments and enable customers to maintain a tenancy which might otherwise fail.

- 79 The council is addressing the need for move on accommodation. It has developed the housing priority panel to identify people who can be accommodated through Wirralhomes with additional floating support and clear criteria are in place.
- 80 The Wirralhomes system has been improved to ensure better access to properties for homeless people and the council has effective relationships in place with RSLs. Originally homeless people were handled through the expression of interest route but this was not working and so it was amended such that 50 per cent of properties are now allocated for homeless people and 50 per cent go through Wirralhomes.
- 81 The council is making effective use of dispersed RSL properties for temporary accommodation. Although there has been some use of B&B for emergency accommodation, the use of dispersed units is providing a better service for homeless families. The council is also part of the Merseyside accommodation partnership (MAP) which has a system of emergency accommodation for vulnerable and/or homeless young people. There are also direct agreements in place between children's services and RSLs for the provision of accommodation for care leavers with ongoing support. This means that the housing and support needs of vulnerable people are being addressed through the most appropriate routes.
- 82 Wirralhomes customers affected by clearance are given an urgent need status and, to encourage them to stay in their area, they are awarded a double urgent need status for areas within two miles. This is enabling people to get rehoused locally more quickly but also means that they are not restricted from applying to move elsewhere.
- 83 It is also positive that the council has encouraged RSLs to de-designate some properties within their stock in order to address the shortage of properties for young people and disabled people. The council is now considering whether incentive schemes could be used to encourage this in order to increase the number of social rented properties available to rehouse people and, at the same time, address the high levels of empty properties in some RSLs.
- 84 There is effective partnership working at a sub regional level in relation to illegal eviction control. The council is taking appropriate action to reduce the numbers of people who are at risk of becoming homeless as a result of illegal eviction and harassment.
- 85 The council is making full use of the powers bestowed by the Housing Act 2004. It is using Regulatory Reform Order (RRO) powers and has revised its financial assistance policy to reflect this. It is piloting enforced sales procedures in accordance with the Government's concordat on good enforcement. This has enabled the council to take a number of successful enforcement actions since the new powers were introduced.

- 86 The council's private landlord forum is effective. Accredited and non-accredited landlords provided confirmation that they value the forum because it has improved communication, assisted their business through referrals for rehousing and they have received quality training on landlord issues. The tenancy deposit scheme aims to improve access to private rented accommodation and also offers tenancy support to ensure tenancies are sustainable in the long term. These initiatives are working to bring stability to the private rented market and to increase confidence of both landlords and tenants.
- 87 The council is making good progress on the mandatory licensing scheme for HMOs. This is a significant issue for the council as there are an estimated 2,500 HMOs in Wirral. Public notices have been issued and applications are being processed. To date there have been 40 voluntary applications (35 of which have been licensed). These figures compare very favourably with partner pathfinder authority performance. The council is now focused on achieving full licensing within the three years which commenced in June 2006. There has been a comprehensive advertising campaign and a fee structure established after full costings and comparisons with pathfinder partners. Empty dwelling management orders (EDMOs) will be used where negotiation to license fails and the council has already invited tenders from RSLs or private landlords. In addition to the mandatory licensing scheme, the HMO team also continues to respond to day to day enquiries and complaints from the general public and landlords about non-compliance across the borough. The team also liaises closely with WHIA about potential disabled adaptation referrals and other minor works for elderly or vulnerable residents. In the last two years 57 complaints have been investigated resulting in 22 HMOs (80-90 units of accommodation) being 'made fit'.
- 88 The council is making best use of existing housing by effective partnership between environmental health and enforcement action in private sector housing. Robust advertising of the housing health and safety rating system (HHSRS) has resulted in higher numbers of complaints of disrepair in private sector housing. In the year to date, 290 complaints have been inspected, of which 55 were resolved pre-HHSRS. Seven enforcement actions have been taken.
- 89 The council is using innovative techniques to deliver its private sector housing strategy. For example, the HOUSED scheme is a process of the council acquiring properties through negotiation, refurbishing them to a high standard, including 'secure by design' and eco friendly homes for resale at discount rates or shared ownership. This scheme has been very successful. Three enforced sales are taking place and a further 40 are in phase two. A private sector developers list has been assembled and this has led to 12 empty properties being sold by owners as an alternative to the enforced sales procedure. The council is also piloting a private sector leasing scheme.
- 90 Group repair schemes are effective. Group repair assistance is currently available within 'The Triangles' area of North Birkenhead and this assistance supports the external renovation of blocks of properties and also includes the provision of solar water heating panels, helping reduce CO2 emissions. The future of group repair assistance beyond this scheme, which is due to be completed in 2008, is under review and will involve a loan element in future years.

- 91 Since the introduction of the RRO in 2002, the council has adopted its private sector housing financial assistance policy. The flexibility introduced by the RRO has enabled Wirral to diversify the assistance given while, at the same time, maintaining historical grant commitments in connection with Tranmere Housing Regeneration Partnership which will be completed in 2007. In relation to housing clearance activity, this has included the introduction of a range of support mechanisms, including:
- an equity based relocation loan averaging £19,500 which has replaced relocation grants, as the major source of gap funding;
  - a panel of independent financial advisors, which has been developed with our HMRI partners; and
  - the Homemovers Service, which includes dedicated staffing support and an information pack to support people moving from areas to be cleared.
- 92 The council is using its powers to intervene in private sector housing to deliver an increasing supply of decent affordable homes. One hundred per cent renovation grants continue to operate in long standing regeneration areas where commitments had been made and the transition from grants to loans is being handled effectively, alongside piloting innovative practices in relation to the transition to equity loans. As an 18 month interim measure, the council has introduced an innovative 50:50 equity/grant loans within the HMRI area based on learning from St Helens. It is intending to introduce equity renewal loans in 2008, which will replace the existing renovation grant provision currently being phased out.
- 93 The council is seeking to make best use of existing housing by proactively targeting high quality enforcement action at private sector housing, although the scale of the issue is large and there are many empty properties which have been unoccupied for longer than six months. A specialist empty property team has been established to identify empty properties, to assess them through a robust appraisal process and bring them back into use through a range of innovative approaches. Reporting of empty properties is encouraged through effective publicity, such as the empty property hotline and website. Officers make contact with landlords and where negotiation fails or contact is unavailable, appropriate enforcement action is taken with 70 forced sales having been achieved. Since the team's inception in 2006, 92 empty homes have been brought back into use impacting positively on confidence in the local housing market.
- 94 Wirral is currently actively piloting the use of the enforced sales procedure. Tighter registration on the future use of the property could be implemented on re-sale of the property to prevent the property remaining empty by any subsequent owner. Wirral regards the use of the enforced sales procedure as an effective tool for reducing long term nuisance empty properties where all other measures have failed and is using case studies to develop its longer term strategy.

- 95 Under Public Service Agreement 7 (PSA7) set by the Government, the council must increase the proportion of decent homes occupied by vulnerable households (those on an income-related benefit). Wirral is making steady progress on this target and 62.3 per cent of the private sector housing stock occupied by vulnerable households is now decent. This is an increase of 4.3 percentage points from the original baseline of 58 per cent in 2002.
- 96 The council is also using its powers to intervene in the private rented sector to deliver an increasing supply of decent affordable homes through the private landlords' accreditation scheme. Landlords are given a number of incentives to join the scheme including free tenancy referencing and training which seeks to ensure all properties meet decent standards and tenants receive effective and legal management services. The team carries out 100 per cent inspections to identify decency. To date, 115 landlords have joined the scheme which has ensured 1,200 (10 per cent of the estimated market) private rented properties meet DHS.
- 97 The council is effective at assisting people to stay in their own homes through the Wirral home improvement agency (WHIA). The agency offers a range of support services, for example where major repairs needed to be carried out in owner occupied properties of lower income, elderly and disabled occupiers. There is also effective signposting to other services such as Warmfront energy grants and initial assessment visits are free. WHIA is within the top quartile nationally for performance compared to all HIAs.
- 98 The adaptations service is also effective at assisting people to stay in their own homes in accommodation suitable to their needs. WHIA assists applicants to apply for a disabled facilities grant (DFG) to fund adaptations to facilitate access into or use of a facility (such as bathing) within the home. DFGs may also be used to enable hospital discharge or maintain independence. WHIA also provide support to improve hospital discharge times, particularly where a minor repair or adaptation is required in order for a person to return to their home.
- 99 The approach taken to prioritising adaptations is positive. The threshold for minor adaptations is set at £1,200. This means that the majority of works can be processed quickly. Where there is a mixture of major and minor adaptations, the minor adaptations are not held back while waiting for major works. Customers needs are therefore generally met quickly and for those customers who are waiting for major adaptations, some of their urgent needs are addressed without delays.



- 100** Wirral has developed robust policies and procedures which target energy efficiency. It has improved domestic energy efficiency by 2.64 per cent from 1 April 2005 to 31 March 2006. Energy efficiency ratings in the private sector have improved, with average SAP ratings of 55 from 53 in 2004. There has been an ongoing comprehensive campaign to raise awareness of fuel poverty, energy efficiency and the availability of grants working closely with strategic partners including Age Concern, and utility companies. Since 2003, 291 staff from the council, partner RSLs and other key staff have received training so that appropriate advice and signposting can be given to residents. There are targets to increase referrals by 10 per cent each year as part of the council's contribution to the national target of eradicating fuel poverty.
- 101** The council has used area-based renewal to achieve maximum impact upon private sector markets, especially in Tranmere where nearly 10 years of housing investment in excess of £58 million has seen 600 homes cleared, 1,200 homes improved and 275 new homes built. There are 2,200 more decent homes in Wirral in 2006 than 2001 and few lower demand homes. In total over 1,500 homes have benefited from HMRI-led investment since 2003.
- 102** The council's approach to homelessness prevention is underdeveloped. A number of initiatives have been put in place and are now starting to demonstrate results. For example, the levels of homeless presentation have dropped from 294 in September 2004 to 205 in September 2006, with acceptances dropping from 180 to 109 over the same period. However, the council recognises that there needs to be wider use made of the range of prevention methods available, for example approaches such as home visits, mediation, landlord intervention, debt and benefits advice, advocacy and the rent deposit scheme are currently underutilised. Although the council has focused its homelessness grant on two prevention posts, an increase in the numbers of people accessing the housing advice service has meant that, to date, it has generally been reactive. The council is therefore not yet able to fully demonstrate that it is using all the tools at its disposal to prevent homelessness.
- 103** There is variation across RSLs in the proportion of properties offered up for homeless applicants. Although there is an agreement in place with RSLs for 50 per cent of properties to go through CBL and 50 per cent to go for homeless applicants and this is monitored by the service, there are variations between RSLs and there is no clear explanation for this, for example Beechwood and Ballantyne allocated 74 per cent of properties to CBL and 13 per cent to homeless applicants. The council is not clear as to why this is this case and it may be preventing homeless applicants from accessing properties on the estate.

- 104** The council has positive practices in place to maximise the effective use of existing adapted properties, but operationally this is underdeveloped. A disability register is being compiled of all social housing, although there has been limited input from some RSLs to date. The register does not contain private sector rented housing properties and there are no plans to integrate this element of provision. The service was originally operated by WIRED (a voluntary organisation) but has recently been taken over by Wirralhomes for further development. Although currently underdeveloped, it is an effective resource for Wirralhomes and will help ensure that empty adapted properties are targeted more effectively and customers with needs matched to the properties available.
- 105** Although relationships with occupational therapists are positive, there is still some fragmentation in the way the adaptations service is delivered. Staff in the adaptations service do not know when customers first entered the adaptations process or how long initial assessment is taking. This means that performance data on the time taken for adaptations is erroneous in that it does not include the assessment period.
- 106** The incentive scheme to attract private landlords to become accredited has not been fully explored. Landlords of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) asked what the incentive was to come forward to incur license fees and potential improvement costs when most HMOs are not inspected and could fall through the net. A suggestion put forward by landlords for the council to offer free licensing has not been explored by the council. Tenant referencing is only available in the regeneration areas and so for landlords not owning stock in those areas, there is no incentive. Failure to undertake a cost benefit analysis represents a missed opportunity to achieve greater efficiency and improved performance.

### **Enabling the provision of more housing to meet needs**

- 107** There are more weaknesses than strengths in this area of service. The council has had a strong focus on balancing the housing market through the regeneration of deprived areas in the borough and has delivered some innovative developments. However, as a consequence of this focus, it has not maximised opportunities to develop more homes to meet a wide range of needs through the use of partnerships and planning powers, despite this being a stated priority within the housing strategy.
- 108** The council has maintained a strong focus on regenerating areas in the east of the borough in order to bring about a more balanced housing market across the whole area and is seeking to change public perceptions of the area as a place where people want to live. For example, it is actively engaged in the North End Community Partnership. This is a key element of the council's overall approach to achieving a more balanced housing market across the borough.

- 109 There is an interim planning policy in place which allows for development provided that need can be demonstrated. There is planning restraint on house building in the west of the borough and in areas working back towards the HMRI area in the east. This supports the council's housing strategy which focuses new development on areas of deprivation and seeks to balance the housing market through area-based regeneration and a more appropriate mix of housing supply. This means that only housing where a clear need has been demonstrated has been built outside the regeneration areas, for example housing for older people in both the social and private sectors.
- 110 Despite, the lack of a clearly documented strategy for the development of new housing, the council is clear about the type of housing it wants to see developed, particularly on the eastern fringes of the borough where property prices are lowest and deprivation greatest, linked in the main to HMRI and adjoining areas. Sites are identified mainly through clearance of poor quality housing in regeneration areas covered by HMRI and development of mixed tenure schemes, including low cost, eco homes. Home ownership is negotiated in partnership with development partners. The council is about to go live with an extensive marketing campaign, 'Live Wirral', to promote home ownership. Recent research has identified a positive shift in perceptions about areas that have undergone renewal, with 39 per cent stating they would now consider living in Tranmere compared to only 4 per cent in Birkenhead which is the next targeted area of regeneration. Property values are now increasing in the east at a higher rate than the west of the borough and the council's interventions are therefore working effectively to narrow the gap between house prices across the borough.
- 111 The council is seeking to ensure that housing developments are located in appropriate places and it uses its partnerships effectively to meet this objective. Regeneration activity is universally acknowledged to be focused on the eastern side of the peninsula - where the highest levels of deprivation and disrepair exist - at the accepted expense of further investment in the west. Since 2003, over £30 million of HMRI funding has been spent in Wirral. This has enabled the acceleration of existing investment programmes in Tranmere and Rock Ferry, where the Council has been coordinating and delivering an area-based renewal programme since 1998. This funding has enabled the council to remove areas of most severe housing market decline in Birkenhead, Seacombe and Egremont.
- 112 A number of successful mixed tenure schemes have been developed over recent years. Examples include the Housing Partnership Scheme developed with Lowry and Riverside Housing Association, which includes 158 properties for outright sale, with 85 social rented and 26 shared ownership properties, the Fiveways scheme of 305 new build properties of which 70 per cent will be for sale and 30 per cent for social rented and the Green Lane Triangle which is a development of shared ownership houses and apartments. This demonstrates that the council has enabled the building of affordable housing in the borough and has used its enabling role to encourage high quality mixed developments.



- 113** Where new schemes have been developed in the borough, the council has worked effectively with partners to bring capital and revenue funding together. For example, the development of new schemes with floating support such as the bungalows for teenage parents, the new domestic violence unit which has an outreach worker attached to it, two extra-care schemes for older people and a family sanctuary scheme. This ensures that schemes are viable and that vulnerable clients receive the housing related support that they need, alongside the provision of housing.
- 114** The council has worked positively to start to address the housing needs of key workers in the area. Two schemes have been approved - the fire station at Heswall and units at the hospital at Arrowe Park. However, there is no clear keyworker housing strategy to set the framework for such schemes, although these developments have demonstrated housing need in line with planning policy.
- 115** The AC market renewal annual review 2005/06 found that as pathfinder policies impact, house prices will rise. In the light of that desired outcome there is a need to make careful provision for low cost housing that can be sustained in the long term and for an appropriate level of social housing. In this inspection we found that although there has been new provision of low cost housing and some social housing, there has been no clear strategy to articulate how the Council is assessing housing need and what its expectations are in relation to future provision and this has been deferred pending the development of the strategic housing market assessment.
- 116** The development of the supply of new affordable housing - particularly social housing - more widely in the borough has been slower. Historically, there has been limited demand for increased provision of affordable housing and it is only very recently that there have been increased pressures on supply due to demolitions and, anecdotally, speculative buying as a result of HMRI and the proposed Peel Holdings waterfront development, alongside shifts in the sub-regional housing market. The overall social housing stock levels available through the unified waiting list and now Wirralhomes have reduced from 22,184 in 2002 to 20,283 in 2006. The affordable housing that has been delivered is generally focused on specialist provision and this has resulted in a limited supply of new social housing to meet an ever-growing housing register, particularly for general needs and single people. This is impacting negatively on the prospects for rehousing for anyone who is not homeless or in urgent need.

- 117 The council does not have a strong track record of maximising the use of Section 106 agreements to achieve affordable housing in the borough. The council has yet to make clear its priorities for planning gain and an affordable housing policy is still to be developed. However, the strategic housing market assessment which is to be finalised in May and has been undertaken to comply with PPS3 will give the council more leverage in future to negotiate Section 106 agreements which result in mixed tenure schemes or to achieve additional investment in affordable housing through the use of commuted sums. There is only one recent example of the council using Section 106 to enable housing development and this was through the use of a commuted sum. This represents a missed opportunity to maximise the availability of affordable housing in the borough and to secure mixed tenure schemes to create more balanced communities. The council has recently set up a Section 106 group to address this weakness. The current lack of an affordable housing policy also means that there is not a clear brief for developers or RSLs which sets out the level, location and type of affordable properties that the council wishes to see built across the borough.
- 118 There are no targets set in the housing strategy for development outside the regeneration areas. This has meant that, while the developments that have been delivered with RSLs through the national affordable housing programme (NAHP) are effective in meeting housing needs and have met the broad objectives of the housing strategy, they have not been strategically driven and there remain gaps in provision. For example, there is a shortage of homeless accommodation, in particular for special groups, such as alcohol users, and for single women. The council's approach to balancing the housing market is, therefore, currently incomplete and may be restricting the options for people living or wanting to live in certain parts of the borough.
- 119 The council's engagement with RSLs through the SHP has failed to address head-on the issue of the development of affordable housing across the borough more broadly. Housing developments are discussed on an individual basis with developers and RSLs, but there is no overall input into the formulation of strategy for affordable housing from the partnership. The council is, therefore, not maximising the use of market intelligence from partner RSLs.
- 120 The Council is not making effective use of partners in contributing to balancing the housing market. There are no formal relationships with developers to explain and involve them in council's policy of excluding development in the west or explanations for the lack of use of Section 106 agreements or clear development briefs. The strategy aims to balance the borough's housing market by focusing on improving the quality and choice of homes in the east of the borough but it is not clear how the exclusion of the west is impacting on affordability to enter the housing market and contributing to economic migration within or outside of the borough.

## Is the service delivering value for money?

- 121** There are more weaknesses than strengths in this area of service. There is a sound approach to securing additional resources in order to delivery high quality services to customers and partnership working is strong and effective. While there are many examples of the service improving efficiency and value for money on the ground, there is no clear approach within the regeneration department to assessing value for money through benchmarking and little by way of demonstrable process efficiency savings. There is a lack of clarity on whether costs within the service are high and they have not been designated as a corporate priority for review.
- 122** Wirral cannot demonstrate a clear track record to date of improving value for money within the housing strategy service. The council transferred its housing stock in 2005 and since then the department has merged with other council departments to form a regeneration department. The council is only now putting in place clear strategies for delivering efficiencies and value for money and so performance monitoring to date has not included any hard data to demonstrate progress against targets at a departmental level.
- 123** The council's comparative costs are high. The council assesses value for money performance against other local authorities through the annual Use of Resources Assessment<sup>3</sup>. This compares community housing services. Homelessness spend is in the lower quartile and Supporting People spend is ranked in the third quartile. These positive comparators in the homelessness service were identified before an increase in the current establishment. In addition, there has been no reconfiguring of homeless staff in response to the reducing levels of homeless presentations and acceptances. The council is continuing to pursue cost comparison with other similar providers such as through the national HMRI benchmarking programme and Wirral has offered to be included in round two of this exercise. It has also begun a cost:benefit analysis of the Wirralhomes service and a service review of adaptations which is, based around the new 1-Business IT system.
- 124** The council cannot systematically demonstrate VFM in the delivery costs of its services. In response to the new council efficiency targets, the council is only now starting to look at comparator information and to drill down on delivery costs. To date there has been little process re-engineering to make efficiencies while the organisation has been increasing human resources.
- 125** There is recognition in the service that the Wirralhomes IT system is ineffective and creating significant inefficiency in the way services are delivered. Expressions of interest (the levels of which are very high as a result of demand on social housing) are currently manually logged on a spreadsheet system which is time-consuming and also creates the potential for errors. Although the service has submitted for an 'invest to save' proposal for investment in developing the system, there is currently no guaranteed funding for this.

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<sup>3</sup> Audit Commission website-value for money toolkit

- 126 The value for money of Wirralhomes for RSL participants is not clearly demonstrated. Currently, RSLs are being asked for a higher levy, but without any guaranteed improvements in service delivery as the investment proposal for the new IT system has yet to be agreed. Little has been done to benchmark with other schemes to consider whether it provides value for money or whether there are more effective ways of working. The scheme has also not yet been opened up to private landlords which would increase the investment that could be made in the service (or reduce the council's contribution). No work has been done yet to compare whether the service is more competitive than private lettings agencies or to look at other ways in which the service could be expanded to generate income.
- 127 The council has developed a strategic approach to value for money and has approved an efficiency plan reduction of £30 million from 2008 to 2011. This will ensure that all areas across the council are thoroughly reviewed as savings are required from every department.
- 128 The council believes that within the context of external circumstances, its costs are reasonable though it does not have robust data to confirm this. The overall costs of the service have increased in recent years, for example through the expanded housing strategy team and HMRI delivery team, but these increased costs are legitimate as they are providing new services which did not exist previously. The housing strategy service in Wirral is highly comprehensive in terms of what it provides and required substantial resources in order to deliver its range of demanding programmes and services. This has been required to establish the post-stock transfer housing strategy function and to deliver a HMRI programme, which is bringing in an additional £10 million per year of direct investment into housing in Wirral.
- 129 The council is working with partners to increase capacity and reduce costs. The council has maximised the use of all available external funding to help improve the housing stock. Examples have been the leverage of £34 million of housing investment from the HMRI Programme, £2,727,000 from English Partnerships, £428,000 from the North West Development Agency (NWDA), £4,891,000 from the Housing Corporation/RSLs, £2,097,000 from the neighbourhood renewal fund (NRF) and £10,724,000 from private sector investment. Future additional investment will come from the VAT shelter established as part of the stock transfer where £40 million will be generated and focused on defined shared targets and outcomes agreed by a Council/Wirral Partnership Homes joint working group. This is enabling the council to focus on its priority targeted areas and to deliver key projects on time and to agreed targets.
- 130 The council has developed partnerships which achieve value for money and have delivered improvements in its performance to service users. It has generated savings which have been reinvested particularly in 'The Triangles' group repair scheme where competitive tendering led to the appointment of contractors at a figure of 10 per cent less than the original budget. The savings created were re-invested to enhance the scheme and improve quality and this has proven to be highly popular.

- 131** Key partnerships with RSLs have led to the agreed re-investment of £5 million in Wirral using recycled capital grant fund (RCGF). This impact of partnership working has been to increase private sector housing investment in Wirral from £5 million in 2002/03 to £6 million in 2006/07. This has enabled regeneration programmes to be delivered in line with targets.
- 132** The council has used procurement effectively to achieve value for money in delivering private sector housing services that benefit service users and other stakeholders including RSLs, private landlords and other council departments. Examples include using competitive tendering for property security and clearance which is flexible to the demands of the service and local residents and using competitive tendering for group repair, schedule of rates works, the HOUSED scheme and Homeswap. This has minimised the contributions which home owners have to directly contribute to a scheme or where there is a charge placed against a property after works are carried out. The impact of this has been to achieve better value for money for council tax payers.
- 133** The council's approach to private sector housing is delivering some demonstrable efficiencies. For example the empty property initiative has brought 92 homes back into use at a cost of £727,000 - approximately £8,000 per property. The Homemovers service costs £134,000 per year, but in 2005/06 assisted 318 people to move home - which equates to £421 per person.
- 134** The council compares well on cost in the HMRI. Work undertaken to compare with Sefton and Liverpool demonstrates that the council performs well. For example, disturbance allowance costs compare favourably with sub-regional partners. The average cost of allowances in Wirral is £1,100 compared to £2,000 in Sefton. Liverpool's are significantly lower at £664 and the council is currently seeking to establish the reasons for this.
- 135** The council is making effective use of loan based products. It has introduced partnering arrangements with private sector loan provider, ART Homes Limited. This arrangement is due to end in 2007 and the procurement of a future loan provider will be undertaken in conjunction with partners within NewHeartlands and will include the criterion of leveraging in private finance to support the public resources available, providing greater value for money.
- 136** The council is seeking to reduce costs and minimise waste in some areas. It has waited to refresh its housing needs assessment through the commissioning of a strategic housing market assessment in order to ensure that it is meeting the requirements of Government guidance on Planning Policy Statement Three (PPS3). It has, therefore, not wasted resources on commissioning a study which did not meet the requirements.



- 137 The adaptations service is delivering value for money in procuring technical services and approved contractors. A market test was conducted of the design service needed to translate OT recommendations into specifications (for lifts, showers, extensions etc.). Following the market test SLAs with in-house services from the council were renegotiated at fees lower than the open market. Competitive procurement was also used in drawing up the approved contractor list through the OJEU which procured 10 per cent savings on the schedule of rates. This means that the work can be completed more quickly for customers and overhead costs are kept low. The council does not insist that all adaptations works are undertaken by the in-house team. Customers are offered the option of using their own contractor for adaptations work and the council then takes responsibility for ensuring that contractors comply with H&S, have insurance and meet equality and diversity requirements. This is helpful for customers who may wish to have additional works undertaken at the same time as the adaptations work.
- 138 The council maximises its existing resources through the recycling of disabled adaptations. The service contributes to rented storage facilities held by social services and recycles all stair lifts, through floor lifts and ramps. Each recycle saves an average of £8 to 10K. The council has benchmarked its adaptations service with Trafford, Bury and Sefton and compares favourably on both costs and outputs. The savings made through competitive procurement are enabling more adaptations to be carried out from the DFG pot.
- 139 The council is routinely applying warranties and implementing defects liability call backs on adaptations works. Customers are also advised to take out a maintenance contract. This reduces the risk of customers bearing any additional costs when equipment breaks down.
- 140 The Homemovers scheme can demonstrate tangible efficiencies. In addition to providing valued customer care through support in demolition programmes, the team has reduced the necessity for costly legal intervention such as CPOs which has saved £50,000 from budgeted provision. Costs compare favourably with other partners within the HMRI Pathfinder. Disturbance payments are allocated under a clear policy to compensate demonstrable loss through production of receipts. Spend on relocation loans is rigorously monitored and so far this year less than £300K has been allocated. Benchmarking with similar schemes in other pathfinder areas also shows staffing ratios to outputs as favourable in Wirral. There are plans to deliver the current home ownership advisory service to partner RSLs within the sub region at a fee which will help resource the team's current overheads as it can be delivered within the current staffing establishment. This enables best value to be obtained from HMRI funds which can then be targeted at priority improvements.
- 141 The empty property team uses appropriate procedures to maximise revenue. Under the enforced sales procedure, when action is taken, legal charges are placed on the property to cover council/corporate debt including legal costs for the process. For example one EDMO identified charges of £15,000 in corporate debt that were recovered through the sale. The empty property team is, therefore, contributing positively to efficiency gains for the council.

## Summary

- 142** We have assessed the council's strategic housing service as a good, two-star, service.
- 143** Customers have easy access to services and the staff are customer-focused. The way the council engages with residents about housing issues, particularly in the HMRI area is effective. The council is seeking to deliver its services fairly to all diverse groups and has effective mechanisms in place to support this objective. There is a sound approach to the development of strategies and the council's information base is robust and comprehensive. The council is delivering its role as a strategic housing authority well following the transfers of its housing stock and it is making clear progress against its priorities for housing in the borough. There are some examples of positive practice, including the Homemovers service, the approach to empty homes, HMO licensing, engaging with private landlords, private sector housing, group repair schemes, energy efficiency and enforcement action. There is a clear focus on meeting DHS across all sectors of the housing market and on achieving a balanced housing market through area-based regeneration. The adaptations service is delivering positive outcomes for most customers.
- 144** However, customer service standards and customer information are inconsistent and are lacking in some key areas of service and there is no systematic and consistent approach to gaining and using customer satisfaction information. The service lacks a clear and explicit vision for balancing the housing market across the whole borough over the longer-term and there is no affordable housing policy to guide development, with a corresponding lack of use of Section 106 agreements to increase the proportion of affordable housing. Comparative costs are high and the council is unable to evidence value for money across its housing services.

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

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

- 145 There are more strengths than weaknesses in the council's track record of delivering improvement. There is a strong track record of improving the things that matter to local people and the council has achieved tangible change in the local area. The council is responsive to recommendations and has a demonstrable openness to learning from best practice. However, value for money improvements cannot be demonstrated and some areas of service delivery have lagged behind.
- 146 The council has a track record of achievement in housing strategy. It concurrently achieved a fit for purpose housing strategy, two stock transfers and a successful bid for HMRI. It has redefined its role as a strategic housing authority and has driven forward on the development of key initiatives which seek to provide a more balanced housing market across the borough. It has a track record of delivery against the housing strategy action plan. To date 31 actions (of 100) have been completed. Performance is reported twice a year to the SHP. There is clear evidence of a track record of delivery in some key areas and the council can demonstrate improvements in outcomes and key performance indicators that would be experienced by users.
- 147 The council also has a track record of responding to inspection recommendations. Recommendations from both the Supporting People inspection and the HMRI pathfinder review have been acted upon and there is strong evidence that the majority of these have been addressed.
- 148 Recognised as an area for further improvement following AC inspections the council has engaged a marketing and communications person to publicise the positive impact of regeneration initiatives carried out. An extensive marketing campaign 'Live Wirral' including use of radio, press and buses aims to promote Wirral as a place to live. The organisation is learning from previous inspection recommendations.
- 149 Against a backdrop of some significant deprivation levels in the borough, Wirral's track record on increasing energy efficiency and reducing fuel poverty for its customers is a key strength. HECA progress on efficiency has been positive at 16.38 per cent so far this year, with significant progress having been made in the last three years since Wirral developed its own strategy. This means that the council is on track to achieve the 2011 government target of 30 per cent.



- 150 The council has a strong track record of maximising the use of all available external funding to help improve housing. This has included HMRI, English Partnerships, North West Development Agency, Housing Corporation/RSLs and NRF. The council has also focused substantial levels of funding from its capital allocation towards housing as a priority.
- 151 In response to gaps in the homelessness service, the council has appointed new housing advisors and has developed a more comprehensive approach to homeless issues through the introduction of preventative work. It has also improved access to better move on accommodation and improved temporary accommodation through the re-focusing of Supporting People funding.
- 152 Positive progress is also being made on addressing the issue of move on accommodation for people with support needs. A new scheme, the housing priority panel, has been set up to assess the needs of particular clients on a case by case basis and to work together to meet those needs and ensure move-on through a range of support. The information from this approach will be used to identify whether there are further gaps in provision or barriers to access and will seek to address these through SP funding in future.
- 153 The adaptations service has a track record of improving service delivery and outcomes for customers. Average waiting times have reduced from 18 months to 9 months, with minor adaptations generally completed within target timescales of 5 days and fast track adaptations completed within the 24/48 hour targets. The service has undertaken a review against the CLG good practice guidance checklist. This identified a range of areas for improvement which the service is now working on. This means that customers will receive a better service in future, for example through the introduction of an adaptations pack and an adaptations aftercare leaflet.
- 154 Of the 25 original actions in the 2003 PSH strategy a number have exceeded the targets considerably. An example of this is target 24, 'to develop a policy to deal with empty private sector properties'. This has resulted in the development of a draft strategy, the creation of a new empty property team with multi-agency working, and successful HMRI and NRF bids in excess of £0.5 million to deal exclusively with empty properties and land across the borough.
- 155 The introduction of the empty homes team has made a positive contribution to reducing the number of empty properties in the borough. The number of empty properties in Wirral is above the national average at 4.3 per cent, but lower than nearest neighbour Liverpool which is 5.6 per cent. The proactive work of the team has brought 92 properties back into use since July 2006. Private sector housing has carried out extensive consultation which identified community concerns about empty properties and the knock on effect of vandalism, blight and arson. In one area, work done by EHOs in carrying out empty property enforcement had dramatically reduced the levels of arson noted by the fire service. While the service did not achieve its performance target for the number of empty homes being brought back into use in 2003/04, performance has improved significantly and both the 2004/05 and 2005/06 targets have been achieved. As a result a robust empty property strategy has been developed and a structure established to take forward the corporate response.

## 42 Strategic Approach to Housing | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 156** However, of the 25 original actions in the 2003 PSH strategy, only 20 had been fully completed in 2006. The remaining 2003 targets consisted of clearance schemes such as 'Ten Streets' and those targets where new legislation and good practice have resulted in a slight amendment in the action plans original aims. These included the HMO targets, which have been superseded by the 2004 Housing Act, which required councils to undertake mandatory HMO licensing, and the development of the private landlord strategy, Good practice now suggests the emphasis for this strategy should be on the whole of the private rented sector, rather than just landlords, and therefore a private rented strategy is programmed in for Summer 2007.
- 157** Wirral is unable to demonstrate a clear track record of improving value for money within the housing department. The council transferred its housing stock in 2005 and since then the department has merged with other council departments to form a regeneration department. The council is only now putting in place clear strategies for delivering efficiencies and value for money and so performance monitoring to date has not included any hard data to demonstrate progress against any efficiency targets at a departmental level.
- 158** The council acknowledges that there are a number of weaknesses in service delivery which need to be addressed. In its self-assessment it states that the service aims to improve the right things, which matter most and address service weakness such as addressing Wirralhomes, Homelessness and Adaptations. There are political and service-based reviews of these services underway at present which will be used to identify deficiencies and develop more robust improvement plans.

## How well does the service manage performance?

- 159** There are more strengths than weaknesses in the service's approach to managing performance. There is clarity on what needs to be done and clear mechanisms for monitoring implementation. There is a good understanding of priorities at all levels. The performance management arrangements are sound and supported by effective ICT. However, there is no documented or clearly articulated specific vision for the borough and no targets in place in some key areas, for example for the delivery of affordable homes.
- 160** The service has aims and priorities for the future that are clear, challenging and robust and which are set out in the fit for purpose housing strategy statement which links together specific service-based aims and priorities. The service places a high emphasis on 'doing the right thing' and the council sees housing as the right thing to do by making it a corporate priority based on public consultation and supporting it with significant funding. The council is focused on improving the things that matter to local people through listening to them more. For example co-ordinating the approach to housing and the external environment and co-ordinating approaches with partner agencies.

- 161** Customers and stakeholders have been actively involved in strategy development. The inner Wirral regeneration consultation exercise conducted by consultants used a variety of engagement methods to determine customer views on priorities for strategic direction. Over 900 customers were consulted. The empty property and land strategy was extensively consulted upon through the private landlord's forum and other stakeholders including the fire brigade and community safety. All strategies routinely go to the SHP and customers are engaged through quarterly area forums. Priorities within plans are co-ordinated, robust and deliverable.
- 162** The council is focused on meeting the national Government agenda. There are clear targets in place to achieve energy efficiency and an affordable warmth strategy. This means that local people can benefit from increased thermal efficiency and lower fuel costs.
- 163** The service has future plans and priorities which are well co-ordinated, robust and deliverable. Plans address national, regional, local and corporate priorities such as the housing strategy objectives and HMRI and are developed within this context. Plans integrate financial delivery plans and have clear milestones such as HMRI delivery plans. They translate strategic aims into deliverable programmes, which are based on solid stakeholder engagement such as Masterplans. The housing strategy action plan will be strengthened by research such as the SHMA and its co-ordination role via the SHP is well established.
- 164** The approach to managing performance is generally sound. It is undertaken through the use of key performance indicators and a balanced scorecard type approach. This means that any service performance failures can be quickly identified and focused on.
- 165** There are effective performance management arrangements in place which are driven at a strategic level. At departmental level, led in the case of housing by the director of regeneration, the regeneration departmental plan translates corporate objectives and priorities into a deliverable programme including output and outcome targets and milestones. These in turn feed into service-based plans such as the HMRI Programme. The departmental service planning and performance monitoring process is driven by the regeneration department management team and permeates throughout the hierarchy of the department in the form of performance review meetings and section plans. Ultimately this thread links corporate objectives to individual officers via key issues exchanges (the council's appraisal system) and personal action plans. Within the council, the housing and community safety overview and scrutiny committee provides the lead role in housing service development and performance monitoring. Based on information presented to it, this committee has chosen a work programme which looks at key service areas beginning with Wirralhomes, homelessness and housing advice.

#### 44 Strategic Approach to Housing | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 166 To support and facilitate the corporate performance management frameworks an effective electronic system has been developed for recording and reporting progress in relation to indicators and targets to compare performance with other authorities - the performance information management system (PIMS). PIMS is used by all parts of the strategic housing service. It enables all services and sections to input their plans electronically and to link activities to departmental aims, corporate objectives and relevant performance indicators. It also aids performance management arrangements and automatically generates 'milestone alerts' to help track performance and identify exceptions.
- 167 Improved performance management systems have been introduced for the rehousing service (Wirralhomes and homelessness). The homeless service has retained the former BVPI relating to decision times and is monitoring this at service and individual level. This is used to identify where decision are made outside the time target and to analyse the reasons. Service performance has improved from 80 per cent to 85 per cent as a result of increased focus and more effective performance management (although the target is 95 per cent). The homelessness and advice service has a clear plan in place for improving the service and is about to commence a review of the whole service in order to inform the updated homelessness strategy. The plan sets out some key improvements that are now being implemented, which include the development of additional posts to strengthen the service through the use of SP funding (support officer, bond officer, home visiting officer and tenancy support officer (inc private sector)). The council is starting to make progress on undertaking a review of its homelessness strategy and service and developing a new strategy. Consultants have been appointed to undertake the review. The homeless forum has been re-established and has met twice. It has started work to review statistics and identify gaps in provision. This will enable the service to increase its capacity to deliver a better service for homeless and potentially homeless people and will improve the focus on homeless prevention.
- 168 There are effective performance management arrangements in place with the two stock transfer organisations. Quarterly meetings take place and focus on KPIs and systematic monitoring of the delivery of promises. This means that the council is ensuring that the commitments made to tenants are being delivered.
- 169 The monitoring of the private sector housing strategy works well. The strategy is monitored by the action plan contained in the stand-alone PSH strategy and the overarching housing strategy statement. This is monitored by the SHP and the council's cabinet. There is a robust performance management structure which measures the impact, outputs and outcomes of many parts of the private sector housing service, principally the HMRI. These are monitored by NewHeartlands and used by the board to inform decision making. They are also monitored by the council's cabinet and used to inform future activity such as the recent decision to bankroll Wirral's HMRI Programme in order to maintain performance.
- 170 The council works pro-actively with existing and potential partners to compare processes, costs and outcomes such as via the HMO Licensing Merseyside Group and liaison with Stoke, Newcastle, and Oldham Councils about specific parts of the HMRI delivery process.

- 171 Partnering arrangements are strong and effective and there are examples of this underpinning improved service efficiencies over time. For example the development of the unified housing register and the subsequent development of Wirralhomes means that RSLs do not have to undertake their own applications process and customers can register and express interest in properties through one central co-ordinated system.
- 172 There is strong evidence that the council has learned from elsewhere. The review undertaken by overview and scrutiny of homelessness has drawn on examples of positive practice in Rochdale and case studies from Shelter. The adaptations service has learned from positive practice elsewhere. There have been reference visits to other HMRI pathfinders and evidence of positive practice being translated into the Wirral context. In private sector housing service, officers have worked with Manchester and avoided many mistakes by following their guidance. They are now establishing a best practice group with Liverpool, Halton, Knowsley, Sefton and Ellesmere Port to share good practice which Wirral is hosting. This demonstrates that there is an openness to learning within the service.
- 173 The adaptations service has positive plans to address service weaknesses. The 1-Business review has identified a need to integrate OT services within the HAT and a final report to council for approval is due to be presented shortly. Other improvements planned include better web information and access improvements through CRM (flags) following the 1-Business review. Customers will be able to get better information on where they are on adaptations waiting lists at customer information points in one stop shops and staff will contact customers who are on the list to give updates on progress and to check need is still current. A new customer information pack is being developed and consulted upon with stakeholders (WEHAG, PCT) and user groups such as the BME forum and visits are planned to existing customers post adaptation by the new review officer. There are also plans to introduce equity loans from 2008.
- 174 Although Wirral does not have a VFM strategy, the council has put in place robust proposals for meeting efficiency targets and improving value for money. The AC annual governance report 2005/06 assessed that Wirral has put in place arrangements for setting, reviewing and implementing its strategic and operational objectives in relation to VFM and that there are arrangements in place to monitor and scrutinise performance. The council's next stage will take the form of a series of challenge sessions looking at any service areas where there are high costs in comparisons with others. Minutes of the corporate improvement group confirm that this has now been raised to a corporate level with an identified need to focus on VFM. Currently, strategic housing has not been identified as an area to pilot the approach as the council has prioritised other council services with 'unusually costly' comparators. However, the desired outcome is a clear understanding of service costs and whether they can be reduced towards average cost for similar authorities. This will in turn contribute the council's efficiency programme. The challenge process is to be chaired by the director of regeneration and will therefore impact on strategic approaches within that department. The three year efficiency targets for the council (£30 million savings) are underpinned by a commitment to re-engineer service delivery to reduce staff costs and also to carry out VFM reviews of all services and ensure effective procurement.



## 46 Strategic Approach to Housing | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 175 There are robust performance management arrangements in place to drive and deliver improved value for money in the future. At a corporate level, Wirral has geared up its management team to improve performance management scrutiny and exception performance. Alongside this, the clear corporate focus on delivering efficiencies and VFM should give the regeneration department clear impetus and focus on this key area of business.
- 176 The council does not have a documented and articulated vision or strategy for new private sector and social housing. Officers and members each provide a personal vision based on positive drivers acting as catalysts for growth, such as the major Peel Holdings planned investment, but there is lack of clarity about specific plans outside of this. For example officers spoke of Liverpool's regional model which is to stop developing social housing for rent and concentrate on the intermediate market - shared ownership - but this is an underdeveloped area culturally for Wirral and needs further research before firm plans can be developed. During 2006/07 the council will complete its strategic housing market assessment which will be used to drive strategy and it plans to work closely with the local strategic partnership, the SHP and stakeholders to define a longer-term vision for the area that sets the context for strategic housing and development targets. There are clear plans to produce an affordable housing strategy by autumn 2007.

## Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 177 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in the council's capacity to improve. The council has significant levels of skills and resources in its strategic housing service. High levels of investment have been made and are providing an effective foundation for the service to move forward. There is also a strong history of securing external resources, developing innovative solutions and improving capacity through training and development, partnership and procurement. However, the council's need to save £30 million over the next three years presents a difficult barrier to overcome, particularly as the service does not have a strong track record in improving value for money, as does uncertainty about a future HMRI funding programme.
- 178 The council is seeking to invest in IT infrastructure to support the development of service delivery. This includes the 1-Business review. In addition, an invest to save submission has been made which would deliver fit for purpose IT for Wirralhomes and potentially reduce the levels of staffing required to deliver the service. This would improve the level of service being provided to RSLs in the scheme.
- 179 The council has invested in the one stop shops in order to deliver more effective and customer-focused services at the front line. £21 million has been invested, including a council-wide customer relationship management system. This should enable customers to access services more easily and to receive a better level of service.

- 180** The council makes good use of recognised standards and quality systems. The Homemovers service is preparing to apply for Charter Mark status and the Handyperson Service achieved accreditation in 2006.
- 181** The council has strengthened its capacity to deliver its strategic housing role following the transfers of its housing stock and has developed its structure to meet changing demands and pressures. For example, the HMO team was restructured early in 2006 to enable the council to respond to the mandatory licensing aspect of the new Housing Act which requires landlords to be a 'fit and proper person' in addition to the property inspection, with an estimated 300 licences to be issued. The current structure enables the council to focus on its priorities in a more coherent way, for example linking the whole regeneration agenda, including housing, parks and open spaces and the overall environment. This means that there is more effective joined-up working and a reduction in silo approaches. This is improving outcomes for customers, through, for example, the 'liveability' approach that is being taken through the use of NRF.
- 182** The council has increased its capacity to focus on performance and value for money. It has invested in two new senior posts which will drive these agendas.
- 183** The council has developed a three year efficiency plan which was approved by cabinet in January 2007. New Government targets for LAs to achieve 3 per cent cashable efficiencies means that the Council will have to make cashable efficiencies of £30 million over the period 2008 - 2011. The regeneration department's contribution to the corporate objective is to save £4.88 million over the three years, over half of which will come from reducing staffing costs and a third from services.
- 184** The homeless service has a clear plan to increase the level of resourcing in the service through the addition of three SP funded posts. These posts will be primarily focused on homelessness prevention and support for homeless people to move on. The addition of these posts should help to alleviate some of the pressure that the service has been under over recent months and will enable improved focus on the prevention of homelessness and the provision of a more customer-focused service and improved outcomes for homeless people.
- 185** The council focuses on building its HR capacity. Staff have access to extensive training opportunities, both in-house and externally and training needs and opportunities are picked up at the key issues (appraisal) meetings that are systematically undertaken. Staff across all housing services are highly motivated and enthusiastic and sickness levels are low. This is a positive driver for improvement within the service.
- 186** The council has demonstrated a high level of self-awareness in re-declaring itself at level 1 of the local government equality standard. It identified a number of gaps in its approach and has sought to fill these and will self-declare at level 2 at the end of this financial year (2006/07). Diversity training has been undertaken across the council and forms part of the induction programme for new staff. This has enabled the council to focus on improving its approach, in particular through the systematic use of equality impact assessments.



**48 Strategic Approach to Housing | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?**

- 187** The council has a robust corporate procurement strategy. Approved in 2005, it reflects national best practice and guidelines including Gershon and Egan principles. There is evidence that the strategy is consistently applied with examples of partnering development within the HMRI, a mix of internal and external service provision, consideration of sub regional procurement such as CBL and extensive market testing to obtain lowest price, for example in the adaptations service. This enables the council to secure value for money in priority areas.
- 188** The service has a positive track record of attracting inward investment. It can demonstrate effectiveness at investing resources well. For example aligning its various funding streams to deliver area-based renewal improvements. Examples include English Partnerships, NWDA, Housing Corporation and maximising investment funding from private sector sources such as developers, energy companies and private landlords. This enhances public investment in housing and is supported by the leverage of resources to deliver capital neighbourhood management outcomes, such as the community fund being established with Wirral Partnership Homes.
- 189** There is clear evidence that the council has been effective at drawing in external funding to support its strategic housing priorities. There are a wide range of agencies contributing financially to help Wirral achieve its objectives:
- health through warmth and Wirral Warm Homes programmes have generated grant funding for benefit health check money advice;
  - the Cosy Homes programme within the HMRI has attracted £160,000 of European funding through utility companies to date and new arrangements are in place to secure future funding through partner insulator APS;
  - the HELP project which has brought in additional funds from Jobseeker Plus and the YMCA; and
  - Wirral has attracted £6.5 million through Warm Front of which £4 million has been targeted outside of the HMRI, borough-wide.
- 190** The council is clearly focused on improving the areas with highest deprivation. It has allocated a significant amount of NRF funding to support housing and regeneration based schemes. These include budgets of £600,000 for private sector decency and liveability. Community consultation has been undertaken to identify 'liveability' issues - the factors that affect people when they walk out of their front doors. This means that the council can effectively target its resources on the things that matter most to local people.
- 191** The Council is investing significant resources into regeneration activity. The Council capital budget for 2006/07 is £6.3 million approximately. Six million of this is invested in the HMRI area. This in turn attracts significant external funding from central government grant through NewHeartlands and also English partnerships. The service is attracting inward investment to deliver private sector housing improvements. This ensures that resources are focused on priorities and improving the things that matter to local people.

- 192** Financial resourcing of the housing strategy is unlikely to be sustainable. The elected members and senior officers see mainly external funding such as HMRI as the primary solution to housing issues and while it contributes its own significant resources, it is not clear whether this is sufficient to meet the future housing needs. This means that there is a risk of an ever widening gap in the housing market and potential failure to meet the housing aspirations of local people.
- 193** There is some doubt about whether the council has the financial capacity and resources to deliver improvement. The council has to save £30 million between 2008 and 2011. In addition to this, each department is required to generate service re-engineering savings. This will mean that there is likely to be pressure on all non-statutory functions.
- 194** The council has not yet taken action to identify and address high cost services. This is set out in the council's direction of travel statement and endorsed by senior officers. This makes it difficult for the service to demonstrate that it provides value for money across all areas of service.
- 195** The council did not secure a substantial level of homelessness grant from CLG. Its allocation appears to be disproportionate to the level of the problems in the borough and this would appear to be compounding under-resourcing of this service. The allocation was challenged and the council will be submitting a full report to CLG once the homelessness review has been undertaken and the homelessness strategy developed in summer 2007.
- 196** There are insufficient financial resources in place to meet the demands of all customers requiring disabled adaptations. Current funding by central government and the council leaves a shortfall of £0.5 - £0.75 million each year. This does not include adaptations to RSL tenants (other than WPH) who have to rely on RSL and Housing Corporation funding. RSLs have been advised that DFG is only available as a 'last resort', but in practice there has been little access to funding because it is already oversubscribed.

## Summary

- 197** We have assessed the service as having promising prospects for improvement.
- 198** The council has demonstrated a track record of achievement, in particular through its work in regeneration areas, and key performance indicators are showing positive trends. There is a positive approach to addressing both inspection recommendations and the outcomes of its own reviews which is helping to address gaps in service delivery. There are clear aims and priorities which are well understood by staff and an effective balance between national, regional, sub-regional and local priorities. The approach to managing performance is well developed. The service is open to learning from elsewhere and embraces positive practice. The council is clear about efficiency targets and achieving value for money and plans are in place to significantly reduce costs over the medium-term. There is good capacity within the housing service and high levels of motivation among staff. The approach to procurement is mature and the council has a track record of attracting significant external funding to deliver its priorities as well as focusing its own resources on housing as a key priority.

**50 Strategic Approach to Housing | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?**

- 199** However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. There is a lack of track record in improving value for money over time. There is no clearly articulated and explicit vision for the housing market across the whole borough or clear targets for development. There will be significant pressures on the housing budget as a result of the £30 million savings that the council needs to make and this is compounded by a lack of certainty on the availability of external funding in the future.

## Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

**Table 1 Best Value performance indicators**

<b>Performance Indicator</b>	<b>All England top quartile 2005/06</b>	<b>Wirral 2005/06</b>	<b>Wirral Target 2006/07</b>	<b>Wirral Outturn 2006/07 (unaudited figures)</b>
BV64 Vacant homes returned to use or demolished	76.5	129	120	120
BV183a Average length of stay in B&B in weeks	1.0	1.0	1.0	1.37
BV183b Average length of stay in hostels in weeks	0	0	1.0	0
BV203 Percentage change in the number of families in temporary accommodation	-16.0%	+42.31%	+9%	+21.62%

*Source: Audit Commission audited figures (awaiting final data)*

## Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
  - the council's self-assessment of the service;
  - corporate plan;
  - housing strategy statement;
  - private sector housing strategy (draft);
  - strategic housing market assessment (draft);
  - homelessness strategy;
  - regeneration department plan;
  - customer facing information and leaflets; and
  - performance information.

## Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
  - interviews with managers, staff and councillors;
  - focus groups with staff, stakeholders and customers;
  - visits to various projects across the borough;
  - review of council's website; and
  - observation of meetings, specifically the strategic housing partnership (SHP).

## Appendix 4 – Positive practice

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

### Homemovers Support and Advice

- 1 The Homemovers Service was established by the NewHeartlands Local Authority Partners in November 2004 to provide support to residents affected by clearance action. There are four Home Ownership Advisory Officers (HOAOs) whose primary role is to help residents living in clearance areas through the moving process providing advice and support, as necessary. Assistance is given to owner-occupiers assistance to help them maintain their home ownership status or obtain shared ownership or rented accommodation. Both private sector and social housing tenants also receive assistance which includes the option to be re-housed through Wirralhomes. The HOAOs provide as much or as little support as required and can explain the clearance process, the compensation and financial assistance available and possible future housing options. They will also contact estate agents, removal companies and other relevant agencies on the resident's behalf and, where necessary, maintain close links with social services and health professionals to ensure that additional support is in place where needed.
- 2 For further information the team can be contacted on 0151 691 8107.

### BME Team

- 3 A Supported Housing Needs Survey was commissioned in 2002. As a result, a Steering Group from the BME Community was established and a BME Support Service was developed and went live in 2005. The team consists of three Support Workers from the BME Community, two of who are bi-lingual. The service focuses upon access and barriers to services related specifically to housing and accommodation issues, but also to identify common barriers, which exist for all services and to ensure that issues are raised on the corporate agenda and addressed appropriately.
- 4 Further information is available in other languages and formats from the team at: [supportingpeople@wirral.gov.uk](mailto:supportingpeople@wirral.gov.uk). A website is currently under development.



## Using NRF Funding to Bring Empty Properties Back into Use

- 5 The council has a good track record of aligning both mainstream and external funding streams to deliver key corporate objectives and priorities. An example of this is through the commissioning of the 'Liveability' theme of the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund via the Strategic Housing Partnership, a subgroup of the LSP. Tackling Empty Properties has been recognised as a key priority of this sub group and has commissioned two projects, a property based scheme and a derelict land based scheme.
- 6 The HOUSED (Home Ownership Using Sustainable Empty Dwellings) Scheme aims to explore ways of bringing long term empty properties back into use in sustainable areas and at the same time offering properties to anyone currently in a HMRI Clearance area or those seeking re-housing on the Wirralhomes Register to free up RSL places in areas of medium/high demand. The project has been running for just over six months and is already in the process of acquiring and renovating three properties. Long term the project will be looking recycle the sale costs and bringing in additional private finance.
- 7 The UGLI (Urban Green Land Initiative) Scheme also has a direct impact on improving the sustainability and attractiveness of an area by tackling the worst areas of derelict land and bringing them back into a constructive use through partnership working with owners and local community groups. The project has been fortunate in attracting additional resources through ERDF which will allow 16 sites to be delivered over the next 18 months.
- 8 For Further information, please contact the Empty Property team on 0151 691 8005. Main web page: [www.wirral.gov.uk/he/Housing/PSHR/EmptyProperties](http://www.wirral.gov.uk/he/Housing/PSHR/EmptyProperties) . UGLI: [www.wirral.gov.uk/he/Housing/PSHR/UGLI.htm](http://www.wirral.gov.uk/he/Housing/PSHR/UGLI.htm) . HOUSED: [www.wirral.gov.uk/he/Housing/PSHR/housed.htm](http://www.wirral.gov.uk/he/Housing/PSHR/housed.htm).

## Approach to Dealing with Empty Properties/Empty Property Team

- 9 Dealing with the issue of empty properties was identified as a community priority for Wirral as far back as 2004. While Wirral has been able to make some inroads in addressing some of the worst areas of housing abandonment through the Newheartlands Neighbourhood Renewal Pathfinder (it has cleared over 600 properties since 2003), the problem of tackling the borough's 6,000 empty properties was going to be considerably more challenging and the council set about developing a corporate empty property strategy with the clear aims of aim of better cross authority and partnership working, improving housing market intelligence regarding empty properties, and the more effective use of enforcement powers.

- 10 The empty property team was established in July 2006. Already the team have been instrumental in bringing back 92 properties back into use over the first six months. The team uses a range of methods for getting vacant properties back into use including:
- Telephone Hotline and Webpages;
  - Options Appraisal Toolkit developed. This is a six step process which if followed will eventually get any vacant premises back into use;
  - Empty Property Management Protocol. This is a good practice guide for private owners and RSLs, to use when they own empty properties with a view to reducing the impact of empty properties on neighbourhoods. The issues covered in this management protocol are Security, Environmental Impact, Physical Impact and an ultimate aim to get the premises back into use within 6 months;
  - Enforced Sales Procedure. We are currently piloting this process in partnership with our Legal Team and Council Tax Dept, targeting 3 long term vacant properties;
  - Empty Dwelling Management Orders. We are currently out to tender for a Private Sector Preferred Partner to execute this function on our behalf;
  - Private Sector Leasing Scheme. We are currently out to tender for a Private sector Preferred Partner to execute this function on our behalf;
  - Enabling Role with Private Sector Developers to bring empty property back into use;
  - Arson Reduction Initiative; and
  - Steering Group.
- 11 For Further information, please contact the Empty Property team on 0151 691 8005. Main web page: [www.wirral.gov.uk/he/Housing/PSHR/EmptyProperties](http://www.wirral.gov.uk/he/Housing/PSHR/EmptyProperties). Key Facts: [www.wirral.gov.uk/he/Housing/PSHR/EP%20leaflet.pdf](http://www.wirral.gov.uk/he/Housing/PSHR/EP%20leaflet.pdf). Empty Property Strategy: [www.wirral.gov.uk/he/Housing/PSHR/strategy.htm](http://www.wirral.gov.uk/he/Housing/PSHR/strategy.htm).

## **HELP Scheme**

- 12 The Housing and Employment Link Project (HELP) is a scheme funded through the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund (NRF) to help people who have recently found work but do not have a suitable home. The scheme provides guidance and support to people in order to help them live independently through accessing accommodation, whilst offering incentives to gain and maintain their employment.
- 13 People on the scheme receive a contribution towards their rent for the first three months and a furniture package. This package is gifted to the person if they sustain both their tenancy and employment for a six-month period.

- 14** Through multi-agency working between the Regeneration Department and Jobcentre Plus the HELP scheme offers a range of specialist help including:
- arranging accommodation by working with the Wirral Choice Based Lettings service, RSLs and private landlords;
  - assisting with rental payments for up to six months;
  - furniture packages to help clients set up their home;
  - general advice and assistance on a wide range of housing and employment related issues;
  - welfare benefit advice and support where required;
  - linking in with support agencies; and
  - linking in with existing schemes that can assist with maximising access and opportunities within the private rented sector such as the Tenancy Bond scheme and energy efficiency initiatives.
- 15** For further Information contact the Help Scheme Manager on 0151 666 5505.