

# Strategic Housing Inspection

Boston Borough Council

June 2009



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# Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

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

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# Summary

- 1 Boston District Council is providing a poor, zero star strategic housing service which has uncertain prospects for improvement.
- 2 The Council is not systematic in its surveying or monitoring of customer satisfaction and there are no service standards or sufficient and systematic involvement of users in service development. Whilst it is easy to get information from the Council detailed guidance is less easily available.
- 3 The Council was slow in starting to respond to equalities and diversity issues and although it's understanding and monitoring is now developing, the Council cannot yet demonstrate much direct impact upon services for its customers.
- 4 The Council's Housing Strategy is out of date and has not been regularly or systematically reviewed and it has been slow to develop an effective affordable housing and private sector strategy and its understanding of the private sector housing market is incomplete. However, overall there is a clear picture of housing need.
- 5 Housing advice and homelessness prevention services work well together and there is some evidence of reducing levels of homelessness. There are strong relationships with the voluntary sector on homelessness prevention and a sensitive response to domestic violence. However, the Council continues to rely on bed and breakfast for emergency accommodation, the quality of emergency accommodation is not good and homeless families can spend too long in temporary accommodation.
- 6 The Council does respond effectively to requests for enforcement from private tenants, but is not proactive. There is a substantial but reducing backlog in processing applications for decent homes grants, a significant budget under-spend in previous years and a lack of monitoring of delivery of both decent homes and disabled facilities grants. There is no proactive approach towards houses in multiple occupation and empty properties.
- 7 The choice based lettings scheme works well and there are plans to expand it to neighbouring councils. The majority of social rented housing in the area has already achieved the Government's decency standard.
- 8 An above average number of affordable homes have been built over the last four years and the Council works well with RSLs and developers. However, the Council was slow to agree an effective policy to encourage the development of more affordable housing via the planning process and did not effectively use the capital receipt from the transfer of its homes in 1999 to develop more affordable housing.
- 9 The Council is only now developing a corporate approach to assessing value for money. There is no systematic benchmarking of costs and a reliance on comparison with neighbouring authorities within the County rather than with the best performing councils. However, the benchmarking of the housing service does suggest that it costs less than comparable services elsewhere in Lincolnshire.

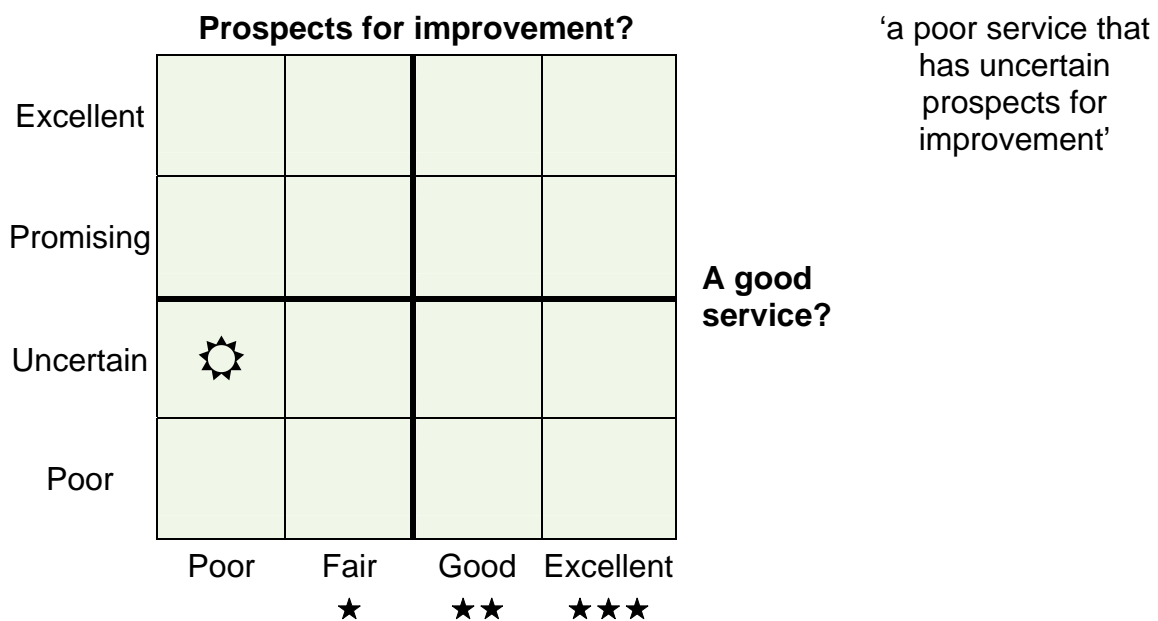
## Summary

- 10 There is a clear corporate commitment to improvement but significant challenges to its delivery. Revised and more effective strategies and policies have yet to produce any significant improvement in outcomes for customers. There is an ambitious programme of outsourcing and partnership working but this will not deliver service improvement or savings for a number of years and will be challenging for the Council to deliver. Effective management of performance is not yet embedded and the Council has significant financial challenges which threaten the delivery of improvement.

# Scoring the service

11 We have assessed Boston Borough Council as providing a 'poor', no-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

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



Source: Audit Commission

12 We found the service to be poor because it has a range of weaknesses including the following.

- There are no service standards and the Council does not systematically monitor customers' experiences or involve them in service development.
- The Council is not proactive in addressing issues of enforcement in the private sector and has been slow to register HMOs and address the levels of empty properties.
- Processing of grant applications is slow and has not been effectively monitored and there is a large backlog.
- The Council still uses bed and breakfast for emergency accommodation and the condition of its hostel accommodation is poor.

<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.

## Scoring the service

- The Council is not systematic in ensuring value for money or comparing itself with the best performing councils.
- The Council's understanding of equalities and diversity is underdeveloped and has not yet begun to make a significant impact on service delivery.

13 There are a number of strengths including the following.

- There is a good range of easily accessible information and advice services and strong partnerships with voluntary agencies including the CAB and RSLs to provide advice and support.
- Housing advice and work on preventing homelessness is improving and the number of homeless applicants is reducing.
- An above average number of high quality affordable homes is being delivered despite severe restraints due to flood risk.

14 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because of the following.

- There are positive signs of a corporate commitment both to improvement generally and to housing issues. There is evidence of learning from review and inspection and of beginning to change service delivery as a result and there is a clear plan for corporate improvement.
- There is increased staffing capacity within the strategic housing service and evidence of improvement in, for example, the delivery of affordable homes, the choice-based lettings scheme and in the prevention of homelessness.
- There is an ambitious programme of outsourcing and proposed partnership working.

15 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include the following.

- The Council's limited capacity, which means that any improvement is dependent on staff being in place to deliver. There are examples of improvement being delayed due to lack of capacity.
- The scale of the proposed change, in particular the outsourcing and partnership programme is challenging, complex and the outcomes are uncertain.
- The Council's fragile financial situation and its unpredictability mean that the budget for the housing service is vulnerable.
- Performance management is not yet embedded.

# Recommendations

- 16 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>2</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

## Recommendation

### R1 Increase customer focus by:

- working with customers to develop comprehensive service standards, for all aspects of the strategic housing service, ensuring that they are monitored and reported frequently, and embedding their use into the performance management framework;
- tailoring the availability and accessibility of services and information by collecting and using comprehensive profile information which includes but is not limited to information about diversity;
- implementing regular measures of satisfaction with customers, addressing the weaknesses identified in current arrangements, and reporting satisfaction levels and actions taken as a result through the performance management framework; and
- providing systematic analysis and feedback to customers on how their comments and complaints have been used to improve service delivery.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- service users will have a better understanding of what to expect from the services
- improved customer satisfaction
- the service will be better able to learn from service users

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented within nine months of report publication.

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

## Recommendations

### Recommendation

**R2** Improve the strategic approach to housing by:

- systematically reviewing and updating its housing strategy, ensuring that the revised housing strategy is informed by stakeholders and service users, and is supported by robust arrangements to monitor and report delivery;
- ensuring that strategic housing priorities are clear and explicit and that there is adequate capacity to deliver these priorities; and
- addressing gaps in the current strategic approach and delivery which include those relating to private sector enforcement, the registration of houses in multiple occupation and maximising the use of the private sector and social rented stock.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a service which is driven by robust and integrated long term aims which meet national, regional and local priorities, and the needs of service users;
- making sure that tenants in the private sector are protected from poor conditions and treatment; and
- increased emphasis on making best use of existing stock to help meet housing need.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with medium costs. This should be implemented within 12 months of report publication.

### Recommendation

**R3** Improve the standard of and appropriateness of housing in the Borough by:

- speeding up the process of assessment and delivery of Decent Home and Disabled Facilities Grants to achieve performance that compares favourably with the best performing organisations; and
- improving working and communication with the County Council over the delivery of Disabled Facilities Grants and minor aids and adaptations.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- works of improvement and adaptation being undertaken more quickly and improving living conditions for residents; and
- improved monitoring of grant delivery

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented within nine months of report publication.

### Recommendation

- R4** Improve the service to homeless households by:
- ensuring that all temporary accommodation at least meets statutory requirements and the needs of homeless households;
  - completing the renovation and improvement of the Council's hostel accommodation; and
  - explore all options for reducing and removing the use of bed and breakfast accommodation.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- improved conditions for homeless households.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented within six months of report publication.

### Recommendation

- R5** Improve and demonstrate value for money by:
- undertaking benchmarking of costs, performance and satisfaction of all elements of the strategic housing service with the best providers nationally and analysing this to inform investment and policy decisions and service improvement;
  - reviewing allocated budgets for private sector renewal in relation known need and demand and ensuring that the service has sufficient capacity to fully spend those budgets; and
  - evaluating the value for money of current working practices and arrangements within the strategic housing service, in particular for grant funding.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- resources are used effectively and are aligned to meet the needs of customers.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented within twelve months of report publication.

## Recommendations

### Recommendation

**R6** Improve the focus on equality and diversity by:

- ensuring that it systematically monitors and delivers its services to all six diversity strands;
- undertaking systematic consultation with all communities, particularly those identified as hard to reach; and
- implementing measures to ensure that inequality in service provision can be readily identified and tackled.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- services which are provided fairly and consistently to all groups within the community; and
- the needs of vulnerable people are being championed and met.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented within 12 months of report publication.

### Recommendation

**R7** Improve the way performance is managed by:

- preparing a comprehensive service plan for 2009/10 which identifies realistic priorities and targets and ensuring that actions are specific and measurable and clearly resourced;
- identifying and addressing gaps in the available performance information and integrating these into performance management and service planning; and
- ensuring comprehensive, systematic and robust collection of data on all areas of performance.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- outcomes and the impact of the Council's work to meet housing need and balance the housing market can be robustly evaluated, monitored and reported.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented within nine months of report publication.

**17** We would like to thank the staff of Boston Borough Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of Inspection: 12-16 January 2009.

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# Report

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## Context

### The locality

- 18 Boston is in south-east Lincolnshire bordered by the east coast and The Wash and by East Lindsey, South Holland and North Kesteven districts. It covers an area of 362 square kilometres and is the smallest District, after Lincoln city, within Lincolnshire. 97 per cent of the area of Boston has been identified by the Environment Agency as being at risk of fluvial and/or tidal flooding. It is an area of significant farming and food production and centres on the town of Boston, a port and ancient marketing town. There are no other large scale communities within the Council's area.
- 19 The region attracts a large number of migrant workers, largely from the European Union States of Portugal and Eastern Europe. The Council estimates that its population has increased since the last census in 2001 by 6-10,000 and it has been placed in the top five councils nationally for A8 citizens registered per thousand of the population.
- 20 Boston has areas of relative wealth and of deprivation. It is ranked the 109th most deprived area out of 354 nationally. Its unemployment rate was 2.8 per cent in September 2008. Many of those employed earn below both regional and national average wages. About a third of all households include at least one person with a limiting long term illness and there are below average levels of literacy and numeracy.
- 21 Affordable housing presents a real challenge as 96 per cent of all single earner households and 76.8 per cent of all two income households are unable to afford an entry level home.

### The Council

- 22 Boston Borough Council has been led since May 2007 by the Boston Bypass Independents, 25 of whom were elected in that year. Currently there are 18 Boston Bypass Independent, 6 Conservative and 4 Better Boston Group, 3 Independent and 1 British National Party councillors, representing 18 wards.
- 23 The Council has operated a Leader and Cabinet model of governance since 2000
- 24 Following a management restructure during 2007/08 the Council now has a management team comprising the Chief Executive, an Assistant Chief Executive, two Corporate Directors and two Assistant Directors. The Council employs 350 staff, 270 full time equivalent across all services.
- 25 The Audit Commission assessed the Council as 'fair' following its 2004 Comprehensive Performance Assessment and the 2007/08 'Use of Resources' assessment scored the Council at 2 out of 4. However, the District Auditor has qualified the Council's value for money assessment in the current year due to delay in closing Boston Sports Initiative accounts.

## Report

### The service

- 26** The Council transferred its housing stock to Boston Mayflower Limited in 1999. As of April 2008 18.6 per cent of the housing stock within the Borough was owned by Registered Social Landlords ('RSLs'), almost 9 per cent was privately rented and the remainder were owner occupied.
- 27** Strategic housing services are managed jointly with property services and sit within the Directorate of Community Services. Environmental services are within the same directorate, planning and economic development are managed by the Assistant Chief Executive.

### Scope of the inspection

- 28** The inspection focused on Boston Borough Council's strategic housing services and included:
- access and customer care;
  - diversity;
  - value for money;
  - the strategic approach to housing;
  - enabling the provision of new housing to meet needs; and
  - making the best use of existing housing.

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# How good is the service?

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## What has the service aimed to achieve?

29 The Council's vision is set out in its recently revised and extended Community Plan 2008-2018.

**'Our vision is for Boston to be a more modern, vibrant and dynamic place to live, work and visit - a better destination for residents, shoppers visitors, commerce and industry.'**

30 This vision is supported by six ambitions:

- getting around;
- making Boston a destination;
- generating prosperity;
- feeling safe and part of your community;
- being healthy; and
- creating a greener and sustainable future.

The ambition of 'being healthy' includes the sub-theme of:

- 'tackling the issue of houses in multiple occupation'.

All housing issues are included within the 'being healthy' theme and are within the Portfolio of a single Cabinet member.

31 The Council's Housing Strategy 2005-2009 identifies four 'equally weighted' housing priorities for the Borough:

- securing the delivery of affordable housing;
- tackling the cause and effect of homelessness;
- ensuring decent homes for all; and
- supporting independence and inclusion.

The Housing Service Delivery Plan for 2008/09 adds further detail to these priorities.

## How good is the service?

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

#### Access and customer care

- 32** Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. There are no service standards or systematic involvement of customers in service development and the Council is not yet systematic in its surveying or monitoring of customer satisfaction. Detailed guidance is not easily available, for example there is no guide for private sector tenants. However, general information about housing options is good and accessible and it is easy to access services in the main Council offices. There is a good range of leaflets and information on the Council's website and the Council generally works well with its partners to make information easily available.
- 33** It is a significant weakness that there are no published service standards for customers. There is also no private tenants' handbook in place to guide private tenants on their rights. And, whilst the general level of information to voluntary agencies is good, there has been insufficient work to ensure that other agencies and organisations are made aware of decent homes grants. For example, these have not been publicised to health or social care workers. There has been insufficient publicity of the sanctuary scheme to assist people experiencing domestic violence. This is one of the reasons for the low take up of this service.
- 34** Customers are not effectively engaged in developing services and the Council acknowledges that its consultation strategy has not been used consistently. There has been insufficient direct consultation of customers in shaping services and only limited direct discussion with service users eg focus groups. This means that the Council cannot be sure that its services are addressing all of the needs and expectations of its residents.
- 35** The approach to monitoring and analysing customer satisfaction information is not systematic. All aspects of housing services are covered by satisfaction surveys and results from these show satisfaction at about 90 per cent, which is positive. However the distribution of satisfaction surveys is not systematic in all areas. For example for disabled facilities grants it is sent to all customers at the end of the process but for housing option clients it is left down to the individual officer to send or hand out a questionnaire. The analysis of customer satisfaction is underdeveloped. The Council does know the response rates in respect of different aspects of the service but does not monitor satisfaction by the six diversity strands. This means that the Council is missing opportunities to learn from its customers and improve the service further.
- 36** The Council is beginning to use satisfaction surveys and complaints to learn from customers. The housing service appears to receive very few complaints and of the four complaints recorded for the last year, only one was found to involve any substantive issue. The complaint guidance states that the Council is committed to learning from the complaints it receives, and the Complaints Action Form emphasises the importance of this. The Council also identifies learning points in its analysis of customer satisfaction surveys. This means that the Council is using potential opportunities to improve its service delivery.

- 37** The systematic monitoring of performance on access is underdeveloped. Corporate monitoring of performance on call answering and response to letters and e-mails is not comprehensive, nor is there any formal monitoring of how quickly people are seen for housing options interviews. While there is some recording within specific service team for example the time taken to respond to enforcement enquiries, there is not a corporate approach to ensuring general access routes for frontline services are monitored.
- 38** There has not been mystery shopping of access routes for housing services and there is no system for recording and analysing how clients have become aware and accessed services. This information is necessary to understand what methods of promotion are most effective assisting access to services. Without a more systematic and consistent approach, the Council cannot be sure of the quality of this aspect of the service nor demonstrate that all of its services are easily accessible to all of its users.
- 39** However, it is easy to access services at the main Council office. The Council has one access point for its services at the main Council offices in Boston town centre. The reception area is open and welcoming. Anecdotal evidence suggests that housing advice cases are normally seen promptly. Emergency cases will be seen the same day and non-urgent cases will not normally wait beyond two weeks. Time taken to answer calls to the main Council reception appears to be reasonable. Information shows that 87 per cent of calls are being answered in 15 seconds and 'lost' calls are very low at only 0.88 per cent of all calls, which ensures that customers can access advice in a timely manner. The emergency telephone number is advertised and both partners and frontline staff aware of it and believe it works well. People calling the number go through to Boston Mayflower Careline who forward onto a duty Council officer.
- 40** The Council's website is accessible and contains information on how to access most services as well as copies of leaflets in various languages and formats and a 'browse aloud' option. It is interactive in that forms can be completed on-line and includes information about the Council's complaints process, although this is not prominently displayed. The website also includes copies of key documents such as the homelessness policy, information on private sector enforcement and housing advice enquiries, an e-mail address for the housing service and an out of hours emergency telephone number. This means that it is easy for people to access information about most services without visiting offices.
- 41** Overall, information on housing options and homelessness services is effective. There are leaflets on housing options and homelessness and an information pack for households placed in temporary accommodation. The various voluntary agencies working with those threatened with homelessness find accessing information easy and that it is well publicised. The Council is proactive in supplying them with copies of their leaflets and there is an assisted person list provided by the housing service to the voluntary agencies to identify those applicants who will need help in completing forms.
- 42** There is an effective provision of information to customers to show them the likelihood of re-housing through the choice based lettings scheme. Housing Options staff will make applicants aware of the implications of their priority banding on their chances of accessing housing. This means that customers have a better understanding of their chances of re-housing and are better able to make choices about their options.

## How good is the service?

- 43 Assistance for private sector tenants is being energetically promoted. General publicity on decent homes grants has been produced through 'Boston Matters' the Council newsletter which is distributed to all households and via the circulation of leaflets. There has also been targeted publicity for grants. Using Hi4EM<sup>3</sup> mapping 3000 households were written to in the areas with the highest level of vulnerable households. This helps ensure that people are aware of the support available.
- 44 The Council works with its partners in the voluntary sector to facilitate access to its services. Both South Lincolnshire CVS<sup>4</sup> and the CAB are the key entry and referral points for migrant workers to the Council. The cross Lincolnshire 'first contact' initiative seeks to identify older people who require home repairs, aids and adaptations and energy efficiency advice. The scheme which is funded by the County Council aims to signpost older people to a range of services across the County. There was a high profile launch of this scheme and leaflets have been distributed to relevant agencies. A leaflet produced for the scheme provide a questionnaire on a range of questions which is returned to a central base and referrals are then made to the relevant agency. All of this makes accessing service easier for residents.

## Diversity

- 45 Strengths and weaknesses are balanced in this area. There is a growing commitment and effort from the Council towards equalities, and the increasing use of equalities impact assessments is beginning to change how it delivers services. There is a growing understanding of all six diversity strands, not just migrants, and some imaginative initiatives for example Placecheck<sup>5</sup> and the 'myth busting' leaflets. However, the Council was late starting work in this area, its understanding and monitoring of equalities and diversity is still underdeveloped and it cannot yet demonstrate much direct impact upon services for residents.
- 46 The Council started late on its equalities and diversity agenda and whilst there is a visible commitment, developing understanding and emerging effective practice, its impact on services is still difficult to identify. The Council was slow in starting work on Level 2 of the Equality Standard for Local Government and its achievement in March 2008 was some months later than it had originally planned.
- 47 The Council's visible commitment to equalities issues is growing. There is a Corporate Equalities Working Group which monitors progress and a dedicated community cohesion and engagement officer. All staff have had equality and diversity training and there is a rolling programme of equalities impact assessments which are beginning to have an impact on service development and delivery. For example the impact assessment carried out in respect of the Council's approach to consultation highlighted a number of weaknesses, particularly in respect of the lack of focus on hard to reach groups. This has lead to a revised and more systematic approach to consultation, particularly with previously excluded residents.

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<sup>3</sup> Housing Information for the East Midlands

<sup>4</sup> Council for Voluntary Service

<sup>5</sup> A community cohesion initiative with the local police working with the local community.

- 48 However, the Council's approach to equality and diversity is not yet comprehensive or fully developed. Equalities and diversity have been seen largely as an issue of migrant workers for a number of years. Whilst the Council has undertaken a number of positive initiatives in this area, this means that the understanding, focus and resources of the Council have been directed to this aspect rather than the full spectrum of diversity strands, and to community cohesion initiatives and so its services in respect of the other parts of the community are less well developed. The focus on migrant workers is now beginning to change and the Council's equalities and diversity perspective is now broader but still undeveloped, which means the Council cannot yet be sure that it fully understands or is meeting the needs of all of its residents.
- 49 The Council is failing to reach the whole community in its consultation efforts and in particular key hard to reach groups such as migrants, the elderly, young people, those with disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-gendered communities. Whilst the Council has recently revised its approach to consultation as a direct result of an equalities impact assessment, its consultation efforts prior to the recent budget consultation exercise, have failed to address hard to reach groups and were not coordinated or even compliant with its stated corporate approach. The Council cannot be certain that it has successfully identified the needs and issues for the whole community, particularly hard to reach groups.
- 50 Monitoring of diversity is underdeveloped. Client ethnicity data is recorded for most services and nationality is also recorded for housing applicants and new lettings and is used as management information. However there is not systematic monitoring using the six main diversity streams and it is difficult to see what use the Council makes of the data it does collect beyond an assessment of access at a very generalised level. Analysis and reporting of diversity in respect of access to services is limited. This means the Council cannot know whether its services are reaching all of its communities.
- 51 The Council's monitoring of its own staff has developed over the last two years. There is a comprehensive Annual Monitoring Report which identifies the main equalities strands of ethnicity, gender, age and disability and some proposed actions. The Council's staff reflect the population in terms of gender and their ethnic origins, although disabled staff were under-represented. An equality impact assessment was undertaken in respect of recruitment in 2008 and an action plan agreed. This means the Council is beginning to develop both sufficient information to identify potential gaps or discrimination in its employment practice and potential actions to remedy these.
- 52 The Council's main offices are accessible by those with disabilities and there is a readily available translation and interpreting service and leaflets published in a variety of languages. In particular, there are leaflets in respect of key housing issues available in all of the languages spoken by the migrant worker population. The Council has also supported and/or launched other projects for example working with young people, ESOL<sup>6</sup> training and regular meetings with the agencies dealing with mental health issues. All of these initiatives help the Council to reach all of its residents.

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<sup>6</sup> English as a second language

## How good is the service?

- 53** The Council works well with its Registered Social Landlord ('RSL') partners and the police on community development and equalities issues and there are a variety of initiatives. There is a joint community development officers group and the Council is working with Boston Mayflower on the imaginative Placecheck community cohesion programme. The Local Strategic Partnership has produced a 'welcome pack' for new arrivals and a 'myth busting' leaflet on migrant workers.
- 54** The housing service works effectively with partners to ensure support for people experiencing domestic violence. There is a strong relationship with Women's Aid, refuge accommodation is available, a sanctuary scheme and floating support in place and evidence of increasing numbers of those reporting domestic violence and seeking help. Voluntary sector partners report that families fleeing domestic violence are dealt with sympathetically and quickly and spend less time in emergency accommodation than in other areas, which minimises the disruption they experience.
- 55** However, there is one significant exception to this. Households assessed as homeless as a result of domestic violence without a local connection are not given the same priority banding as other homeless households. The same priority will only be awarded after the family has lived in the area for 12 months. This means the family will often spend 12 months in temporary accommodation. While this accommodation will be from Boston Mayflowers general housing stock and is of a good quality, the family has to move on from this accommodation when their priority enables them to successfully bid for permanent homes. This is due to change as part of the development of a sub regional letting scheme but currently still creates unnecessary disruption to these families.

## Strategic Approach to Housing

- 56** Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. The Council's housing priorities are not clearly identified in corporate plans and its overall strategy is not detailed. The Housing Strategy has not been regularly or systematically reviewed and has not effectively engaged its partners in strategy development. The Council has been slow to develop an effective affordable housing and private sector strategy and there are weaknesses in other key areas such as affordable warmth and knowledge about the level of empty homes. Not all data is reliable, however, there is a reasonably clear picture of housing need. There are good relationships between the housing and planning service and between housing and its partners and the Council has made an effective contribution to improving coordination across councils via the county wide strategies for homelessness and Supporting People.
- 57** The Council's housing priorities are not clearly identified in corporate plans and its overall strategy to deal with the key housing issues is not particularly detailed. The revised Community Plan Action Plan does include several housing targets for the next two years but some of these lack specificity for example: 'invest in Disabled Facilities Grants' and some include targets which are not the same as those expressed elsewhere and are clearly unachievable. This means there is a lack of corporate clarity about overall housing priorities.

- 58** The housing strategy has not been regularly reviewed and updated. The current strategy was developed in 2004/05 and is of reasonable quality and the broad priorities logically reflect the market and needs information and were based on a wide consultation process. However, while current needs information suggests that the broad priorities remain unchanged, the Strategy is out of date and does not reflect some key recent changes such as the quality of private rented housing, in particular the homes of some migrant workers and the 2007 sub regional housing market assessment. The Strategy is due for renewal in 2009/10 but this means the Council will have to wait for another year before it can be certain that its strategy properly reflects the needs of its community.
- 59** In addition progress on the delivery of the housing strategy 2005-2009 has not been effectively monitored and reported. The action plan in the strategy was updated with progress in 2006 and some limited aspects were updated in the 2007/08 service development plan for housing. However, there has not been a formal annual review of progress and updating of actions where required. This means the Council cannot be sure that it is achieving its agreed aims and outcomes.
- 60** Work on sub-regional housing strategy has been mixed. Boston has been actively engaging in this work and a sub regional housing market assessment has been carried out. However there is no sub-regional strategy in place, although this is now in development. Further, there has not been a joint approach with neighbouring councils on affordable housing policy. This means that the Council is missing opportunities to share learning and present a united approach to encourage developers to build more affordable homes.
- 61** RSL partners are not well engaged in the housing strategy development process and have not been involved in the review of the current strategy. There is no specific forum for RSLs to engage with the Council to discuss housing strategy and so they cannot effectively contribute to its development or review or inform the Council of the impact of its current strategy on the housing market, for example, in the current financial situation. There is a regional housing forum for RSLs but the Council's RSL partners lack a clear understanding of the priorities in the strategy. This means that RSLs are not being effectively used to develop the new strategy and the Council can not be sure that RSLs are focusing on assisting in delivering the existing strategy.
- 62** There is a strong analysis of housing need. A sub regional housing market assessment covering central and coastal Lincolnshire was completed in July 2007. This built on a housing needs survey specific to Boston carried out in 2005. Data on housing need and the housing market is also provided by the Council in a quarterly bulletin which is distributed to its partners. This includes regular analysis of the housing register with applications being annually reviewed to ensure this is up to date. House prices, wage levels and demographics are also being analysed on a regular basis. Boston was also involved in commissioning a regional gypsy and traveller needs survey. This means that the Council and its partners have a good understanding of the current need for housing within the Borough.

## How good is the service?

- 63 There has been a strategic approach to carrying out rural housing needs assessments. These have been focussed on areas where an analysis of housing register demand has shown a potential need, particularly for affordable housing. Where villages were close together some surveys were grouped to provide greater value for money. However, the Council has not always effectively managed relationships with Parishes in delivering surveys which has also made the process more difficult in some areas. The surveys have been used to identify potential areas for the development of affordable homes to meet the needs in rural areas, for example they were used to develop the 'exception' site at Bicker on which 12 'eco' homes have been built.
- 64 The private sector housing strategy is underdeveloped. The nature and scale of issues in the private sector in Boston means that the Council and its partners need a clearer expression of the issues and priorities of the Council. There is a clear private sector policy which details the Council's activity in the sector but this is not a comprehensive analysis nor does it provide a clear view of what the Council wants to achieve and how it will be achieved and resourced. This would provide additional focus and clarity on direction of activity in this area.
- 65 Information on private sector housing is mixed. There was a comprehensive housing survey in 2005 which also assessed compliance against the housing health and rating systems. This information has been well used to inform general strategy development. However information on private sector activity is not comprehensively collated on an ongoing basis to build up a picture of the condition and nature of private sector housing. Current IT systems do not enable collation of information on grant activity and enforcement work and the stock condition survey information is now over four years old. This means that the Council cannot be certain of where to apply its limited resources in this area to maximise its impact.
- 66 Information on the level of empty homes is not robust. The Council's Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix return shows 710 properties empty for over six months at the end of March 2008. This information was developed from Council Tax returns. However, other internal reports also apparently developed from the same information show levels at that time to be approximately 400 with levels rising to 481 by October 2008. This means that information to inform policy decisions on the private sector is not sufficiently accurate.
- 67 The Council is not yet making a sufficient impact on the need to improve energy efficiency and heating for vulnerable households in Boston. SAP levels for housing in the area remain in the bottom quartile and there is no clear strategy in place to provide a focus on activity across all housing tenures, assess the current position or how improvements are to be delivered. This means the Council cannot be sure it is maximising the effect of activity in this area.
- 68 There is comprehensive information on the condition of social housing in Boston. The Council gathers this information from RSLs and analyses this on an annual basis. This is used by the Council to understand and ensure progress towards achieving decent homes standards in the social housing sector which has resulted in the achievement of a higher level of decency in social housing in Boston.

- 69** There is an effective interdepartmental approach to strategy development. There is close working between the housing and planning service and environmental services in developing strategy. These teams form part of the same directorate and mechanisms are in place to enable effective communication. This means that the resulting strategy will be better able to address issues across service boundaries and ensure that needs are met.
- 70** Council officers are effectively engaging in the county level strategy on homelessness and Supporting People. Boston Borough Council has made a significant contribution to the development of the county-wide Supporting People strategy which has helped ensure it meets the needs of Boston residents as well as the County as a whole. This has already resulted in additional supported housing services in the Borough.
- 71** Boston has also ensured that its homelessness strategy is integrated into the Lincolnshire Homeless strategy, whilst still reflecting a distinct element of the County approach. There was wide consultation in the development of the strategy which was launched at the end of 2006. The integrated strategy has improved the co-ordination between councils in Lincolnshire to provide a more joined-up approach for homeless applicants.

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### Making the best use of existing housing

#### Housing advice, homelessness prevention and housing options

- 72** Strengths and weaknesses are balanced in this area. Housing advice and homelessness prevention services are improving, work well together and there is some evidence of reducing levels of homelessness as a result. The choice based lettings scheme is being used effectively to prevent homelessness. There are strong relationships with the voluntary sector on homelessness prevention and a sensitive response to domestic violence. However, the Council continues to rely on bed and breakfast for emergency accommodation, the Council's hostels need refurbishment and homeless households can spend too long in temporary accommodation. There is also a lack of systematic value for money ('vfm') assessment of both bed and breakfast use and the rent deposit scheme.
- 73** There is a focus on homelessness prevention in the day to day operation of the housing options service. Officers examine housing options with clients approaching the organisation for advice and where there is potential homelessness. Options include an effective rent deposit scheme and officers will also mediate where family breakdowns have taken place or there are disputes with landlords. They will also have discussion with mortgage companies where appropriate. Specialist money advice can be accessed through the CAB. Homelessness prevention payments are also available to clear arrears where appropriate. The housing register is being effectively used as a tool to prevent homelessness and generally to provide housing options advice. Applications are examined when they are received and advice is pro-actively provided where it is felt this would be of benefit. This means that the Council works effectively to reduce the number of families experiencing homelessness.

## How good is the service?

- 74 The choice based letting system is being effectively used to help prevent homelessness. The priority banding system is designed to help prevent emergency homeless situations arising. Where there is a clear threat of homelessness, for example, where a valid notice has been served, and the household is likely to be in priority need, this will result in the household being given a gold banding priority. This is the highest priority and will normally enable the household to access housing via CBL prior to being made homeless, thus avoiding the disruption of homelessness.
- 75 Performance on preventing homelessness through housing advice is improving and 60 cases were assisted during the first three quarters of 2008/09. There are also reducing numbers of homelessness applications and acceptances from 223 homelessness applications in 2006/07 to 147 in 2007/08. While there is a national trend of reducing numbers of homeless, these figures suggest that the Council has improved from the bottom to the third quartile in its performance in this area.
- 76 The Council works effectively with a wide range of voluntary agencies who offer advice and support to those threatened with homelessness. The Council is seen by its partners as genuinely committed to preventing homelessness and it has recently increased the funding to the CAB to support debt advice to prevent mortgage repossessions and to work constructively to minimise the family and personal disruption caused by moving house. However, there is no formal referral agreement with the CAB for this service and no clear picture of how quickly clients will be seen by the CAB. This means that the Council cannot be sure of the quality of service being provided and there is no systematic process for the sharing of information to enable cases to be dealt with more effectively.
- 77 The Council is not sufficiently proactive in preventing homelessness and does not always apply its limited staffing capacity to best effect. Council officers spend too much time seeking to intervene in individual cases, for example, attempting to mediate in cases of family breakdown where these would be better referred to specialist agencies, thus releasing Council staff to engage more proactively, for example: the Council does not effectively monitor RSL tenants at risk of homelessness. It does receive information from Boston Mayflower about potential evictions, but not from other RSLs and not in sufficient time to effectively prevent eviction.
- 78 Partnership work to reduce homelessness is effective. There has been a particularly successful partnership with NACRO<sup>7</sup> services in Lincolnshire which is seen as one of the reasons why the number of 16 and 17 year olds accessing housing options services has reduced. Partnership initiatives have included a Youth Homelessness drama presentation to every year 11 pupil within Boston over the last three years. There is also a multi-agency protocol in place for dealing with 16-17 year olds who are homeless or threatened with homelessness. This work is effectively reducing the numbers of homeless young people.

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<sup>7</sup> National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders

- 79** The Council provides effective support for some homeless applicants in temporary accommodation. There is a risk and needs assessment of those placed in hostel accommodation and support services are provided via Supporting People funded support workers who make twice daily visits to hostel clients to ensure their support needs are being met. However, there is no similar assessment or support service for those in bed and breakfast accommodation. The assessment and support service helps ensure that households are not inappropriately placed in shared temporary accommodation and that they are effectively supported where they are placed in hostel accommodation. However, the Council is not providing a consistent level of support for all those in temporary accommodation.
- 80** Some of the temporary accommodation provided by the Council is not appropriate for homeless households. The Council still relies on the regular use of bed and breakfast accommodation and, despite its high cost, has not yet explored other options. Between April 2008 and January 2009, 29 homeless households were placed in bed and breakfast. Of these 12 were single people and 17 were families. This is a similar level to 2007/08. Whilst the average length of stay in bed and breakfast has reduced and in the year to date is three weeks, this is still longer than in other district councils. The bed and breakfast accommodation is not all well located, and some homeless applicants with the most challenging needs are placed outside of the Borough. The accommodation is also not tailored to the needs of homeless households, although it is generally regarded as being of a reasonable standard. There are no support services provided to residents.
- 81** Hostel accommodation is not of a high quality and homeless applicants spend too long there. The hostel consists of a six bed house and two one bed flats which provide shared emergency accommodation for homeless households. The properties are in significant need of refurbishment which is due to take place this year. The time households spend in hostel accommodation has reduced slightly over the last year from 6.6 weeks to 5.5 weeks at the time of inspection, but it is still longer than average compared with other district councils.
- 82** There is currently no direct access accommodation in Boston which means that non-statutory homeless households requiring emergency accommodation have to be directed to outside of the Borough.
- 83** Other temporary accommodation is of a good quality and the number of households in temporary accommodation has reduced. Around 75 per cent of the temporary accommodation used by the Council is provided by Boston Mayflower from its general housing stock which is of a good standard. The number of homeless households in temporary accommodation has reduced by 53 per cent from 31 March 2006 to 31 March 2008 and now stands at 40 households. Some families in Boston Mayflower accommodation can opt for this to become their permanent accommodation.
- 84** However, some homeless families are still spending too long in temporary accommodation, in particular those fleeing domestic violence from outside of the Borough, who (as was previously mentioned) are required to wait 12 months before being considered for permanent accommodation and homeless families subject to old allocation policies which mean that they can wait for up to seven years until their property of choice becomes available.

## How good is the service?

### Private sector housing

- 85** Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. The Council is not pro-active in identifying dwellings which require enforcement activity.' There is improving delivery of decent homes ('DH') grants but a backlog in processing, a significant under-spend in previous years' budgets and a lack of monitoring of delivery of both DH and disabled facilities grants ('DFG'). There is a lack of a proactive approach towards houses in multiple occupation ('HMOs') and empty properties.
- 86** There has been insufficient pro-active work on enforcement in the private sector. There are significant issues in the private rented sector in parts of Boston particularly in relation to the quality of accommodation being provided to migrant workers. While some specific cases are being dealt with robustly, there is insufficient capacity within the private sector team to deal with the scale of enforcement and HMO issues in a pro-active way. This has resulted in insufficient progress being made on licensing of HMOs and on pro-active HMO analysis and inspection. Only one full HMO license has been issued and six interim licences. There has been insufficient consideration of applying an additional licensing scheme in Boston in areas where there are concerns about housing conditions in properties which fall outside of HMO licensing criteria. This means that residents in the private rented sector are not being adequately protected.
- 87** The Council responds effectively but not quickly where a tenant seeks help in respect of enforcement. Such enquiries are risk assessed and targets for response are in place and monitored. Performance is broadly in line the target of responding to 80 per cent of enquiries in 10 days, which is relatively slow. Monitoring sheets show that a range of robust enforcement actions are being progressed and the numbers of notices issued has increased from 128 in 2007/08 to 79 in the first half of 2008/09. There are some very good examples of joint working with other agencies in dealing with some poor housing conditions in the private rented sector. This means that the Council is tackling issues in the private sector where they are brought to their attention.
- 88** Engagement with private sector landlords is mixed. There is a regular private landlords' forum which is well attended and used to share information and carry out consultation. There is a new County-wide newsletter in which information about national changes is disseminated to all private landlords but which does not include any local information or focus which would raise the profile of the private landlord forum. The Council has recently signed up to the East Midlands Landlord Accreditation scheme but there is not a clear strategy for ensuring this is developed effectively in the Borough and interest from private landlords to date has been limited which means the Council is missing opportunities to influence private landlords for tenants' benefit.

- 89** The Council's performance on delivering decent homes grants is mixed. The Council's priority is on achieving decent homes for vulnerable people. There was a very slow start to the scheme due to issues about grant conditions and weaknesses in joint working between the Home Improvement Agency ('HIA') who administered the scheme and the Council. Resources to fund these grants are made available through the Regional Housing Board and are linked to stock condition. Only three grants were completed in 2007/08 against a target of 80 and there is a backlog of claims, some of which were cases re-visited when the grant criteria changed. This is causing delays in processing new grant claims. Whilst performance is improving, with 31 completions up to the end of December 2008 and approximately 70 completions expected by the end of March 2009, average processing times are currently 482 days, against a target of 150 days. However, the scheme is adequately funded to meet demand and there is an effective handyman scheme provided by the HIA (funded by the Council) which provides a minor repairs service to older and vulnerable people. This means that private sector assistance is starting to improve the housing conditions of some vulnerable people in the private sector.
- 90** The Council is beginning to improve the energy of homes in Boston, however, the average SAP rating for the private sector in Boston is 46, which is bottom quartile when compared to other areas. It is assisting some residents to access Warmfront grants and is seeking to ensure value for money is achieved in the process. Warmfront grants can be linked to a decent homes grant or provided as a stand alone grant. Publicity about the grants is linked to decent homes grants and targeted at vulnerable households. The Council also provides top-ups to Warmfront funding where the works required are above Warmfront grant levels. The Council also provides loans but only where these are linked to grants. The level of Warmfront grant work in Boston is at reasonable levels compared to other councils in the region, with £1 million spent over the last three years. This means that the Council is contributing well to the energy efficiency of privately rented and owner-occupied homes in the private sector, and to enhancing the comfort of residents.
- 91** The Council's performance in delivering disabled facilities grants ('DFGs') is mixed. The availability of disabled facilities grants is being effectively promoted by the Council. Leaflets are widely distributed and grants are promoted on the Council website and have been promoted in Boston Matters. However, while the Council has publicised the existence of these grants, guidance for customers on how to use these services is underdeveloped. There are no clear booklets guiding customer through the process, nor does the Council provide clear indications of reasonable timescales for regularly updating clients. So, whilst residents are aware of the service, the Council cannot be sure that they understand how to access the grants.

## How good is the service?

- 92** Residents are still waiting too long for adaptations to their homes funded through DFGs. Whilst the Council has provided a sufficient budget for these grants processing times for grant applications are still too long: the average time for the Council to process applications and complete work is currently 276 days. The Council does not work effectively with its partners, particularly the County Council who manage the occupational therapist ('OT') service. Boston is not involved in the process once it is referred to the OT service and does not have information on the timescales being achieved for OT visits, although these are known to be lengthy for some clients and there is only a basic system for prioritisation of applications. The Council receives no information on the number of Boston residents awaiting an OT visit which means it cannot effectively monitor the service for Boston residents.
- 93** The Council has no information on the efficacy of the service to provide minor aids and adaptations to private sector residents in Boston. These works are managed by the County Council and delivered through Nottingham Rehad. The Handyperson scheme, which undertakes works for public sector tenants, is a potentially useful addition to the larger scale grant application process. The HIA handyperson service is starting to deliver minor home repairs effectively but there has not been a considered approach in terms of its potential to deliver minor adaptations.' The Council is therefore not making the best use of the Home Improvement Agency service to improve living conditions for vulnerable residents.
- 94** There is no proactive in place to recycle aids and adaptations, although this is done on occasions where the residents have told the Council that the equipment is no longer required. This would be best done at a County-wide level but we found no evidence to suggest that the Council was advocating this. There is also no matching of properties with adaptations already fitted to prospective tenants under the CBL scheme, although applicants requiring adaptations are given additional priority under the scheme. This means that the Council is potentially wasting resources in equipment that is not being used.
- 95** The Council is not effective at ensuring that empty homes are brought back into use. An empty homes strategy was identified as part of the housing strategy action plan but has not been delivered. The Council reported at the end of 2007/08 that 710 empty properties which have been vacant for more than six months, an increase from 303 in the previous year. However there is confusion over the exact levels as different reports show different figures. There has been no significant action by the Council to help bring these homes back into use which means that homes are not being used and residents spend longer in unsuitable property.

### Making best use of social rented and other homes

- 96** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. The choice based lettings scheme works well and there are plans to expand it to neighbouring councils. The majority of social rented housing in the area has already achieved the Government's decency standard and new housing is regarded as good quality by partners and residents are satisfied. However, there is no approach agreed with RSL partners to identify under-occupation and ensure the optimum use of social housing.
- 97** Overall the choice based lettings scheme is operating effectively. It is effectively administered in partnership with Boston Mayflower Housing Association and all RSL lettings are made through the scheme, including shared ownership properties. Currently the scheme does not include private sector properties, although this is an area that the Council wants to include in the future. Completed housing register applications are processed promptly, 90 per cent of within five days. This ensures that households seeking accommodation are able to start bidding for homes shortly after submitting an application. Previous areas of low demand for social housing now have sufficient demand as a result of the scheme and customers are being provided with increased choice.
- 98** Almost all social housing in Boston is of good quality. Over 98.32 per cent of social housing in Boston achieves the Government decent homes standard. The Council has made a significant contribution to achieving this target through its transfer of its housing stock to Boston Mayflower in 1999 which has facilitated a significant level of investment in that housing to bring it up to decent homes standards.
- 99** Whilst the Council does not systematically seek feedback from tenants, informal feedback to Council staff and RSL partners is that the quality of newly built social housing is high and that tenants are satisfied.
- 100** However, the overall approach to under-occupation in social housing is underdeveloped. While it is reflected in the award of priority in the choice based lettings scheme, there has not been any work undertaken with RSLs to establish the level of under-occupation in their stock and how work could be targeted to try to address under-occupation. This means that some social housing may not be used to its optimum capacity.

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

- 101** Strengths and weaknesses are balanced in this area. An above average number of affordable homes have been built over the last four years despite the restrictions imposed by flood risk and the Council works well with RSLs to access affordable housing grant and with developers to encourage further development. There is a new planning policy which requires 30 per cent of all development to be affordable homes and the Council rigorously enforces planning requirements. However, the Council was slow to develop this policy and did not use the capital receipt from the transfer of its homes in 1999 to develop more affordable housing. There are gaps in the current provision, particularly in respect of housing for young people and in systematically assessing the satisfaction and quality of new housing.

## How good is the service?

- 102** A reasonable level of affordable housing has been delivered. Over the four-year period from 2004/05 to 2007/08, 188 units of affordable housing were developed in Boston, 90 of which were rented housing, which is less than the two thirds recommended by the affordable housing policy. This was partially due to weaknesses in previous affordable housing policy. The availability of sites, particularly larger ones, has been very limited. Despite this the level achieved by Boston is above average. The Council has obtained £3.5 million of grant funding from the Department of Health for the development of a new extra care scheme which is being effectively progressed. Boston has also been working effectively with RSLs to access affordable housing grant funding to develop new homes. However, only 20 units are likely to be delivered during 2008/09 which is lower than all of the previous years as flood risk planning issues have started to impact on the programme. The Council's approach is helping to maximise the potential for more affordable housing.
- 103** The Council is taking all possible steps to ensure that the flood risk issues are addressed as soon as possible. The Council's potential to meet the needs in respect of affordable housing is being severely restricted by the concerns of the Environment Agency to the construction of housing on land liable to flooding. This affects large parts of Boston. The Council is liaising with the Environment Agency to ensure an effective strategic flood risk assessment is completed which clarifies the position in relation to what land can be developed. However, the LDF<sup>8</sup> development process is on hold pending the outcomes of the Lincolnshire Coastal Study Strategy and key decisions within the Council's budget process. This means that further action to increase the supply of housing is similarly stalled.
- 104** However, the Council was slow to develop an effective policy to help meet the need for increased levels of affordable housing through the planning processes. Some of the issues which slowed the development of policy were not under the direct control of the Council, for example, the local plan process was severely disrupted by a decision at County level. However, from 2000 to the end of 2006 private developers were only required ensure affordable homes represented 10 per cent of homes on sites and only on those of a relatively large size. This is despite the 2000-2003 housing strategy identifying an increasing need for additional affordable housing. This means that the Council has missed opportunities for developing more affordable homes.
- 105** There was wide consultation on the affordable housing policy which provides a clear explanation of the Council's approach. The non statutory policy was developed as an interim measure which will continue until the local development framework is agreed. The Local Development Framework ('LDF') has not progressed as originally planned, due to the secretary of state's recommendations which requires housing growth in Boston to be constrained to existing commitments, until the outcome of the Coastal Strategy and the revised RSS<sup>9</sup>. The comprehensive consultation process has helped ensure the non-statutory policy is able to impact on development plans. The policy commenced from January 2007 and requires private developers to ensure affordable homes represent 30 per cent homes on eligible sites. The policy includes a challenging approach to eligible sites identifying that in the two main conurbations sites of 15 units or more are eligible and five units in all other areas. This will help the Council deliver affordable housing in private developments.

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<sup>8</sup> Local Development Framework

<sup>9</sup> Regional Spatial Strategy

- 106** Planning policy on affordable homes has been robustly enforced. The policy up to January 2007 of 10 per cent affordable homes was relatively low but was consistently enforced. The new affordable housing policy of 30per cent is also being effectively applied. 55 affordable homes have received either full or outline planning permission through the new policy which represents 30 per cent of homes on eligible sites which is in line with policy. If the current flood risk restrictions had not been imposed this figure would have been higher. This rigorous enforcement of planning requirements maximises the potential for more affordable housing.
- 107** The Council's housing and planning service has developed proactive relationships and dialogue with RSLs and commercial developers. There is a quarterly meeting between housing and planning officers and each RSL to discuss potential and on-going schemes and a half yearly meeting with developers. Planning and housing are both seen externally as accessible and joined up in the way they operate. These good working relationships encourage potential developers and facilitate the development of more housing.
- 108** There has also been an effective approach to utilising developable land that was transferred to Boston Mayflower as part of the stock transfer process. At the time of stock transfer there was analysis of land that was transferred to identify the potential for housing development. These were predominantly small infill sites or disused garage areas. These are being effectively utilised by Boston Mayflower in partnership with the Council to provide additional affordable housing. These developments are still ongoing and have successfully attracted Housing Corporation grant. This helping to increase the level of affordable housing.
- 109** However, only a small proportion of the receipt from the stock transfer was used to develop affordable housing. This means the capital receipt had limited impact on the delivery of new social housing.
- 110** The Council is not effectively addressing the long term housing needs of single and young people as there is an inadequate supply of affordable long term accommodation. The Council has not pursued private sector leasing but is now beginning discussions with the private sector to explore the potential for increasing the supply of single person private rented accommodation.
- 111** There has not been a systematic approach to assessing satisfaction with the development of new homes by RSLs. While some copies of satisfaction surveys have been collected, these have not been consistently collected on all schemes and analysed to assess satisfaction. The limited available evidence suggests that tenants are satisfied with the new social housing and that where this is constructed on private developments it is of a high quality and is integrated on estates.

## How good is the service?

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### Is the service delivering value for money?

**112** Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. The corporate approach to assessing value for money is underdeveloped. The Council has developed a Medium Term Financial Plan ('MTFP') and has an ambitious programme of partnership working and outsourcing but this is only in its early stages and there is limited current evidence of systematic value for money. There is a lack of systematic benchmarking of costs and a reliance on comparison with neighbouring authorities within Lincolnshire rather than with the best performing councils. However, the benchmarking of the housing service does suggest that it costs less than comparable services elsewhere in Lincolnshire.

### How do costs compare?

- 113** Benchmarking of cost and performance is not yet comprehensive. Some individual pieces of work have been carried out but these have not all been fully analysed and are not comprehensive. There was a basic benchmarking of housing costs and staff levels across all but one of the other district councils within Lincolnshire but not with any other councils. This suggests that Boston is roughly average in terms of staff time and costs in the County but that the Council spends considerably less than the other districts on private sector housing services.
- 114** Benchmarking of DFGs costs shows positive results. Average cost on grants is 2nd lowest from 40 councils in the region. While this needs further investigation in respect of the nature of works delivered it does provide some indication that grants are being delivered at low direct costs, although the Council's processing of grants is very slow. However, despite the long timescales for processing grant applications (as previously mentioned), service users express high rates of satisfaction with the service.
- 115** There has been insufficient analysis of benchmarking data for private sector grant assistance. The Council has comparative figures distributed by HiEM and Warmfront but there has been insufficient analysis to effectively determine comparative performance and identify top performers where there may be opportunities for learning. There is an absence of systematic benchmarking of the costs of other aspects of the housing service with the best performing councils, which means the Council has no means of knowing whether its services are offering value for money.

## How is value for money managed?

- 116** The corporate approach to assessing comparative value for money across services is underdeveloped although a value for money strategy is being developed and cost information is improving. The Audit Commission's Use of Resources assessment for 2008 scored the Council 2 out of a possible 4 and the District Auditor has qualified the Council's value for money assessment this year.
- 117** The Council is beginning to address issues of value for money more systematically but this is not yet fully embedded. There has been a comprehensive zero based budgeting exercise in 2007 which also included activity based costing and led to the Medium Term Financial Plan and to the identification of specific proposals for the housing service which included highlighting the gaps in staffing capacity in respect of its work with the private sector, on energy efficiency and affordable homes, some of which have since been filled. This means that the Council is improving its understanding of how it spends its money but is not yet fully able to respond to what it identifies.
- 118** The housing service has clear information and a good understanding of the level of resources available for its work. Previous, current and projected expenditure is effectively recorded and is linked to the medium term financial plan. This means that the service is better able to manage its resources to ensure effective service delivery.
- 119** However, not all aspects of the housing service resources are well managed. The Council is not achieving value for money in its use of bed and breakfast. The housing benefit system does not fully cover the Council's costs of using bed and breakfast. Losses to the Council were £21,000 in 2007/08 but are likely to be approximately £60,000 in 2008/09. There has been a recent change in use of bed and breakfast with alternative provision being identified which will reduce costs, which is positive. However, given the limited staffing capacity in the housing service, costs of this scale will severely restrict its ability to deliver some key services.
- 120** The Council has not sufficiently explored methods of maximising value for money in the way it provides assistance to residents in the private sector. For example, providing loans repayable on the sale of property was briefly examined in the early development of private sector assistance policy but has not been properly explored. There is some duplication of work in the delivery of decent homes grants. A technical officer from the Council visits to make a list of work required and then a technical officer from the HIA visits to specify the works. There also needs to be further overall analysis of value for money issues in the split between the Council delivering DFG services and the HIA delivery decent homes grants assistance. Failure to maximise value for money means that there are less resources available for direct service delivery.
- 121** Value for money in the procurement of works in the private sector is mixed. The HIA does use a schedule of rates and has increased buying power through operating across the region. However, DFG works are procured individually and although costs appear low there has not been a thorough investigation of the advantages of alternative approaches, including consideration of the time added to the process by having to have separate tendering processes for all works. This means that the Council is missing opportunities to save costs by rationalising its procurement practice in this area.

## How good is the service?

**122** The Council has been successful in attracting external funding to assist in improving homes in the private sector and in the delivery of affordable housing. The Council has received £988,000 from the regional housing board for private sector assistance over a three-year period up to and including 2008/09. Work in the private sector has been slow to progress and a significant proportion of this money remains to be spent but is ring-fenced for this purpose. The Council, in partnership with RSLs, has also been consistently successful in obtaining affordable housing grant. This has enabled the delivery of new homes in a number of areas although a significant proportion of the recent large allocation of £5.6 million has had to be returned because a number of schemes have not progressed due the flood risk issue.

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# What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

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

- 123** Strengths and weaknesses are balanced in this area. The Council is beginning to transform its approach but has yet to produce a substantial or significant range of improvement in services. There are some clear examples of improvement in the housing service and some in how the Council works corporately and other service areas. There are examples of learning from review and inspection and of beginning to change service delivery as a result and the Council is clearly committed to corporate and service improvement. But there are still key areas where there is little evidence of real improvement, such as equalities and diversity and value for money.
- 124** The Council's recent focus has been on revising its corporate approach to service delivery and whilst it can point to some clear responses and impact, such as its approach to improving value for money and the Medium Term Financial Strategy, the gradually improving approach to equalities and diversity and the corporate improvement programme introduced following the last staff survey in 2008, much of the improvements are internal and there is, as yet, little visible impact on how services are delivered for customers.
- 125** The Council does not have a track record of effectively managing its resources, although there is recent improvement. It is facing continuing financial difficulties and has for many years balanced its budget by reliance upon its reserves, including the £19 million capital receipt from the stock transfer to Boston Mayflower. During 2008/09 the Council successfully identified almost £1 million of in-year savings to meet shortfalls brought about by the economic down-turn. These savings were identified largely from restructuring and use of reserves and included only 4.4 per cent of service level reductions, none of which affected the housing service. However, the Council is facing a similar challenge in setting its budget for 2009/10 and whilst there are no specific proposals which would impact upon the housing service, it cannot be certain that there will no further need to identify savings in-year and that this might have a detrimental impact on the housing service.
- 126** The Council is making slow progress on improving its approach to equalities and diversity. It has now achieved Level 2 of the Equality Standard for Local Government and equalities impact assessments which are beginning to have an impact on how services are delivered, for example the assessment of its approach to consultation showed that the Council was failing to identify, and therefore consult with, hard to reach groups, such as migrant workers, the elderly and young, gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-gendered communities and that the Council did not systematically ensure that the current consultation approach was applied. This had lead to a revised consultation strategy and policy, developed from learning in another council.

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

- 127** The housing service can identify some specific areas of improvement which are having an impact on residents. It has responded to feedback on the implementation of decent homes grants. Following poor take up of grants the HIA consulted clients and provided feedback to the Council. As a result the criteria for grants have been changed and take-up has improved. 31 have been delivered in the third quarter of the current year and this means more residents are benefiting from the service.
- 128** There has been a performance benchmarking exercise for the housing service during 2007 but using only the other districts within Lincolnshire as comparators. The Council is now using external consultants to carry out more comprehensive and detailed benchmarking. This will provide more effective and detailed comparative information to identify potential service improvement in the future.
- 129** The Council can also demonstrate other improvements and delivery against its strategic housing plans:
- improved performance on prevention of homelessness: 60 cases were assisted in the first 3 quarters of 2008/09 compared to only 26 in 2007/08 and the numbers applying as homeless reduced from 223 in 2006/07 to 147 in 2007/08;
  - the time spent in bed and breakfast has reduced from 2007/08 when it was 7.8 weeks and now averages three weeks;
  - the number of households placed in bed and breakfast has reduced from 44 in 2006/07 to 32 in 2007/08 and has remained static from 2007/08 to 2008/09, with 29 so far this year;
  - the introduction of homelessness prevention payments, which have been used to prevent five households who were at risk of becoming homeless in the current year;
  - the introduction of a rent deposit scheme which has been used to help 15 residents in the current year;
  - the launch of the 'first contact' scheme across the County to identify older people who require repairs, aids or adaptations which has resulted in the referral of five residents to the housing service since the scheme was set up;
  - improved performance on processing of decent homes grants, from 3 grant completions in 2007/08 to 31 completions to the end of December 2008 and 70 completions expected for 2008/09;
  - a new scheme coming on line in April 2009 through Axiom Housing to provide eight emergency access units for non-statutory households; and
  - recent improved performance in bringing empty properties back into use. In 2008/09 21 properties have been brought into use, up from 2 and 6 in previous years.

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

- 130** However, there are also significant areas where the Council is showing either limited progress or no improvement. Examples include:
- there are a significant number of empty homes in the Borough with at least 710 homes empty for more than six months, and slow progress in beginning to address this;
  - there has been slow progress in delivering the HMO licensing scheme and in developing a comprehensive approach to dealing with issues in the private sector; and
  - it is still taking too long to deliver decent homes and disabled facilities grants.

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## How well does the service manage performance?

- 131** Strengths and weaknesses are balanced in this area. The Council has revised its approach to the management of performance and whilst this is still being embedded, there is growing evidence of an improved approach across the Council from councillors to front line staff and partners. Service delivery planning has been revised and aims and priorities are clearer. However, much of the revised approach is still to be embedded and there is as yet no clear plan for the strategic housing service. There are examples of significant failure to respond effectively in areas such as HMO licensing and to manage performance, such as the backlog in processing grant applications. This means that that the Council cannot yet demonstrate fully effective management of performance or how its resources are being directed towards its priorities to deliver agreed outcomes.
- 132** The Council is well positioned to deliver continuous improvement across all of its services. There is strong leadership and a clear vision from the Leader, Cabinet, Chief Executive and the Housing and Property Manager. The Council has made a considerable investment over the last 18 months to revise and extend its Community Plan to 2018, to incorporate the priorities of the new administration and to extend its vision. There is a revised and more focused Continuous Improvement Plan which focuses on the improvement and transformation programme for the organisation and a Medium Term Financial Plan. However, most of the Cabinet's vision and plans for Boston are long term and recent, still lack detail and the linkages between plans still need to be made explicit, thus it is likely that visible impact will take several years.
- 133** Over the last 18 months the Council has re-focussed its approach to service planning, based on three core plans: the Community Plan, Medium Term Financial Plan and Continuous Improvement Plan. This has provided a clearer, longer term vision for the community and a clear agenda for internal change. There has been a comprehensive programme designed to enhance staff engagement and morale and some evidence of improvement is emerging, although this is not yet well embedded, for example only about 80 per cent of staff received annual appraisals this year and they are not yet seen as delivering real benefit to individual staff. The Council is not able to demonstrate the full impact of its change programme before the next staff survey in March of this year.

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

- 134** The Council's revised approach to service delivery planning is not yet embedded or visible in the Housing Service Delivery Plan for 2008/09. Plans should now be more strategic, identify proposed actions and outcomes and build in a clear assessment of equalities and diversity issues but the plan for housing was lacking in detail in terms of specific actions and outcomes and its actions on equalities and diversity focussed on equality impact assessments rather than on actions which would have a direct impact on services. This means that the revised approach has yet to make a real difference to how the Council delivers its services.
- 135** The service delivery plan for 2009/10 for the strategic housing service is not yet clear. It is likely that service delivery planning will be delayed whilst the Council identifies how it will achieve its budget. This means that it is difficult to identify what the housing service intends to deliver in the coming year. There are some clear proposed service improvements. Plans for the 'court desk' are well advanced and a provider has recently been appointed. The service will commence by April 2009. This will help those threatened with eviction. There are also plans for the development of direct access emergency accommodation which will mean that non priority homeless households will not need to be directed outside of the Borough. A support contract has been awarded for eight units of accommodation and sites are currently being identified.
- 136** The Council's approach to the management of performance has improved but is not yet fully embedded. Its approach has been renewed and a new system introduced using the balanced scorecard which is better able to integrate performance and financial management although this is not yet fully implemented or embedded and therefore it is difficult for the Council to demonstrate improved performance management. For example, each member of staff should receive annual performance appraisal but this is not yet universal. However, a recent review of IIP accreditation feedback indicates that the 'revision of the appraisal system has been welcomed and is viewed as a positive experience' and feedback from staff representatives and a 'pulse' survey of staff indicates that the new system is improved and the majority of staff receive regular feedback on performance from their managers. However, there remains a small percentage of staff who are not yet included and who do not clearly understand its purpose or see it as beneficial.
- 137** Councillors are seeking to take an active role in performance management both via regular consideration of the balanced scorecard and through consideration of housing performance issues at Cabinet, for example, they have picked up on lack of take up of Decent Homes Grants and considered this at Cabinet in December 2008 which resulted in changes to the grant criteria.
- 138** The Council is self aware and can demonstrate a clear corporate commitment to learn from external challenge and inspection and a recent IDeA peer efficiency review. It is seeking to address the right things and has amended its Improvement Plan and the action plan to achieve this. Following the cultural services inspection in 2008, a detailed action plan was implemented leading to improvements such as the development of service standards and improved activity rates. Similarly the recent Investors in People report comments that the 'assessor is particularly impressed with how positively feedback has been received at previous reviews and used to improve the organisation.' The Council's willingness to learn makes improvement more likely.

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

- 139** The Council has shown the ability to learn from feedback and its own mistakes in respect of Decent Homes Grants. The Council gathered feedback on the reasons for low uptake of grants from the HIA. The terms for these were adjusted in June 2008 to increase the maximum grant from £10,000 to £15,000 as grants in some cases were proving insufficient to achieve decency. In addition the criteria for repayment of the grant on the sale of the property were amended to provide a sliding scale of repayment for owner occupiers. This shows the Council's willingness to implement change in this area of the service.
- 140** However, it is not clear that the housing service is using all opportunities to learn when things go wrong, for example, the complaints process. Whilst there is complaints policy and the Housing Service seems to receive few complaints, the policy states that the Council will learn from its mistakes but there is no indication how this will happen and nor any examples of how it has.
- 141** The Council's focus is still largely internal, on building its internal capacity and it has not yet managed to effectively engage service users, residents or partners in service review and development nor does it systematically or comprehensively evaluate service users experience or satisfaction and use this to improve services. There has been a lack of systematic review of the housing strategy action plan and the Council does not effectively engage partners in the development or review of its housing strategy.
- 142** There has not been clear reporting on performance against affordable housing policy. While headline number of affordable new homes provided has been reported, there has not been reporting on performance against target thresholds set in affordable housing policy. This means the Council can not be clear about how effectively these have been enforced and whether its policy is effective in delivering against targets.
- 143** The Council is not making the best use of its Homelessness Forum as a mechanism for learning and source of challenge to its performance. Members of the Forum are very positive about their relationship with the Council and its commitment but would welcome an opportunity to comment on and provide challenge to the delivery of the Council's housing strategy.

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

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### Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 144** Strengths and weaknesses are balanced in this area. Whilst there are positive signs of a corporate commitment both to improvement generally and to housing issues, increased staff numbers within the housing service and an ambitious programme of outsourcing and proposed partnership working, there is a risk that the Council will be sidetracked by the major financial challenges it faces and the complexity of its partnership programme and miss the opportunity to make small scale improvements which might have an immediate impact on service users. The Council's limited staffing capacity and the scale of its corporate improvement agenda mean that any improvement in the strategic housing service is uncertain.
- 145** The Council has to date demonstrated a commitment to preserving and developing the strategic housing service. Under the new political administration, the trend of revenue funding cuts for housing was reversed in 2008/09 and the budget for 2009/10 showed a further increase and was protected from the substantial in-year reductions made in response to the financial situation. Budget increases were used to support some expansion of capacity and key staff including a Housing Strategy and Enabling Officer and jointly funded Empty Property Officer, have been recruited to improve service delivery. During 2007/08 funding was £600,000 following year-on-year reductions since 2005/06. Funding for 2008/09 is £685,000 and the budget for 2009/10 is planned to be £827,530. Current expenditure reductions which the Council are seeking to achieve in 2009/10 are not expected to affect housing which means the service should have the resources to deliver improvement in services.
- 146** However, the Council's overall financial position is now so fragile that there is a real possibility that the budget for 2009/10 will require cuts to all services. It is seeking to address its budget difficulties proactively and imaginatively, seeking radical and long-term solutions rather than relying on quick fixes, although the urgent difficulties during 2008 were largely managed through the freezing of vacancies. The Council has already identified savings of £2.2 million for the 2009/10 budget which aims to maintain the level of service to residents but it recognises the risk of further turbulence and therefore that any further savings would inevitably include the closing of services and buildings and possible further restructuring to cut posts. The resources of the Housing Service have been largely protected to date and the intention is that this should continue. However, given the volatility of the financial situation, this cannot be guaranteed.
- 147** The Council's political leadership is strong. They have a clear vision for Boston and housing, particularly affordable housing is seen by them as a priority. Whilst Cabinet members are inexperienced as councillors, they are unusually able and experienced in other spheres. The Council has undertaken a fundamental restructure of senior management and new staff have been recruited to key posts which will strengthen the Council's overall capacity. This restructuring has also contributed to the poor staff morale since many now fear for the future of their jobs and recognise the real risk of further restructuring as a consequence of the financial situation.

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

- 148** The continued staffing capacity of the housing service is uncertain. Given the limited capacity of the Council, delivery of the service and improvement priorities is particularly dependent on having key staff in post. Currently the staff of the housing service are able and committed and the service is well lead. It has benefited from the recent management restructure with the recruitment of new staff. However, there is some evidence that it has experienced difficulties in recruiting staff with the right skills in the past. The Housing Service Delivery Plan for 2008/09 highlights a significant risk to service delivery caused by inadequate staffing levels. Boston is the lowest staffed housing department in the County but with some of the highest level problems. The Service Delivery Plan also highlighted that service levels in respect of energy conservation were threatened by the loss of a staff member. The staffing levels in the private sector team are also too low to address the scale of the issues, particularly in respect of HMOs. The Council acknowledges that both future improvement and current levels of service provision are at risk as there are no resources to drive improvement forward quickly due to the challenging financial position.
- 149** The Council has made a real improvement in how it engages with and talks to staff. In the last 18 months there has been a significant programme designed to improve dialogue and engagement and better listen to staff. This is likely to have improved staff morale and make improvement in other areas more likely. The Council has also significantly improved sickness levels following a review in 2008/09. Sickness absence in 2007/08 was over 11 days per person per year. Current sickness levels are predicted to be around seven days per person per year for 2008/09. However, performance appraisal is not yet operating consistently for all staff. While most staff now receive annual feedback meetings on performance, a significant proportion do not get more regular feedback or believe that the performance appraisal process helps them understand how their job fits in with the Council's priorities. The Council is investing in the development of its senior managers via the leadership Development programme which will run until June 2010. This will enhance staff willingness and capacity to deliver improvements but is unlikely to make a visible difference to services for some time.
- 150** The Council is seeking to enhance the capacity of the strategic housing service by working more collaboratively. There are proposed strategic housing service partnerships with the adjacent councils of East Lindsey and South Kesteven in respect of a sub- regional choice based letting scheme and a common policy and application form have already been agreed. The new structure implemented in summer 2007 has assisted joint working between departments within the Council. This brought together all community services including housing, planning and environmental services. Managers of the different teams now meet regularly together. This helps to coordinate service delivery, for example, refuse collection staff have helped identify problems with certain HMOs. This is helping provide better coordinated services in some areas.
- 151** There is a recently revised, clear and comprehensive procurement strategy, supported by a procurement manual which is designed to support service improvement, encourage partnership working, be a key vehicle for change and deliver value for money. It covers both supplies and services and includes major procurement exercises. This should enable the Council to begin to achieve a more systematic approach to securing value for money in its contracts.

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

- 152** There is an ambitious corporate planned programme of partnership working with other councils and outsourcing of services designed to increase capacity, provide cost savings and service efficiencies. They are at an early stage of a partnership with South Holland and East Lindsey district councils which will explore the potential for sharing or outsourcing of services. The Council has yet to develop a formal business case or undertake a formal risk assessment. It is also exploring the potential for outsourcing of leisure, sport and cultural services and is market testing the potential in respect of environment services including street cleansing, refuse collection and grounds maintenance. All of these are large scale and complex and only in their early stages. If successful they are likely to deliver both savings and service improvements but the detail and timing of these is still being developed. They will also be challenging for the Council to deliver given its limited financial and staffing resources. The initial proposals appear to be well planned and the Council is taking the time to explore the experience of other councils. However, in the current financial climate they must also be seen as risky. The scale of the proposed partnerships also risks distracting the Council from identifying smaller, more easily achievable service improvements and of taking staff attention and resources away from service delivery.
- 153** The Council is already engaged in a complex variety of partnerships and is not yet able to fully understand where they meet, cross or overlap. The internal audit team are currently undertaking a partnership mapping exercise but have not yet reported. This means the Council is currently not able to fully manage or exploit the potential of partnership working.

# Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

1 Draft PI Table for Strategic Housing Inspections for Local Authorities.

**Table 1 Performance indicators**

Performance indicator	All England top quartile 2006/07	AIB 2005/06	AIB 2006/07	AIB 2007/08 *
BVPI 213 Housing advice preventing homelessness (per 1000 households)	6		1	1
BVPI 64 Vacant private homes returned to use or demolished	112.5	0	2	6
BVPI 183a Average length of stay in B&B in weeks		3.04	2.62	7.76
BVPI 183b Average length of stay in hostels in weeks	0	7.08	6.05	5.75
BVPI 202 Number of people sleeping rough	0		3	3
BVPI 203 Reduction in number of families placed in temporary accommodation		26	-17	N/A

# Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
  - focus groups with staff and customers;
  - interviews with staff, Councillors, partners and key stakeholders;
  - shadowing staff carrying out their activities;
  - observation at customer contact centre;
  - various file checks;
  - review of Council's website and leaflets; and
  - mystery shopping.

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