

Landlord Services

Rugby 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.

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

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

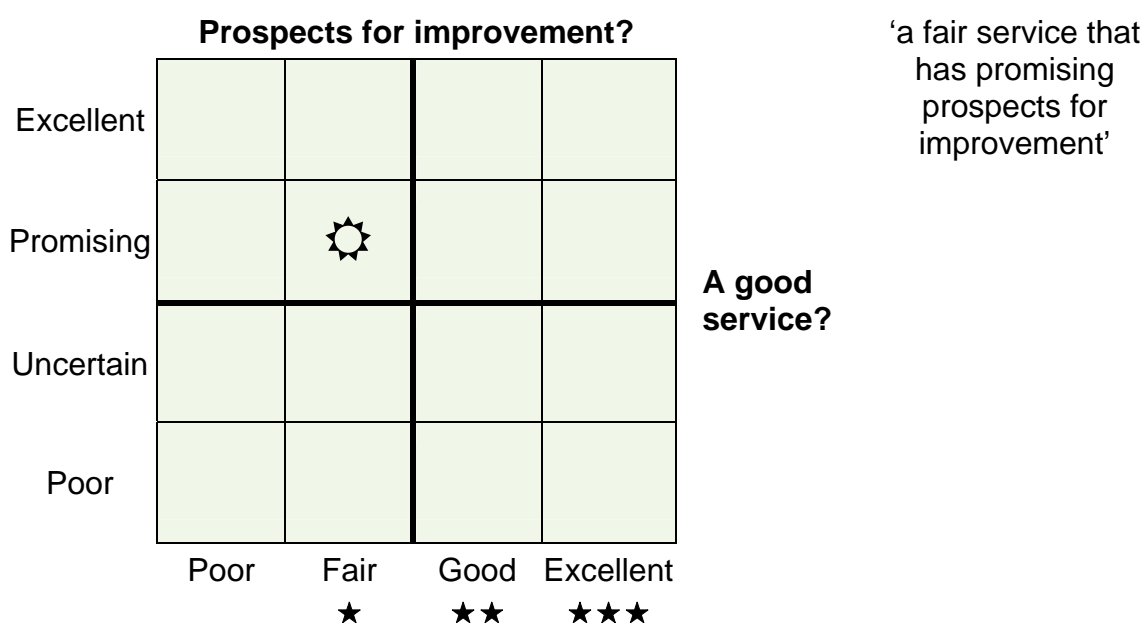
Summary

- 1 Rugby Borough Council (RBC) provides a fair, one-star landlord service with promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 Fundamental steps have been taken to improve services with new structures and managers to deliver it. Significant improvements have been delivered to tenants and this is reflected in steadily increasing satisfaction.
- 3 However, the service is still in a period of change and a number of aspects of the service still need development particularly response repairs, telephone access, value for money and the use of performance information to drive improvement.
- 4 Tenant satisfaction with the overall service is high and increasing. It is easy to access services and staff are enthusiastic and customer focused. Information, service standards and the website are comprehensive. Tenant involvement is strong and shaping services in many areas.
- 5 Homes are well maintained and vacant homes are repaired quickly and to a good standard. Annual gas safety checks are carried out effectively and the homes of tenants who have disabilities are adapted quickly to meet their needs.
- 6 There is a focus on preventing rent arrears. Anti-social behaviour (ASB) is tackled appropriately with strong partnership working, appropriate action and sound prevention and support. Estates are clean and tidy.
- 7 However, the response to telephone contact is poor, opening hours are restricted and learning from complaints is limited. There is a lack of a targeted approach to tackling rent arrears. ASB casework has been patchy.
- 8 The repairs service is weak, many repairs are not completed on time or carried out by appointment offered at the first point of contact. The strategic approach to stock investment is currently under-developed and RBC lacks a complete understanding of the condition of its homes.
- 9 The approach to value for money is weak. RBC does not know how its costs or performance compares with other housing organisations, housing efficiency gains are limited and progress is recent and not yet embedded.
- 10 RBC has a clear focus on improvement. Significant improvements have been delivered to tenants and this is reflected in steadily increasing satisfaction. Performance against the majority of key indicators is generally strong and improving.
- 11 The Council is self critical and aware of what improvements are needed, plans are well monitored, coordinated and robust. Leadership is strong and learning from others is shaping service improvements. Staff capacity is strong and external resources and partnerships are supporting service delivery.
- 12 However, performance information and management are limited and are not currently used fully to inform and drive improvement. The approach to procurement is at an early stage and IT capacity is limited.

Scoring the service

13 We have assessed Rugby Borough Council as providing a ‘fair’, one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

14 We found the service to be fair because it has a range of strengths including:

- tenant satisfaction is high and increasing, comprehensive service standards are in place, it is easy to access services and staff are enthusiastic and customer-focused; written information is good and the website is informative and interactive;
- there is strengthened and positive tenant involvement with a number of tenant-led improvements as a result;
- there is high level leadership, appropriate training, and a well-embedded approach to equality impact assessments (EIAs) which is delivering outcomes;
- tenants with disabilities are receiving a very responsive adaptations service;
- staff are making positive use of customer profile information to tailor service delivery and there is a strong focus on supporting vulnerable tenants;

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

- homes are well maintained and the investment programme exceeds the Decent Homes Standard (DHS);
- there is an appropriate lettable standard reviewed with residents and empty properties are repaired quickly and to a good standard;
- there is strong performance on gas servicing supported by strengthened procedures, steps are taken to maximise access and tenant satisfaction is high;
- a full range of payment methods are offered, there is a focus on preventing arrears and there are positive arrangements ensuring that tenants have access to independent money advice;
- there are sound arrangements for tenancy management;
- ASB (anti-social behaviour) is tackled appropriately with sound procedures, strong partnership working, appropriate action and sound prevention and support;
- estates are clean and tidy with little or no sign of graffiti or dumped rubbish; and
- there a sound strategic approach to value for money, good use of partnerships and shared service procurement and delivery and resources have been redirected to front line services.

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

- there is no clear access strategy for housing services, the response to telephone contact is poor and opening hours are restricted;
- learning from complaints is limited;
- customer profile information is not yet comprehensive, monitoring of fair and equal access to services is limited and, therefore, the Council cannot demonstrate full compliance with the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice for Equality in Housing;
- the strategic approach to stock investment is currently under-developed and therefore, RBC lacks a complete understanding of the condition of its stock;
- repair appointments are not offered at the point of first contact and performance on time taken to complete repairs is poor;
- the average time taken to let empty homes has increased significantly and it is not clear whether arrangements to repair them provide value for money;
- there is no profiling of tenants with rent arrears to inform a targeted approach and performance management of income and arrears management is under developed;
- residents are not satisfied with action taken on ASB and RBC does not know the full reasons yet and casework has been patchy in the past;
- RBC does not know how its costs or performance compares with other similar organisations; and
- housing has not been subject to the same efficiency approach as the rest of the Council and there is limited evidence of specific efficiency gains.

Scoring the service

16 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- fundamental steps have been taken to improve services with new structures and managers to deliver it;
- significant improvements have been delivered to tenants and this is reflected in steadily increasing satisfaction;
- recommendations and improvements have been implemented as planned;
- performance against key indicators is strong and improving in a number of areas;
- there is a strong corporate commitment to improvement, the Council is self critical and aware of what improvements are needed;
- plans are well monitored, coordinated and robust;
- leadership is strong;
- there is a programme of service reviews in place and learning from others is informing service improvement;
- there is a clear strategy to achieve culture change;
- staff capacity is strong and external resources and partnerships are supporting service delivery; and
- funding is in place to deliver the DHS programme and other planned improvements.

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

- there is limited improvement in achieving value for money within this service;
- there is limited existing performance or management information and RBC does not know how well it is performing in terms of access to services;
- the development of procurement is at an early stage; and
- IT capacity is limited.

Recommendations

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

Recommendation

R1 Strengthen the focus on customers by:

- developing and implementing a clear strategy for customer access to the housing service including which aspects of the service will be delivered by the one stop shop;
- review with tenants the opening hours of the one stop shop and contact centre to see if these meet their requirements and take action on the findings;
- improving telephone access and setting clear targets to significantly reduce the number of lost calls;
- using the results of satisfaction surveys to drive improvements;
- revising the approach to capturing all complaints and using the complaints process to drive improvement by learning from the outcomes;
- introducing appointments for response repairs at the first point of contact;
- setting clear targets to improve the speed with which response repairs are completed with the aim of achieving performance which is among the top 25 per cent of organisations; and
- providing and widely publicising a detailed three-year programme of improvement works planned for tenants' homes.

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

Recommendations

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- customers will be able to access services more easily;
- RBC will have a greater understanding of customer dissatisfaction and be able to target improvement action;
- customers will have better information about likely improvement works to their homes allowing them to plan for these well in advance; and
- customers will receive an improved repair service by having their repairs completed on time.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by December 2009.

Recommendation

R2 Fully implement the actions contained in existing service improvement plans including:

- completion of alterations to the one stop shop to ensure that it fully complies with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act;
- completion and implementation of the asset management strategy;
- development of a Housing Revenue Account Business Plan;
- completion of customer care and domestic violence training for all staff;
- improve the balance between emergency and urgent repair work;
- reprocure repair contracts;
- introduce the planned improvements in reletting homes and reduce the length of time that they are empty;
- complete planned improvements to managing ASB including a case management system;
- deliver the actions within the value for money action plan; and
- introduce benchmarking of cost and performance to understand how services compare to peers and act on the findings.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved access to services;
- improved outcomes for tenants using the repairs and ASB services; and
- the delivery of services which provide value for money to tenants.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by March 2010 apart from the procurement of response repairs which should be implemented by March 2011.

Recommendation

R3 Strengthen the approach to diversity by:

- collecting comprehensive customer profile information;
- monitoring fair and equal access to all housing services and reporting on the findings; and
- demonstrating full compliance with the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice for Equality in Housing.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better focused services to customers depending on their particular needs; and
- ensuring tenants do not experience discrimination when accessing services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2009.

Recommendation

R4 Improve the approach to performance management and outcomes for service users by:

- introducing, monitoring and reporting on the planned range of local and management performance indicators and taking action on any under performance;
- monitoring and reporting on the full range of service standards and taking action to remedy under performance; and
- set, monitor and report on patch-based targets for rent and current tenant arrears collection.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased accountability and challenge of service performance;
- improved outcomes for service users; and
- more effective collection of rental income to support service delivery.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by September 2009.

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

Dates of Inspection: 30 March - 3 April 2009

Report

Context

The locality

- 20 The Borough of Rugby lies within Warwickshire near the centre of England, stretching from Coventry in the west to the county borders of Northamptonshire and Leicestershire in the east. It covers an area of 357 square kilometres encompassing the town of Rugby (population approximately 62,950), together with 41 parishes ranging in population from as little as 20 to nearly 3,000.
- 21 It has a population of 91,000 residents (mid-2007 estimate) which increased by 4 per cent between 2001 and 2007. People from minority ethnic communities represent 7.2 per cent of the Borough's population (ONS, 2007). This group consists of a significant Indian majority with sizeable populations of Pakistani, Afro-Caribbean and Chinese families and an increasing Eastern European community.
- 22 Rugby is generally an affluent Borough with average annual earnings of £25,000 (2007). In terms of deprivation, Rugby ranks 246 out of 354 areas of England, where 1 is the most deprived. However, 19.3 per cent of households earn less than £10,000 per year and there are pockets of significant multiple deprivation, notably in the Brownsover South, Newbold and Overslade wards. There has also been a rise in unemployment from 1.6 per cent at this time last year to 2.3 per cent although this is still below the national average for the United Kingdom.

The Council

- 23 Rugby Borough Council (RBC) has been Conservative controlled since 2004. The composition of each party stands at 27 Conservative members, 11 Labour and 10 Liberal Democrats. The structure is based on a cabinet-with-leader model, with the civic role of the mayor being retained.
- 24 The Council has a total annual turnover, including housing, of about £55 million. The Council's General Fund net expenditure is in the region of £14 million.
- 25 The Council has recently completed a restructure which has involved the recruitment of a new Chief Executive, evolving three Directors into two Deputy Chief Executives and reducing the thirteen Heads of Service to seven.

The service

- 26 The Council owns and manages 3,934 homes 1,443 of which are sheltered housing for older people.
- 27 The inspection focused on the Council's landlord services including stock investment and asset management, housing income management and tenancy and estate management. It also considered the three cross-cutting areas of access and customer care, diversity and value for money in relation to those services.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 28** In April 2008, the Council adopted a new refined and more focused Corporate Strategy. Based on an extensive consultation process the Council adopted as its strategic objective:
- 'Clean, Green and Safe'.
- 29** This is underpinned by the following five key priorities:
- ensure all the Borough's residents are aware of our services and can access and influence them;
 - meet the housing needs of our residents now and in the future;
 - enable residents, visitors and enterprises to enjoy, achieve and prosper;
 - enable and maintain an environment which our residents can take pride in and which impresses our visitors; and
 - enable the delivery of excellent VFM services in line with our corporate plans.
- 30** Housing contributes to and is involved in delivering all the key priorities. However the key priority 'Meet the housing needs of our residents now and in the future' has the following key aims:
- creating affordable homes that are greener and cheaper to heat;
 - helping vulnerable people with support needs to live independently;
 - preventing homelessness for families and single people;
 - improving the condition of all types of houses in the parts of Rugby that particularly need improving;
 - improving housing conditions for poorer and more vulnerable people; and
 - giving people on the housing waiting list more choice about the homes they are offered.
- 31** The key priority 'ensure all the Borough's residents are aware of our services and can access and influence them' has the following key aims:
- through a series of customer focused end to end service reviews drive improvement in customer service and eliminate waste;
 - develop a one stop shop;
 - develop plans for public space management in neighbourhoods;
 - form a Rugby active network;
 - develop a corporate policy on complaints, compliments and feedback;

How good is the service?

- upgrade the Council website increasing useability and transactional availability; and
- develop a plan for community information on the website.

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

Access and customer care

- 32** Strengths and weaknesses are balanced in this area. Tenant satisfaction is high and increasing, it is easy to access services and staff are enthusiastic and customer focused. Written information is good and the website is informative and interactive. Comprehensive service standards are in place and there is strengthened and positive tenant involvement. However, there is no clear access strategy for housing services, the response to telephone contact is poor, opening hours are not fully customer-focussed and learning from complaints is limited.
- 33** Residents are satisfied with the overall service from RBC. Overall satisfaction is high at 88 per cent (2008 STATUS survey) and has been increasing steadily over the last three years. This level of satisfaction is in the top 25 per cent of all district councils.
- 34** It is easy to access appropriate advice in person. The one-stop shop has well trained advisors including specialists in housing and repairs. 'Meet and greet' staff help to reduce waiting times and signpost customers to specialist advice and facilities. The reception and telephone contact centre are resolving a high number of enquiries at the first point of contact with 77 per cent achieved from October 2008 to March 2009. This provides a responsive service to customers.
- 35** Access is increased by the use of the Brownsover Community Information Centre. Two surgeries by housing officers are held every week on this large estate as well as a wide range of other advice sessions. This increases access for local tenants.
- 36** Staff are enthusiastic and customer focused. All staff in the reception and contact centre have had detailed customer care and specific knowledge training. This is strengthened by having a number of specialist advisors with detailed housing or repairs knowledge. All new staff have customer care training as part of their induction and a rolling programme of training called 'The Way We Work', which includes customer care and value for money, is underway. This is supporting customer-focused service delivery.
- 37** There is a good range of written information both in leaflets and on the website. A comprehensive range of leaflets cover all major housing services and this information is also available on the website. However, the tenants' handbook is out of date but will be revised in 2009/10. The website is informative and interactive. Information is comprehensive and current and includes clear advice on tackling anti social behaviour and full details of current involvement opportunities. Repairs can be ordered, rent paid and complaints made directly online. This provides clear information and an easy method for customers to access service.

- 38 Strong service standards for all aspects of landlord services are in place and were developed with customers. Service standards have been drawn up with tenants and performance against them will be reported to residents. Comprehensive service standards across housing have been developed in partnership with residents who have identified their 10 priorities which will be reported regularly to the Rugby and District Tenants' Association (RDTA) and in newsletters. However the standards are new and the first monitoring report is not yet due. Monitoring by residents of their priorities can help focus on service improvement.
- 39 There is strengthened and positive tenant involvement. There are constructive but challenging relationships between tenants groups, staff and the council's housing portfolio holder. Involved tenants are positive about their increased influence and a significant number of positive changes have been on the basis of tenant participation and feedback such as the new service standards, the option of showers for sheltered tenants and a range of other positive outcomes. Tenant involvement and feedback is an essential element in improving services.
- 40 The reception area does not currently fully meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act. Remedial work is underway to address this and steps have been taken to alleviate any current issues. RBC had intended moving to a purpose designed one-stop shop last year but the current financial climate has led to a postponement. A full refurbishment of existing facilities is now being designed to remove the remaining barriers to access of some high level desks and restricted wheelchair access around seating. The meet and greet service helps to alleviate any issues by speaking directly to any customer who may have access difficulties.
- 41 There is no clear strategy of how access to housing issues will be developed. While the one-stop shop approach has been agreed at a corporate level and is part of a jointly agreed corporate strategy with other councils in Warwickshire, this has not been translated into a strategy for access for housing, although this is planned for 2009/10. Some work has been undertaken to gather customer views which were broadly supportive of the current arrangements. Hence, while the reception and contact centre are handling an increasing percentage of enquiries, there is no clear strategy of when or if all calls should be handled in this way. Without a clear strategy it is difficult to plan the transfer of advice services.
- 42 Opening hours of both reception and the telephone contact centre are limited. Both are only open from 9 am to 5 pm. There is an intention to consult users and review this. However, at present, opening hours may not meet some customer's requirements.
- 43 The response to telephone enquiries is poor. The contact centre opened in October 2008 and is still being developed. Not all calls are handled by the contact centre and many go directly to housing staff. From October 2008 to March 2009, 17.7 per cent of calls to the contact centre were abandoned and 28.8 per cent of direct calls in addition the average response time of over one minute is long. This is being addressed by the provision of additional telephone lines within housing and the contact centre's performance is improving. However, a large number of customers are unable to make telephone contact when they call.

How good is the service?

- 44 The approach to using customer feedback to drive service improvement is not developed. While satisfaction surveys are in place for the service areas inspected, the overarching findings are not yet robustly analysed and drawn together to inform service design and improvement. However RBC is starting to develop more systematic feedback from customer surveys by introducing learning clinics for different teams to discuss feedback from surveys. This will help to ensure that customers' views are fed in to service development.
- 45 Complaints are not being fully used to drive improvements. There is a low level of housing related complaints and evidence that some may not be being captured within the corporate complaints process and this is not helped by the complaint form not being user friendly. This is being addressed at present via planned training and learning clinics and the revision of the form. There is some evidence of learning from individual complaints and changes have been made. However, this has not been systematic and so improvement opportunities are not maximised.

Diversity

- 46 Strengths and weaknesses are balanced in this area. There is high level leadership, appropriate training, and a well-embedded approach to equality impact assessments (EIAs) which is delivering outcomes. Black and minority ethnic (BME) tenants are even more satisfied with services than tenants overall. Tenants with disabilities are receiving a very responsive adaptations service. Staff are making positive use of customer profile information to tailor service delivery and there is a strong focus on supporting vulnerable tenants. However, customer profile information is not yet comprehensive, monitoring of fair and equal access to services is limited and, therefore, the Council cannot demonstrate full compliance with the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice for Equality in Housing.
- 47 There is high level leadership and strategic direction on equality and diversity. The deputy leader is a committed diversity champion at cabinet level with the head of housing fulfilling a similar role. A clear policy and a comprehensive equality and diversity action plan is under-pinning the Council's approach along with a Single Equality Scheme with detailed action plans covering race, disability and gender. Joint work is taking place within the County to develop an extended scheme which includes age, faith and sexual orientation. Overall, the approach is providing appropriate challenge and strategic direction and this was recognised as strength in the recent peer review of equality and diversity.
- 48 RBC's community engagement strategy and toolkit is supporting a consistent approach across the Council. It was developed jointly by staff and councillors and included a 'Have Your Say' campaign to ask local people how they wanted to be consulted. A wide range of community and faith groups were also consulted using the expertise of the Benn Partnership (a local community organisation and advice centre). This is supporting the Council in consulting communities in line with their preferences although this has still to be applied to housing services.

- 49 Appropriate arrangements are in place for training and awareness raising on equality and diversity. Training is mandatory for staff and councillors with 95 per cent of housing staff and 60 per cent of councillors trained to date. Additional training for the remaining councillors has been arranged for April 2009. Equality and diversity is also part of induction training for all new staff. This ensures staff have the appropriate skills and knowledge of this important area.
- 50 The approach to Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) is well embedded and delivering outcomes. Councillors, key staff and local community groups, such as Rugby Disability Council, received bespoke training which included assessing existing policies and procedures and coverage of issues such as harassment and links to the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice for Equality in Housing. Corporately around 50 per cent of existing policies have now been assessed with all new policies assessed before they go for Cabinet approval. The approach is further strengthened by including an EIA section within Cabinet report templates. However, it is not clear how EIAs are challenged or reviewed to ensure the approach is robust and consistent. An example of an outcome from an EIA is an inclusion of signposting for men experiencing domestic violence within the newly developed domestic abuse policy.
- 51 Black and minority ethnic (BME) tenants are even more satisfied with services than tenants overall. The satisfaction of BME tenants with overall services is high at 90 per cent (88 per cent for all tenants) and their satisfaction with participation is also high at 73 per cent (66 per cent for all tenants) and has been increasing steadily over the last three years. This level of satisfaction is in the top 25 per cent of all district councils.
- 52 The Council has made slow progress against the Equality Standard for Local Government which it is now working to address. It has only reached level two but has a clear action plan in place to reach level three when an assessment takes place in September 2009. A peer review was undertaken in October 2008 which highlighted that 42 per cent of the elements of the standard were met fully, 28 per cent were almost completely met with the remainder not evidenced at that time. A key area for improvement was ensuring that equality and diversity was well-embedded across the organisation and this is now built into service plans, targets for individual staff and team meeting agendas. This will provide focus for RBC's work in this area and, while progress has been slow to date, the Council is now clear about what it wants and needs to achieve.
- 53 Staff are making positive use of customer profile information to tailor service delivery. This includes using information on tenants' contact preferences when making contact on issues such as rent arrears and adapting the approach taken when tenants are known to be vulnerable on rent arrears and gas servicing. Information on tenants' vulnerability is flagged up on the repairs portal so that contractors are aware of it when making contact. There have also been a number of instances where important letters have been translated into other languages for tenants who do not read English. All of this is making good use of the information which exists to deliver a tailored service to tenants.

How good is the service?

- 54 Housing staff show a strong focus on supporting vulnerable tenants to sustain their tenancies. They have strong links with a range of agencies and support providers including Bromford and Orbit Housing Associations' floating support services and specialist support agencies for drug and alcohol users and they make proactive referrals of new and existing tenants. Bromford's service is co-located with RBC's housing service which has led to closer ties and working arrangements. This helps to provide the specialist support that some tenants require.
- 55 Tenants are receiving a very responsive adaptations service. There is no waiting list for adaptations and funding was increased in 2008/09 to deal with an increased number of referrals with the 2009/10 budget increased to £210,000 to reflect this. The whole process to provide a level access shower takes around 12 weeks from the point that the need is notified to the occupational therapist to work being completed and minor works are completed within 7 days. This is supporting tenants to live independently.
- 56 RBC is working to achieve a diverse workforce. Workforce planning profiles and surveys are carried out. The Council has identified a significant under representation of younger people and, to a lesser extent, representation from people from black and minority ethnic communities (5.8 per cent as opposed to 7.2 per cent) especially in more senior roles. Action is being taken to address the first through work placements and the development of a pre-apprenticeship scheme. Plans to address the under representation of BME senior staff forms part of the 2009/10 service plan. A representative workforce helps to ensure that staff understand the needs of their customers.
- 57 Partnership working is supporting RBC's work in this area. As well as working with floating support providers, as mentioned above, engagement with local communities is supported by a service level agreement (SLA) with Warwickshire Racial Equality Council. A positive outcome if this has been the close support and working to jointly address two recent cases of racial harassment on a specific estate. This joint working provides specialist knowledge which might not have been available.
- 58 RBC is strengthening its approach to working with Gypsies and Travellers. In addition to two permanent sites it has successfully bid for £1.4 million to develop 12 pitches with 60 additional pitches and 5 transit sites planned by 2012. It has worked with the Police to develop a 'Firm but Fair' protocol to address issues on one site and has developed a 'Respect the Difference' DVD along with training for councillors challenging myths and prejudices.
- 59 The approach to domestic violence is mixed. RBC is funding Warwickshire Domestic Violence Support Service to provide support, advice and practical assistance to survivors when they move onto permanent accommodation. It is also enabling the development of a new purpose-built refuge in the Borough to replace existing provision. A draft domestic abuse policy has been developed and is currently being consulted on with the aim of seeking cabinet approval in June 2009. However, while some staff have had training on domestic abuse, not all staff have which potentially limits the effectiveness of dealing with individual cases.

- 60 Customer profile information gathering is still at an early stage. Information has been collected for only 38 per cent of tenants. However an action plan is in place to fill the remaining gaps. While the data gathered is being used to tailor services to specific tenants, as described above, it is not yet being used to generate reports to inform service delivery and decision making. Comprehensive profiling information is needed to help tailor services to the specific needs of tenants.
- 61 There is no systematic or comprehensive monitoring to ensure fair and equal access to housing services. There is no monitoring or reporting of the profile of tenants accessing the repairs, rent arrears or anti-social behaviour services to establish any trends or barriers to access. While satisfaction forms gather customer profile details, this is not analysed or reported to inform service delivery. Although RBC is self-assessed as meeting the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice for Equality in Housing, without robust and comprehensive monitoring it is not able to demonstrate that this is the case or take action to address barriers to fair and equal service delivery.
- 62 The approach to monitoring contractors' commitment to equality and diversity principles is not fully developed. While this was not included within the 2006 tendering of major works contracts, RBC has since developed its own corporate approach and contractors have either signed to this or provided their own. However, there is currently no ongoing monitoring of contractors' performance in this area.

Stock investment and asset management

Capital, planned and cyclical works

- 63 Strengths and weaknesses are balanced in this area. Homes are well maintained and the investment programme exceeds the Decent Homes Standard (DHS). The service is being shaped by customers. However, the strategic approach to stock investment is currently under-developed, RBC lacks a complete understanding of the condition of its stock and some aspects of the service lack customer focus.
- 64 Homes are well maintained. At the end of March 2008, only 6 per cent of homes failed the DHS, with very low levels of tenants refusing to have works undertaken. RBC is on target to meet the 2010 deadline for DHS. Programmes for door and window replacement and roofing have been completed. Remedial works have been undertaken to homes built using non-traditional methods and some have been demolished and replaced by new homes which better meet modern standards and expectations.
- 65 The investment programme is exceeding the DHS. This includes the replacement of both the kitchen and the bathroom where both fail the standard, the installation of heat recovery extraction fans, non-slip flooring and lever taps and offering a choice of low level bath or shower cubicle for sheltered housing tenants with over-bath showers are now fitted as standard in bathroom works. There is also an action within the 2009/10 action plan to explore opportunities to enhance this further with tenants. This will ensure that homes meet tenants' longer term expectations and aspirations.

How good is the service?

- 66 However, the strategic approach to stock investment is currently under-developed. There is no adopted asset management strategy and the Housing Revenue Account business plan is out of date. The asset management strategy is in draft and being developed along with a strategic review of sheltered housing provision which is due to be completed in April 2009. The lack of a strategic framework hampers long term investment decisions.
- 67 The Council's understanding of the condition of its homes is not fully developed. It carried out a 20 per cent stock condition survey in 2006, which is currently being revalidated. This data has been added to reflect completed DHS works and adaptations to homes and is complemented by the strong local knowledge of staff working in this area. However, the understanding is not entirely comprehensive as there has only been an assessment of compliance with the Housing Health and Safety Rating System for 31 homes, with plans to clone this information, which could potentially impact on the future investment needs of the stock.
- 68 Appropriate arrangements are in place to performance manage the delivery of the investment programme. Budget information is provided monthly and is explored in managers' meetings with 95 per cent spend projected for 2008/09. All completed work is quality checked with payment withheld until defects are addressed. Team meetings and staff one to one meetings focus on programme delivery to ensure that work is being completed to time, budget and quality.
- 69 There is good partnership working to deliver the repair and maintenance programme. RBC uses a framework agreement with a wide range of contractors. Relationships with contractors are constructive with positive communication and a willingness to work together to resolve issues. This is necessary in order to deliver programmes well.
- 70 There is an appropriate range of cyclical maintenance programmes in place. This includes a four yearly external and communal area painting programme, the fitting and testing of electronic smoke alarms, lift and stair lift servicing, and door replacement and fire protection work in high rise blocks. This helps to maintain homes and avoid the need for response repairs.
- 71 RBC is developing its approach to affordable warmth. It has developed a strategy supported by an action plan. 'A' rated programmable condensing boilers are fitted to homes as part of the DHS programme. Discussions are currently taking place with a national power provider to explore opportunities to access funding to enhance existing insulation levels in homes with lower SAP ratings. While the current SAP rating is low at 63 points and places the Council among the poorest performing organisations for this indicator, it is likely that this is an under-reported figure as there has been no reassessment in the light of improvements which have improved the thermal comfort of homes.

- 72** The approach to asbestos is sound. A corporate asbestos management plan and policy is in place. All communal areas have been surveyed along with surveys of 10 per cent of internals on multi-storey blocks with small scale removal undertaken where necessary. A programme of re-inspections is in place with all homes surveyed prior to investment work. The 2006 asbestos regulations have been incorporated into contracts and data is shared with contractors and flagged on the main database. Staff and contractors have all received training and there is a clear customer information leaflet on the occurrence of asbestos in homes along with an article in the winter edition of Tenant Times. Risks are appropriately identified and managed.
- 73** The service is being shaped by customer feedback. Examples include the introduction of shower cubicles in sheltered schemes, the fitting of heavy duty toilet seats, a choice of bath panel is offered and the range of kitchen unit colours has been extended. Responding to feedback helps to deliver a service that the customer wants.
- 74** However, the approach to involving customers in this service area is mixed. There has been positive tenant involvement in developing the wide range of new policies for property services including gas, adaptations and asbestos. The maintenance and repair service review group have considered all policies with the readers group approving all printed information. However, tenants have no role in monitoring contractor performance and there are no arrangements for contractors to attend RDTA meetings or service review groups. Tenants' views and experiences are not yet fully shaping the service.
- 75** Some aspects of the service lack customer focus. Although help is provided with moving large items of furniture, there is no detailed assessment of tenants' needs and vulnerability in advance of improvement work beginning. Profile information maybe used to identify individual needs but as this is not yet held for all tenants the approach is not yet comprehensive. There is also no published, detailed improvement programme so that tenants can receive ample warning of impending work.
- 76** Customer satisfaction with completed work is mixed. Satisfaction with heating system replacement is high at 96.8 per cent, but is lower for kitchens (88.9 per cent) and bathrooms (87.9 per cent). However, this is not being used to drive service improvement and there has been no detailed exploration of the reasons for these differences. Opportunities to improve the service to tenants are being missed.

Responsive repairs

- 77** Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. Appointments are not offered at the point of first contact and performance on time taken to complete repairs is poor. However, customer satisfaction with the service is high.
- 78** Apart from gas repairs, customers are not currently offered appointments at the point at which they report a repair. This is included within the 2009/10 improvement plan. While contractors are required to make appointments with customers once work is passed to them, opportunities to offer an efficient and seamless service to all customers are being missed.

How good is the service?

- 79** Performance on the time taken to complete repairs is poor. In 2008/09, only 74 per cent of emergencies were completed within the 1 day target, only 65 per cent of urgent jobs were done within the 3 day target, only 63 per cent of routine jobs within the 7 day target and only 80 per cent of non-urgent repairs within the 20 day target. Some tenants are not receiving a prompt service in line with the Council's stated targets.
- 80** There is currently a lack of monitoring or management of repairs completed correctly in a single visit. While efforts are being made to identify how this data could be collected, it is not possible to demonstrate whether customer focus and value for money are being maximised.
- 81** The level of response repair order variations is high. Around 24 per cent of all work ordered between April 2008 and January 2009 was subject to variation and there has been limited work done to explore the reasons for this with a view to reducing the level and improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the service.
- 82** Efforts are being made to improve the balance between emergency and urgent work but performance does not yet reflect recommended levels. During 2008/09, emergencies accounted for 20.5 per cent of orders and urgent 24.3 per cent compared to a recommended 10 per cent emergency and 20 per cent urgent. RBC has included actions in its improvement plan to address this with customer service advisors receiving additional training and performance being monitored through team meetings and one to ones with maintenance inspectors to ensure that jobs are not over-categorised. However, current performance is limiting the overall efficiency of the service.
- 83** The balance between planned and responsive repairs does not reflect good practice levels. In 2008/09, responsive repairs accounted for 60 per cent of revenue funded works and planned maintenance 40 per cent compared to a recommended level of 40 per cent responsive and 60 per cent planned. This is limiting the Council's ability to provide a well planned and cost effective service.
- 84** Tenants' satisfaction with the repair service is high. Monitoring for 2008/09 shows that 92 per cent of tenants found it easy to report a repair and were satisfied with the standard of the work with 95 per cent reporting that their homes has been left in a tidy state and that Council staff had been helpful and polite.
- 85** There is evidence that customer feedback is shaping improvements in the repairs service. Customer satisfaction survey returns highlighted that some contractors were not consistently presenting identification when visiting tenants to do work. This has been raised with contractors and reports of this issue have reduced as a result. Contracts do not specify that an alternative heating source needs to be provided when there is a system failure in all electric properties. However, following customer feedback, a supply of portable heaters has been purchased for use where this happens.

- 86 There are appropriate arrangements in place for quality checking completed repair work although the process is not being used to drive improvement and inform learning overall. All work over £1,000, which includes adaptations, is inspected along with a 10 per cent random sample and individual quality issues are addressed. However, the overall findings are not being drawn together to identify trends, issues with particular contractors, or learning points. Opportunities to improve services are being missed.
- 87 Appropriate arrangements are in place for dealing with out of hours emergency repairs. The housing repairs number automatically diverts to an external out of hours service provider with operators having detailed scripts, an up to date list of council properties and contact details for contractors who work on a rota basis. Two officers are on call for advice or to attend incidents. This is providing an effective service to tenants.
- 88 There are appropriate arrangements to ensure emergency repairs are completed more quickly for vulnerable tenants. Staff have been given clear guidance on the situations in which it is acceptable to prioritise an emergency repair (with a 24 hour completion target) to be completed in 4 hours. This includes situations where older people are left without heating following a system breakdown. However, there is no monitoring of the occasions where this has taken place as these instances cannot be picked up on the IT system.

Void (empty) homes

- 89 Strengths and weaknesses are balanced in this area. There is an appropriate lettable standard reviewed with residents, empty properties are repaired quickly and to a good standard. However, the average time taken to let empty homes has increased significantly and it is not clear whether arrangements provide value for money.
- 90 Empty homes are repaired to a good standard. The lettable standard has been reviewed with tenants and approved by the readers' panel. This is given to prospective tenants when they view the property and ensures that they are clear about what they can expect when they move into their new home. During 2008/09, new tenant satisfaction surveys showed that 84 per cent were satisfied with the condition of their new home and garden.
- 91 Void repairs are completed quickly. There is a strong focus on ensuring that properties are inspected, work ordered, repairs, safety checks, energy performance assessments and cleaning carried out and post-inspections completed within a total of five working days. This has been supported by the introduction of key safes at properties. Repairs are seldom done post-letting and, if they are, it tends to be external work such as fencing. While the average for 2008/09 exceeded the target at 6.86 days, this is still strong performance.
- 92 Sound arrangements are in place for decorating vacant homes. All sheltered housing which needs decoration is done as part of the void repair process. While it has not been possible to arrange a voucher scheme with local DIY stores, new tenants of general needs homes receive a decoration allowance in the form of a cheque with payment made in two stages - half at letting stage and the balance when half of the decorating has been completed. This is increasing tenant choice and enhancing the Council's assets.

How good is the service?

- 93** The average time taken to relet vacant homes has increased significantly. The average was 20 days in 2007/08 but increased to 44.9 days in 2008/09. This was partly affected by the positive step of reletting some long term vacant homes and the figure excluding these was 37.8 days. Steps are being taken to improve performance including an end to end process review, setting clear improvement targets with closer monitoring, and increasing staffing resources. This is already having an effect and reletting times are now reducing having peaked earlier in the year. However, rental income has been lost as a result of this decline in performance.
- 94** It is not clear whether the arrangements for void repairs are providing value for money. The average cost of work has increased from £823 in 2007/08 to £1,082 in 2008/09 although this is largely due to introducing 'turn on and tests', Energy Performance Certificates and cleaning. However, there has been limited benchmarking to demonstrate whether this figure is comparable with similar organisations. In addition, void work is done on the same schedule of rates as responsive repairs with no reduction due to contractors benefiting from carrying out work in an empty home. So RBC cannot demonstrate that it is achieving value for money in this area.

Gas servicing

- 95** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. There is strong performance on gas servicing supported by strengthened procedures. Steps are taken to maximise access and tenant satisfaction is high. However, there are some weaknesses in the revised procedure.
- 96** The Council is performing strongly on gas servicing. At the point of inspection only nine safety certificates, out of 2,897 homes with gas, had lapsed. The oldest was two months out of date where the tenant was in hospital, with appointments made or clear action being taken to gain access to the remainder. Legal duties are currently being met.
- 97** The Council has strengthened its approach to gas servicing. It has developed a new policy and procedure which includes making servicing appointments eight weeks before the safety certificate expires and a streamlined no-access process. Copies of safety certificates are given to the tenant and to new tenants at sign up. Effective procedures are supporting strong performance.
- 98** Steps are taken to maximise the opportunities to gain access. Tenancy conditions include the requirement to allow access for gas servicing, it is covered in the tenant handbook and an article in the winter issue of Tenant Times highlighted its importance. The contractor will do servicing in the evenings or at weekends, although this is not advertised. Stickers are placed over door locks when appointments are missed and the third letter sent in the no-access process has an envelope stamped with 'this is not a circular the contents could save your life'. There is also close liaison with housing management staff to ensure that possible vulnerability issues are taken into account.

- 99** RBC is using a number of remedies to address no-access cases. It issues abatement notices with the third 'no-access' letter and, if this is ignored, it proceeds to court action with 11 warrants to gain entry and cap off obtained in 2008/09. In two cases it has fitted timers to limit the gas supply where there has been a history of problems in gaining access. This range of remedies is supporting the Council in meeting its legal obligations.
- 100** Tenant satisfaction with gas servicing is high. In 2008/09, 98 per cent of tenants were satisfied with the standard of the work, 100 per cent reported that their home had been left in a tidy state, 93 per cent rated the contractor's overall performance as 5 or better out of a total score of 9, with 73 per cent awarding the highest score.
- 101** There are appropriate arrangements in place for checking quality. All safety certificates are thoroughly checked before they are accepted by RBC. Ten per cent of completed work is audited with 10 per cent of that stripped down to ensure that work has been done correctly with corrective action taken where needed. This helps to ensure all work has been completed correctly.
- 102** Appropriate arrangements are in place for servicing solid fuel appliances in the 22 homes that have them. This is done under an annual programme which includes chimney sweeping.
- 103** There are some weaknesses in the revised procedure. While there is awareness of the need to cap off a gas boiler or fire if a sick or disabled tenant is found to be sleeping in a room with a gas appliance and, anecdotally, this happens, this is not covered in the gas servicing procedure. The procedure refers to the old CORGI registration arrangements rather than the new Gas Safe register and this change has not been communicated to tenants. While overdue gas services are flagged on the IT database and available to repairs staff, it does not alert staff using other parts of the system, such as rents, that this is an issue. This is a missed opportunity to ensure that appointments are made for servicing when tenants make contact on other matters.

Aids and adaptations

- 104** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. Tenants are receiving a responsive adaptations service. The service is well publicised and there is a positive working relationship with occupational therapy (OT) staff. Improvements within the wider investment programme are helping to reduce demand for adaptations. However specific satisfaction with the service is not being measured and the longer term impact of adaptations work is not evaluated.
- 105** Tenants are receiving a responsive adaptations service. The adaptations policy was developed with tenants and reflects recommended practice for minor works to be completed without an OT assessment and Community and Local Government Department (CLG) recommended timescales. There is no waiting list for adaptations and funding was increased in 2008/09 to deal with an increased number of referrals with the 2009/10 budget increased to £210,000 to reflect this. The whole process to provide a level access shower takes around 12 weeks from the point that the need was notified to the OT to work being completed and minor works are completed within 7 days. This is a prompt and responsive service.

How good is the service?

- 106** The adaptations service is well publicised. A clear customer leaflet includes target timescales and is available on the website. An article on 'minor works without delay' has also been included in the spring edition of Tenant Times and OTs are also promoting this aspect of the service to their clients. This enables tenants to know what level of service is available.
- 107** There is a positive working relationship with OT staff. This includes joint visits to specify the work required to meet tenants' specific needs and positive communication to resolve any issues which may arise. Monitoring meetings take place four times a year and there are also county-wide meetings with OT staff and other local councils which provide opportunities to share experiences and good practice. This is helping to provide a positive service to tenants.
- 108** Improvements within the wider investment programme are helping to reduce demand for adaptations. Low level baths and shower cubicles are now offered to sheltered housing residents as part of the Decent Homes programme and over-bath showers are also installed in general needs properties as standard. This is not only reducing demand but provides the service in a proactive way.
- 109** Value for money is being achieved in a range of ways. This includes procuring stair lifts from a specialist provider through the Eastern Shires Purchasing Organisation reducing the cost of a straight stair lift from £2,000 to £1,700. Stair lifts are also reused where possible for a charge of £120 for a condition survey and storage and then reinstalled for £900 with any new requests matched to the store first. Adaptations are recorded on the property attributes database to ensure ease of matching when homes become vacant. However, there has been no comparison to date of how the cost of adaptations compares to those of similar organisations and so it is not clear whether work such as level access showers is providing value for money. This is helping to make best use of resources.
- 110** Specific satisfaction with the service is not being measured. While satisfaction surveys are sent to adaptations customers, this is done as part of surveying of tenants who have had repairs done and the results are not separated out to identify the specific experience of the adaptations service. This limits the benefits of carrying out these surveys.
- 111** The longer term impact of adaptations work is not evaluated, and there is no follow-up assessment of how work has promoted independent living. Opportunities to improve the service and to demonstrate its contribution to community sustainability are being missed.

Housing income management

- 112** Strengths and weaknesses are balanced in this area. A full range of payment methods are offered and there is a focus on preventing arrears. There are positive arrangements ensuring that tenants have access to independent money advice. However, there is no profiling of tenants with rent arrears to inform a targeted approach and performance management of income and arrears management is under developed.
- 113** A full range of rent payment options are offered, and there is increasing focus on promoting the most cost effective. As the most efficient and cost effective payment option, Direct Debit forms are included in sign-up packs for new tenants and, while there are currently no incentives to encourage tenants to pay by this method, 40 per cent of tenants who are not on full Housing Benefit (HB) do so. This is ensuring that tenants can pay their rent conveniently.
- 114** Good information is provided to tenants on rents and the status of their rent account. Quarterly rent statements are produced and leaflets covering rent setting, payment options and service charges and arrears letters are clear and understandable. Tenants are well informed about rent matters.
- 115** RBC is enabling tenants to access affordable home contents insurance. A low cost home contents insurance scheme is in place and promoted to new tenants at sign-up, during settling in visits and in Tenant Times with 90 tenants taking this up. This is enabling tenants to insure their belongings who may not have been able to do so otherwise.
- 116** There is a positive relationship with the HB service. There is regular communication on individual cases including joint visits to address the needs of vulnerable tenants. Formal quarterly meetings are used to discuss issues and share information on developments. Housing officers have recently been trained to verify income details and this will help to ensure that claims are processed with a minimum of delay.
- 117** There is a focus on preventing rent arrears and supporting tenancy sustainment. Housing officers build up a relationship with new tenants from an early stage as they carry out accompanied viewings, sign-up interviews and settling in visits four weeks after letting. This provides opportunities to explain the importance of paying rent and affordability issues as well as identifying any vulnerability or support needs which would prompt a referral to floating support services. Only six evictions took place in 2008/09 following strenuous attempts to avoid them.
- 118** There are positive arrangements in place to ensure that tenants have access to independent money advice. This includes priority appointments with Rugby Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) under a service level agreement with progress updates and regular drop-in sessions at the Town Hall and the Brownsover Community Information Centre. Partnership working with the County Council and Coventry and Warwickshire Co-operative Development Agency is providing advice on bank accounts, budgeting, bill paying, loans, savings and other financial services with two sessions a week in the Town Hall. Housing officers have recently received debt advice training from CAB and are due to job shadow money advice workers there in June 2009. This is helping to maintain focus on sources of financial advice for tenants.

How good is the service?

- 119** Efforts are made to make personal contact with tenants when arrears arise, in line with the pre-court protocol. Staff make contact early in the morning and in the evenings and also make good use of SMS messaging. They also have a good understanding of their tenants and their needs and preferences which they use well to tailor the action taken. The IT system escalates action but staff are able to override this if it would be inappropriate to make contact, for example, if the tenant is recently bereaved. Letters are clearly written and include details of payment options and also the availability of independent advice from the CAB.
- 120** Rent collection performance has shown year-on-year improvement and is above average compared to similar organisations. It increased from 98.1 per cent in 2006/07 to 98.52 per cent in 2007/08 and 98.66 per cent in 2008/09. The average for district councils was 97.9 per cent in 2007/08 which RBC exceeded. However in the context of the high proportion of sheltered housing tenants and the relatively low levels of deprivation this performance is not as strong as could be expected.
- 121** There has been some success in collecting former tenants' arrears (FTAs) and rechargeable repairs costs. Although there was no target set, around £21,400 was collected in FTAs in 2008/09 against a total £75,000 through a combination of in-house staff efforts and referral of cases to an external collection agency. Of £7,803 raised in rechargeable repairs (less invoices subsequently issued with a credit note), £5,305 was recovered which is a collection rate of 68 per cent.
- 122** There is currently no housing income management strategy setting out how income from all sources will be maximised including rent, FTAs, garage rents, leaseholder service charges, other service charges, rechargeable repairs and community alarm charges. A comprehensive corporate debt policy is in place and is due to be reviewed but there is limited evidence of this being regularly used or referred to by housing staff. Opportunities to target resources and increase income are being missed.
- 123** Performance management of income and arrears collection is under-developed. While performance is included in team and one to one meetings, staff have not been set individual targets for rent and arrears collection and, while the Best Value Performance Indicator for the proportion of rent and current tenant arrears is monitored, there is little focus on current tenant arrears which has fluctuated considerably during 2008/09. Team leaders monitor performance weekly on an overarching and a patch basis, but there is no sample checking of case work to ensure that consistent and timely action is being taken.
- 124** RBC is not maximising the impact of its rent arrears work. It has not developed a profile of tenants with rent arrears to identify common issues or trends. It is therefore not able to tailor its approach or target resources to where they will have most impact.
- 125** The approach to promoting a rent payment culture is mixed. An article on rent payment was included in the winter issue of Tenant Times. However, there are no campaigns encouraging tenants to pay during the four non-payment weeks and no targeted publicity raising the profile of this issue.

- 126** There are limited examples of customer feedback shaping the service. Service review groups have not yet been involved in any matters relating to income management although they are due to be consulted on the revised procedure manual. There are no satisfaction surveys to capture tenants' views on the service. The wording of an arrears letter was reviewed following feedback from one tenant. However, opportunities to shape the service around tenants' needs and aspirations are not yet being maximised.
- 127** The rent procedure manual has not been reviewed since 2006 and therefore does not reflect current working practices such as making early, personal contact or referral to floating support services. It also does not make links to the Council's corporate debt policy or financial inclusion strategy. The manual is scheduled for review early in 2009/10.

Tenancy and Estate Management

- 128** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. There are sound arrangements for tenancy management. ASB (anti-social behaviour) is tackled appropriately with effective procedures, strong partnership working, appropriate action and sound prevention and support. Estates are clean and tidy with little or no sign of graffiti or dumped rubbish. However, residents are not satisfied with action on ASB and RBC does not know the full reasons yet and casework has been patchy in the past.
- 129** There are sound arrangements for tenancy management. Policies and procedures have been reviewed, accompanied viewings and sign ups take place, tenancy support is offered to all new tenants, introductory tenancies are used and a follow up visit is made after four weeks. Introductory tenancies are actively managed and one has been brought to an end. However there is no formal six monthly review and visit for introductory tenancies although this is in the service plan for 2009/10. Overall, these arrangements provide a sound basis for managing tenancies.
- 130** There are new and comprehensive arrangements for tackling ASB. A full review of ASB has been completed including new policies and procedures, an assessment against the Respect standard (the national standard for tackling ASB), with an action plan to meet gaps and training for staff. Training was done jointly with other local housing providers, police community support officers (PCSOs) and support workers. RBC has decided to complete its action plan before formally signing up to the Respect standard. However, there is no formal strategy for tackling ASB although this is being developed following the completion of the assessment against the Respect standard. Sound policies and procedures and training on them will help staff to address ASB issues.
- 131** Partnership working is used to address ASB. The operational housing manager is part of the Community Safety Partnership tasking group, the team leader part of the ASB tactical group and there are good informal links with PCSOs and community safety wardens. Partnership working with police is well developed. Regular formal and informal liaison takes place and RBC is party to an information sharing protocol via the Community Safety Partnership. Hot spots for ASB are identified through tasking meetings and action targeted to address issues. This partnership working has led to significant reduction in ASB especially at Brownsover and a general reduction in the number of ASB reports across the borough between 2007/08 and 2008/09. This all helps to provide a coordinated approach to tackling ASB.

How good is the service?

- 132** Prevention is used to reduce ASB issues. The Council employs six community safety wardens who work with young people and patrol until 11pm seven days a week and there is a range of youth work and summer play schemes. Design improvements are used to tackle ASB including gating alleyways, fencing and CCTV in sensitive locations. The use of CCTV as well as estate based officers has dramatically reduced issues of ASB in the high rise blocks. All this helps to reduce ASB.
- 133** A wide range of support is available to tenants. There are two floating support schemes available and specialist support for people with drug, mental health, domestic violence or alcohol issues. In total more than 40 tenants receive specific support services. In practise support can be put in place for all tenants who require it without any undue delays.
- 134** Action to address ASB is appropriate and focused on prevention. During 2008/09, seven acceptable behaviour contracts, two referrals for mediation, one good neighbour agreement and one injunction were used as opposed to only one eviction. External support packages are put in place for both people experiencing ASB and alleged perpetrators and housing staff support people experiencing ASB with detailed procedures including regular contact. This demonstrates a focus on resolving the issue rather than relying on eviction.
- 135** ASB is addressed outside of office hours. As mentioned earlier, the Council employs six community safety wardens who patrol daily until 11pm. The 'out of hours' service takes calls on ASB and passes them to the community safety wardens until 11pm. There is also a noise line which responds to serious or repeated noise nuisance. This helps to address ASB as it is happening.
- 136** There is a focused approach to the management of high rise blocks. There is a concierge scheme, on site estate officers and a CCTV (closed circuit television) system. These services are covered by service charges to tenants but the calculation is now out of date and will be reviewed as part of the major exercise to depool service charges across the stock in 2009/10. This approach has led to a significant reduction in issues on these estates which are no longer difficult to let.
- 137** Estates are clean and tidy with little or no sign of graffiti or dumped rubbish. An external cleaning contract is monitored regularly. Grounds maintenance is handled through a service level agreement and there is a responsive litter picking team which can be sent to any area which requires specific litter clearing. Graffiti is removed promptly and is monitored by a cross departmental action group. However, cleaning and grounds maintenance schedules are not on display for residents and plans to involve tenants in monitoring standards are still being developed. Clean and tidy estates are important to residents and help reduce ASB.
- 138** The estate inspection process has been strengthened. Walkabouts are widely advertised and tenants are now involved in the process. Housing officers and maintenance staff both attend six monthly walkabouts of all homes and tenant attendance is growing with a tenant on the majority of inspections. In addition key areas receive a focussed service with the high rise blocks having a daily inspection and Brownsover a monthly one. A star grading system is being developed and is in draft. This is providing a more focused inspection and tenant input helps to identify issues that are important to them.

- 139** Residents are not satisfied with action on ASB and RBC does not know the full reasons yet. Satisfaction with speed and responsiveness to ASB issues was rated significantly lower than other issues in the recent STATUS satisfaction survey and satisfaction monitoring when cases are closed has only just begun and so no results are available. Without knowing the specific concerns of tenants it is difficult to address them.
- 140** Casework on ASB has been patchy. There is no case management system and casework has been dependant on individual officer's initiative although there is now a spreadsheet which records progress on cases. The new arrangements have significantly strengthened ASB casework and action plans are now used on all cases and managers review all cases on a monthly basis as well as more frequent discussion in team meetings. While some positive and successful action has been taken, historically this has not been monitored and records do not show how consistent this approach has been in the past. New procedures are designed to address this but it is too early to see the outcomes of these.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 141** Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. RBC does not know how its costs or performance compares with other similar organisations, housing has not been subject to the same efficiency approach as the rest of the Council, there is limited evidence of specific efficiency gains, procurement is under developed and progress is recent and not yet embedded. However, this is changing and is supported by a newly developed sound strategic approach. There is good use of partnerships and shared service procurement and delivery and resources have been redirected to front line services.

How do costs compare?

- 142** RBC does not know how its costs or performance compares with other similar organisations. What little information that RBC does have shows that repair costs are higher than similar organisations.
- 143** The understanding of the relationship of costs to performance or how this compares to peers is not comprehensive. There is currently no benchmarking of cost or performance. The limited work that does exist in relation to the repairs service shows a high cost service and there has been no detailed work on costs of individual components of the housing service. While RBC has recently joined a benchmarking service and information on costs and performance is being gathered, no comparisons are available yet. Without a full understanding of how costs and performance compare with peers it is not possible to identify and address high cost or poorly performing areas.

How good is the service?

How is value for money managed?

- 144** There are limited targets for efficiency gains within housing and no significant efficiency savings. The only target is a council-wide 3 per cent efficiency gain target. There are no specific targets for individual services and housing has made no contribution to the Council's annual efficiency statement targets in past years. However, there have been some limited recent savings through a corporate cleaning contract, a new CCTV contract and the procurement of stair lifts for disabled tenants. This lack of targets has hindered the delivery of value for money and cost savings.
- 145** Service charges have not all been robustly reviewed to ensure that actual costs are recovered and that costs are fairly apportioned. There are specific service charges based on historical costs for tenants of sheltered housing and high rise blocks. However, these service charges are based on historical information and may not fully reflect current costs. Service charges have not been depooled for the rest of the of tenants and so tenants are paying for services which only some tenants benefit from. Tenants are unable to see if they are receiving value for the services provided.
- 146** Value for money is not embedded in the service. No detailed training has been undertaken for housing staff or tenants on value for money and staff do not have individual or team efficiency objectives or targets. Work has recently started with staff such as including it on team meeting agendas and the 'Way We Work' training sessions are addressing this. There are plans to engage the residents group in the value for money agenda in April and May 2009. However, until value for money is better embedded it will be difficult to make progress in this area.
- 147** Procurement is under developed. Repair and maintenance contracts are a major expenditure and there is no evidence that they currently provide value for money. However the corporate procurement action plan includes retendering all current contracts in advance of the current contracts expiring in April 2010 and a draft housing procurement strategy has been developed for consultation, as a sub-strategy to the corporate strategy, in order to deliver these actions. Good procurement of repair and maintenance is critical in achieving value for money.
- 148** Resources have been redirected to front line services. The corporate and housing restructure has seen a reduction in directors (from five to three including chief executive and two assistant chief executives) and heads of service from (thirteen to seven). This has enabled a strengthening of front line housing services staffing including an additional housing officer and property maintenance inspector, two participation staff as well as specialist staff to help manage the improvement programme. This provides a more customer focused service.
- 149** There is a sound strategic approach to delivering value for money. Value for money is one of the five corporate values, there are clear corporate value for money and procurement strategies and action plans and there is a sound, specific strategy and action plan for delivering value for money in housing. The action plan addresses the key issues in a practical way. However this sound approach is newly developed and has yet to deliver significant outcomes. Delivery of the action plan will assist in achieving value for money in housing.

150 Value for money is being achieved through partnerships and sharing services with other authorities. However these arrangements are new and have yet to lead to significant measureable savings.

- IT (information technology) is a shared service with Nuneaton and Bedworth Council. A shared head of service is based at Nuneaton and Bedworth and procurement of IT systems is being handled jointly leading to cost savings.
- Procurement is a similar shared service with Nuneaton and Bedworth Council.
- Savings have been achieved by jointly procuring energy performance certificate (EPC) assessments with a neighbouring council. Quotes had been received of between £50-£60 with £34 quoted for a cloned certificate. However, by working with Nuneaton and Bedworth Council, a price of £46 has been achieved which falls as more EPCs are completed and £22 charged for a clone. As around 50 per cent of RBC's stock can be cloned this will provide further savings over time.
- RBC has enhanced its capacity in relation to equality and diversity by developing a shared service with the County Council. This is enabling it to access a wider pool of skills and knowledge than would have been possible if it had employed its own equality and diversity officer for the same cost.
- Partnership working through a service level agreement with Warwickshire Racial Equality Council has enabled access to specialist advice and support in dealing with cases of racial harassment.
- Joint procurement of training for involved residents.

151 The budget process is challenging and budgets are on target. The budget setting process is challenging with a forum for managers to be tested on their assumptions. A saving of 5.5 per cent was achieved in the 2009/10 housing budget via this process. Budgets are well managed and the 2008/09 housing budgets are on target. Capital under spends in earlier years have been addressed.. This all demonstrates that financial planning and management is effective.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 152** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. Significant improvements have been delivered to tenants and this is reflected in steadily increasing satisfaction. Recommendations and improvements have been implemented as planned. Performance against key indicators is strong and improving in a number of areas but weak in two important areas. There is limited improvement in value for money.
- 153** RBC has delivered significant improvements experienced by users which is reflected in a sustained increase in tenant satisfaction over the last three years. Satisfaction at 88 per cent (2008 STATUS survey) is in the top 25 per cent for district councils. This demonstrates that the improvement in services has been recognised by customers over a sustained period.
- 154** There have been a wide range of improvements which are directly benefiting tenants. Some of these are well embedded such as delivery of the capital programme and work to non-traditionally built homes whereas others have followed the significant restructure and have been introduced over the two years since then. These improvements include:
- a strengthened approach to tackling ASB based on early intervention, prevention, partnership working and support;
 - a strengthened approach to tenant participation which has led to a significant number of positive changes and which is recognised by involved tenants;
 - the delivery of the capital programme leading to a very low number of homes failing the DHS;
 - completion of the work to repair or replace non-traditionally built homes;
 - tenant-led improvements in investment in homes such as the option of a shower instead of bath in all sheltered home refurbishments;
 - significant improvements in gas servicing leading to only nine properties being without a gas certificate (and action underway on all these) at the time of the inspection;
 - comprehensive service standards covering all aspects of the landlord service drawn up with tenants;
 - a wide range of informative leaflets on all aspects of the housing service;
 - an interactive website allowing reporting of ASB, payment of rents, ordering repairs and submission of complaints;

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- targeted estate walkabouts including housing and repair staff and tenants; and
- an enhanced floating support service including specialist support for people with mental health, drug, alcohol or domestic violence issues.

155 RBC has delivered the improvements that it has committed to. Almost all the recommendations of the last inspection report have been completed. The outstanding issues are the introduction of choice based lettings (completion due in 2009 and timescale dictated by partners) and the completion of the strategic sheltered housing review (completion due April 2009). Action has been taken to address the time taken to complete emergency repairs but performance is still weak. In addition the actions from the mock inspection in summer 2008 have been delivered well. Some 77 per cent of the actions have already been delivered and the remaining actions are in the 2009/10 service plan. Progress has been delivered well over the last two years but was slow prior to the management changes. Internal audit has also been used to improve property services with the majority of recommendations implemented.

156 Performance against key indicators is strong in a number of areas but weak in the speed of completing response repairs and reletting empty homes both of which are important measures for tenants. The direction of travel and level of performance indicators for overall satisfaction, rent collection, properties meeting the DHS, gas servicing, adaptations and satisfaction with repairs are all strong and have seen a steady improvement over the last three years (although there was a dip in performance in 2006/07 prior to the new management arrangements) . Those for which a comparison exists are in the top 25 per cent of similar organisations apart from rent collection which is above average and improving. However, performance is weak and has deteriorated on the speed of response repairs. Performance on reletting of empty homes has dipped this year after sustained improvement in the previous three years, although there has again been some very recent improvement. This presents a generally positive picture with two significant exceptions.

157 There is limited evidence of improving value for money in landlord services. While a positive structure has been put in place there are few examples of significant improvements in value for money. This is covered in more detail in the section on value for money above.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

How well does the service manage performance?

- 158** Strengths and weaknesses are balanced in this area. There is a strong corporate commitment to improvement, RBC is self critical and aware of what improvements are needed, plans are well monitored, coordinated and robust. Leadership is strong, there is a programme of service reviews in place and learning from others is a strength. However, there is limited existing performance or management information and there are some gaps in written strategies.
- 159** There is a strong corporate commitment to improvement. The leadership team is focused on corporate improvement and is delivering a change programme to drive improvement and deliver excellent services. This has involved a restructure and focus on new streamlined executive and heads of service teams, a totally new management team within housing, the programme of management development and the end to end service reviews. This focus is delivering significant improvements for tenants.
- 160** RBC is self critical and aware of what improvements are needed. A comprehensive mock inspection was commissioned in July 2008 with the findings incorporated into a housing improvement plan and additional staff resources recruited to project manage its implementation. At the end of March 2009, 77 per cent of the actions had been completed and those due for completion from April 2009 have been incorporated into the service plan. However progress is slightly over-stated as a few actions which have been put in to the 2009/10 service plan are shown as complete. This is significant progress in a relatively short period.
- 161** Plans are well coordinated and robust. There is a clear structure of corporate plan, directorate strategies, One Plan (corporate service plan by directorate), housing improvement plan and individual objectives. Weaknesses are recognised and plans in place to address them. The corporate performance management system pulls together all plans and performance information, is kept up to date and is a working tool. This helps with planning and service delivery.
- 162** Plans are well monitored and reviewed. There is a robust process of monitoring progress against plans including review by the corporate management team, the housing management team and by councillors through the Housing Improvement Overview Group. This provides challenge and ensures that plans are delivered to target.
- 163** A wide range of staff are involved in service planning and improvement projects. All managers and team leaders have responsibility for projects on the corporate performance management system and individual officers have their own projects. For example, a housing officer has led on developing the estate walkabout process and the estate grading system. This makes good use of resources and a commitment from staff to change.
- 164** Performance management of staff is well organised. There is an effective appraisal system with objectives set based on corporate and team objectives. Regular one to one and team meetings take place to discuss and review performance and individuals have clear and specific objectives but few numerical targets. This all contributes to involving staff in delivering progress.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 165** Leadership and empowerment of staff is leading to significant improvements in working arrangements and service delivery. Managers spoke of a whole new approach led by the chief executive and head of housing which is empowering them to address issues and improve services. They feel empowered and encouraged to make improvements. Front-line staff are also very positive about the changed culture and leadership. This is contributing to the raft of changes introduced in the past year and supports future improvement.
- 166** Learning from other organisations is well developed and supporting improvement. RBC has learned from a wide range of strongly performing organisations to develop its approach to areas such as ASB, its value for money strategy, gas safety checks, void management and learning clinics for complaints and customer surveys. This has assisted RBC in developing and improving its services to tenants.
- 167** There is a strong focus on reviewing services to increase their efficiency. A new business improvement team is leading a three-year programme of end to end service reviews with a review of planning nearing completion and a review of repairs planned for 2009/10. These are complemented by shorter, interim service reviews with one on the voids process completed and changes about to be implemented. This is supporting service improvement.
- 168** There is limited existing performance or management information and what exists is piecemeal and not pulled together. Managers do have access to information via the IT system and specific reports which they can run but these are not produced as regular reports to be reviewed in any forum apart from a few key areas which are reviewed in the monthly housing management meeting. There are plans which include and have identified a comprehensive set of monthly local and management performance indicators for 2009/10 but targets have yet to be set and the information is not yet being reported. The lack of information limits the ability to manage and improve services.
- 169** RBC does not know how well it is performing in terms of access to services. There are both corporate and housing specific service standards but these service standards are not monitored or reported on (although there is a plan to address in 2009/10) and, although collected, customer satisfaction data is not yet used as an effective improvement tool. RBC cannot demonstrate that it is delivering its service delivery promises to customers.
- 170** There are gaps in strategies for landlord services. The asset management strategy is only in draft form, there are no strategies for ASB or housing income management and the HRA business plan is extremely out of date. A decision had to be taken to prioritise work on strategies and the priority was given to the housing, homelessness and resident involvement strategies. The AMS strategy and HRA business plan will follow the completion of the strategic review of sheltered housing which is nearing completion. At present it is unclear how strategic property investment decisions are made despite significant demolition and rebuilding.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 171** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. Fundamental steps have been taken to improve services, there is a clear strategy to achieve culture change and staff capacity is strong. External resources and partnerships are supporting service delivery. Funding is in place to deliver the DHS programme and other improvements. However, the development of procurement is at an early stage and IT capacity is limited.
- 172** RBC has taken fundamental steps to improve services. There has been a corporate restructure to focus on service delivery and support which has reduced the corporate management team to a chief executive and two assistant chief executives and the heads of service from thirteen to seven with one responsible for the whole of the housing service. The housing service has been restructured with a management team of eight of whom seven including the head of service are all newly appointed within the last eighteen months and a significant strengthening of staff in front line customer facing roles. This commitment to improvement is leading to a wide range of improvements in service delivery.
- 173** There is a clear strategy to change the culture and way of working within the Council. The existing HR strategy is being refreshed and updated and turned into a culture change strategy, the executive and management teams have been reshaped and the housing management team is all new. This new approach is leading to significant change and improvement in services to customers.
- 174** Staff capacity is being increased. Management development training, the 'Way We Work' training for all staff, ground rules for housing staff, corporate management meetings (six weekly for all managers/team leaders with chief executive) and end to end service reviews are all combining to change the way that staff work and improve services to customers.
- 175** Staff capacity is strong and supporting service development and improvement. This includes:
- a new management team which is providing a strong focus on improvement;
 - front-line housing service capacity has been strengthened with increased staffing resources and reduced housing patch sizes;
 - a stable staff structure with low turnover, low and declining sickness absence levels and no vacancies at management level; and
 - enthusiastic, committed and customer-focused staff.
- 176** Capacity has been enhanced by external resources. This includes specialist consultancy to support the service reviews described earlier, the external mock inspection and support to implement the recommendations from that inspection. This complements existing staff resources and supports the development and passing on of new skills.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 177** RBC has the funding in place to deliver its DHS programme and other improvements. RBC has significant Housing Revenue Account reserves and a low level of remaining DHS works. While financial constraints have impacted on some General Fund services, including delaying the new one-stop shop and a General Fund recruitment freeze, this has not impacted on housing recruitment and there are adequate reserves to meet planned programmes of work.
- 178** Capacity has been enhanced by a range of partnership and joint working arrangements. These include arrangements to provide floating support to help people to sustain their tenancies, support for survivors of domestic violence who are rehoused, support from Warwickshire Racial Equality Council for tenants experiencing racial harassment, independent money advice from the CAB and financial inclusion services from Coventry and Warwickshire Co-operative Development Agency. Shared services with other Councils for IT, equality and diversity and procurement described earlier are also increasing RBC's overall capacity for service delivery and improvement.
- 179** The development of effective procurement arrangements in housing is still at an early stage. The Council is exploring opportunities to achieve improved value for money in the procurement of housing repair and maintenance contracts. A draft housing procurement strategy has been developed, as a sub-strategy to the corporate strategy, for consultation and work is taking place with a view to retendering in advance of the current contracts expiring in 2011. The Council has also joined Procurement for Housing although there have been limited outcomes of this to date. However, the full potential to achieve significant savings through more efficient and effective procurement methods has not yet been realised.
- 180** There is limited IT capacity within landlord services. The housing IT system provides a robust service for rents and repairs but there are no existing plans to upgrade or extend it to other housing activities. It is unclear how the planned introduction of the ASB module will be implemented and the existing modules cannot directly produce many of the planned performance indicators for 2009/10 which will have to be produced via stand alone spread sheets or manual systems. This limits capacity to monitor, manage and improve services to tenants.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 1 Performance indicators

| Performance Indicator | District average 2007/08 | Rugby BC 2005/06 | Rugby BC 2006/07 | Rugby BC 2007/08 | Rugby BC 2008/09 unaudited |
|---|---------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| BVPI 63 Average SAP rating | 69.3 | 63 | 63 | 63 | Not yet available |
| BVPI 66a % rent collected | 97.9 | 98.78 | 98.1 | 98.52 | 98.66 |
| BVPI 74a % tenants satisfied with overall service | 81 | 87 | 81 | 81 | 88 |
| BVPI 74b % BME tenants satisfied with overall service | 75.1 | 83 | 79 | 79 | 90 |
| BVPI 75a % tenants satisfied with participation | 67.2 | 64 | 62 | 62 | 66 |
| BVPI 75b % tenants satisfied with participation | 60.5 | 63 | 58 | 58 | 73 |
| BVPI 184a LA Homes which were non decent at start of year | 20.9 | 3 | 1 | 6 | Not yet available |
| BVPI 184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes | 19.2 | 0 | 66 | 286.4 | Not yet available |
| BVPI 212 Average relet time in days | 33.7 | 19 | 24 | 21 | 44.9 |

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 tenants;
 - interviews with staff, councillors, contractors and partners;
 - inspection of ready to let properties homes;
 - shadowing staff carrying out their jobs;
 - observation at customer contact centre and reception:
 - visits to all local offices;
 - estate inspections;
 - tour of the district and housing stock;
 - talking to tenants;
 - observation of meetings;
 - various file checks;
 - review of Council's website and leaflets; and
 - mystery shopping.

Appendix 3 – Positive practice

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

Partnership work with Warwickshire Racial Equality Partnership

- 1** Rugby Borough Council has strengthened its approach to racial harassment through partnership working. It has a service level with Warwickshire Racial Equality Partnership and this has brought positive benefits in tackling two specific cases by providing specialist support and expertise.

Shared service delivery

- 2** Rugby Borough Council has increased its capacity for service delivery and improvement through shared services with neighbouring councils. It shares the delivery of IT services with Nuneaton and Bedworth Council and also the procurement function. The equality and diversity function is shared service with Warwickshire County Council which has enabled the Council to access a wider pool of skills and knowledge than would have been possible if it had employed its own staff.

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