

Audit Summary Report

August 2006



Strategic Housing Services

Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council

Audit 2006-2007

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Summary report

Introduction

- 1 This report provides an assessment of the strategic housing services provided by Walsall MBC. The main areas of activity considered are housing strategy and enabling the provision of affordable housing, and private sector housing services, including the delivery of grants and housing standards. In addition cross cutting themes of access and customer care, diversity and value for money are addressed within the specific context of these service areas.

Background

- 2 The Housing Inspectorate has carried out two inspections of the council's strategic housing services. In March 2004 the service was assessed as 'a poor service with promising prospects for improvement'. A reinspection in November 2004 assessed the service as 'a fair service with promising prospects for improvement'. The reinspection recognised that progress had been made in delivering improved services but weaknesses remained in some areas, particularly around the delivery of the grants service and the enabling of affordable housing. This piece of work has focussed on these areas.

Audit approach

- 3 The findings in this report are based upon an assessment of key documents relevant to the service areas and a series of interviews with managers responsible for delivering the services.

Main conclusions

- 4 The council has continued to make sound progress in improving its strategy and enabling service and the private sector housing service. Although tangible outcomes that customers would notice are still to be realised in some areas, the council now has a strong framework from which to deliver improved services. Most of the weaknesses identified in our previous inspection reports have been addressed and the council has a good awareness of the areas it needs to improve.
- 5 The council has developed a comprehensive strategic framework for its strategic housing services which clearly fits within, and complements, the wider regeneration objectives for Walsall.

- 6 Significantly increased numbers of affordable housing have been secured for the future and will be provided from 2006/07 onwards. This is being achieved by requirements on developers through section 106 agreements, and by increased funding through the approved development programme.
- 7 Resources to provide DFGs (disabled facilities grants) have been significantly increased to tackle the previous under investment, and in recognition of the importance this service has in meeting the needs of vulnerable customers and the wider impact around health and well being.
- 8 The grants service is being more effectively delivered which is reducing the time customers wait for grants. However, customers still wait over a year for DFGs which is a poor standard of service.
- 9 Private sector renewal activities are increasingly strategically focussed to complement wider regeneration and improve housing standards. The council has a number of initiatives and joint working arrangements to assist in improving standards in private sector housing. Areas that have not received sufficient focus in the past, such as empty homes and affordable warmth, are now being addressed.
- 10 The council has limited information about its costs and cannot demonstrate that it delivers value for money in its strategic housing services.

Detailed report

Access and customer care

- 11 The council has attractive and informative leaflets available for customers, although these lack service standards in some areas. Customer feedback is used to improve services.
- 12 There are two service standards leaflets for the housing service which set out the customer care service standards that customers can expect. Other leaflets covering specific areas of service are informative in describing the services available but do not include service standards in relation to delivery of the service, such as waiting times for grants. The council intends to address this once the service is operating at its optimum level, and waiting times in particular can be published and achieved. The leaflets are assessed against the Plain English Standard, some are crystal marked and clearly signed for translation into community languages.
- 13 The council promotes the grants service through its leaflets which are available in a range of agencies and community centres. Information is also regularly published in the council magazines. The council is proactive in finding out levels of public awareness of the service and checks this through the use of non-service user surveys and at focus groups.
- 14 The council has customer feedback arrangements in place which it uses to improve services. Mystery shopping exercises, using WHG (Walsall Housing Group) residents, have been carried out at regular intervals since April 2005. These have been used to test telephone response times and the quality of the advice and information given by the one stop shop and by officers delivering the housing services. The findings are reported and discussed at Housing Management Team meetings and improvement actions identified. Following feedback from the first mystery shop customer care training was provided, which included stopping the use of jargon. Mystery shopping since then has indicated an improvement in customer care. The findings and actions taken are also reported back to the mystery shoppers so they can see they are making a difference.
- 15 Focus groups are regularly held, recruited through adverts in magazines and in supermarkets. They have been used to review and comment on information and leaflets. As a result of this the contents of leaflets and the format and contents of the satisfaction surveys have changed. The focus groups have also been used to assess the level of public awareness of particular housing services and whether customers know how to access these.

- 16 Satisfaction surveys are sent out to service users. The results of these are reported quarterly to the Housing Management Team. The response rate is 37 per cent. The council has also introduced a customer feedback newsletter which is sent to all those who have been sent a survey, regardless of whether or not they returned it. This includes a summary of the feedback received and what happens as a result. It also includes some performance information. It is planned to send these out quarterly. This is a positive initiative to encourage customers to give their views and involve them in services.
- 17 The council started non-user satisfaction surveys in late 2004 aimed at finding out the levels of awareness of services. For 2006/07 it has set a target to get 100 returned surveys for each of the nine Local Neighbourhood Partnership areas (LNP). The surveys are posted to residents on a random basis, given out at LNP meetings and there are exercises to hand them out on the street and to customers visiting the one stop shop. Again this is a positive initiative to gain customer views.
- 18 Complaints are dealt with centrally through the 'Tell Us' corporate complaints procedure. Service managers are responsible for dealing with them but few complaints are received for the services considered by this report.

Diversity

- 19 The strategic housing service has a framework to assist it in meeting the diverse needs of its communities and it is using diversity monitoring to improve services. However, monitoring is largely around ethnicity. The council recognises that it needs to explore how monitoring can be extended to capture other diverse groups.
- 20 The BME housing strategy 2005 to 2008 provides the framework to ensure that the needs of BME communities are identified and steps taken to meet these. The strategy was developed through a variety of research sources, including some specifically commissioned by the council and WHG. The strategy will now feed into the other strategies as they are reviewed. Further research is planned later this year to identify the housing aspirations of diverse communities at a much more detailed level, so that policies and the development of projects are based on a more comprehensive understanding of these needs.
- 21 Actions to take forward the diversity agenda are captured in the Service Plans which are expected to reflect the corporate equalities plan as well as specific strategies. The intention is to mainstream equality actions into service delivery. Monitoring is through the performance framework, and the Directorate's Equalities Board.

- 22 The diversity of all service users is monitored by ethnicity and gender and sometimes by age. Other diversity information is not collected but consideration is being given as to how disability and other groups can be captured, perhaps through working with appropriate agencies. Access to services is monitored by diversity and action taken as a result. For example, through monitoring grant applications by ethnicity it has been identified that there is low take up by the Afro-Caribbean community and work is now planned to explore the reasons for this and take appropriate action.

Strategy and enabling

- 23 The strategic housing service sits clearly within the council's broad regeneration framework and contributes to the wider community and council objectives through its housing activities.
- 24 The council has a comprehensive approach to regeneration and effective partnership work to deliver it. WHG is a key partner and a Strategic Regeneration Framework (SRF) has been developed setting out the priorities to be addressed, and identifying the major transformational and other housing projects required to support the regeneration of Walsall. A five-year investment strategy for regenerating Walsall is being developed, consolidating the regeneration priorities and projects, and strategic housing services' activities and schemes will contribute to delivering this investment strategy.
- 25 The Council has comprehensive information to inform the development of priorities through a shared information base with partners. The Strategic Partnership Information Resource (SPIR) is coordinated through a team of officers, jointly funded, and gathers information from a range of sources, including statistical returns and survey work. This is a useful resource to assist in developing strategic housing priorities.
- 26 The council has achieved external funding from a number of sources including NDC and the NRF, and also through a VAT shelter arrangement with WHG. A third of the funds available to WHG through the VAT shelter, are for use in partnership with the council for regeneration activities which results in social and economic benefit to the community.
- 27 The council has a comprehensive strategic framework to deliver the strategic housing function. The Housing Strategy 2005 to 2008 achieved Fit for Purpose in January 2005. The council works with the WHP (Walsall Housing Partnership) to deliver and monitor the action plan. The Housing Strategy is supported by four further strategies for private sector renewal, homelessness, BME communities and empty homes. The strategies complement each other and clearly identify the priorities for the service.
- 28 The service plans are developed from the strategies to ensure that they are in line with the priorities and the key actions are picked up for delivery. Targets are set in the various action plans but some outcomes are not clearly specified which means they cannot easily be measured in terms of their overall contribution to the higher strategic objectives.

- 29 The council has sound intelligence about the housing market to inform its strategic decisions. This is based on the housing needs survey in January 2005 and research from a range of sources, including the Black Country and Telford HMRA and the Black Country study. This provides information at a regional, sub regional and local level on which to develop policies, projects and schemes. The council keeps the information up to date by gathering information across a number of factors such as house prices, rent levels and income levels to inform affordability issues. It reports this in its 'Understanding the Housing Market Report'. This is complemented by having some of the information available at a LNP level.
- 30 The housing needs study showed that there was a shortfall of 622 affordable housing units across Walsall. In the West 100 per cent are required for shared ownership or discounted market value and in the East, 50 per cent shared ownership and 50 per cent rented.
- 31 Progress is being made to deliver affordable homes with arrangements and resources in place to enable significantly increased numbers of affordable housing in future. However the tangible outcomes in terms of homes built are limited at present. The council is now providing affordable homes through section 106 agreements. Policy H4 was adopted in March 2005 which requires 25 per cent affordable housing on sites of 25 units or more or one hectare. To support this supplementary planning guidance, the SPD (Supplementary Planning Document), was adopted by the council in July 2005. This sets out the council's expectations in relation to matters such as property type and size, pepper potting arrangements and gives the option of commuted sums.
- 32 As a result of this approach, 119 affordable housing units have been agreed through section 106 agreements, some of which are on site. Negotiations for a further 21 are well progressed and 47 are in the pipeline.
- 33 There are effective working arrangements through a development team approach, where officers meet with developers at the pre application stage to discuss the requirements expected from the developer. Strategic housing is also developing working relationships with developers through informal discussions even earlier in the process.
- 34 The council has developed a sound basis for attracting Housing Corporation funds through the Approved Development Programme (ADP). The council is able to demonstrate a strong strategic framework for meeting housing needs through regeneration activities and affordable housing provision, alongside a good relationship with RSLs through the WHP to deliver schemes.

- 35 This has helped to significantly increase funding for affordable housing through the ADP. For 2004 to 2006 the programme was limited. £1.5 million was awarded for three schemes which provided six refurbished sheltered units, five units for young people and some Homebuy. For 2006 to 2008, £7.743 million has been awarded which will deliver 220 affordable homes. This includes some supported housing provision but is mainly general needs shared ownership which is the housing need priority. The allocation also includes a bid from a private developer which will deliver about 30 shared ownership properties as part of a larger development. These properties will be sold to a housing association for Homebuy.
- 36 In addition there is also a bid to the Housing Corporation as part of the pilot scheme for developers to bid for ADP funding. Bovis homes are bidding for clearance of WHG high rise blocks to be replaced by housing for sale, shared ownership and rent. The scheme will include larger properties to meet BME needs in the area.
- 37 The council has arrangements to identify and meet supported housing needs in Walsall. Supported housing needs are identified through the Supporting People Strategy which identifies the priority groups for Walsall. The main priority is for housing with care for older people. Learning disabilities, mental health, homelessness and alcohol and drug abuse have also been identified as supported housing priorities. On an operational level the commissioning managers for the priority areas, work with the strategic housing service and RSL partners to identify and develop schemes for particular needs.
- 38 In 2006 to 2008, 51 frail elderly dwellings will be provided and four units for people with learning disabilities. In 2008 to 2010 a major refurbishment scheme has been prioritised for the reprovision of residential care units into 220 properties for older people with extra care. The council needs to continue to develop its approach to supported housing provision so that priorities for the medium and longer-term are clear.

Private sector housing

- 39 There is a comprehensive private sector renewal strategy. Private sector housing complements the work of wider regeneration activities through using the tools it has available such as provision of grants, bringing empty homes back into use, energy efficiency measures and working with private landlords.
- 40 The council has stock condition information based on a sample survey carried out in 2003. This includes information on category 1 hazards to assist in the move to the HSRS (Health and Safety Rating System) from April 2006. The council has used the stock condition information and government guidance to assess compliance with PSA target of achieving 70 per cent decent homes for vulnerable households in the private sector. This indicated a baseline figure of 65 per cent of vulnerable households living in decent homes. The council has set targets to achieve 70 per cent by 2010, which it will review as it improves its stock condition information. The number of homes made decent as a result of private sector activities is monitored as a local performance indicator. 143 homes have been made decent this year up to end of January 2006 against a target of 150.
- 41 The stock survey information has been supplemented by targeted survey work in particular areas such as part of the Kickstart scheme and a neighbourhood renewal assessment in the Birchills area. However, the council recognises that it needs to gather more comprehensive information and has plans to start rolling stock condition surveys in 2006/07. This will involve asking staff who visit properties in the course of their work to complete a survey form and this will be complemented by the use of temporary staff to conduct surveys based on random sampling. Technical officers have been trained to assess the HSRS. A data base will be established to replace the existing stand alone system which will interface with the private sector IT system (NVM) so that the information is updated following the completion of any grant work or work as a result of enforcement activities.
- 42 The council uses different initiatives to improve conditions in private sector housing. The council is part of the Kickstart programme run by a consortia of local authorities in the West Midlands. In Walsall this has targeted about 250 pre-1919 properties in the Bloxwich area. In the Walsall scheme owners are offered grants as an incentive, to be used alongside their own resources, to bring their properties up to a good state of repair. Where owners are vulnerable, and are not able to raise their own finance, the scheme offers loans based on equity release. These are provided through Art Homes, a subsidiary of a RSL and financed through the Regional Housing Board. The Kickstart scheme is due to be evaluated in 2006/07 and if it proves successful it will be used as a model to extend into other areas.
- 43 The council is using the NRA (Neighbourhood Renewal Assessment) approach in the Birchills area. The survey work has been completed and options are now being developed. This approach may be considered in other areas if appropriate but most areas are now covered by the wider work of the regeneration strategic framework.

Disabled facilities grants

- 44 The delivery of DFGs over £1,000 has been the responsibility of the strategic housing service since April 2005. Previously the service was delivered by the OT (occupational therapist) service. Minor adaptations under £1,000 continue to be delivered directly through the OT service but paid for by the strategic housing services' budgetary provision. All referrals to housing from the OT service are category 1 priority, although there is an override priority for very urgent cases. Grants under £5,000 are not currently subject to a means test.
- 45 Performance in relation to waiting times for DFGs remains weak, although these have significantly reduced. Resources, capacity and the arrangements to deliver the service have been improved so as to achieve sustained improvement in the service over time.
- 46 The council is investing significant capital resources into the grant programme, with £16 million agreed over four years from April 2005. The council approved this in recognition of the previous under investment in the DFG service and the contribution that DFGs make to the wider health and well being priorities of the council. Previous expenditure on DFGs was about £1.6 million a year. The capacity to deliver this level of programme is still being assessed and developed so that spend can be planned and programmed. The budget for 2005/06 is £2.6 million.
- 47 The council is addressing capacity issues in a number of ways. Capacity to deliver a more effective grants service has been increased through restructuring and increasing the establishment to carry out the work. Agency and temporary staff are used to support workloads, pending permanent recruitment to some posts. Caseworkers and technical officers work on a patch basis to allow one point of contact for customers. This is supported by a liaison officer for coordinating information with the OT service prior to a referral and caseworker being appointed.
- 48 Capacity in the grants section has also been increased through the introduction of IT to support the service (the NVM system). Although paper records are still maintained and will be until satisfactory audit arrangements are agreed, the process is now automated and performance information can be generated. There is also a drawing facility on line which means that adaptation plans can be easily shared and commented on by colleagues and recycled as a basis for similar adaptations in other properties. This saves officer time and is a more efficient way of working.
- 49 To increase capacity further the council has prepared a tender for agency services to deliver grant work. WHG will be invited to tender and if successful will provide the agency service for their own properties, providing opportunities for more effective working arrangements. Other agencies successful in tendering will also be used to increase the amount of DFGs delivered.

- 50 The council has also increased the work that the Home Improvement Agency, Care & Repair (C & R) carries out. C & R operates under a service level agreement with Walsall. It has delivered Home Repair Assistance grants for some time, but from April 2005 has also delivered DFGs under £5,000 and some larger adaptations. C & R have effectively assisted the council to tackle the backlog of DFG applications. 75 cases were passed over in August and were topped up in December.
- 51 WHG and other RSLs carry out minor adaptations in their stock up to £1,000. There are also arrangements with WHG for adaptations to be carried out as part of any major works programmes, with the adaptations element paid for through the DFG route. Given the amount of work that WHG will be carrying out in their properties, the council needs to explore further the opportunities that exist for more effective joint working and the use of available resources.
- 52 There are policies and procedures for the grants service with time scales for the various actions set out. NVM will be used for monitoring these when the system is fully embedded and the council is sure the data is up to date and accurate. However, the target for the initial visit to be carried out within three weeks of referral is collated from the system so that compliance with this target can be monitored.
- 53 The waiting times for customers to receive their adaptation are reducing. In February 2005, 2000 applicants were waiting for an OT assessment. By February 2006 this had reduced to 890 applicants. The waiting time has reduced from 18 months to 7 months, which is a significant improvement, although still means vulnerable clients are waiting a long time for an assessment. The OT service has introduced a range of measures to reduce waiting times including operational changes, using locum staff and the introduction of the Smart Care package which enables more assessments to be made in a clinical setting.
- 54 Performance for processing applications once referred from the OT service to the grants service has also improved. A target of 84 weeks was set for 2005/06 but as at January, 42 weeks was being achieved. This figure includes historical cases which are being worked through the system, but once these are cleared more accurate information can be obtained. Once approved the time taken for work to be completed is between 4 and 8 weeks for routine works and up to 12 weeks for extension work.
- 55 There are positive working relationships between the parties involved in delivering the grants service, supported through regular meetings to address operational and performance issues. There are monthly adaptations steering group meetings between the strategic housing service and the OT service and six-weekly meetings between C & R and the strategic housing service, which the OT service is about to join. Performance information is monitored at these meetings with overview information considered through the council's performance system and for C & R through a quarterly multi-agency Advisory Board.

- 56 Performance information is currently focussed on the time to process grants as this is the area targeted for improvement. Current performance figures include historical and current cases and are also affected by errors of inputting when setting up the system. Once the data is cleansed and historical cases are dealt with the NVM system will produce a range of performance information and the council will need to determine the performance suite it needs to effectively manage performance. The council also needs to consider how it can measure and assess the impact that DFGs have, in the medium and longer-term, in sustaining independent living and improving health, well being and the quality of life for vulnerable people in the community.
- 57 Performance and budgets are not broken down by tenure type. This would be useful to inform the tendering exercises for agency work and could also be used to develop other initiatives, with WHG in particular, to improve services.
- 58 Customer satisfaction surveys are sent out on completion of the grant work. If these are not returned they are followed up by telephone or face to face visit. Satisfaction levels are generally high.
- 59 The council is developing a cross tenure adaptations register and working with the Disability Living Centre to consider how a one stop shop approach can be set up to increase access to housing for people with disabilities.

Discretionary renovation grants

- 60 Discretionary Renovation Grants are delivered as part of the area based approach described above. The council has always invested in renovation grants but increased the budget to £3 million for 2005/06. Applicants are visited within three weeks and advised whether or not they are eligible for grant aid. Grants are processed in an average of 38 weeks and applicants can opt whether to use the council's agency service. Home Repair Assistance grants are dealt with through Care & Repair.
- 61 The budgets for both DFGs and discretionary renovation grants are projected to spend in 2005/2006.

Housing standards

- 62 The council works proactively with private landlords to develop their role in the housing market and improve housing conditions. Two landlord forums were run last year. The first one was attended by about 60 landlords. The second forum was open to neighbouring authorities and their landlords. Recognising that some landlords have properties in more than one council area, there has been joint work across boundaries over licensing and standards with uniform application forms and advice leaflets developed.
- 63 There is an enforcement policy and the council has adopted the enforcement concordat. Notices are served, prosecutions and works carried out in default but the policy is aimed at working with landlords to improve their properties rather than resorting to enforcement activities.

- 64 The council does not have comprehensive information on HMOs (houses in multiple occupation) in the Borough but the council is building this up. Council tax and housing benefit records are used to identify potential HMOs and there are plans to carry out surveys in areas where there appears to be any concentrations of HMOs. About 150 HMOs have been identified.
- 65 There have been registration schemes for HMOs in the past although there is not one at present. However, arrangements are in place to introduce licensing from April 2006 for known HMOs which meet the licensing criteria. Many HMOs are less than three storeys so will not require licensing. There is a risk assessment scheme for HMOs which determines the inspection frequency.
- 66 The council is seeking to improve conditions in the private sector through the Homestamp scheme. This is a consortium of local authorities, the Police, Fire Service and private landlords which looks at good practice and health and safety issues in private sector housing. It is chaired by Walsall and is delivering a more regional approach across the private rented sector. For example 'Safety in HMOs' guidance has been produced across the region and work is underway to develop a protocol agreed by councils, the Police and Fire Service about the acceptable standards for student accommodation. It is also introducing an accreditation scheme for landlords, based on a scheme running in London. The paperwork has been prepared and the project is ready to be launched in April.

Empty homes

- 67 The council is taking action to tackle empty homes in the Borough, although this has not been an area of focus in the past. At April 2005 there were about 1000 homes in the private sector (excluding those owned by RSLs) which had been empty for longer than six months. Empty homes are recorded on the NVM system.
- 68 An Empty Homes Strategy has been developed and a proactive approach is being adopted. The council has identified 180 empty homes where landlords have responded positively to requests for information and these are now being pursued to get them returned to use. A budget of £100,000 has been agreed to enable landlords to be offered grants to encourage them to carry out work to the property in return for nomination rights. Mailshots are planned for the future based on council tax records.

Affordable warmth

- 69 The council is placing more emphasis on affordable warmth and energy efficiency, as again this has not been an area of focus in the past and there have been limited outcomes for energy efficiency work.
- 70 The council has created a new post dedicated to energy efficiency, which was appointed to in November 2005. An affordable warmth strategy is being developed and a consultation event has been programmed for May 2006. Presentations are currently being given at Local Neighbourhood Partnership meetings to promote the importance of energy efficiency. NRF funding for £650,000 over two years has been secured as part of a health scheme to improve warmth in homes. The council administers the scheme which is based on health officers making referrals which can then be referred to appropriate energy initiatives such as Warm Front. However, the lack of dedicated resources in the past has meant that the council has not maximised the external funding opportunities available with only £30,000 secured for insulation measures.

Value for money

- 71 The council cannot demonstrate that it delivers value for money for its strategic housing services. There is limited information on the costs of activities. The council has figures based on its budgets about the overall costs of delivering services but the detailed breakdown below this has not been carried out. The council plans to carry out this exercise in 2006/2007. The council is being proactive in trying to set up benchmarking arrangements with other authorities in the area to enable cost comparisons. However, it has found some reluctance from others to share this information. Clearly knowing the costs of services and how they compare to others is critical in any assessment of value for money.
- 72 The council is taking some steps that will assist in demonstrating efficiency gains. Arrangements are in hand to tender a Schedule of Rates for private sector grant work which will avoid the need for individual grant quotations and also allow a comparison of prices between contractors. A specification for the provision of lifts has also been developed and will be tendered which will streamline this process. The tendering of agency services described earlier will allow the value for money of the council's in house agency service to be tested.

Performance management

- 73 There are sound arrangements for managing performance as part of the corporate performance management framework. Performance is monitored at monthly housing management team meetings and quarterly at the Senior Management Performance Board. This considers a suite of PIs, budgets and service plan actions by exception. If a PI is not performing as expected an action plan to address this is drawn up. A strategic score card with key PIs is reported up through the management structure along with any exception reporting.
- 74 In addition to the suite of BVPIs and local performance indicators, a number of service performance indicators have been identified to show a more detailed picture of performance. These are considered at housing management team meetings.

Recommendations

<i>R1 As services improve, review and update published service standards so that customers are clear about what they can expect from the service they are receiving.</i>
<i>R2 Extend diversity monitoring to cover a range of groups within the context of the Walsall area.</i>
<i>R3 Ensure that the targets set in the various service action plans have clearly specified outcomes, which can be easily measured in terms of their overall contribution to the higher strategic objectives of the council.</i>
<i>R4 Continue developing the approach towards meeting supported housing needs so that priorities for the medium and longer-term are clear.</i>
<i>R5 Continue to reduce waiting times for DFGs and assess the impact that DFGs have, in the medium and longer-term, in sustaining independent living and improving health, well being and the quality of life for vulnerable people in the community.</i>
<i>R6 Collect detailed cost information on the activities provided through the strategic housing service, and assess these, using benchmarking information where appropriate, to demonstrate how the service delivers value for money.</i>