NOTE: In the case of non-members, this agenda is for information only

Committee - OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION (OSC)

Date & Time - THURSDAY, 22 SEPTEMBER 2005 AT 2.15 P.M.

Venue - THE NORFOLK ROOM, CONFERENCE SUITE, ELIZABETH HOUSE, WALPOLE LOKE, DEREHAM

Members of the Committee requiring further information, or with specific questions, are asked to raise these with the appropriate officer at least two working days before the meeting. If the information requested is available, this will be provided, and reported to Committee.

Members of the OSC:

- Askew, Mr S.
- Bambridge, Mr S.G.
- Byrne, Mr. A.J.
- Carrick, Mr J.F.
- Cathcart, The Earl
- Cowen, Mr J.P. (Vice-Chairman)
- Duigan, Mr. P.J.
- Goreham, Mr R.F. (Chairman)
- Gretton, Mr J.R.
- Holland, Mr C.J.
- Howard-Alpe, Mrs S.R.
- Kybird, Mr. R.
- Martin, Mr K.
- Matthews, Mrs S.M.
- Ramm, Mr J.E.
- Rose, Mr B.

Committee Services,
Elizabeth House, Walpole Loke,
Dereham, Norfolk, NR19 1EE

Date: 12 September 2005

PERSONS ATTENDING THE MEETING ARE REQUESTED TO TURN OFF MOBILE TELEPHONES

Please ask for Elaine Wilkes: Telephone (01362) 656354
e-mail: elaine.wilkes@breckland.gov.uk
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ITEMS OPEN TO THE PUBLIC</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. **MINUTES**
   To confirm the minutes of the meeting held on 8th September 2005.  
   [5 - 9](#)

2. **APOLOGIES**
   To receive apologies for absence.  

3. **URGENT BUSINESS**
   To note whether the Chairman proposes to accept any item as urgent business, pursuant to Section 100(B)(4)(b) of the Local Government Act, 1972.  

4. **DECLARATION OF INTEREST**
   Members are asked at this stage to declare any interests that they may have in any of the following items on the agenda. The Members’ Code of Conduct requires that declarations include the nature of the interest and whether it is a personal or prejudicial interest.  

5. **NON-MEMBERS AND PUBLIC SPEAKERS WISHING TO ADDRESS THE MEETING**
   To note the names of any non-members or public speakers wishing to address the meeting.  

6. **PROPOSAL FOR STATE OF THE DISTRICT WORKSHOPS**
   [10 - 12](#)

7. **AUDIT COMMISSION HOUSING INSPECTION - PUBLISHED REPORT**
   [13 - 70](#)

8. **ANNUAL REPORT ON INTERNAL AUDIT - 2004/5**
   Report of the Chief Accountant.  
   [71 - 82](#)

9. **POSITION STATEMENT – PUBLIC TOILETS REVIEW (FOR INFORMATION)**
   Further to minute 68/05 of the Commission’s meeting on 21st July 2005, an update from the Asset Manager is attached on progress in respect of the review of public toilets.  
   [83](#)

10. **WORK PROGRAMME**
    (a) A copy of the Committee’s current work programme is as attached at Appendix 1 of the Minutes of the last meeting (item 1 above). The Commission is asked to agree any additions, deletions or amendments to the programme as appropriate.  
   (7 – 8)
(b) A copy of the latest update of the **Forward Plan** of the Executive (due to be published on 16th September) is attached to identify any forthcoming items to consider for inclusion in the overview and scrutiny plan. (Members should refer to their copy of the published version of the Plan for more details of the items listed.)

11. **NEXT MEETING**

To note the date of the next meeting on 20th October 2005 at 2.15 p.m. in the Norfolk Room, Conference Suite, Elizabeth House, Dereham.
PROTOCOL

The Working Style of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission (OSC)

This document sets out the roles of Members and Officers and the general principles to be adopted by the OSC overseeing its mode of operation.

Member Leadership
Members of the OSC will take the lead in selecting topics for overview and scrutiny and in the questioning of witnesses. The OSC will expect Cabinet members to take responsibility for answering the OSC’s questions about topics which primarily relate to the Council’s activities.

A Constructive Atmosphere
Meetings of the OSC will be constructive and not judgmental. The OSC recognises and accepts that effective scrutiny is best achieved through challenging and constructive enquiry. People giving evidence at OSC should be given due respect and not made to feel under attack.

Independence
Members of the OSC will not be subject to whipping arrangements by the party groups.

Respect and Trust
Meetings will be conducted in a spirit of mutual respect and trust.

Consensus
Members of the OSC will work together and, while recognising political allegiances, will attempt to achieve consensus and agreed recommendations. There will be recognition that the OSC has a primary duty to scrutinise on behalf of the community.

Openness and Transparency
The OSC’s business will be open and transparent, except where there are sound reasons for protecting confidentiality. The minutes of the OSC’s meetings will explain the discussion and debate so that they can be understood by an outside reader.

Impartial and Independent Officer Advice
Officers who advise and support the OSC will give impartial and independent advice, as officers support all members of the Council.

Regular Review
There will be regular reviews of how the overview and scrutiny process is working and a willingness to change if it is not working effectively.

Programming and Planning
It is the responsibility of the OSC to determine its annual work programme and also allocate work to the Policy Development and Review Panels. Before each topic is commenced, the OSC will agree the scope of the exercise, what information they will need initially, and which members, officers and external witnesses they wish to see.

Managing Time
The OSC will aim to conclude the business of each meeting in reasonable time. The order of business will be arranged as far as possible to minimise the demands on the time of witnesses.
BRECKLAND COUNCIL

Overview & Scrutiny Commission

At a Meeting of the

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION

Held on Thursday, 8 September 2005 at 2.00 p.m. in The Anglia Room, Elizabeth House, Dereham

PRESENT
Goreham, Mr. R.F. (Chairman)          Gretton, Mr. J.R.
Askew, Mr. S.                         Holland, Mr. C.J.
Bambridge, Mr. S.G.                   Howard-Alpe, Mrs. S.R.
Cathcart, The Earl                    Kybird, Mr. R.G.
Cowen, Mr. J.P.                       Martin, Mr. K.
Duligan, Mr. P.J.

ALSO PRESENT
Key, Mr. R.

In Attendance
Broughton, Mr. M.                     - Scrutiny Officer
McGrath, Mr. S.                       - Principal Committee Officer
Wilkes, Miss E.M.                     - Senior Committee Officer

71/05 CHAIRMAN’S ANNOUNCEMENTS

(a) The Chairman welcomed The Earl Cathcart and Mr. R. Kybird to the meeting as newly appointed members of the Commission and paid thanks to Mr. D. Mortimer and Mrs. Spencer, whose appointments had been transferred from this Committee to the new Policy Development and Review Panels.

(b) The Chairman reminded members to submit their returns to the Scrutiny Officer regarding attendance at the forthcoming Scrutiny Conference to take place at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, on 18th November.

72/05 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 21st July 2005 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

73/05 APOLOGIES

Apologies for absence were received from Mrs. S.M. Matthews and Messrs. A.J. Byrne, J.F. Carrick, J.E. Ramm and B. Rose.

74/05 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME (AGENDA ITEM 6)

The Scrutiny Officer presented the report and outlined the background to the new overview and scrutiny arrangements and the basis of the draft work programme put forward for the Commission’s consideration and adoption.
In discussing the draft programme, members acknowledged the importance for the work programme to be relevant not only to the Council’s priorities but also that it should fit with the officers’ operational programme within that. The need to know and understand the performance management process, i.e. the levels of statutory and non-statutory functions and other aims and objectives, within which the Council operated and to ensure effective monitoring of these, was also recognised.

In this connection, it was suggested that it might be helpful to have a presentation from the Executive Members and Operations Managers on the key issues and corporate priorities over the longer term, bearing in mind that the Commission’s draft programme covered only the next six months, with a view to identifying where the Commission could best assist through its programme of performance monitoring and policy development and review.

A number of additions and amendments to the draft programme were then discussed and agreed, following which it was

**RESOLVED** that

(1) the Overview and Scrutiny Commission draft work programme for October 2005 – March 2006, as amended, be as set out in Appendix 1 to these minutes;

(2) the draft work programme for the Policy Development and Review Panels, as amended, be as set out in Appendix 2 to these minutes; and

(3) the Executive Members and Operations Managers be requested to give a presentation to the Commission at its meeting in October on key issues and corporate priorities over the longer term.

The meeting closed at 2.48 p.m.
## APPENDIX 1

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMISSION**  
**WORK PROGRAMME**  
October 2005 – March 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Lead Officer</th>
<th>Start Date</th>
<th>Finish Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>OSC Work Programme</td>
<td>To agree an initial work programme</td>
<td>Mark Broughton</td>
<td>October 2005</td>
<td>March 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Internal Audit</td>
<td>To consider the half-year report</td>
<td>Mark Finch</td>
<td>Nov. 2005</td>
<td>Nov. 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Corporate Forward Plan</td>
<td>Standing Item</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Each meeting</td>
<td>Each meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Council Constitution</td>
<td>To consider the ongoing review</td>
<td>Ian Vargeson / Mike Horn</td>
<td>October 2005</td>
<td>Nov. 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>OSC Annual Report</td>
<td>To produce the 2005 annual report</td>
<td>Mark Broughton</td>
<td>Feb. 2006</td>
<td>March 2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Ombudsman Link Officer’s Report</td>
<td>To consider the half yearly report</td>
<td>Susan Allen</td>
<td>Nov. 2005</td>
<td>Nov. 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Environmental &amp; Security Services Contract</td>
<td>To monitor the contract</td>
<td>Mark Stokes</td>
<td>October 2005</td>
<td>October 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Healthy Living &amp; Life Styles</td>
<td>To monitor the contract</td>
<td>Andy Wright</td>
<td>Feb. 2006</td>
<td>Feb. 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>BT Payphones &amp; Ofcom Review</td>
<td>To assess the outcome of the Ofcom review and BT’s payphone proposals</td>
<td>Mark Broughton</td>
<td>Dec. 2005</td>
<td>Jan. 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2006-07 Council Budget</td>
<td>To monitor the formulation of the 2006-07 Budget</td>
<td>Mark Finch</td>
<td>October 2005</td>
<td>Feb. 2006</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Call-ins</td>
<td>To consider any call-ins arising under the procedure</td>
<td>Ian Vargeson</td>
<td>October 2005</td>
<td>March 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Open Spaces Policy</td>
<td>To assess the delay in agreeing this policy (Forward Plan item)</td>
<td>Andrea Long</td>
<td>October 2005</td>
<td>October 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Annual Performance Plan / Performance Clinics</td>
<td>To consider appropriate recommendations in respect of unmet targets</td>
<td>Operations Managers</td>
<td>Nov. 2005</td>
<td>March 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Asset Management Plan</td>
<td>To review the AMP</td>
<td>Ray Johnson</td>
<td>Nov. 2005</td>
<td>Nov. 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Elections May 2005</td>
<td>To review the electoral arrangements used for the May 2005 elections.</td>
<td>Ian Vargeson</td>
<td>Nov. 2005</td>
<td>Dec. 2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Policy Development &amp; Review Panels</td>
<td>Standing item – to receive reports from the Panels</td>
<td>Panel Chairmen</td>
<td>Each meeting</td>
<td>Each meeting</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>Internal Audit – Strategy</td>
<td>To review the document</td>
<td>Mark Finch</td>
<td>October 2005</td>
<td>October 2005</td>
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<td>No.</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Lead Officer</td>
<td>Start Date</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Risk Management Updates</td>
<td>To consider any updates to the policy</td>
<td>Mark Finch</td>
<td>Nov. 2005</td>
<td>Nov. 2005</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Communications Strategy and Consultation Plan</td>
<td>To review the strategy and plan</td>
<td>Mel Baker</td>
<td>Nov 2005</td>
<td>Nov. 2005</td>
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<td>PANEL 1</td>
<td>Policy Development</td>
<td>Lead Officer</td>
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<td>Finish Date</td>
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**Scrutiny Reviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Development</th>
<th>Lead Officer</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fundamental Review of Planning</td>
<td>Phil Daines</td>
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<td>Local Transport Review</td>
<td>Mark Broughton</td>
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<thead>
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<th>Policy Development</th>
<th>Lead Officer</th>
<th>Start Date</th>
<th>Finish Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local Strategic Partnership (LSP)</td>
<td>Mitch Kerry</td>
<td>October 2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clean Neighbourhoods Act 2005</td>
<td>Mike Wheatley</td>
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</table>

**Scrutiny Reviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Development</th>
<th>Lead Officer</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crime/Victim Support</td>
<td>Sandra Dewsbury</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PANEL 3</th>
<th>Policy Development</th>
<th>Lead Officer</th>
<th>Start Date</th>
<th>Finish Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homelessness Strategy / Housing</td>
<td>Anita Brennan</td>
<td>October 2005</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

**Scrutiny Reviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Development</th>
<th>Lead Officer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Healthy Living and Life Styles</td>
<td>Keith Stevens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licensing Arrangements</td>
<td>Nigel Burrows</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REPORT OF THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OPERATIONS MANAGER
(Author: Andy Wright)

PROPOSAL FOR STATE OF THE DISTRICT WORKSHOPS

Summary: To allow the Overview and Scrutiny Commission to comment and propose amendments to the draft format of the State of The District workshops at Full Council on 1st December 2005.

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 At Full Council in March 2005 a request was made for a State of the District report to be presented at a future Full Council meeting.

2. KEY DECISION

2.1 This is not a key decision.

3. COUNCIL PRIORITIES

3.1 The matter raised in this report falls within the following Council priorities:

- A safe and healthy environment
- A well planned place to live which encourages vibrant communities
- A prosperous place to live and work

4. MAIN BODY OF REPORT

4.1 Consideration has been given to how to make this an informative and interesting process. Interactive workshops with invited guest speakers who are specialists in their field was felt to be the most appropriate way. Each speaker will be asked to present information in their related field about the statistics and issues facing the Breckland area.

4.2 Attached at Appendix 1 is a breakdown of the proposed topic areas, along with speakers who at the time of preparing the report have been approached to check their availability.

4.3 It is intended to invite all the Town and Parish Councils to workshops also. Plus at a later stage it is intended to use the information from the workshops at staff briefings.

5. OPTIONS

5.1 To adopt the proposal for State of the District workshops to be held on 1st December before Full Council.

5.2 To amend or change the proposed format for the State of the District workshops

6. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)

6.1 By inviting specialist guest speakers the level of information presented on the day will be improved. This will give members a better insight into the issues being faced in the
District. It will also make the day more interactive with ample opportunity for questions and debate.

6.2 The information presented will become part of the Council’s overall approach to knowledge management.

7. **RECOMMENDATION(S)**

7.1 That the Overview and Scrutiny Commission endorse the proposed approach for the State of the District workshops at Full Council on 1st December

**Appendices:**

1. *Proposed State of the District Workshop format*

*Footnote:* The proposed workshops will comply with Equal Opportunities, Section 17, Crime & Disorder Act 1998, and Human Rights Act 1998.
State of the District
Workshops
1 December 2005

9.30  Introduction and Community Plan outline

9.45  WORKSHOP 1

10.30 Coffee/Tea

10.45  WORKSHOP 2

11.30 Panel Question & Answer

12.00 Buffet Lunch

12.45  FULL COUNCIL

Members will be allowed to choose 1 topic from each workshop session. The proposed sessions are:

- **Economy**  - Dave Marlow, EEDA
- **Housing**  - Mike Palmer, Breckland Council
- **LDF**  - Andrea Long, Breckland Council
- **Health**  - Chris Humphris, Southern Norfolk PCT
- **Street Scene**  - Phil Walker, Serco
- **Children & Education**  - Lisa Christensen, NCC
- **Crime**  - Chief Superintendent Alan Hayes
- **Transport**  - Mark Thompson, NCC
- **Learning & Skills**  - Nick Craig, The Learning & Skills Council

**Venue:** Conference Suite, Breckland Council, Elizabeth House, Walpole Loke, Dereham NR19 1EE
A REPORT OF THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT OPERATIONS MANAGER

Andy Wright

AUDIT COMMISSION HOUSING INSPECTION – PUBLISHED REPORT

Summary: This report summarises the outcome of the inspection of Breckland’s Housing Strategy and Enabling Services recently undertaken by the Audit Commission. The inspectors’ report is attached.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Audit Commission (AC) Housing Inspection took place during the period 3 to 6 May 2005. The inspectors’ report was published on the Audit Commission web site on 29 July, with an associated press release.

1.2 The Council has identified Housing as its top priority and it is important to take account of the findings and recommendations of the inspection, in order to build them into a comprehensive improvement plan for the Service, preparation of which is underway and will be presented to members in due course.

1.3 The purpose of this report is to highlight the key outcomes of the Housing Inspection and their potential contribution to the required step change in the quality and performance of the Service, which will enable it to contribute to the Council’s pursuit of its Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) in 2007/08.

1.4 The Audit Commission used the following Key Lines of Enquiry to assess the quality and effectiveness of the Council’s Housing Service.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy and Enabling</th>
<th>Homelessness and Housing Needs</th>
<th>Private Sector Housing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access, customer care and service user focus</td>
<td>Access, customer care and service user focus</td>
<td>Access, customer care and service user focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Diversity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate context</td>
<td>Housing advice service provision</td>
<td>Private sector stock condition and need data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs analysis</td>
<td>Homelessness services provision</td>
<td>Private sector housing strategy and its implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy consultation</td>
<td>Temporary accommodation for homeless households</td>
<td>Tackling poor housing conditions in the private sector</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resource allocation for strategy delivery</td>
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<td>Monitoring of achievement of the Private Sector Housing Strategy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action plans and housing strategy delivery</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Enabling social housing development</td>
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<tr>
<td>Value for Money</td>
<td>Value for Money</td>
<td>Value for Money</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. **KEY DECISION**

2.1 This is not a key decision.

3. **COUNCIL PRIORITIES**

3.1 The matters raised in this report falls within the following Council priorities:

- A well planned place to live which encourages vibrant communities
- A safe and Healthy Environment

4. **COMMENT ON THE MAIN FINDINGS**

4.1 The eventual score for the Housing Service was “fair with promising prospects for improvement”.

4.2 This outcome is far better than had been anticipated and is a significant improvement on the indications given by the inspectors during the initial stages of their work. Judgement two, “likely to improve” is particularly encouraging, as it demonstrates that the inspectors became convinced that members and officers at Breckland are committed to continuous improvement in the Council’s top priority service.

4.3 The report makes eight recommendations which will be built into the Housing improvement plan, currently being prepared, and this report, therefore, draw on wider sources of information and opinion than the Housing Inspection recommendations detailed below.

5. **REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS:**

5.1 The recommendations were as follows:

**Recommendations**

R1 Within six months, develop an access strategy in conjunction with the corporate centre, based on research into footfall and need, which clearly identifies how the housing service will: improve access for customers; develop service standards; deliver mandatory customer care training; and use complaints, surveys and other forms of customer consultation to ensure access to services meets customer needs.

R2 Within six months, develop a diversity strategy in conjunction with the corporate centre, which includes: profiling of customers to inform service development; a comprehensive training package for housing staff to ensure behavioural compliance with good practice and which is tailored to housing specific service delivery issues; and a system for monitoring contractor compliance on equalities and diversity issues.

R3 Within six months, develop systems for involving partners, particularly in rural areas, and customers in monitoring performance and reviewing the continued relevance of strategies on a regular basis.

R4 Within three months, review protocols with partner agencies around case management and nominations to ensure improved services for homeless applicants during assessment and re-housing processes.
R5 Within six months, develop a strategic approach to the provision of interim and temporary accommodation to ensure it is of appropriate quality and in locations which optimise the opportunity for customers to maintain existing support networks.

R6 Whilst making use of the powers contained in the Housing Act 2004 as soon as they take effect, develop over the next twelve months a private sector housing strategy. This should be based on a revised stock condition survey and set clear objectives about working with partners and stakeholders to implement the Act and improve private sector housing conditions in the district.

R7 Use newly increased staffing resources as an opportunity to improve the effectiveness of appraisal, performance management, risk management and partnership involvement processes and embed in the way housing services are planned, delivered and monitored.

R8 By 1 September 2005, develop an improvement plan to address the various weaknesses and recommendations emerging from this inspection report.”

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are no financial implications arising directly from the recommendations contained in this report.

7. OPTIONS

7.1 To note the report and require that its content be addressed in the Housing Improvement plan that is currently in preparation.

7.2 To note the report.

8. REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

8.1 The Housing Inspection gave an informed and detailed insight into strengths and weaknesses of the Council’s current Housing Service. As the Council is committed both to its top priority service and to the overall pursuit of excellence, it is appropriate to take full account of such informed critical assessment in formulating an improvement plan.

9. RECOMMENDATION

9.1 To approve option 7.1 above.

Footnote: This report complies with the following: Equal Opportunities, Section 17, Crime & Disorder Act 1998, and Human Rights Act 1998
Housing Strategy and Enabling Services

Breckland District Council
The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively, to achieve high-quality local and national services for the public. Our remit covers more than 15,000 bodies which between them spend nearly £125 billion of public money every year. Our work covers local government, housing, health, criminal justice and fire and rescue services.

As an independent watchdog, we provide important information on the quality of public services. As a driving force for improvement in those services, we provide practical recommendations and spread best practice. As an independent auditor, we monitor spending to ensure public services are good value for money.
Contents

Local Authority Housing Inspections 4

Summary 5
Scoring the service 5
Recommendations 6

Report 9
Context 9
How good is the service? 11
What are the prospects for improvement to the service? 42

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators 52
Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed 53
Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken 54
Appendix 4 – Positive practice 55
Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

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

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 Breckland District Council operates in England. The population is 121,418, of which 4.7 per cent are from minority ethnic communities.

2 The council is conservative led with 42 of the 54 seats.

3 The council employs 295 full time equivalent staff across all services.

Scoring the service

4 We have assessed Breckland District 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 Scoring chart</th>
<th>Prospects for improvement?</th>
<th>'a fair service that has promising prospects for improvement'</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Promising</td>
<td>☀️</td>
<td>A good service?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uncertain</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>Poor, Fair, Good, Excellent</td>
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Audit Commission

5 The service is ‘fair’ because:

- Staff are customer focused and there have been recent improvements in written information for service users and services to some groups;
- There is some emphasis on benchmarking of costs to improve value for money;
- The council does understand the housing needs of the district;

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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.
but

- There is no strategic approach to access or diversity to ensure services meet the needs of all users;
- There is only limited consultation with customers or partner agencies about service improvement issues;
- The council is not good at preventing homelessness;
- The council is not good at dealing with disrepair in the private sector.

There are 'promising' prospects for improvement because:

- The council has recently reviewed its housing services and is in the process of beginning to improve them;
- Housing is the top priority service and staffing has been increased to improve performance;
- There is effective leadership in place;

but

- The council has been slow to address poor performance in housing and still has some out of date plans in place.

Recommendations

To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. In this context, the inspection team makes the following recommendations, the commencement date for which is the first of September 2005:

<table>
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<th>Recommendations</th>
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<td><strong>R1</strong> Within six months, develop an access strategy in conjunction with the corporate centre, based on research into footfall and need, which clearly identifies how the housing service will: improve access for customers; develop service standards; deliver mandatory customer care training; and use complaints, surveys and other forms of customer consultation to ensure access to services meets customer needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>R2</strong> Within six months, develop a diversity strategy in conjunction with the corporate centre, which includes: profiling of customers to inform service development; a comprehensive training package for housing staff to ensure behavioural compliance with good practice and which is tailored to housing specific service delivery issues; and a system for monitoring contractor compliance on equalities and diversity issues.</td>
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### R3
Within six months, develop systems for involving partners, particularly in rural areas, and customers in monitoring performance and reviewing the continued relevance of strategies on a regular basis.

### R4
Within three months, review protocols with partner agencies around case management and nominations to ensure improved services for homeless applicants during assessment and rehousing processes.

### R5
Within six months, develop a strategic approach to the provision of interim and temporary accommodation to ensure it is of appropriate quality and in locations which optimise the opportunity for customers to maintain existing support networks.

### R6
Whilst making use of the powers contained in the Housing Act 2004 as soon as they take effect, develop over the next twelve months a private sector housing strategy. This should be based on a revised stock condition survey and set clear objectives about working with partners and stakeholders to implement the Act and improve private sector housing conditions in the district.

### R7
Use newly increased staffing resources as an opportunity to improve the effectiveness of appraisal, performance management, risk management and partnership involvement processes and embed in the way housing services are planned, delivered and monitored.

### R8
By 1 September 2005, develop an improvement plan to address the various weaknesses and recommendations emerging from this inspection report.

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8 We would like to thank the staff of Breckland District Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 3 May - 6 May 2005

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Report

Context

The locality

Breckland is a large, sparsely populated rural district\(^1\) in central Norfolk. It has a population of 121,418, approximately half of which lives in 108 rural parishes and the other half in the market towns of Watton, Attleborough, Dereham, Thetford and Swaffham. The district’s population grew rapidly by 12.5 per cent against a two point five per cent national figure during the 1990’s and it is forecast to grow by a further 4.9 per cent by 2012\(^{\text{II}}\).

The district has comparatively high percentages of older people\(^{\text{III}}\), of retired people\(^{\text{IV}}\) and of pensioner households\(^{\text{V}}\). It has only average numbers of people with long term illnesses\(^{\text{VI}}\) and there is relatively low unemployment\(^{\text{VII}}\). There are fewer one person and lone parent households than the national average\(^{\text{VIII}}\) and numbers in full time study are also below the national average\(^{\text{IX}}\).

Breckland has a high percentage of white British people\(^{\text{X}}\) and other white groups are the only significant minority\(^{\text{XI}}\). There are believed to be large, mobile communities of Gypsies and travellers in the district and at least 15,000 migrant workers in Thetford and Dereham who have not been monitored by the census. It is thought that the district is home to residents of 25 nationalities, the principal ones being Portuguese, Polish, Latvian, Lithuanian and Bulgarian, but this situation is fluid and subject to rapid and unpredictable change as employment migration patterns change within Europe and further afield.

The district is ranked 222 out of 354 in England in terms of multiple deprivation\(^{\text{XII}}\), which tends to indicate that it is relatively affluent, but Breckland Council’s own research indicates that this may mask extremes because over half of its households earn less than £15k.

The council

The council, which is Conservative controlled, operates on the basis of a cabinet system of four portfolios. Strategic housing services are managed within the “Community Engagement” portfolio. One head of service covers all the enabling,

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\(^{1}\) 0.9 people per hectare

\(^{\text{II}}\) All demographic data extracted from 2001 Census:

\(^{\text{III}}\) 24.4 per cent against a national average of 20.7 per cent over 65

\(^{\text{IV}}\) 16.6 per cent against a national average of 13.6 per cent

\(^{\text{V}}\) 27.9 per cent against a national average of 23.8 per cent

\(^{\text{VI}}\) 18.6 per cent

\(^{\text{VII}}\) Two point six per cent against a national average of three point four per cent, with 26 per cent of these being long term unemployed and five per cent having never worked

\(^{\text{VIII}}\) 27.2 per cent against 30 per cent and four point five per cent against six point five per cent

\(^{\text{IX}}\) Four point two per cent against seven point three per cent

\(^{\text{X}}\) 95.3 per cent against a national average of 89.6 per cent

\(^{\text{XI}}\) 2.7 per cent

\(^{\text{XII}}\) Office of National Statistics (ONS) 2003
homelessness and private sector housing functions, although this post is currently vacant and the role is being partially covered by an interim manager. The council set up a Housing Improvement Board in May 2004 to help steer its housing work and this has recently been expanded to include partner agencies.

14 Breckland has a “good” corporate performance assessment (CPA) rating, although it only achieved a “c” rating in the housing element of this assessment in March 2004. Its housing strategy was declared “fit for purpose” by the Government Office for the East of England in March 2005.

15 The council has a six year business plan and medium term financial strategy to 2010. Council tax is only its third largest income stream after government grants and commercial income/interest from invested capital, including a rent roll of over £1m from a 172 unit industrial estate. The council is developing a strategic partnership model which will involve working with a private sector provider to review services and consider alternative methods of future delivery.

16 The Breckland local strategic partnership (LSP) has recently developed a ten year community plan under the banner “Partnership in Action”, with a vision to: “...improve the quality of life for people living and working in and visiting Breckland”. The council also supports the “Breckland Against Crime” crime and disorder reduction partnership (CDRP), five area and two village partnerships.

The service

17 Breckland has a housing stock of 52,439, of which fewer than 8,000 are managed by housing associations or other public bodies. Owner occupation is above the national average.

18 There is a significantly higher level of unfitness than in neighbouring Rural East Anglia Partnership (REAP) districts. There is an average private sector SAP rating of 43 in the district and Breckland’s own research indicates that it has significantly higher ratios of detached properties and lower numbers of flats and post 1964 stock than the regional or national average.

19 The district has a concentration of housing in Council Tax bands A to C. Average house prices are £166,795, compared with £163,779 and £184,975 respectively in neighbouring Kings Lynn & West Norfolk and North Norfolk.

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I All data based on 2003 ONS figures:
II 73.2 per cent against 66.9 per cent
III six point four per cent
IV Kings Lynn & West Norfolk have four point three per cent and North Norfolk three point five per cent
V standard assessment procedure – this is the housing industry’s energy efficiency rating
VI Private Sector Stock Condition Survey 2002
VII ONS 2003 data indicates 79.7 per cent against national average of 66.9 per cent and local comparisons of 78 per cent and 70 per cent for neighbouring Kings Lynn & West Norfolk and North Norfolk
VIII Oct – Dec 2004 Land Registry
How good is the service?

Access and Customer Care

20 It is essential that the council’s services are accessible to all of its customers and that they are delivered in a manner which meets their needs. This is not always the case in Breckland because the council does not have a strategic and fully resourced approach to access, based on solid customer research, which ensures accessibility. Although it has plans in place to develop a call centre, revised website and ‘presence offices’ in its five market towns, its staff are customer focussed and it has recently introduced a comprehensive set of customer leaflets and satisfaction surveys, the council delivers housing services from a limited range of locations which are not accessible and both out of hours and daytime services suffer from low staffing levels.

21 The size, sparsely populated and rural nature of Breckland present significant challenges for access and community engagement. Housing customers, particularly, find access a problem because they tend to be among the most vulnerable of council service users, more likely to be reliant on limited public transport services and to require in depth, one to one advice from specialist staff.

22 The council has centralised most services, including housing, to its purpose built Dereham headquarters. This building is on the outskirts of the town and is not easily accessible by public transport, even from Dereham itself. Partner agencies report that they experience waiting times of up to six minutes for telephone answering, which they and their customers find frustrating and expensive. They are also frustrated about being put through to staff voicemail services, once the phone is answered, without the option of being transferred to a colleague.

23 The council is in the process of setting up a call centre which may improve this situation by giving basic advice to all callers, including, from August, on housing issues. This will not, however, be a free phone service. Before the year end, it will also establish five ‘presence offices’ in the market towns where a similar information and signposting service will be provided. Housing staff carry out home visits to inspect disrepair and houses in multiple occupation (HMOs), which take approximately ten days. Homelessness visits are made on all cases of parental eviction, where the applicant is “homeless at home” and where s/he cannot easily access the office or surgery. Referrals for intensive money advice and housing mediation also supplement these, in some cases.

24 Agencies offering housing related services on behalf of the council are accessible in the district, including the Portuguese community project, based in Thetford for two days per week, the Home Improvement Agency which has no local base but operates on the basis of home visits and Peddars Way housing association which manages the local housing register.

25 There is no history of a strategic approach to access issues in housing, which is a weakness. Councillors have not received comprehensive reports on the nature and quality of customer care and, although inspectors found that staff handled cases in a customer focussed manner, they have received no formal customer care training for several years and are not always conscious of the “bigger
picture” issues around access, such as the implications of having no service standards in some areas and how satisfaction surveys and complaints should feed into service improvement. There is a nominated customer care champion in housing who leads on producing leaflets and customer satisfaction surveys, supported by the corporate “People First” team, but this is a new role and it has had limited impact.

26 The absence of a strategic approach is acknowledged by key councillors, who have only recently begun to understand access barriers because they have been highlighted in service reviews. They are committed to addressing these issues but there are justifiable concerns amongst some staff and managers about how the call centre, in particular, will operate in relation to housing.

27 There is a lack of clarity about whether there will be a dedicated housing team within the call centre and about the extent of involvement the housing team will have in developing advice scripts and setting up referral systems to ensure specialist support for the frontline team. This is an area of potential risk because the wrong advice from non-specialist staff could result in increased homelessness presentations, failure to target grants and loans to those in greatest need and the requirement for increased enforcement activity.

28 Although the council has established that the telephone is the preferred method of contact across all services, housing itself has done little to research footfall or demand and act upon it until recent service reviews. These noted, for example, that highest demand for homelessness services came from Thetford, which is over an hour from the Dereham office by public transport. The council has responded by setting up a surgery there one day per week which does meet some of this need. Customer survey information gathered during the previous review of homelessness over two years ago, however, indicated the need for a local rate or free phone telephone service, but this has not been actioned.

29 The council has not analysed the costs and benefits of different access methods to housing or done large scale research on barriers to access such as opening hours or surgery venues. Despite some consultation, the council has also failed to involve customers in developing its access strategy to ensure barriers are removed. This is a missed opportunity to tailor the service to meet needs, particularly when it is currently faced with dilemmas such as which services to offer over the phone and whether to follow Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) advice and increase the number of home visits on homelessness cases in the context of an under resourced team which has failed to process either assessments or appeals within target times for most of the past year.

30 There are no clear standards for all aspects of the housing service so ongoing quality monitoring is not possible. It has developed corporate service standards which are well presented in a comprehensive and accessible format, ensuring customers know what level of service to expect and enabling them to make informed decisions about when it would be reasonable to complain. The standards also provide a context for the analysis of satisfaction survey data and performance information at quarterly clinics. There are only three service standards in housing, which were not set with customer involvement. More standards were being drafted at the time of this inspection, but they only covered
homelessness services, had not been consulted on and it was unclear how customers would be involved in monitoring performance against them.

31 The council’s main Elisabeth House office in Dereham is not welcoming. It is open daily from nine to five, with the homeless out of hours service clearly signposted outside the building and appropriate information on display about housing services but its reception area has only limited seating, no toys to occupy children and part of the area is used for storing boxes. This detracts from the professional image staff are attempting to convey. There is sufficient private interviewing space but the lack of an IT terminal in interview rooms means staff must leave customers to check information during interviews, which is not good practice.

32 Despite the fact that the council offers so few housing access points, its website also has limited functionality. Housing web pages contain basic information and key documents such as the housing strategy, but exclude others such as the landlords guide. Housing pages are not prominently displayed with an easy link icon from the home page and there are no interactive forms for any housing services. Pages on homelessness are not written in simple language. Partners and users have not been consulted on content or layout and some partners report that they have used the websites of other councils to access the generic information they need to help them with their work in Breckland. The email contact provided via the website is the Principal Housing Officer, which means he spends a significant amount of time responding to basic enquiries which could be handled at a more junior level.

33 There is a project plan in place for a contractor to design and deliver a new council website and intranet by August 2005. This has the potential to improve access, particularly as it will be available in translations. A consultation action plan is in place to ensure that staff, key partner agencies and some service users are consulted about the form, content and links within the website. It is unclear, however, how much "hands on" participation users will have in ensuring that navigation and interactive forms are user friendly.

34 The homeless out of hours service is accessible and well publicised but could be significantly better managed. It is provided through the Peddars Way control centre, which rings around a series of specialist officers to find someone to deal with the case. The absence of a “duty” system means this can be time consuming and the customer may wait for some time to receive appropriate advice and assistance. This problem is exacerbated by limited cell phone reception in parts of the district which means some staff are rarely reachable, and the fact that they are not recompensed for providing this service and have no obligation to do so.

35 The daytime homelessness service also has weaknesses in terms of access. Although customers tend to be seen quickly and privately, there are no service standards against which speed or effectiveness of this initial interview can be assessed. Transport is not routinely provided to interim accommodation except in exceptional circumstances and only for families with children. Other customers are encouraged to make an application for an emergency benefit payment if they cannot afford transport, which is an unresponsive policy towards customers who are already vulnerable and under extreme stress.
Access problems in private sector housing services tend to be due to limited staffing resources. Landlords report that staff dealing with HMO advice and enforcement issues, for example, are faced with complex systems of subletting which they do not have the resources to pursue quickly. Although they have found staff to be supportive and have received good advice on, for example, means of escape from fire, this has sometimes been frustratingly slow and one case was quoted where it had taken two months to produce a technical drawing, by which time it was redundant because the landlord had done his own research and had carried out the necessary remedial work.

Front line staff have appropriate knowledge about the full range of enquiries they face and are able to signpost customers to other agencies as necessary.

The council did not, until recently, produce its own information leaflets on housing issues and those available were not tailored to local need. Partner agencies report that lack of information has been a significant problem for customers. It was rectified in the week prior to the inspection, however, when a comprehensive suite of 12 leaflets for customers was issued, six on homelessness and related issues and six on private sector housing issues. All have Portuguese strap lines, as well as an advert for audio and large print versions. The leaflets are well laid out, using simple language and clear explanations and they signpost appropriate advice agencies as well as council services. They are, however, produced in a small font, despite the fact that several of them are targeted at elderly customers. Partner agencies and customers were not involved in planning content or layout, which is a significant weakness.

There is a comprehensive guide for landlords, modelled on that produced by Colchester Council. This covers tenancy and property management, health and safety and financial issues. Some major local landlords have not seen it, however, so the council does not appear to be making best use of this resource. It is working on a tenants rights pack, following a similar format.

The council’s quarterly magazine, “Breckland Voice”, is well presented and readable. Although it featured only occasional housing articles until recently, the spring 2005 issue does cover a range of housing issues, including the new Home Improvement Agency (HIA), affordable housing, work on HMOs and homelessness. The same approach to making good use of the magazine is continuing with the summer edition, currently in development.

The corporate compliments and complaints service is well publicised and easy to access, including using a downloadable web form. It is managed at the corporate centre, includes complaint handling standards and activity is reported quarterly. The current electronic monitoring system for complaints was only introduced two months before the inspection and previous, manually analysed data was acknowledged to be unreliable.

The council has canvassed customer views on high level issues, such as priorities for the housing strategy and it’s ADP, via a citizen’s panel. This confirmed that the need for more affordable housing was the most significant issue to be tackled. The council also did some focus group work in 2003 with
customers on the detail of the affordable housing policy and with partners on the homelessness strategy.

Robust customer and partner consultation processes are not embedded at a more detailed level. This, along with the need for regular reporting of consultation outputs to the Housing Improvement Board, has been acknowledged in recent service reviews. This is beginning to be addressed through the use of customer satisfaction surveys, such as the one used during the homelessness service review itself, but there has not been more active participation and service users are even represented on the intermittent homelessness forum by advocacy agencies. As reported previously, very recent innovations such as the new leaflets were produced without customer involvement and a number of partner agencies reported that they do not feel consulted about service improvement.

Ongoing customer satisfaction surveys at the end of each housing process were put in place two months prior to the inspection. One survey is in use for all private sector functions and a separate one for all homelessness and housing advice services. Because of the infancy of these systems, limited evidence was available about how the council was using this data, but one promising early response has been to simplify the private sector grant application form in use for benefit claimants after customers reported that it was too complex. The surveys cover key issues such as staff attitude, quality of advice, leaflets and follow up correspondence. The private sector survey also gives customers the opportunity to express a view on whether enforcement and loan options are adequate.

Diversity

This is a crucial area in all of our inspections. It is essential that services are designed and delivered in a way that ensures all customers can access and benefit from them and that those who are already excluded or isolated in society are not further disadvantaged by their housing circumstances. It is also essential that services are designed to reflect the diversity of the local population and to respect cultural differences.

There is some evidence of effective leadership and good management in the promotion of equalities and diversity but our inspectors found that the application of diversity principles was patchy and appropriate ambitions are not always being translated into challenging strategies. Interpretation and translation services are good and partnership working is developing in this area. There has been speedy and appropriate action to meet the acute housing and support needs of high profile groups such as Portuguese migrant workers and Gypsies and travellers, but a lack of understanding about the needs of others.

The council has achieved level one of the Equality Standard for Local Government and there is a clear plan in place to achieve level two and elements of level three by the end of 2005/06. Its Diversity in Action Working Group (DAWG), made up of representatives from all departments including housing, has steered this work and will shortly implement “e@sat” software to ensure monitoring of activity against the standard.
The housing service does not have a clear understanding of its customer base. It does not hold a service user profile or monitor service use on this basis. It cannot demonstrate that either service delivery is not discriminatory or that culturally sensitive and specific needs are being met, except through its Portuguese speaker project.

The council is addressing most of its responsibilities in relation to legislation and good practice. It has developed a range of equality in employment and service delivery statements and a Race Equality Scheme. This prioritises services for review if they offer opportunities to better promote equalities or improved relations between groups, are in danger of being differentially delivered or being seen to be, or if they must be delivered in a culturally specific or sensitive manner to meet the needs of certain groups. These include services to the homeless and to travellers but they have not yet happened and there is no clear plan in place showing timescales set.

It is impossible to demonstrate positive outcomes for customers as a result of the introduction of diversity impact assessments because they only began in April 2005. Some work was done on private sector housing in advance of this initiative. It indicated, among other things, that some religions preclude interest bearing borrowing, which has implications for accessing improvement loans, but no policy revision is planned to take account of the fact that this is currently the only option for owners of properties which are in disrepair and the cost of remedial works will be over £500.

The staff profile reflects the local community in terms of ethnicity and disability. Although it employs over twice as many women as men, this ratio is more representative within the Community Engagement portfolio area. Two of the five members of the council’s senior management team are women and two of the four managers temporarily running the housing service are also women.

Diversity training for staff has limitations. The council is rolling out its first and only planned round of corporate diversity training which takes the form of a two hour distance learning package to be completed independently by staff over the course of a month, with optional discussion sessions offered during the process. This approach to awareness raising, which does not bring staff together on a compulsory basis to lay firm foundations about behavioural compliance, is unlikely to provide significant challenge to pockets of ignorance or complacency. There are no plans to follow this up with more targeted sessions for housing staff, despite the fact that they are routinely required to address the needs of vulnerable and excluded groups. The council says the success of this training will be assessed by reviewing the quality of impact assessments before and after it but these have not been used in housing in advance of the training, so this cannot happen in practice.

There are appropriate reporting systems in place to allow councillors and senior managers to understand performance and to display leadership on equalities and diversity. Although there is no dedicated corporate diversity performance report, DAWG produces a regular update on issues being addressed, which goes to senior managers. ADPs also contain some diversity targets which are reported quarterly at performance clinics to both managers and councillors.
The council has not developed a full range of diversity strategies consistent with its status as a “good” organisation and reflecting the rapid growth of its migrant worker communities. The absence of a community cohesion strategy means it does not have a systematic approach to influencing the cohesion debate locally, regularly review its contribution or divert resources to address exclusion. It is in the process of developing a social inclusion strategy but this will not be in place until some time in 2005/06.

There is no BME housing strategy because the council's resources have been focused on producing a fit for purpose housing strategy, which has some coverage of these issues. The housing needs of BME communities will form part of the forthcoming housing market assessment and this is likely to be followed by a sub-regional consideration of the needs of BME communities. No detailed BME housing strategy is planned, however, despite the fact that these groups have significant housing problems which are being only partially addressed by existing strategies. For example, the scale of the fire risk faced by migrant workers in HMOs is not addressed by plans to inspect thirty of these per year, out of an estimated 450 in the district. Other examples include the need for targeted prevention activity to reduce increasing homeless presentations by BME customers.

The housing strategy does not address provision for customers with HIV and it is not clear whether research is planned to assess the needs of this group.

The council cannot demonstrate that it always communicates with its customers in a way which meets their needs. The private sector housing team holds information on the spoken languages and access requirements of its known customers, as well as allowing staff to record notes about vulnerability or special needs in the notes pages of the FLARE IT system. This does not, however, flag this information up automatically or transfer the data to other systems within the council. The homelessness team has a similar stand alone system, but this is used for notes on staff safety.

The approach to interpretation is good. Its Portuguese speaking community development officer is based in housing. This is by far the most commonly spoken minority language in the district and her approach is to go beyond interpretation and advocacy to proactively develop targeted information to meet this group’s housing needs. She also works with Eastern European migrants, who prefer to learn English, and maintains a good understanding of and responds appropriately to the volatile dynamics of successive waves of migrant communities with different language and support requirements.

The council is a member of the county wide INTRAN multi agency partnership, which provides translation and interpretation services. It uses three services, Language Line, Deaf Connexions and CINTRA and covers all 74 languages requested in the county. Key staff have received training in accessing the service and it has been used mostly for Portuguese translation. The three private sector housing staff that come most into contact with migrant groups have also been sponsored to learn simple Portuguese and one is taking advanced lessons. They are able to carry out a basic property inspection in the language, which allows them to “work smarter”, without the need for an interpreter in most cases.
The housing service has responded to the needs of its customers by producing most of its standard documents for homeless customers and the residents of HMOs, including satisfaction surveys, in Portuguese. Other key documents, such as the housing strategy and the twelve basic housing service leaflets are offered in large print, audio and Braille formats and there is a strap line in Portuguese offering written translations. Translations are not available for immediate downloading on request, however, so although the decision not to print batches of all these documents in every format represents a sound approach to value for money, the fact that a translation may take some time to produce is a weakness in terms of customer service. Managers also acknowledge that more information for travellers should be marketed principally in an audio format to take account of relatively low literacy levels in that community.

The council cannot demonstrate that all of its physical access points are compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) because it has not carried out a formal audit or reported compliance with the law to a council committee. A mixed picture is evident across the range of council owned buildings in the district, but the fact that housing services are delivered from such a limited range of venues means most housing customers are seen in a suitable environment. The Elisabeth House office, where most housing interviews are conducted, was built only two years ago to a DDA compliant design. There is disabled parking, level access to reception, with automatic doors, and a low counter for enquiries. It has hearing loop and minicom facilities, although these are not clearly signposted. The Thetford office, where weekly surgeries are held, is currently 75 per cent compliant and inspectors saw a schedule of works to bring it up to compliance this year.

There is no evidence to suggest that social rented housing is being let in a discriminatory manner in the district. The council has recently begun to monitor lettings on the basis of ethnicity and ratios reflect what is known about the make up of the local population.

There are systems in place for assessing the support needs of vulnerable customers at the point of nominating them for rehousing. Appropriate referrals are made for supported housing or to floating support agencies to optimise the sustainability of tenancies.

The council has responded to emerging acute support needs quickly, not only within the migrant worker community but also amongst Gypsies and travellers who congregate in and around the district for some of their key festivals. It has identified its first short stay stopping site which will provide six pitches in a location which is well sited, in planning terms and has been approved by active travellers. The council will fund the scheme itself if its bid for £60,000 from the ODPM is unsuccessful. The use of this location should prevent incursion on to a local site of special scientific interest.

The housing section’s approach to involvement of hard to reach groups is developing but concrete examples tend to be of consultation rather than involvement, including around service reviews and strategy development. There are plans in place within housing to run a series of focus groups this summer with older and younger people and with customers who have been through the
homelessness process to examine how their experiences can be used for service development. In response to on-site challenge from inspectors about the lack of involvement of less visible excluded groups, such as those in isolated rural areas, managers immediately responded by planning a further focus group to explore these issues. The manager of the private sector housing section also meets every six months with the disabled tenant forum of one of the local housing associations to discuss adaptations and related issues.

66 The council's partnership work is developing on diversity issues. It has developed a partnership with the Keystone Development Trust which recently attracted £219,000 of New Communities funding to expand the Portuguese community development project. Another example is with the Norfolk Traveller Liaison Group, where the council plays a leading role in producing information for and in consulting Gypsies and travellers. The group has also developed a multi-agency protocol, adopted as a model document by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), for dealing with unauthorised encampment. This ensures that one agency acts as a point of contact and is responsible for sharing information with others to avoid unnecessary visits and repetitive questioning. It also explains to travellers and the settled community what to expect in terms of service and clarifies which agencies are responsible for enforcement on which types of land. Partner agencies in this area of work praise council staff for their commitment and specialist knowledge and for their sensitivity in addressing issues such as disability on existing sites.

67 In other areas, partnership working has been less productive. The council cannot demonstrate concrete housing service improvements from its work with the East of England Regional Assembly equality network, the county wide Community Cohesion group, the Racial Equality Council or the BME sub group of the county wide public involvement forum. Partnerships around provision of support and supported accommodation, such as floating support and foyers, have not been rigorously pursued with commissioning partners. Staff and managers also report that they would like to do more with community groups and agencies working in rural areas with the elderly, to promote energy efficiency and home improvement grants and loans, because they recognise access barriers and staff shortages in this area and feel partners could help with promotion. There has been some use of the mobile energy advice centre, which is shared with other districts, for promotion events at “flu jab” days at local health centres but there has been little work with other groups.

68 The council does not have a robust approach to ensuring that its contractors and consultants are committed to diversity in service provision. Although it has a pre-qualification questionnaire requirement, there is no system in place for ongoing monitoring of their performance on diversity and managers expressed uncertainty about whose role it would be to enforce this if it were in place. The council does not have a corporate procurement policy which proactively encourages smaller or potentially excluded suppliers to bid for work, which is a weakness.

69 There is an effective approach to dealing with harassment and domestic abuse and is taking steps to develop its work in this area now a new member of staff has been appointed to work on updating the homelessness strategy. It is party to
the county wide protocol for exchange of information and monitoring, participates in the CDRP multi-agency group to improve service levels and is a third party reporting agency for all types of hate crime. The council also has close links with the police at an operational level. It has produced a leaflet with a directory of services for survivors and has sufficient refuge places to meet its targets, although it is researching where more refuge provision is required in the south of the district. It also has an ADP objective in 2005/06 to develop a Sanctuary scheme which would provide additional funding for security measures to customers suffering domestic abuse.

70 The Breckland CDRP has recently reviewed its Strategy and its six priorities for the next three years include violence against the person, domestic violence and anti-social behaviour. There is no domestic violence forum in the district but voluntary sector and statutory partners will be involved in a CDRP working group being set up in July to plan a work programme on domestic violence.

**Housing Strategy**

71 This is the key area of inspection for housing authorities which have transferred their housing stock because it is an assessment of how they perform their principal “enabling” role of ensuring there is sufficient housing of good quality to meet the needs of the district’s residents. In Breckland, inspectors found that although the housing strategy is very new and its impact cannot yet be measured, the council is developing appropriate measures to address identified need. It still has weaknesses, however, in partnership working and has no plans to review the strategy, with partners, in the light of large scale research due this year.

72 The council adopted its first “fit for purpose” housing strategy the week before this inspection. It is an overarching document which reviews all housing related issues and sets clear priorities and objectives. These include improving overall housing supply and the supply of affordable housing via planning policy, providing supported accommodation to meet the needs of the vulnerable and maintaining partnerships to maximise inward investment.

73 The strategy does have a clear action plan and partners were consulted on this at a recent Housing Improvement Board meeting. Because there had been no effective housing strategy in place prior to this inspection, the council had been operating on the basis of the housing objectives set out in the council’s business plan which, although comprehensive and appropriate as an alternative, were not agreed with partners.

74 The housing strategy makes links to and is consistent with other internal strategies, such as the supporting people and community strategies and in the absence of a private sector housing strategy or revised homelessness strategy it also covers these issues, clearly setting out the district’s key challenges and solutions, plans and targets. It is also clear how the strategy links to the asset management plan in terms of identifying land for development.

75 The strategy does not interface as effectively as it might with the sub regional strategy because the timelines in which they were agreed are not fully compatible. This is despite the fact that the council has a leading role in chairing
the REAP. It does, however, address regional priorities and translates them into local objectives. It has sections on meeting regional priorities, where it makes links between the regional strategy, business plan and community strategy.

76 The housing strategy is based on a housing needs survey. The housing needs survey was carried out in July 2002 in partnership with districts with which the council no longer has sub-regional links and it is due to be updated by a full housing market assessment in 2005/06, which may result in the need for the strategy to be revised. It does rely, to some extent, on the visual survey of HMOs and empty dwellings carried out in July 2004 to supplement stock condition data, but it does not include any local needs survey information from parish councils or targeted research data on the needs of BME, older or younger people, which are key to understanding homelessness and private sector provision in a district like Breckland.

77 The council does have some understanding of demand and supply in the local market. The 2002 survey had been supplemented by some market trend monitoring for both sale and renting and by annual surveys of estate agents to gauge the market for first time buyers in the district. The council had also undertaken targeted research to establish demand and supply issues in areas where it felt the district had particular needs. For example, it carried out a key worker survey and a parish council survey in 2004.

78 Internally collected needs information was used in developing the housing strategy, such as levels of homelessness and housing advice presentations. The council also analysed Peddars Way’s waiting list and considered earnings data.

79 The strategy clearly sets out the housing needs of the district and the council’s proposals to address them. The research done in the district has also been used more widely. For example, it is clear how the key worker survey information has fed into a sub regional bid for key worker funds from the regional investment fund as part of the REAP strategy.

80 The council understands local travel to work and labour market patterns and how these impact on demand and affordability. The Norwich travel to work area inflates house prices in the north of the district and high speed train links to Cambridge and London has done the same in the south. The council understands market imbalances and that demand for both purchased and rented properties outstrips supply. The strategy seeks to proactively influence the housing market by enabling the development of more affordable housing.

81 The housing strategy does address the key issue of the percentage of homes in the district which will achieve the decent homes standard by 2010. The council is monitoring progress against the standard and has set itself targets on vulnerable households in non decent homes in line with Public Service Agreement Seven (PSA7). It is not clear, however, how it will use its enabling role to ensure housing associations in the district achieve 100 per cent decency by 2010.

82 There has been some basic consultation with the local community in developing this strategy but has not employed a wide range of involvement methods. Its customer feedback surveys and the use of focus groups of hard to reach customers are so new that they have not yet fed into strategy making but it did...
consult the citizen’s panel in the autumn of 2004 on their priorities for housing provision and these were used to inform the strategy.

83 The council has not actively engaged with partner organisations in developing this strategy. It did send out a questionnaire to parish councils and some other partners as part of the process, which asked about their priorities. This was not comprehensive, however, and most of the key agencies inspectors met which will be involved in delivery, such as housing associations, were only consulted at the end of the process on the finished document. They had only 10 days to read this and return comments and they received no feedback on whether the council had taken on board their views. It should be noted, however, that the council intends to quickly review the housing strategy action plan and consolidate it with the ADP, now the strategy has been confirmed as fit for purpose, and will involve partners more closely in that process.

84 There was developer involvement in writing the council’s affordable housing policy via focus groups, so it did have an understanding of the economics of development, locally, when this was written.

85 A Housing Improvement Board meets six weekly to consider progress against the council’s priorities of improving access to affordable housing and performance on homelessness and private sector housing issues. This has recently been expanded to include key partner organizations but it does not include all of those with an interest in the strategy and the council has no other dedicated forum to discuss housing strategy issues in the district, such as a housing association, parish council or developer forum.

86 The council cannot demonstrate that it has effectively communicated the key messages in the strategy to residents to minimise potential misconceptions about its contents, although the full document is available for public scrutiny on its website. This is partly due to timing, in that the strategy was only adopted the week before this inspection and a communication strategy had yet to be agreed.

87 The strategy outlines a number of objectives: improving the supply of housing; increasing the supply of affordable housing; improving fitness and fuel efficiency, focusing on the most vulnerable; maximizing the use of social and private housing stock; enabling independent living through adaptations; ensuring allocations meet the needs of the most vulnerable; reducing homelessness and supporting the homeless; improving facilities for Gypsies and travellers; and influencing the allocation of resources for supported housing. It is clear from the action plan what staff time and funding are allocated but there remain some areas where resources have not been identified.

88 The council has a history of allocating the maximum permissible amount of capital to recycle as Local Authority Social Housing Grant (LASHG) and this enabled over 800 units of affordable housing in the ten years following transfer of its stock in 1993. Since the use of LASHG was abolished, the council has delivered 52 units in 2003/04 and 84 units in 2005/06, although 39 of those built last year were part funded by the Housing Corporation.

89 The council has a six year business plan and medium term financial strategy, so there is some certainty of continued funding for housing in future years and
funding for DFGs has consistently been sufficient to meet demand. There are key areas, however, such as provision for private sector loans and grants, where there is some consensus that budgets will have to be significantly increased to support strategic objectives in future.

90 The council does have a vision of making best use of its assets to enable affordable housing and is partially achieving this by selling off individual plots of land at district valuer valuations, larger sites on the open market at the best available price and attempting to generate revenue through ground leases to support housing provision. It has also released covenants and transferred some strips of land directly to Peddars Way to reprovide small pockets of properties where achieving the decent homes standard will be impossible or uneconomic, such as the Canon’s Walk, Exeter Way and Litcham developments.

91 There is a plan in place to review the 6,000 sites the council owns, in terms of suitability for affordable housing, over a period of years. This will ensure some sustainability for the future, particularly as planning guidance changes and sites become more attractive to developers over time. Because it has had no asset manager in post for some months, this review has progressed slowly but the newly appointed post holder has been able to “cherry pick” land suitable for immediate housing association development. This means partners can meet the Housing Corporation’s forthcoming deadline for grant funding bids. The first 100 sites have been reviewed and, after consultation with lawyers and planners, 21 giving the best prospect of early delivery have been identified. These will yield an estimated 125 units on a range of sites across the district if funding is secured.

92 Once the initial tranche of easily deliverable sites has been transferred, the council will concentrate on those in areas of greatest housing need. There are likely to be a mixture in terms of size and previous usage and the work will progress in line with the council’s developing Open Space Strategy because a number are likely to be on infill sites previously left empty as open space but now unpopular with locals or unnecessary as an amenity. These are likely to be more attractive to developers because services may already be in place.

93 The council had some success in working towards meeting its business plan aims on housing in the period prior to adopting the housing strategy. For example, it improved the supply of affordable housing through planning policy by more than its 52 unit target last year but this target, which rises incrementally to 165 units by 2010, barely begins to meet the needs identified in the housing needs study of 2003 for 600 units per year. It has also participated in supporting people strategic development and helped identify gaps in provision in the district but these have not been filled by appropriate and fully funded schemes. It has been more successful in improving provision for gypsies and travellers by moving quickly to identify a short stay stopping site in the district, bid for funding to develop it and commit to the project, even if funding is not forthcoming from ODPM.

94 There is an affordable homes action plan, which not only incorporates targets for delivery each year but also includes objectives to undertake needs surveys, access funding opportunities, identify development opportunities and carry out sub regional partnership working. This includes some SMART\(^1\) elements, in that

\(^1\) Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Resourced and Timebound
it sets clear targets and identifies resources required, including research, staff time and some funding. It does not, however, assign objectives to named individuals and, although historical performance figures are included, targets are not, so it cannot be used as a tool to track success over time.

95 The housing strategy action plan is SMART, with staff and most resources allocated. Targets are set for the next three years, although there could be more clarity about how outcomes will be measured. Performance will be managed via ADPs but there are no annual reviews planned, to respond to changing needs.

96 There are strong internal working processes in place between housing, planning, legal, finance and environmental health sections which will assist in ensuring delivery. Finance and legal colleagues, in particular, were heavily involved in developing the strategy. It is less clear how well the council has consolidated its external partnerships to focus on those which will work to support the strategy, but we note that two partnership schemes which were worked up and ready to be submitted received windfall funding from the Housing Corporation shortly after the inspection. This funding will yield 25 units of affordable housing, including a wheelchair bungalow, and will assist in redeveloping the homeless hostel.

97 The council cannot yet demonstrate that its action plan is working to deliver against strategy objectives because it is so new. It should be noted, also, that although the strategy includes a risk matrix and management action plans, there is currently no risk champion in place within housing to ensure risk management is effectively carried out.

98 There are strong and evolving cross border partnerships through REAP. These are based on shared strategic housing priorities and there is some shared learning, particularly from service specific partnerships such as those working with Gypsies and travellers.

99 The council has affordability targets within its planning frameworks, but these will require review when a housing market assessment is carried out later this year. Its affordable housing policy and rural exceptions policy do not have supplementary planning guidance status and are considered to be interim policies until the review of the local development framework in 2008. Although the 2002 housing needs study recommended an affordable housing policy of 40 per cent on new build sites, the council consulted developers and accepted that this would blight residential development in the district. There has been no review of this position in the intervening two years and it has not been creatively applied in areas of highest housing need to test the market because it felt it was crucial to give developers a consistent message.

100 The policy has been implemented successfully. It stipulates the inclusion of 30 per cent unsubsidised dwellings on new build sites of over 15 units in urban areas and of over 5 units on rural developments. The expectation is that these will be transferred to housing associations on completion. 193 non rural and 17th rural units have received planning approval since July 2003.
The council has done some work to identify land supply issues. The Local Plan, to 2006, identified more land than was required by Planning Policy Guidance Note 3 (PPG3) but Breckland’s regional housing target is the ninth highest in the region, which will bring the next local plan into alignment with PPG3. An Urban Capacity Study was undertaken to establish availability of land for housing and this indicates that the district has an urban capacity of 1925 dwellings.

Although the council is only achieving 30 per cent of housing development on brownfield sites, which is worst quartile performance, Government Office East have acknowledged that this is a problematic issue in such a rural district. Two thirds of outstanding planning permissions are currently on brownfield sites, so performance is likely to improve in the foreseeable future.

Housing staff are involved with planners in making section 106 agreements with developers. It also works effectively with housing association partners to ensure that development opportunities on its own land are allocated fairly between them and that they do not compete with one another for stock gain via 106 agreements with private sector developers. It does not, however, have a formal “preferred partner” system which would facilitate efficiency savings over the long term and ensure specialist provision of different types of housing. It is also insufficiently proactive in that it does not prepare development briefs for sites to guide developers on issues of design or sustainability.

The council has been successful in encouraging mixed, sustainable developments in its bigger towns. This has not always been popular with housing association partners whose priority is to build for rent on any available site, but the council is attempting to retain a balanced community, which means mixed tenure estates and visible areas of green space.

The council has also been successful in ensuring quality through planning policy. For example, on a site in Thetford, it has enabled three large family wheelchair bungalows on an otherwise owner occupied development, involving occupational therapists in design and letting them jointly with Peddars Way, which is due to take over ownership shortly.

The council acknowledges that its work with parish councils is underdeveloped, but it has recently begun to support the rural housing enabler post by part funding its salary and has also produced a guide for parish councils on developing affordable housing.

There has been only limited work with partners, in advance of the production of the housing strategy, to innovatively meet the needs of specific groups. For example, the council has been unable to demonstrate proactivity in enabling supported accommodation for vulnerable groups such as homeless teenagers and the provision of furnished accommodation for this group has been achieved largely without council involvement. There has, however, been more success in working with partners to encourage shared ownership and other low cost home ownership options. For example, two low cost market sale schemes in Thetford which met housing need and were developed and marketed by private builders.
Homelessness and Lettings

Effective coordination of homelessness, housing advice and housing register services is a key factor in delivering an effective housing strategy. The homelessness strategy in particular should have strong links with the delivery of the wider housing strategy. This inspection found that there are significant weaknesses in the way these services are delivered and, although recent service reviews have identified and action plans are beginning to address these problems, the council has yet to tackle partnership issues around case work and rehousing or to develop a strategic approach to the provision of interim and temporary accommodation.

The demand for housing advice and homelessness services in Breckland is slightly lower, per head of population, than its immediate neighbours, but it is increasing. There was a 38 per cent increase in homeless acceptances in 2003/04 and figures have continued to increase throughout 2004/05. 1,652 households received housing advice and there were 216 acceptances out of 384 homeless applications last year. The ratio of acceptances to applications and the nature of the reasons for presentation are typical of Eastern region authorities.

The council acknowledges that it has not yet developed a fully effective prevention service which would reduce the number of customers presenting as homeless. Failure to address the prevention agenda in the past has been largely due to limited staff resources but this is only now being addressed, despite being first raised in the CPA inspection over twelve months ago and being raised again by the ODPM Homelessness Directorate’s Special Advisor in November 2004.

Homelessness and housing advice services have historically been delivered on a generic basis, but the council was in the process of developing a “soft split” between them at the time of this inspection. This was to allow staff to develop a more specialist knowledge base and increase the emphasis on prevention, while continuing to provide a seamless service and appropriate cover arrangements.

The council has an advice and assistance service, although access limitations have been outlined earlier in this report. The service has some emphasis on prevention but, because it does not monitor the number of homelessness presentations prevented in this way, it cannot demonstrate its level of effectiveness. A system is being developed to allow the council to monitor this area of performance in readiness for the introduction of BVPI 213 next year.

It is positive that there are a number of options packages in place to help prevent homelessness as a result of debt, including funding for and signposting to the local Citizens Advice Bureau, which delivers twelve cases per year of intensive debt counselling. Housing advice staff also give basic income maximisation advice, use benefit calculation software and have a dedicated contact within the benefits service to help resolve housing benefit problems before they escalate to the point where eviction is a possibility.

There are few housing options in the district for young people. Relationship breakdown with family is one of the commonest causes of homelessness and the

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The council recently began using a local mediation service for 16 and 17 year olds in this position. This would be good practice as one strand in a broader approach, but it has a blanket policy of referring all those presenting as homeless in this age group. Such a policy can be insensitive to situations of, for example, undisclosed domestic abuse. This approach is in place as much because of an absence of appropriate supported accommodation for this age group, such as via foyers or floating support, as on the basis that a return to family is always the best course of action. Plans to set up a lodging scheme for single homeless people in 2005/06, possibly using Homelessness Directorate grant funding and possibly in partnership with a specialist provider, are underdeveloped.

Another significant cause of homelessness in the district is eviction in the private rented sector. This indicates a need for more effective and earlier intervention to negotiate with landlords. Although there has been some success in this area the council acknowledges that this will only become the focus of its advice strategy after the “soft split” is in place.

There are some options in place to assist customers who do not fall into groups which the council has a duty to house when they become homeless. There is a rent deposit loan scheme for leavers of supported accommodation and for those who are either intentionally homeless or in non priority need categories but this is small, with a budget of only £6,000. In a climate of high private sector rents, this means the scheme is unlikely to make a significant impact, even though most of the fund will be recycled several times over a period of years. It was able to assist only eight customers in its first year of operation.

The council has not done enough to provide a comprehensive and structured approach to prevention in partnership with other agencies. It does have an “early warning system” in place with Peddars Way Housing Association which gave it notice in advance of 109 evictions last year so it could offer help. It has not, however, responded quickly to ODPMs suggestions about setting up a “sanctuary” scheme to reduce homeless presentations after domestic abuse, which it is just beginning to consider. The list of private lettings agents it provides to customers asking for help in obtaining private rented accommodation is also limited in that it does not constitute either an accreditation or direct lettings scheme. The quality of accommodation is only checked on the lodging scheme list, where there is a resident landlord.

There is no reliable data about rough sleeping in the district so the council cannot assess whether it has an adequate prevention service or whether more direct access accommodation is required. There has never been a rough sleeper count carried out, which calls into question the validity of the information the council supplies to support its HIP return. A count is planned during 2005/06, however, using ODPM guidance on methodology, to develop a baseline for monitoring performance under new BVPI 202.

Targets for 2005/06 include reduction in acceptances by 20 per cent against the three main causes of homelessness: family breakdowns; relationship breakdowns with partners and evictions in the private sector. These are ambitious in the current context and audit systems will be required to ensure the integrity of decision making under such pressure to reduce acceptance figures. The council
Breckland District Council

has also set some process focussed objectives for 2005/06, including developing a procedure and practice notes, setting casework outcome targets and developing interagency protocols to ensure early referrals for advice.

Performance on the speed of assessing homeless cases has been weak, with an average of only 75 to 85 per cent of cases assessed within 33 days for most of 2004/05. This was against an unchallenging target of 85 per cent which, the council argues, was pitched so low to take account of limited staffing resources. Despite the fact that it is putting in place the resources it feels it needs to deliver the service in future, however, this target has still only increased to 95 per cent for 2005/06. The council also only achieved 95 per cent against its 100 per cent target for processing review decisions in 2004/05, despite holding quarterly performance clinics and weekly performance review meetings covering these issues. The council plans to increase the number of home visits carried out, in line with ODPM advice on verification, despite the fact that this will put significant additional pressure on the staff team.

The council carried out a homelessness review in 2003 and published a strategy which attempted to tackle homelessness more effectively. The review was comprehensive but the strategy’s action plan is not in operation, with some staff unaware of its contents and partner agencies not actively involved in reviewing or monitoring progress as envisaged when the partner forum, which has only met twice, was set up. Partner agencies are also taking on only limited roles in assisting the council to discharge its duties.

Staff and managers have a good technical knowledge of homelessness and are committed to both customer care and to modernising service delivery. They are well trained in case law and deal sensitively with cases, in line with the relevant legislation and codes of guidance. There has been some challenge from ODPM about whether a homeless duty is being accepted too early, when other options might still be available, so the council is taking a middle line by beginning to process homelessness claims while also pursuing housing advice options.

There are few formal procedures in place in this area of work, although frontline staff do have procedures for taking initial applications including guidance on the law and targets for response times. Despite the absence of clear procedures for each stage of the assessment process, record keeping is efficient, with clear audit trails visible through interview notes, interim assessments and rehousing summaries. Evidence to support applications is appropriately obtained and advice on options is being offered. Decision letters are clear and specify the customer’s rights. Duty decisions and appeals are authorised by managers and an element of peer review is also included, which is not only a capacity building tool but assists in moderating staff decision making.

The council has some protocols in place to liaise with partner agencies, but these are not comprehensive or consistently adhered to and are backed up only by ad-hoc arrangements. For example, there is an effective protocol with social services for dealing with intentionally homeless families. Despite it having been drafted two years ago, however, the protocol between social services, the council and connexions for dealing with homeless young people has never been formally adopted and there is confusion about how relationships should work in practice.
Partner agencies consider that the council’s risk assessments at referral stage are inconsistent and there is limited willingness to share information. Partnership working in general on case management is weak, with phone calls not returned and issues having to be raised repeatedly as case holders change without passing on information. Partners agree, however, about the fact that the council responds well in high risk cases, such as schedule one offenders or care leavers, effectively identifying when a multi-agency approach is necessary.

The council is working to reduce the length of time families spend in interim accommodation. In 2004/05, the average family stay in bed and breakfast was four weeks and in hostels nine weeks, against government good practice limits of six weeks. Both of these figures were improvements on 2003/04 performance. ADP targets are in place to continue this improvement and achieve top quartile performance within two and three years respectively, although the “bar” is likely to rise during this period in terms of where top quartile performance begins. Appropriate targets are also in place in the ADP for improvements against the range of new BVPIs for homelessness.

The council does not systematically ensure customers placed in interim accommodation are given the most suitable properties for their needs. If the 11 unit Thetford hostel is full, staff book customers into bed and breakfast accommodation on the basis of “cheapest first”, which is insufficiently sensitive in an area where geography is so crucial to support networks.

There is limited contact and support provided by homelessness staff to customers while they are in interim accommodation. They receive updates on their cases via the phone or by letter. There is sufficient floating support provided by other agencies if customers require it, but those who are not assessed as being in need are expected to make their own arrangements to access health, social services and education. This is a weakness in an area where placements can be some distance from established support networks.

There is no formal strategy in place for identifying and managing interim and temporary accommodation to ensure it is of good quality and in appropriate locations. The council was unable to demonstrate how the accommodation currently in use was chosen and several partner agencies expressed concern that it is in the wrong areas and that the council is insufficiently sensitive to customers’ needs to be close to existing support networks.

The council has done only limited work with bed and breakfast proprietors to educate them about this client group and there is no forum in place to air their views. Most proprietors will not take homeless customers for more than a few nights, making it difficult for the council to place people in appropriate locations. It has also failed to follow ODPM advice about setting up a direct lettings scheme into the private rented sector, which would reduce pressure on existing interim and temporary accommodation, although it does have a lodging list. This means it has to rely too heavily on a women’s refuge, a hostel for young offenders and, in emergency, private hotels outside the district. These placements are appropriate for only a small percentage of customers.
Move on temporary accommodation in Peddars Way dispersed units is used for families who have been in bed and breakfast for five to six weeks, so the council does not infringe government guidelines. If this accommodation is suitable to the family’s needs, an assured tenancy is set up when the duty is confirmed, rather than move the household, which is positive.

There is no programme in place to regularly check the quality of temporary or interim accommodation. Although the Greater Norwich housing authorities have developed a grading system for bed and breakfast accommodation, based on the fitness standard, Breckland is not yet using it. There are also no plans in place to adopt the new ODPM hostel review toolkit. Where it is using the same private hotels outside the district as other local authorities which have inspection regimes in place, the council does review and act on their findings.

Plans are in place to develop a new hostel in Dereham, in partnership with Peddars Way Housing Association, which will manage it and will also build move on accommodation on the site. The council will lease the association the site and is also contributing £531,000 to the development costs. This will not come on stream until the summer of 2006. At that point, the Thetford hostel will be decommissioned and that site also redeveloped for a new hostel. It is only after this that provision is likely to come close to meeting forecast need. The council acknowledges, however, that it is likely to have to explore other sources of interim and temporary accommodation within a relatively short period, unless it significantly improves its prevention work, because demand is escalating so rapidly.

Reality checks at the Thetford hostel and two regularly used bed and breakfast hotels were carried out during this inspection. The hostel is modern and of adequate but not high standard, with reasonable rents. It is staffed during the day, although the role of staff is to signpost rather than provide direct support. Despite having good parking, common room and play facilities, this is bedsit accommodation, which is not ideal for customers who may have to stay there for periods of several months. The bed and breakfasts were also of reasonable standard but even more inadequate for anything other than short stays because of limited access to cooking and laundry facilities. This is particularly challenging for low income households who are unlikely to be able to afford to eat out.

The council has not been sufficiently proactive in negotiating or enforcing nomination agreements with local housing associations. Nomination procedures are in place but are cumbersome and outcomes are not effectively monitored or managed. The council was unable to confirm whether nominations were in line with agreements, although housing associations are supposed to report this information quarterly. Only a relatively small percentage of lettings by housing associations are made to homeless people. In 2003/04 17.7 per cent of lettings were to statutory homeless and 5.5 per cent were to non-statutory homeless applicants and in the first three quarters of 2004/05 this had fallen to a total of only 21.64 per cent.

Some associations perform significantly better than others in assisting the council to discharge its duty and figures do not necessarily correlate with stock size or

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extent of specialism. Some of the best performers are those with the smallest stock in the district, which limits their contribution. Nomination rights to the largest supplier tend to be used for temporary, rather than permanent lettings.

137 The council’s housing register is managed by Peddars Way, which also manages the list for Broadland Housing Association, under a 1997 service level agreement (SLA) which involves no fee. This agreement has changed incrementally but not been fundamentally reviewed during that period. The homeless person’s list is maintained by the council, but Peddars Way also effectively prioritises all homeless applicants by awarding a high points level for rehousing when a duty is accepted.

138 There is uncertainty between the council and Peddars Way about how their strategic relationship will develop on lettings. The SLA is due for renegotiation later this year, coinciding with Peddars Way’s plans to introduce a banded waiting list as the first step towards choice based lettings. Although this is only four months away and there has been some discussion about the detail of how homeless applicants and those with a local connection will be treated under the banded system, unresolved issues include whether there will be a common register, which services might carry a charge in future and whether the council will market test for the delivery of them. This is clearly a strong partnership, with both parties understanding the need to move away from traditional ways of working and to reduce duplication, so this lack of clarity is surprising.

139 The council has difficulty in rehousing homeless people to whom it owes a duty if they have perpetrated antisocial behaviour in the past. This is because it has limited influence over nominations, does not make a financial contribution for management of the register and, although Peddars Way does not have a formal exclusions policy, the council cannot prevent it suspending such cases.

140 The register is managed fairly and in line with good practice. Peddars Way has service standards in place, consults customers on proposed policy changes, carries out customer satisfaction research and monitors BME lettings. It has attempted to address sustainability issues by adopting a local lettings policy in Thetford which allows an element of under occupation by smaller families and does not disadvantage the homeless. The two organisations have also negotiated a sustainable approach to letting new build schemes. For example, at the newly developed Canon Walk development in Thetford, there will be 40 per cent lettings to homeless nominations but the remainder will be to transfers and the vacancies thus created will be allocated to homeless applicants, wherever possible.

Private Sector Housing

141 The way the council delivers private sector housing services is integral to its wider housing strategy. There are links between private sector housing and homelessness in terms of prevention and supply and there are also links with enabling because management of the private sector stock can be integral to meeting the need for affordable, good quality homes. There are significant weaknesses in the way private sector housing services are delivered. Although recent service reviews have identified these problems, action plans can only
Demand for private sector housing services are high in Breckland because its large migrant worker and elderly population generate demand for HMO enforcement work and disabled facilities grants (DFGs). It has high numbers of older, empty and unfit properties dispersed among its rural parishes, which means enforcement action has historically been slow and reactive because it involves a lot of staff time and does not attract the funding available for urban improvement schemes.

The council carried out a comprehensive private sector stock condition survey in July 2002 alongside its housing needs survey. This covered the issues which it was good practice to cover at that time: faults to dwellings and repair costs; unfitness and serious disrepair; energy efficiency; and grant demand implications. It involved a socio economic interview survey as well as a physical survey of 761 archetype properties, including some housing association stock, which were then cloned to indicate stock condition across the district.

The survey found that the poorest housing was in the district’s private rented sector and its relatively large pre-1919 stock. Energy efficiency was close to the national average, but the cost of remedial works was relatively high because many rural properties are detached, built without cavity walls and have no access to a mains gas supply. There was 6.5 per cent unfitness, with the most common reason for unfitness being disrepair. 7.2 per cent of properties were in substantial disrepair and needed £2,500 spending on them within a year. 1.4 per cent of properties lacked at least one basic amenity. Over 1500 of the district’s 50,000 properties were vacant.

The survey indicated that bringing average SAP ratings up to an acceptable figure of 59 would involve improving most of the district’s dwellings and cost £136.2 million. It also indicated that £33.9 million was urgently required for repairs in the owner occupied sector alone, which was likely to generate grant demand of £18.6 million, without considering the ability of landlords to fund work in the rented sector.

The council has not continually updated this survey with information collected during service activities. Although there were no obvious indicators of rapid changes in stock condition, it supplemented this baseline data, however, with a visual survey of the housing stock, undertaken by a team of 12 environmental health officers and technicians from across the council, in the summer of 2004. This was designed to inform the risk assessment it uses to prioritise HMO inspections and to begin to identify empty properties so enforcement work could begin on them. The exercise was supported by council tax record research.

Plans are in place for a stock condition survey update in 2005/06 because the council recognises it needs more sophisticated information so it can implement the newly introduced Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS).

There is no separate private sector housing strategy, although high level objectives in this area are covered in the housing strategy. The council's aims
are based on needs data and there has been an attempt to address local, regional and national issues and legislative change in target setting.

149 There are a range of other sub strategies in the area of private sector housing which are now in need of review to bring them in line with the housing strategy and the council’s revised housing priorities. These include the empty property and fuel poverty strategies and the renewal policy.

150 The council has not taken every opportunity to bid for funding for its private sector work. It suffers, in funding terms, from the fact that its poorer housing is isolated and that deprivation in the district is not extreme. This means it cannot benefit from many of the initiatives aimed at improving housing conditions in urban and more uniformly deprived areas. It failed to bid for challenge funding for decent homes last year because it had insufficient data on decency levels and too few staff available to prepare the bid. If successful, this would have allowed it to increase the scale and impact of its renewal work.

151 The requirements of the Regulatory Reform (Housing Assistance) Order 2002 (RRO) have been addressed by introducing a mixture of small grants and loans, under the “Enhance” scheme, to help tackle disrepair. These are not available in the private rented sector, however, where the PSSCS indicates that the worst problems exist, and are only available to customers in receipt of benefits. Many of these are elderly and reluctant to borrow and the grant element only covers the first £500 of the cost of any works, with a supplementary loan available up to a total of £6,000, so it has major limitations, even for owner occupiers.

152 The council has also made loans available under the “Domicile” scheme to tackle empty properties. These cover 20 per cent of the costs of bringing an empty property back into use or converting commercial space into affordable housing, but they also have an upper ceiling of £6,000. Both loan schemes operate on the basis of uncompounded interest at bank base rate plus one per cent and a charge on the property, which is only repaid on sale, unless the borrower chooses to pay it back sooner, which is good practice.

153 A significant weakness is that, despite introducing “Enhance” and “Domicile” in response to the RRO, the council has not effectively implemented them. Short staffing has meant background procedures around the loan deed have only recently been put in place and neither scheme has been marketed because there was a fear that the team would not be able to cope with demand. This means no loans have actually been made since the scheme was set up in July 2003.

154 The council has also responded to the RRO by carrying out labour intensive “Safeguard” inspections on nine properties and has 15 currently outstanding. These represent good practice in that they provide home owners with a comprehensive audit of disrepair and energy efficiency issues and allow staff to signpost a number of fuel poverty initiatives as well as being the precursor to loan applications. They have not, however, impacted significantly on disrepair and have tied up valuable expert resources. Discussions are underway about passing this role to the newly employed HIA in future, alongside its customer support role on grant and loan applications.
The council acknowledges that it must review the loans system as a matter of urgency. Managers would like to increase the maximum size of loans to £25,000 in recognition of building cost inflation and to encourage participation from the owners of empty properties. They would also like to extend eligibility to the owners of low value properties who are not in receipt of benefit and to increase the grant element of the scheme to £1,000 to reduce the administration burden around small scale works. All of this will necessitate a significant increase in the scheme’s capital allocation from £200,000 in 2005/06 to at least £400,000 in 2006/07 and political support will be sought.

The recent service review has systematically prioritised the various strands of private sector housing work for the first time. These priorities will form the basis of the council’s first comprehensive private sector housing strategy, to be adopted later in 2005. They do not, however, all coincide with broader council priorities. For example, in preparation for PSA7, the team has prioritised improving the housing conditions of the most vulnerable and reducing health inequalities through concentrating on HMO enforcement activity, energy efficiency work and DFGs. This is partly because these are statutory duties and partly because this is where its limited resources can be used to greatest effect.

This review has shifted responsibility for dealing with empty properties, traditionally an enforcement function, away from the private sector team. This is in line with the council’s Community Plan objective of improving performance against BVPI64 because it will help deliver more affordable housing. Because the skills for developing affordable housing sit elsewhere in the team, this work will be led by housing strategy staff, with only empty property enforcement work commissioned from the private sector team. This is an innovative approach, which will focus appropriate skills in appropriate tasks.

A key element of the new private sector housing strategy will be a response to the requirements of the Housing Act 2004, much of which comes into force in the autumn of 2005. New policies are required for: inspection and enforcement under the HHSRS; HMO licensing, including the adoption of a local scheme because the mandatory scheme is unlikely to apply to most HMOs in the district; and empty properties. The absence of detailed guidance on some of the new legislation, such as charges for HMO enforcement and how decent homes will replace unfitness as part of the HHSRS, was holding up development of these policies at the time of this inspection. Staff training on the 2004 Act had taken place, however, and plans were in place to free up staff resources to produce framework policies and brief other departments on the Act’s provisions. For example, housing benefits staff need to know that rent is not payable on an unlicensed HMO. There was, however, a lack of clarity as to how partners would be consulted on policies and work was not far advanced, so the late May deadline was ambitious.

There has been some progress in improving energy efficiency. The council has worked with South Norfolk Primary Healthcare Trust on the fuel poverty elements of its Health Improvement Plan and set an ADP target of removing 50 families per year from fuel poverty. Despite successfully attracting WARMFRONT grants into
the district\(^1\), it does not have a specialist member of staff to help focus its education work or ensure “Enhance” is well used for heating installations. It has only achieved 13 per cent of its Home Energy Conservation Act (HECA) target of 30 per cent over ten years, but rather than adequately resourcing this work to meet the target, the council has simply extended the timeframe to 30 per cent over 15 years, which is a significant weakness.

The council was slow to invest in a HIA to help it process DFGs and renewal grants, which might have released staff time for other priorities at least a year ago. It has recently begun to use the West Norfolk Care and Repair Agency, however, after winning £20,000 of ODPM funding to supplement its own £63,000 investment. The council has also allowed Peddars Way, which carries out over £100,000 worth of adaptation work each year to its own properties, to set up an internal agency. Both organisations charge 10 per cent basic fee to process grant applications, procure contractors and inspect works but neither will take on grant approval or budget responsibilities, so the council will continue to discharge its duties on DFGs, while freeing up specialist staff time for enforcement work.

The council has been largely unsuccessful in engaging with the private rented sector. Although it has had aspirations to set up an accreditation scheme for some time, this initiative has not moved forward. Its landlord forum, set up a year ago, has only met twice and has no terms of reference. It has been viewed by the council as principally a mechanism for passing on information. Landlords interviewed during the inspection felt that the absence of both an accreditation scheme and an effective forum were significant weaknesses in an exceptionally buoyant market being constantly entered by new landlords who do not understand their legal obligations in terms of repair and fire.

Resourcing problems mean there had been very little HMO enforcement work done for several years until a specialist officer was appointed twelve months ago. During the last year, almost 70 inspections have taken place, which is a significant improvement. The council has not, however, developed a HMO registration scheme in the run up to the introduction of mandatory licensing in the autumn of 2005, despite knowing for the past year that it probably has over 450 HMOs in the district. Its unusual HMO stock profile means that most of Breckland’s HMOs will not be covered by the statutory scheme and a local one will be necessary.

Breckland’s HMOs tend to be large, two storey, new build properties in good repair, typically owned by absent “buy to let” landlords who are unaware that their properties are being sub let to house large numbers of migrant workers, often in overcrowded conditions where means of escape from fire is a significant problem. The council’s agenda is not to close these properties because low paid workers are crucial to the local economy and closure will simply move them elsewhere in the district. It sees its role as to make their occupants safe, but its ability to do so is hampered by the fact that most do not speak English and are moved around frequently. Staff spend a lot of time researching complex sub-lease relationships to discover the freeholder of the property before they can put it...
Direction Order in place and supervise fire proofing work. Relationships with the Fire Service are good and effective partnership working is in place.

164 The empty property strategy has been in place for six years, but has had little impact. This is partly because the district's empty properties are either uneconomic or difficult to bring back into use. For example, many are on the margins of working farmyards or far from services. The other reason for the failure of the strategy has, again, been lack of resources. Although last year’s large scale identification exercise was able to pick up a number of properties which had previously not been visible, the council has not had the staffing resources to move to the next stage of identifying their owners and visiting to give advice. The "Domicile" loan is intended as "seedcorn" money to encourage owners to spend a larger amount but, as covered earlier, it has not been marketed.

165 The council may be optimistic in assuming that Empty Dwelling Management Order (EDMO) powers, to be brought in under the 2004 Housing Act in the autumn, coupled with an increased loan facility in 2006/07, will be the basis of a more effective empty property strategy. If successful, these measures will still be slow to impact on BVPIs. Also, although the council wants to bring empty properties into use to meet the need for affordable housing, these may not be in the right places to meet demand. The council has not begun a dialogue with partner housing associations about EDMOs, which it will need to do unless it is prepared to manage the properties itself. As with Compulsory Purchase Orders (CPOs), the threat of an EDMO may be sufficient to stimulate owners into taking action, but the council has no track record of using CPOs, so it has no historical experience to inform its assumptions about the future.

166 Housing has not always been drawn into a holistic approach to regeneration. For example, the Dereham Town Centre regeneration project has been ongoing for the past 18 months, but the private sector housing team has not been involved in the process. This was a missed opportunity to consider bringing commercial premises into residential use, increasing the supply of affordable town centre accommodation and reducing the pressure on homelessness services from single people.

167 Risk assessments and systems of prioritisation are in place to ensure the council tackles HMOs and DFGs on the basis of "worst first" but this is not the case in the areas of empty properties or disrepair. There are no plans in place to address this issue by targeting activity once a full staff complement is in place.

168 The council adopts a range of interventions in private sector housing but it has not used all the remedies available to it and has not always targeted identified need, such as improving disrepair in the private rented sector. Performance against private sector housing BVPIs is improving but is still generally only fair. BVPI62 on unfitness was deleted in April 2005 and will be replaced by a new one relating either to the HHSRS or decent homes but last year the council made fit or demolished 31 properties against an unambitious target of 20 in a climate of 6.5 per cent unfitness. BVPI64 on empty properties indicates that 11 were brought

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1 0.92 per cent against a top quartile figure of 3.75 per cent

Breckland District Council
into use against a more ambitious top quartile target of 20\textsuperscript{1}, although it should be noted that there are estimated to be over 1500 empty properties in the district, so the impact of this success is limited.

169 The council has made mixed progress against its business plan objectives on private sector housing. For example, it has been successful in beginning to tackle overcrowding and related problems in HMOs but less so in its use of loans to make best use of the housing stock and improve fitness and fuel efficiency. It has also had only limited success in ensuring 63 per cent of vulnerable households were living in decent homes by March 2005, in preparation for it reaching the good practice target of 70 per cent by 2010 and its estimates indicate that it has currently only achieved 42 per cent.

170 The enforcement policy is based on the Enforcement Concordat and staff are experienced and expert, but they have been under resourced, in terms of both funding and time, so they have been unable to take much of the action necessary to tackle poor housing conditions. The council has not used CPO or marketed its own loans scheme and its grant expenditure of £58,000 in 2004/05 was entirely on residual renovation grants from pre-2003. Even by doubling its budget, as the council is likely to do next year, it is unlikely to be able to fund the grants and loans necessary to improve the stock and is unlikely to have access to much external grant funding, so a substantial proportion of the costs of improvement must be met by owner occupiers and landlords through increased use of enforcement powers.

171 The council’s £500,000 per year budget for DFGs is sufficient to meet need and is well managed, with 108 approvals given last year and 55 on the waiting list at the time of the inspection. Optimum use is made of resources by encouraging Peddars Way to cover the costs of certain adaptations in its own stock. Although it does work effectively in partnership with occupational therapists through a regular forum meeting, the council has not always made the most creative use of its enabling role in, for example, developing a district wide register of adapted properties to allow all agencies to “work smarter” in exploring rehousing options.

172 Managers acknowledge that speed of performance on DFGs is not good. Cases are prioritised into four categories, with the highest priority jobs taking just over four months, on average, from application to completion and the lowest taking around eight months. It should be noted, however, that occupational therapists report that their own waiting list is six to nine months for some visits and the council only begins monitoring waiting time after this initial visit.

173 The council carries out HMO inspections on the basis of risk and served 27 Notices requiring remedial works in 2004/05. Although its target of inspecting 30 HMOs per year when it has at least 450 to visit seems unchallenging, it should be noted that complaints about potential HMOs arrive at a rate of two or three per day, the distance travelled to carry out inspections, degree of difficulty involved due to language barriers, the problems in locating owners and the limited technical assistance available means the team is barely able to manage this level of work. The new staffing structure includes additional resources, including an

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\textsuperscript{1} all unaudited
additional environmental health officer wholly dedicated to HMO work with effect from June 2005, which should help improve fire safety in HMOs more quickly.

174 Despite having no formal and up to date strategy, the council does have an action plan for private sector housing within its ADP. This is SMART and easy to monitor, with milestones which aim for top quartile performance over two or three years in BVPI areas. Short staffing is currently being addressed, but there remains uncertainty about whether adequate funding will be provided to enable the council to effectively tackle poor housing conditions.

175 Performance on private sector housing is reported to councillors via performance clinics and this information is used to initiate new and revised action and tackle slippages in the programme. The council does not, however, report performance to partners in the same effective manner and they are not clear how their roles contribute to achieving objectives. This is the case even of those which are most closely involved in delivery at operational level, such as the HIA and occupational therapists.

176 The council has not developed many local PIs in the area of private sector housing to help assess the impact of its work, update baseline stock condition information and provide targets to stretch performance. For example, it does not record how many people with disabilities it has helped to remain in their own homes. Its targets in non BVPI areas are also less challenging than those under BVPIs, such as the number of HMOs to be visited per year.

177 The council cannot effectively monitor the number of vulnerable households in decent homes in the private sector, as it is required to do to deliver its PSA7 target. It has used the ODPMs “ready reckoner” tool but this is unreliable because the current stock condition information was gathered before the decent homes standard was set and did not include all the necessary criteria. The council recognises the need, once it has carried out its forthcoming stock condition survey update which will cover decent homes information, to keep its database updated with information on grants and loans given and enforcement action taken, as well as demographic research undertaken. This will allow it to develop a reliable baseline, predict future trends and track performance on PSA7.

Value for Money

178 A critical judgement made during inspections is the extent to which customers are receiving value for money in the way their services are provided. This is not always the same thing as low cost because quality is also important and high cost services can still provide value for money, depending on context. In Breckland there is a generally positive picture, with benchmarking, some levering in of external funds, partnership procurement and a challenging efficiency agenda, although the council’s emphasis on “low tax, prudent spending” has meant keeping costs low, rather than value for money.

179 The council understands its costs and how they relate to the quality of services it is providing. It recently benchmarked against other eastern region stock transfer authorities as part of it service reviews, is a member of the “G16” benchmarking
Breckland District Council

Breckland District Council

club and reviews its performance against the “Hampshire Matrix” for private sector housing work.

Benchmarking indicates that there is a need for more staffing resources across frontline housing services if the required step change is to be achieved in performance. Breckland’s investment in homelessness is lower than that of its peers. The figure is more comparable in private sector housing work but demand is higher, so unit costs are relatively low in both areas. This issue is being addressed by expanding the staff team across both services to a level which should allow housing to contribute to the achievement of CPA excellence by 2007/08, which is the council’s principal ambition.

Benchmarking as part of service reviews also indicated the need for a number of good practice initiatives and for process reengineering across both services to allow staff to “work smarter”. As a result, the soft split is being introduced in homelessness and a reorientation of the private sector team will happen on the appointment of new staff. This will allow administration and frontline advice functions to be carried out by junior staff, freeing up technical officers and environmental health officers to do skilled work and the section manager to take a more strategic role. These are all positive initiatives in terms of value for money.

The council has not effectively involved partners or customers in decision making to ensure services best meet their needs within the financial and other constraints in place. This is not an organisation where stakeholders are routinely involved in determining the quality and range of housing services provided or in investment and procurement decisions. Although this is beginning to change, there are few concrete examples in place yet.

There are some strong partnerships with providers. For example, Peddars Way administers the register free of charge, the council has participated in sub-regional research and joint negotiations with other authorities to improve the quality and reduce the cost of bed and breakfast accommodation and it co-owns a mobile energy advice centre with neighbours, optimising its ability to provide cost effective advice.

An isolated example of “spend to save” within housing, using a partner housing association, is the redevelopment of the council’s hostels, whereby more units of better quality accommodation are being reprovided on existing sites.

The council has taken advantage of some opportunities for more effective partnership procurement. For example, the private sector housing team has led a stair lift procurement consortium with four partner local authorities. This has reduced unit costs, enhanced the opportunities for recycling and increased the speed of installation. The partners have agreed a common specification and used the Eastern Shires Purchasing Organisation to procure the contract with one supplier, which has since been extended to include through floor lifts. The contract is currently being retendered and partners are discussing extending the scheme to include level access shower trays and other fittings.

There has been some success in leveraging in funding through partnerships, most notably the half million pounds per year brought into the district via Heat and Warmfront grants, the quarter of a million pounds recently attracted for a
Portuguese speaker support project in partnership with the Keystone Trust and a Housing Corporation Annual Development Programme allocation of £2.1 million last year for 52 units of rented housing, of which 23 are rural. The HIA is funded jointly through council reserves, supporting people grant and the housing renewal budget. There are also a number of smaller scale examples of the private sector housing team taking advantage of opportunities to distribute free energy efficient light bulbs and kettles provided by energy suppliers.

187 The council has been slow, since the abolition of LASHG, to consider more innovative forms of funding for development, like the private finance initiative or leasing, to deliver affordable housing. This is unexpected in an authority which is otherwise open to the idea of involving the private sector in provision. It has been largely due to limited strategic management resources within housing to pursue these options. It has now commissioned a feasibility study into its options for investing capital in housing which will bring in sufficient return to offset what it will lose by not investing elsewhere. Partners raised concerns during this inspection that the council’s political agenda may make it uneconomic for them to develop affordable housing if they have to buy council land at its full market value.

188 The council has been more effective in bidding for grant in some areas than in others. Although it did not take advantage of the opportunity to bid for decent homes grant because of resourcing problems, partners working with Gypsies and travellers praise the council for the speed with which it made the first bid in the county to fund a much needed short stay stopping site.

189 There is no corporate procurement strategy in place but the council is developing a model of “strategic alliance” aimed at improving value for money across all service areas, ensuring modern procurement principles are applied and driving efficiency savings. It is in the process of choosing a commercial partner to seek out trading and partnering opportunities and help it explore different service delivery models. An "Alliance Board" will commission assessments of the best delivery solution for each service area and make recommendations.

190 The council has not effectively communicated its strategic alliance ideas to staff and stakeholders. At the time of the inspection, there was uncertainty on the part of staff and managers about the future shape of services, despite the fact that service reviews had recently taken place in housing. There was also a certain amount of cynicism about the motives of any profit making company prepared to work with the council and about how cost and quality would be balanced.

191 There is a clear and consistent commitment to the philosophy of “low tax, prudential spending”. Staff at all levels demonstrate an awareness of this and it is clear that these principles have been applied in housing services for some years. Although this has resulted in relatively low cost services, it has also meant that quality and performance have suffered in the areas outlined earlier in this report. It has also meant that staff and managers have been so occupied with simply keeping a service running that they were unable always to take the strategic decisions which might have allowed them to “work smarter” by making better use of partners or to lever in external funding to improve value for money.
Managers acknowledge that, although there has been a sustained emphasis on cost, a value for money culture is not embedded yet in housing. These issues first came to the fore two years ago, when a fundamental portfolio review led to housing being prioritised, but it is only through recent service reviews that cost and quality have begun to be linked and the council’s leading edge commercial approach is less well developed in housing than elsewhere.

Recent service reviews have resulted in the restructure of the service and are leading to staffing increases, but they have focussed more on good practice than value for money. There is an acknowledgement that a full scale value for money review of the housing service is necessary to fundamentally challenge whether some functions should be carried out by the council at all. It is intended that this will happen through the strategic partnership’s work.

There are no efficiency targets within housing, in recognition of capacity issues, although the council does have a challenging efficiency agenda. Its general approach is to invest in frontline service delivery, via the proposed call centre, freeing up more technically expert resources to provide better value for money in specialist areas.

There is a robust approach to the management of capital resources. The capital strategy ensures feasibility studies and options appraisals are carried out before projects are initiated. Schemes must demonstrate, within a business plan, that they will give a financial return higher that achievable through cash deposits over five years. Decisions are also based on a review of whole life costs and the revenue implications of the project.

The council has over £45million in reserves and actively seeks opportunities for income generation from investment. All projects requesting match funding are scored against agreed criteria and asset transfer at nil cost is only considered if there is a policy priority, like affordable housing development. Capital projects are monitored monthly and project evaluations done to ensure value for money.

Summary

The council does not have a strategic and fully resourced approach to access, based on solid customer research. Its staff are customer focussed and it has very recently introduced appropriate leaflets and satisfaction surveys but it delivers housing services from a very limited range of locations which are not accessibility also suffers as a result of low staffing levels.

There is some effective work on equalities and diversity but this is patchy, with appropriate ambitions not always translated into challenging strategies. Interpretation and translation services are good, partnerships are developing and the council has responded quickly to meet the acute housing and support needs of minority ethnic groups such as migrant workers and Gypsies and travellers. It does not, however, have a profile of its service users and it has been slow to assess the needs of less visible socially excluded groups.

The housing strategy is very new and its impact cannot yet be measured but the council is developing appropriate measures to address identified need. It still has
weaknesses, however, in partnership working and has no plans to review the strategy, with partners, in the light of large scale research due this year.

200 There are significant weaknesses in the way homelessness and housing advice services are delivered. Recent service reviews have identified and action plans are beginning to address these problems but the council has not tackled partnership issues or developed a strategic approach to the provision of interim and temporary accommodation.

201 There are also significant weaknesses in the way private sector housing services are delivered. Again, recent service reviews have identified these problems but action plans will only begin to bring about the desired step change when staffing resources and funding are increased.

202 There is a generally positive picture on value for money, with benchmarking, some levering in of external funding, partnership procurement and a challenging efficiency agenda, although the council’s emphasis on “low tax, prudential spending” has resulted in it keeping costs low, rather than on value for money.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the evidence of service improvement?

203 The council’s track record in improving housing services has not been strong in the past, although its wider track record is better. There remain significant affordability, disrepair, HMO and empty property problems in the district and the council has yet to complete its shift in emphasis from investigation to prevention of homelessness. In recent months the council has begun to act on service reviews in housing, share learning and particularly to involve staff, but many of its housing service problems have been known for some time and not addressed until recently.

204 Councillors acknowledge that they have had concerns about housing capacity and performance for some years. The service had a low profile and was under resourced after the landlord function was transferred to Peddars Way in 1993. It is only in the last year that the council’s attitude to the service has changed. This has been cabinet led and, although key councillors are on board, some feel there is an ongoing need to educate backbenchers of all parties about the importance of housing strategy.

205 The pace of change in the past has been slow. Breckland was one of the last councils in the region to develop a fit for purpose strategy. It has also been slow to address the housing weaknesses identified during the CPA inspection, with some of them raised again as issues by the ODPM homelessness directorate almost a year later.

206 There have been some improvements over the past two years. For example, in homelessness the council began 18 months ago to use dispersed Peddars Way properties as temporary accommodation, which improved conditions and reduced
lengths of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation. There was also the development of the rent deposit scheme last year to help with prevention of homelessness. In private sector housing the council has also begun to address problems in the highest risk HMOs. The council began to tackle the affordability agenda by developing its affordable housing policy almost two years ago. While this is not delivering housing units on the scale necessary, it has stressed to developers that the council expects its agenda to be delivered via planning policy.

Although some of these actions have resulted in improvements in the quality of life for some customers, for others, including the most disadvantaged, the impact has been minimal. Because customer satisfaction monitoring is underdeveloped, it is not possible for the council to demonstrate the extent to which customers consider the housing service to have improved.

Performance is still unsatisfactory. The table above of unaudited performance figures against the council’s sometimes unambitious targets for the year end 2004/05 shows that it has some way to go in achieving its aspiration of a step change in housing performance.

The council has begun to make speedier progress recently, supporting its changed approach by appointing an interim manager to carry out service reviews of each housing service. Once the reviews were complete the council acted swiftly to begin to address the issues raised, particularly by increasing staff resources. An improvement action plan was developed in preparation for this inspection which contained 21 action points and all but one were completed to timescale, even before additional resources were in place.

The wider council does have a track record of improving services to customers from a low base. It had bottom quartile recycling performance of four per cent in 2000/01, when it carried out a service review. The council drew in £900,000 of funding from DEFRA to support implementation of a fortnightly collection service and a three year improvement and communication plan. The recycling rate for 2004/05 is 34 per cent and DEFRA has recently recognised the council as the most improved performer in the east of England.

Although it has not addressed the issue of partnership working in housing, the council has shown that it can improve performance through partnership working in other areas. Its benefits and revenues partnership with Forest Heath council has led to improvements in managing housing benefit and collecting council tax and business rates, with both organisations now performing in the top quartile for speed of processing and second quartile for accuracy.

Service reviews and recent benchmarking indicate that the housing service does proactively seek to learn from good practice and from its own experience and that there is some systematic sharing of learning. For example, the council recently introduced a process whereby each ADP has an appended report which identifies where the team has learnt and this is shared across portfolios at performance

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I  63 inspections and 27 notices served over the past 12 months
II  See Appendix 1
III  unaudited
The housing team does not have a strong track record of consulting partners and has no discreet consultation policy. Some consultation with partners on housing objectives is, however, built into the council's wider consultative plan for 2005/06. This includes reviewing lettings, action planning around the Gypsy and traveller strategy and a review of the options for extending services for victims of domestic abuse. The council will also consult both partners and hard to reach groups as part of developing its social inclusion strategy and will carry out an exit survey and desktop review of client needs from the contact centre and presence offices.

There has also only been limited consultation with customers in the past but, as outlined earlier in this report, the citizen's panel was used to determine key housing priorities in developing the housing strategy last year and focus groups are shortly to be used to examine issues around access for hard to reach groups. Although housing customers were not due to be involved in redeveloping the council’s website, this issue was taken on board following feedback during this inspection and the council will now involve them.

There is no formal learning loop in place to ensure service improvement flows from complaints. Managers acknowledged during this inspection that they should do more and immediately began to design a system at the corporate centre to ensure automatic policy review following complaints.

Customer satisfaction and complaints monitoring were only in place for a few weeks before this inspection and the council was only able to cite one example of it influencing delivery by leading to the simplification of the grant application form.

There are only limited opportunities for staff to input at a strategic level within the council, although recent developments in housing suggest that this team is introducing these more quickly than others. Monthly team meetings and a series of discussions around the recent service reviews have allowed staff to feed into policy and procedural review and to contribute on operational issues.

How good are the current improvement plans?

The council’s service reviews and plans developed recently have been much more robust than in the past. They address service weaknesses and are generally SMART, although there are some sub strategies still to be developed and some resources still to be identified.

Service reviews in housing have not, historically, been rigorous and have been managed in isolation from the corporate improvement team. The most significant of these was the 2003 homelessness review. This was carried out using best value methodology and involving partners to some extent, but the council acknowledges that it rushed to meet ODPM deadlines and was not challenging in terms of competition. For example, it did not market test to establish whether housing advice could be delivered more effectively by an independent advice agency.
Recent service reviews in homelessness, private sector housing and the enabling service have examined services in depth and focussed on moving them forward by assessing them against top quartile performers. They have applied the lessons learned from benchmarking and have involved staff. Again, services have not been subject to competition and there has been limited consultation with stakeholders, but they have been robust in challenging how services are delivered, particularly in terms of access, strengthening partnership working and developing a stronger performance culture.

These reviews have resulted directly in increased resources and the development of work plans to improve performance. They have set objectives of excellence by 2007/08 in housing enabling and homelessness and for above average and improving performance for private sector housing for the same period.

The council does not have a well developed approach to procurement of housing services and has not examined whether other service providers may be better able to deliver elements of the service in terms of cost and quality. A more fundamental review of the whole housing service, which will involve more significant challenge and competition, is planned as part of the work of the strategic alliance during the next year.

There is an appropriate hierarchy of linked plans in place. For example, the housing strategy action plan links to the business plan, capital strategy and ADP and these support community plan housing objectives of balancing the housing market and developing sustainable communities. The council does not, however, have all the detailed sub strategies in place within housing which it needs, such as a private sector strategy and those it has are out of date, such as the empty property strategy.

The council is effectively involved in sub regional planning and strategy making in key housing areas, such as around Gypsies and travellers and the REAP sub regional housing strategy.

Plans do address service weaknesses, as well as legislative and regulatory changes such as the RRO. At the time of the inspection, however, the council was awaiting staffing resources and more detailed guidance before developing its policies in response to the Housing Act 2004, when outline plans should really have been in development by then.

The council is attempting to tackle poor performance on homelessness at the same time as reorienting towards prevention. It has set itself ADP objectives which reflect this, including reinterviewing rehoused homeless people who are in danger of not sustaining tenancies; developing an interagency protocol to anticipate tenancy failure and target support; working with supporting people commissioners to deliver more responsive tenancy support services; and working with domestic violence survivors to break repeat behaviour patterns.

The council’s most recent plans are now generally SMART, although sufficient funding is not always in place for example to deal with disrepair. Plans do cover the short, medium and longer term and set more challenging targets than previously, including milestones towards top quartile performance over time. We note that since the inspection, the new interim head of service is also developing
a comprehensive housing improvement plan. This will pull together existing ADP objectives and new goals emerging from the self assessment and inspection process.

228 There are some older plans which are out of step with emerging good practice, such as the homelessness strategy action plan. Although this was reviewed in 2004, it has not been revised to take account of the benefits of more innovative involvement of partners and of measuring prevention outcomes. This is due to be reviewed again in 2005, now adequate resources are in place.

Will improvements be delivered?

229 The council is now providing a clear vision and effective leadership in housing, with resources shifted to meet need in most respects and improving communication systems in place. It is in a position to make better use of its newly enhanced staffing structure to fully implement and embed underdeveloped systems and particularly to improve partnership working.

230 The council’s aims for housing are realistic in its current context and desired outcomes are clearly articulated. Councillors have a clear vision for housing which includes further reductions in the threshold for affordable housing on site, the wider use of leasing arrangements with housing associations and solutions to the problems of informal Gypsy and traveller incursions on to private land. Leading councillors also want to see a more business oriented approach in housing, like that which allowed improvements in benefits and revenues without increased funding, and expect this to develop through the strategic alliance.

231 Councillors and managers understand the context in which they operate. They recognise that there have been significant problems in the service for some time, including low morale, under resourcing and ineffective partnership working. The scale of the council’s housing problems is daunting and some appear intractable because they require such significant investment, but there is a universal commitment to make substantial progress in all areas. This is driven not only by pressure from constituents on issues like affordable housing, but also by the need to improve housing services to achieve CPA excellence by 2007/08.

232 The council has a new leader and portfolio holder who have the support of the minority parties as well as the controlling group. The leader is well respected and has an inclusive and consensual style. Opposition councillors do not necessarily support the low tax, prudential spending policy and some want to use capital resources differently to achieve affordable housing objectives, but they have not sought to undermine the majority group’s policies. This is because they feel they have “more things in common than we have apart” in terms of aspirations for housing.

233 There are clear demarcations in duties between councillors and officers and mutually respectful relationships are in place.

234 Housing is the council’s top priority, which is reflected in the fact that corporate aims and strategies have been refined and there have been some resulting resource shifts in the immediate run up to this inspection. For example, additional staff were in the process of being appointed, funding had been shifted
to help expand the HIA into the district, plans were in place to provide some frontline housing services via the call centre earlier than envisaged, land was being identified for housing association development and an interim manager had been appointed to carry out a series of service reviews. It was too early, however, for the council to be able to demonstrate concrete benefits for customers as a result of any of these changes.

235 Although housing had been the council’s top priority for almost two years it was able to demonstrate only limited shifts in resources over that longer period. For example, it had contributed to the redevelopment of the homeless hostel and made small contributions to developing affordable housing. It had not, however, reviewed staffing levels or shifted resources into private sector housing where significant problems of disrepair were not being addressed.

236 The council faces dilemmas in two key housing areas in terms of political prioritisation and it was unclear at the time of this inspection how they would be resolved. Its strategy commits it to addressing and potentially providing more funding for two politically unpopular housing services. At the time of this inspection it had yet to publicise its plans for a short stay stopping site for Gypsies and travellers in Thetford and to make a formal decision about whether to fund this, should its bid for ODPM funding fail. It had also to consider whether it had realistically assessed the risks inherent in inspecting only 30 HMOs per year in a district which probably has over 450, an unknown number of whose owners may be putting their vulnerable occupants at risk in the event of a fire.

237 The council cannot yet demonstrate how it intends to meet housing need in the way it uses its capital, although it currently has over £45 million in reserves and has a capital strategy in place. It has not quantified the capital requirements of the new housing strategy, which is planned during 2005/06 using a cross departmental team. Its emphasis on sustainability and capital investment will not be supported in either affordable housing or private sector housing unless the return will be greater than would have been achieved by investing elsewhere. Councillors see this as a sustainable way to ensure capital funding into the future.

238 The council has developed some self awareness about its capacity during recent service reviews and is putting in place the people and skills it requires to deliver its priorities and drive improvements. There is widespread recognition that, although staff are experienced, well qualified and committed, the service has been under resourced, poorly co-ordinated and largely reactive in the past. The previous structure was very flat, creating tensions between operational and strategic management roles for the head of service and principal environmental health officer and making some staff take on roles beyond their job descriptions.

239 This is being addressed by increasing the numbers of middle managers, freeing up the head of service for a more strategic role and reducing the need for peer supervision. Specialist support is also in place from consultants on issues such as involving hard to reach groups.

240 The size of the frontline establishment is being increased by five posts. £115,640, rising to £182,450 by 2008, was approved shortly after the inspection to fund a restructure which staff were been involved in designing. This allowed
the creation of the “soft split” from July 2005. It also allowed the council to enhance processes for consulting customers and improve partnership working on homelessness and enabling, particularly reestablishing the Homelessness Forum, which had not met for over a year. Employment of the HIA and some use of the call centre to deal with routine housing enquiries has also begin to assist in freeing up staff time for more specialist tasks.

241 The housing service now has active, visible and effective leadership. Although the head of service post was vacant at the time of this inspection, direction was being provided by interim and acting managers and a positive change process was in place which was recognised by staff and partners. Morale was improving and there was clarity about objectives. Decision making was transparent and beginning to be inclusive of staff views, although not of partners or customers. Since the inspection, an interim head of service has been recruited to drive improvements until this post is permanently filled.

242 Staff are positive about improvements in communication which have taken place in recent months. The Chief Executive holds a monthly team briefing for all staff which provides information on major priorities such as progress on the strategic alliance. This helps staff understand their contribution, although the size of meetings means they provide little opportunity for dialogue. There are more team meetings than in the past and staff feel that managers are genuinely prepared to listen. Some report that they still feel isolated within the Community Engagement portfolio, which does not meet together as a larger team.

243 The council has a framework for reviewing the skills and abilities of staff through its appraisal system and this is reasonably effective. Staff are generally well trained and up to date in terms of professional development. The I&DEA is providing support to the council’s senior managers and, although this has not cascaded down to lower levels, the interim manager who carried out recent housing service reviews has done a significant amount of mentoring and one to one coaching with junior staff and has particularly assisted in developing teambuilding, communication, time management and prioritisation skills.

244 The appraisal system is less effective in managing performance. It involves annual objective setting and six monthly reviews. There is a “grandparenting” process in place whereby senior managers review objectives set at a more junior level and corporate human resources staff pick up training and development issues. Inspectors spoke to a number of staff, however, who had not had an appraisal or review in the past 12 months and others who did not feel the process had been productive in managing their performance on a personal level. One to one sessions to discuss performance, case work and personal development were also happening more formally and frequently in some areas than in others.

245 The appraisal system is not linked to reward, which is something that key councillors would like to see changed. A “total reward package” is currently being considered which will make these links and incentivise the 39 per cent of staff who are at the top of their pay scales.
The role of the housing improvement board is evolving. It may supplement strategic management capacity in future, with partner organisations being invited to suggest how it might develop at a meeting held after this inspection.

The strategic alliance may prove to be a vehicle for enhancing capacity. It is likely that it will result in more cross border and partnership working and this may have an impact in housing. It also has the capacity to help the council realise efficiency savings and improve the quality of service delivery if appropriate emphasis is placed on cost and quality factors in its development.

The council has not sought quality accreditations, such as the Chartermark, in the past. It takes the view that it will only pursue these where the process will add value and where expenditure in terms of staff time and other resources are justified by improved outcomes for customers.

There is a performance management framework in place, but this is not fully embedded in housing. Staff do not yet feel full ownership of their targets and objectives, although they are becoming more engaged through performance clinics and associated processes. Managers acknowledge that performance problems were neglected before this system was introduced. There was a reliance on the appraisal system and a culture of setting unchallenging targets, with only limited understanding of the need for “step changes” in some areas. Councillors report that there was a failure to effectively analyse performance problems, coupled with weak management, which meant they were not made aware, for example, of the significance of not having a fit for purpose housing strategy. They are confident that management issues have now been addressed.

The current performance management system is based on a hierarchy of targets linked to the community plan, business plan and ADPs and it uses a range of local PIs as well as BVPIs. A simple electronic system highlights exceptions and “traffic lights” them. When this was first introduced managers set themselves too many high priority targets and objectives and the council was constantly failing to meet objectives. The new system also highlighted that too much project work was being done across the council at the expense of core service delivery. The system’s clarity of focus on one overall plan for each service area has allowed this to be addressed as use has evolved, however, and managers now understand how to get the best out of it.

There are quarterly corporate performance clinics where poorly performing services, such as homelessness assessment, are required to put in place action plans. These are then monitored on a weekly or monthly basis by managers and portfolio holders, with progress feeding back into the clinic. Clinics also track deferred projects to prevent slippage, look at complaints and learning, celebrate achievement and review whether additional resources are required to meet objectives, for example in the case of ensuring the housing strategy was completed on time after it fell behind schedule.

Councillors are more confident, under this system, that performance is being effectively managed. They have an appropriate role in clinics and can access more detailed information through their own secure area of the website. They acknowledge, however, that there remain weaknesses in scrutiny arrangements.
and that there is a need for greater synergy between the scrutiny programme and ADPs. There is some consensus among councillors that scrutiny should have a bigger role in driving policy review and strategy development, as well as in performance management. It should be noted, however, that scrutiny has been used more effectively in housing than in some areas. The panel has considered performance on fuel poverty and affordable housing as well as reviewing the housing, traveller and supporting people strategies over the past year.

253 The council’s philosophy is that it does not need all of its indicators to be in the top quartile by 2007/08 to achieve its overriding ambition of CPA excellence. It has taken the pragmatic decision that, in areas where local context means this is unachievable, such as bringing empty properties back into use, it will set less challenging targets. This is particularly the case in areas where no BVPIs currently exist, such as inspection of HMOs and addressing disrepair. This means that, although housing is its top priority service, only its aspects which impact on CPA assessments are actually being prioritised, in practice, for the achievement of excellence.

254 There has been little staff or partner involvement in planning in the past. The 2005/06 ADP has been developed with more middle manager and staff input than in previous years and its targets and objectives flow from those of the community plan and business plan, which have involved partners to some extent. Recent service reviews within housing do recognise, however, the need for more involvement of both staff and partners in agreeing priorities in future.

255 The council has also been ineffective in involving partners in monitoring or managing performance. Although it set up the Housing Improvement Board during 2004, this only invited partner organisations to join it shortly before the inspection. It has also failed to use other forums to consider its performance. For example, the homelessness forum has not continued to meet and review performance in the way envisaged when the homelessness strategy was written and this only began again after the inspection.

256 The identification and management of strategic risks in housing is underdeveloped. Although the council has developed a risk management framework, with operational risk groups established in each portfolio area, no risk champions have been appointed in housing because of limited staffing cover.

257 The council has been able to identify only isolated examples of customer feedback impacting on performance. This is because it has introduced service standards in very few housing service areas and an effective complaints monitoring system has been put in place so recently. We note, however, that the council considers this inspection to have been a catalyst in reopening discussions corporately around access, diversity, consultation and inclusion issues and that the weaknesses identified and recommendations made in housing will inform corporate decision making in these areas.

258 There are effective financial monitoring systems in place. Managers in housing have the skills and delegated authority to manage resources in line with priorities and have some influence over budget setting, as evidenced by staffing increases following the service reviews.
Summary

259 The council’s track record in improving housing services is not strong but its wider track record is better. There remain significant affordability, disrepair, HMO and empty property problems in the district and the council has not completed its shift in emphasis from investigation to prevention of homelessness. In recent months the council has begun to act on service reviews in housing, share learning and particularly to involve staff, but many of its housing problems have been known for some time and not addressed until recently.

260 The council’s recent service reviews and plans are more robust than in the past. They address service weaknesses and are generally SMART, although there are some sub strategies still to be developed and some resources to be identified.

261 There is now a clear vision and effective leadership in housing, with resources shifted to meet need in most areas and improving communication systems in place. The council can now make better use of its newly enhanced staff structure to fully implement and embed underdeveloped systems and particularly to improve partnership working.
### Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BVPI 62 Private Unfit Dwellings Made Fit or Demolished (%)</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>14th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BVPI 64 Number of Private Dwellings Returned to Occupation (%)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BV183a Average Length of Stay in Bed and Breakfast (Weeks)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BV183b Average Length of Stay in Hostel Accommodation</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

Before going on site and during our visit, we reviewed documents as requested on our standard document request list and a number of additional documents which the council felt would be helpful in reaching our judgements.
Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

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. These included interviews, focus groups, file checks and shadowing of staff.

We met a range of people involved with the service, including frontline staff and middle managers. We interviewed the Leader, several other councillors, the Chief Executive, various senior housing and corporate managers and representatives from a range of partner and stakeholder organisations.
Appendix 4 – Positive practice

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

The Project

262 The council employs a Portuguese speaking community development worker to support the substantial number of migrant workers employed in farming and food processing in the south of the district. This was a speedy and effective response to the poor housing, pay and working conditions they face which it had initial difficulty in addressing because of language and trust barriers.

263 The community development worker gives benefits and housing advice and signposts other services. Her success led directly to the more ambitious Work Advice and Guidance Project which assists these disadvantaged service users to progress from relatively low skilled and low paid work into a wider range of job and training opportunities. Portuguese migrants are the largest single ethnic group using this service but increasing numbers of Poles, Latvians and Lithuanians also receive help.

264 Funding for the post is through the European Social Fund (£118,414 for the period April 2004 – December 2006). Whilst overall management of the project rests with the Keystone Development Trust, the community development worker is line managed and directed in her work within the council’s housing service.
ANNUAL REPORT ON INTERNAL AUDIT – 2004/5

Summary: This report has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Accounts and Audit regulations 2003 and more particularly the CIPFA Code of Practice for Internal Audit in Local Government – 2003. It includes an opinion on the overall adequacy and effectiveness of the Council’s internal control environment, compares the audit work carried out during 2004/5 with that which was planned and gives performance information for the internal audit service.

1. INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

1.1 Since 1 April 2003 the internal audit service has been provided under a joint arrangement with Broadland, Breckland and South Norfolk Councils. The work to be delivered by the contractor is determined by the approved Audit Plan for each of those Councils and the Audit Manager of South Norfolk Council (Audit Manager) manages the arrangement under the terms of an agreement signed by the three Councils.

1.2 This contract was for an original term of 3 years with an option to extend for a possible 2 years. The Audit Manager is currently in discussions with the contractor and the section 151 officers of each of the Councils regarding whether or not to extend the contract.

1.3 Under the Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003 issued by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), the Council is required to “maintain an adequate and effective system of internal audit of its accounting records and of its system of internal control in accordance with proper internal audit practices”.

1.4 The guidance accompanying the regulations states that proper internal audit practices are those contained within the CIPFA Code of Practice for Internal Audit in Local Government – 2003.

1.5 Under that Code the person responsible for managing the internal audit function is required to submit a formal annual report to the Council on a number of specified matters. They are paragraphs 4 to 10 that follow.

2. KEY DECISION

2.1 This is not a key decision.

3. COUNCIL PRIORITIES

3.1 The matters raised in this report fall within the following Council priorities:

- A safe and healthy environment
- A well planned place to live which encourages vibrant communities
- A prosperous place to live and work

4. OVERALL ADEQUACY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF THE INTERNAL CONTROL ENVIRONMENT

4.1 The overall adequacy and effectiveness of the internal control environment is generally satisfactory, however it is compromised by the absence of proper business continuity arrangements and a lack of up to date Contract Standing Orders, Financial Regulations, Terms of Reference, whistleblowing arrangements and Code of Conduct for employees. Further information is given below.
4.2 I referred last year to the need to review the main procedural documents that are at the very core of the Council’s operations to confirm that the control environment was keeping pace with new developments and structural changes. The issued versions of Contract Standing Orders and Financial Regulations are dated October 2001 and Terms of Reference are dated October 2002. It is understood that these documents are in the process of revision. However this has been further delayed by the long term sickness of the Council’s consultant. There is now an urgent need to complete this process and approve the revised Contract Standing Orders and Financial Regulations.

4.3 The continuing absence of proper Business Continuity arrangements (with the exception of the ICT recovery plan) is a serious hindrance when considering the adequacy of the internal control environment at a strategic level and urgent action is required to address this matter. This was referred to in last year’s annual report and again in my November 2004 progress report under the heading of outstanding high priority recommendations. However, it is understood that a timetable has been drawn up, and training arranged, to develop business continuity plans across all services, to ensure that the Council complies with the terms of the Civil Contingencies Act, when they come into force in November 2005.

4.4 The lack of segregation of duties caused by staff maintaining Council Tax and NNDR records and also being involved with collection and recovery of amounts due was raised during the year.

4.3 The Chief Accountant, in his role as section 151 Officer, discussed the situation with the Revenues Income Manager and concluded that there were other controls to sufficiently reduce the risk of not having a complete segregation of duties. In the circumstances, no further action by internal audit was deemed necessary

5. **ISSUES RELEVANT TO THE STATEMENT ON INTERNAL CONTROL**

5.1 The Accounts and Audit Regulations 2003 state that the Council is responsible for ensuring that it has a “sound system of internal control”. In confirmation, the Council must produce a Statement on Internal Control to be signed by the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council. CIPFA have issued guidance regarding the specific requirements involved in this process.

5.2 Internal audit has recently completed some work to:

- assist in the preparation of this statement;
- to examine the operation of key controls for each of the main financial systems not audited during 2004/5; (N.B. all were found to be operating satisfactorily)
- to determine the status of high priority audit recommendations made during 2004/5 where the agreed action date preceded 1 April 2005.

5.3 The Chief Accountant has been charged with the preparation of the Statement on Internal Control. We have recently reported the following opinion to him.

“If regard to the Statement on Internal Control, Internal Audit now consider that:

- Previous high priority recommendations have been, or are being, addressed (N.B. this does not include recommendations arising from computer audit)
- All key systems have now been evaluated
- Elements of Corporate Governance have been addressed via the preparation and approval of key strategy and policy documents. However, there is a need to ensure that attention is given to some areas including: updating evidence and evidence files, training/induction, defining responsibilities of committees and key staff and in timetabling SIC production”

5.4 In connection with the above opinion, the following matters need to be considered for the future preparation of the Statement on Internal Control. They are the more significant issues in the Action List of the report in which the above opinion is
expressed and relate to the latest guidance on the Statement on Internal Control from CIPFA.

- reviewing the Code of Corporate Governance;
- updating the Overview and Scrutiny Commission’s terms of reference to include corporate governance and risk management responsibilities (now completed)
- the absence of up to date procedural documents such as Contract Standing Orders, Financial Regulations, Terms of Reference, the Code of Conduct for Employees and whistleblowing arrangements.
- The absence of adequate Business Continuity arrangements in all services.

6. AUDIT WORK UNDERTAKEN DURING 2004/5

6.1 The table below shows in summary the audit coverage that was planned compared with that which was delivered. Details are shown in Appendix 1 attached to this report.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Days planned (revised)</th>
<th>Days delivered</th>
<th>% of planned work delivered</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Systems audit</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>141.4</td>
<td>88.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer audit</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>96.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extra work</td>
<td>28.25</td>
<td></td>
<td>28.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>191</strong></td>
<td><strong>200.65</strong></td>
<td><strong>105.1</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6.2 The only planned work not carried out related to the audit described as Cabinet Office. The audit plan was approved prior to the management restructuring and it subsequently became apparent that the work contained within that audit was effectively covered elsewhere in the plan.

6.3 Attached at Appendix 2 are the abridged management summaries of the audit reports for each of the significant audit projects completed since the progress report you received in November 2004.

7. PERFORMANCE OF THE INTERNAL AUDIT SERVICE

7.1 The internal audit service is measured by the indicators shown in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Achievement 2003/4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work completed compared with that in the Audit Plan</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>105.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average time taken to produce draft audit reports</td>
<td>10 working days</td>
<td>9.0 working days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average time taken to produce final audit reports</td>
<td>15 working days</td>
<td>27.0 working days</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of audit recommendations accepted by management</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>94.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.2 The time taken to produce final reports is worthy of comment as it is significantly in excess of the target, although it has improved from the 31.4 working days reported to you last November.

7.3 As reported to you then, the achievement of this particular target is not entirely within the ability of the contractor to deliver as it relies for instance upon officers of the Council responding promptly to requests for meetings and is influenced adversely if relevant officers are absent. It was also affected by delays due to the management restructuring.
7.4 Nevertheless, I have told the contractor to continue to strive for further improvement and I have asked to be promptly informed if significant delays are occurring outside of their control.

8. **IMPLEMENTATION OF AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS ACCEPTED BY OFFICERS**

8.1 This committee has asked to be kept informed of the implementation of audit recommendations rated as high priority.

8.2 The current position is: -

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of high priority recommendations due for implementation by 31 March 2005</th>
<th>18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. actually implemented</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8.3 The four recommendations not fully implemented relate to IT issues and are detailed at Appendix 3. However all 4 recommendations have been partially completed.

8.4 In addition, the Audit Manager has a responsibility to follow up all agreed recommendations 6 months after publication of the audit report.

8.5 A recent review of the four IT audits carried out during 2004/5 has identified not only the non-implementation of 4 high priority recommendations referred to above but also that only 11 out of 24 medium priority recommendations have been implemented, with 5 of these being partially completed and another having compensatory controls introduced. Present proposals show revised implementation dates are between 4 and 12 months after those originally agreed, which is a cause for concern.

9. **COMPLIANCE WITH THE CIPFA CODE OF PRACTICE (THE CODE)**

9.1 The contract for the internal audit service requires the contractor to comply with the Code.

9.2 The Audit Manager has recently completed a formal review to establish the degree of compliance with the Code. The results have been supplied to the Chief Accountant. In summary the internal audit service is largely compliant with the Code apart from the existence of an internal audit strategy and terms of reference. A draft version of such a document is presently with the Chief Accountant, who is taking the strategy through the approval process.

9. **QUALITY ASSURANCE**

9.1 The internal audit contractor is required to maintain an appropriate and effective quality assurance system. A copy of their quality assurance manual has been supplied to the Audit Manager who has the right to audit that system at any time. In view of our satisfaction with the quality of work being delivered that right has not been exercised.

9.2 In addition the Audit Manager seeks to maintain the quality of the work by approving the terms of reference for each audit and examining all draft audit reports before issue.

10. **OPTIONS AVAILABLE**

10.1 To note this report

11. **REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION**

11.1 Not applicable

12. **RECOMMENDATION**

(1) That members note this report

**Appendices:**

Appendix 1 Audit work delivered compared with the Audit Plan
Appendix 2 Abridged management summaries of audit reports
Appendix 3 Outstanding audit recommendations
## AUDIT WORK DELIVERED COMPARED WITH THE AUDIT PLAN – 2004/5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project description</th>
<th>Planned days</th>
<th>Days delivered</th>
<th>Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SYSTEMS AUDIT</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waste management</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key financial controls</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council Tax &amp; NNDR**</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exchequer services**</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing Benefit**</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Property management</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet office</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>No work necessary due to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>management restructuring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL SYSTEMS AUDIT</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>141.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMPUTER AUDIT</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT contract management</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firewall and DMZ security</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Software legitimacy</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote access, 3rd party access,</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mobile computing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL COMPUTER AUDIT</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EXTRA WORK</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance indicators – quality control</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile phone enquiry</td>
<td>12.25</td>
<td></td>
<td>Completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procurement enquiry</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL EXTRA WORK</td>
<td></td>
<td>28.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Management summaries (abridged) are attached for information.
Audit of Council Tax and NNDR - Report No. BRK/05/10 issued 3 March 2005

Responsible Manager – Commercial Operations Manager

Management summary (abridged)

Audit Opinion

In respect of both Council Tax & NNDR there is a clear lack of segregation of duties between the maintaining of billing records and debt recovery responsibilities, thereby increasing the risk of any malpractice going undetected.

Control weaknesses exist within Council Tax in respect of accounts with credit balances, suppressed recovery cases and arrears cases after the summons stage, due to the absence of a regular review by a senior officer of actions taken by staff. Better control is also required over transfers of balances between accounts in respect of both Council Tax and NNDR. Without any improvement in internal control arrangements, it will continue to be difficult to have assurance that actions taken by staff have been appropriate.

Although, based upon our testing, write offs were found to be valid, the reason for writing off the debt was not always apparent in the supporting records submitted for approval in respect of both Council Tax and NNDR debts.

The Council Tax suspense account needs to be reviewed regularly, although the reason for not having done so (working on the Council Tax Base calculations for 2005/06) is noted.

Ensuring systems backups for Council Tax and NNDR are regularly tested would provide assurances that the information can be recovered when required.

Recommendations

The number of recommendations made is shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority rating</th>
<th>Number of recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The recommendations rated as high priority are:

1) Staff responsible for maintaining Council Tax/NNDR billing records should not also be involved with recovery duties and access rights to the Academy system should be restricted accordingly.

2) Credit balance reports should be checked each month. The reason for the credit balance should be verified and appropriate action taken where necessary to clear the credit. The Council Tax Manager should check, sign and date the reports as evidence that this control has been applied.

3) Monthly reports should be produced of all cases where recovery action has been suppressed. Each case should be reviewed to determine whether action is required. Each report should be signed and dated by both the reviewing officer and by the Council Tax Manager.

4) All cases submitted for write off must be accompanied with appropriate documentary evidence for justifying write off e.g. correspondence from Bailiff, Tracing Agency, Visiting Officer etc.

5) Regular reports of all transfers should be produced and reviewed by the Council Tax/NNDR Manager in order to provide assurance that each transfer is bona fide. The Council Tax/NNDR Manager should sign and date the reports in evidence of this
N.B.

- Management did not accept the first high priority recommendation and the matter is addressed in the body of the report.
- High priority recommendations 2, 4, 5 have been implemented. Recommendation 3 is not due to be implemented until 30 September 2005 although work in preparation for that is already being done.
- A timetable has been agreed for implementation of the 8 medium priority recommendations. Internal audit will be checking progress in September/October 2005.
Audit of Exchequer/Paymaster Services - Report No. BRK/05/11 issued 28 January 2005

Responsible Manager – Chief Accountant

Management summary (abridged)

Audit Opinion

Payroll

We found that controls were generally operating satisfactorily although they could be enhanced with the completion of up to date written procedures on all aspects of administering the payroll and the setting up of an authorised signatory list for approving starters, leavers and amendments to pay.

Creditors

Controls were operating satisfactorily. Nevertheless, the segregation of duties between the authorising of orders, receipt of goods and certification of invoices for payment needs to be clearly defined and adhered to. The introduction of the new purchasing system, planned for April 2005, could provide the required level of control if implemented in the appropriate manner.

Insurances

There is a need for improved controls including the completion of up to date written procedures on administering the Council’s insurances arrangements, the setting up of an insurance register and ensuring it is maintained to effectively manage and track the progress of claims. With the renewal of the insurance contract due, it would seem appropriate to review the effectiveness and suitability of the Council’s own self-insure arrangements. It is not clear as to whether the Council’s cover for IT equipment is sufficient.

Officers’ Expenses

For the most part, controls were found to be satisfactory. However, there is no review process to confirm whether officers in receipt of essential user car allowance still warrant this facility.

Leased Cars

Whilst the system for administering leased cars is adequate, introduction of independent verification of lease calculations and accurate reconciliation of lease payments/deductions would improve the control environment. Management may also wish to introduce physical inspection of applicants’ driving licences bearing in mind changes to legislation. Market testing of leased car companies would provide assurance that the best deals are being obtained by the Council.

General

Without regular testing of backups, the ability to restore data (Payroll & Creditors) could be jeopardised.

Recommendations

The number of recommendations made is shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority rating</th>
<th>Number of recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
N.B.

- Management did not accept 4 of the above recommendations and following discussion internal audit are happy about that.
- A timetable has been agreed for implementation of the remaining 17 recommendations. Internal audit will shortly be checking progress.
Audit of Housing and Council Tax Benefit - Report No. BRK/05/06 issued 14 April 2005

Responsible Manager – Commercial Operations Manager

Management summary (abridged)

Audit opinion
We found that controls were operating satisfactorily in most areas and that the change from a formal claims renewal process to the intervention process has been implemented on an appropriate basis.

However, there were some concerns over the failure to instigate legal proceeding against debtors who have not made arrangements to pay overpayment debts, problems over the recording and resourcing of the Home Visit programme and the absence of reconciliation procedures between the Council Tax / Benefits systems and backdates. In some of these areas recommendations had been made in the previous audit (Report BRK/04/03) but the agreed action had not been taken even though the agreed implementation dates had expired. As a result these recommendations have been repeated in the Action List included within this report.

Recommendations
The number of recommendations made is shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Priority rating</th>
<th>Number of recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The recommendation rated as “High” is:

Urgent action should be taken to instigate Court Action in cases where overpayment debts remain outstanding and no agreement to pay has been obtained from the debtor.

N.B.
- A timetable has been agreed for implementation of these recommendations. Internal audit will be checking in October/November 2005.
## Appendix 3
### Summary of outstanding high priority recommendations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Report details</th>
<th>Recommendation made</th>
<th>Management response at the time</th>
<th>Original implementation date</th>
<th>Current status</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Software legitimacy</strong></td>
<td>The installation of software should be restricted to users with administrative access permissions. This will ensure that only software purchased via the correct process will be installed by Steria.</td>
<td>There is a refresh of the desktop environment currently underway. The new desktop environment will allow for the desktop environment to be locked down in the manner recommended. Therefore, this control will not be fully implemented until the refresh is complete.</td>
<td>End 2004</td>
<td>Partially implemented Steria have commenced the rollout of the Lock Down Policy and should have this completed by end September 2005.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report No. BRK/05/05 issued 23 July 2004</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A record of the licences purchased,</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>As above</td>
<td>End 2004</td>
<td>Now completed BelManage application implemented June 2005.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>where the software is installed and when</strong></td>
<td>A record of the licences purchased, where the software is installed and when appropriate, the disposal date should be maintained in a software asset register. An IT Asset Management application may be the most effective way of managing this process.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>appropriate,</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>the disposal date should be maintained</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>in a software asset register.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>An IT Asset Management application</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>may be the most effective way of managing this process.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Downloads of software from the Internet</strong></td>
<td>Downloads of software from the Internet should be prevented</td>
<td>As above</td>
<td>End 2004</td>
<td>Partially implemented Steria have commenced the rollout of the Lock Down Policy and should have this completed by end September 2005.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>should be prevented</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IT Remote access service and mobile computing</strong></td>
<td>Downloads of software from the Internet should be prevented</td>
<td>As above</td>
<td>End 2004</td>
<td>Partially implemented Steria have commenced the rollout of the Lock Down Policy and should have this completed by end September 2005.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report No. BRK/05/09 issued 21 October 2004</td>
<td>The Council should consider the security regarding the use of mobile devices. It should ensure that data loaded onto laptops receives the same level of security protection as that provided for data stored on the corporate network. This matter should be addressed in the</td>
<td>The vast majority of laptops are built with Windows XP which require a username and login so there are security controls in place. The issue of mobile security will however be considered as part of the Security Policy Review.</td>
<td>January 2005</td>
<td>Partially implemented This recommendation is to be considered further as part of the ICT Security Policy review in <strong>September 2005</strong>.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IT Remote access service and mobile computing</strong></td>
<td>The Council should consider the security regarding the use of mobile devices. It should ensure that data loaded onto laptops receives the same level of security protection as that provided for data stored on the corporate network. This matter should be addressed in the</td>
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<td>January 2005</td>
<td>Partially implemented This recommendation is to be considered further as part of the ICT Security Policy review in <strong>September 2005</strong>.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>IT Remote access service and mobile computing</strong></td>
<td>The Council should consider the security regarding the use of mobile devices. It should ensure that data loaded onto laptops receives the same level of security protection as that provided for data stored on the corporate network. This matter should be addressed in the</td>
<td>The vast majority of laptops are built with Windows XP which require a username and login so there are security controls in place. The issue of mobile security will however be considered as part of the Security Policy Review.</td>
<td>January 2005</td>
<td>Partially implemented This recommendation is to be considered further as part of the ICT Security Policy review in <strong>September 2005</strong>.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

81
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Report details</th>
<th>Recommendation made</th>
<th>Management response at the time</th>
<th>Original implementation date</th>
<th>Current status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT Security Policy or a supplementary policy which is authorised and distributed.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>As stated in the Final Report, the majority of laptops run Windows XP, and all new laptops are installed with this version of the operating system, which provides a reasonable level of password and file security. Additionally, Terminal Server is being used for remote access where possible so that files are not being stored locally.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the information of Members, this report summarises the present position in regard to the review of public toilets.

1. Immediate action – Continue to monitor cleaning and maintenance of toilets, pressure jetting maintaining the décor.

2. Refurbishment of toilets – One toilet in each town to be refurbished providing the Town Council agrees to take on the future maintenance. The toilet would be transferred together with a commuted sum to cover future maintenance and cleaning.

3. Consideration is being given to instructing an Architect to produce a specification and budget to refurbish the toilets. The specification will be subject to agreement with the Town Councils and that they will take over the toilet once the refurbishment is completed.

4. Enquiries are also being made with a view to obtaining outside assistance to manage the refurbishment project.

5. The Specification for refurbishment will be low energy, low maintenance, easy care.

6. The timescale for refurbishment is between Christmas and Easter.

7. The level of complaints is reducing.
The Forward Plan shows key decisions that the Council is likely to make over the next four months.

**Key decisions are:**
1. A decision to approve or recommend to Council any matters relating to a Policy or Plan.
2. A decision made in connection with setting the Council Tax.
3. Expenditure or savings are normally significant if they exceed 25% of the budget for a service or function.
4. A decision which significantly affects the community in more than one ward.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PORTFOLIO / MATTER FOR KEY DECISION</th>
<th>Item Ref. No. (Click for more details)</th>
<th>DECISION EXPECTED TO UNDERTAKE</th>
<th>DATE OR PERIOD WHEN DECISION LIKELY</th>
<th>CONSULTATION</th>
<th>DOCUMENTS AVAILABLE</th>
<th>WHO WILL MAKE DECISION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Cabinet Office                     | FP 1/05                              | To approve the revised Constitution | Changed from September 2005 to December 2005  
See FP1/05 for reasons | Continued internal consultation | Report when prepared | Council |
| Environment Open Spaces Policy     | FP 3/05                              | To agree a policy                | Changed from Summer 2005 to Winter 2005  
See FP3/05 for reasons | Community consultation | Report when prepared | Cabinet to make recommendation to Council |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PORTFOLIO / MATTER FOR KEY DECISION</th>
<th>Item Ref. No.</th>
<th>DECISION EXPECTED TO UNDERTAKE</th>
<th>DATE OR PERIOD WHEN DECISION LIKELY</th>
<th>CONSULTATION</th>
<th>DOCUMENTS AVAILABLE</th>
<th>WHO WILL MAKE DECISION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commercial Operations</td>
<td>FP 10/05</td>
<td>To release £1 million + capital and revenue for joint venture project between the Council and Crown Estates to develop a 44 acre Thetford site to create a quality business enterprise park targeted at the advanced engineering and motor sport sectors.</td>
<td>Changed from Sept/Oct 2005 to December 2005 See FP10/05 for reasons</td>
<td>Internal</td>
<td>Report when prepared</td>
<td>Cabinet to recommend to Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment (Housing)</td>
<td>FP 11/05</td>
<td>To adopt a policy</td>
<td>Changed from July 2005 to September 2005 See FP11/05 for reasons</td>
<td>Community/Stakeholder/Schools</td>
<td>Report, schedule of responses to public consultation, policy</td>
<td>Cabinet to recommend to Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Engagement</td>
<td>FP 12/05</td>
<td>To adopt the Local Strategic Partnership’s Cultural Strategy</td>
<td>March 2005</td>
<td>Public consultation to include: public meetings, focus groups and questionnaires</td>
<td>Report when prepared</td>
<td>Cabinet to recommend to Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial Operations</td>
<td>FP 14/05</td>
<td>To adopt the Local Strategic Partnership’s Economic Prosperity Strategy</td>
<td>March 2006</td>
<td>Consultation arrangements are being coordinated through Mary Davis of OPERA who is coordinating all corporate consultation needs.</td>
<td>Report when prepared</td>
<td>Cabinet to recommend to Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PORTFOLIO / MATTER FOR KEY DECISION</td>
<td>Item Ref. No. (Click for more details)</td>
<td>DECISION EXPECTED TO UNDERTAKE</td>
<td>DATE OR PERIOD WHEN DECISION LIKELY</td>
<td>CONSULTATION</td>
<td>DOCUMENTS AVAILABLE</td>
<td>WHO WILL MAKE DECISION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
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<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Engagement</td>
<td>FP 21/05</td>
<td>To agree the Council’s capital contribution to the scheme.</td>
<td>September 2005</td>
<td>No recent external consultation</td>
<td>Various update reports to OMs, Executive Board on the progress of the scheme</td>
<td>Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People First</td>
<td>FP 22/05</td>
<td>To approve a Strategy for improving Customer Service, Communications and Customer Satisfaction.</td>
<td>October 2005</td>
<td>Internal and External Consultations</td>
<td>Report when prepared</td>
<td>Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People First</td>
<td>FP 23/05</td>
<td>To implement a programme of improvement to the Council’s Presence Offices</td>
<td>October 2005</td>
<td>Internal and External Consultations</td>
<td>Report when prepared</td>
<td>Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet Office</td>
<td>FP 24/05</td>
<td>To adopt the revised Comprehensive Equality Policy, Equality Strategy and Race Equality Scheme</td>
<td>December 2005</td>
<td>Draft Policy will be distributed among stakeholders for comments as part of the Equality Strategy consultation</td>
<td>Policy and report when prepared</td>
<td>Cabinet to recommend to Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial Operations</td>
<td>FP 25/05</td>
<td>To adopt the Framework for Land Management</td>
<td>September 2005</td>
<td>Internal and committee consultation</td>
<td>Report when prepared – to replace policy as per Cabinet minute no. 304/01</td>
<td>Cabinet to recommend to Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment (Housing)</td>
<td>FP 26/05</td>
<td>To adopt policies required to implement provisions of new legislation</td>
<td>September 2005</td>
<td>Internal and external</td>
<td>Cabinet report when prepared.</td>
<td>Cabinet to recommend to Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PORTFOLIO / MATTER FOR KEY DECISION</td>
<td>Item Ref. No.</td>
<td>DECISION EXPECTED TO UNDERTAKE</td>
<td>DATE OR PERIOD WHEN DECISION LIKELY</td>
<td>CONSULTATION</td>
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<td>WHO WILL MAKE DECISION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment (Housing)</td>
<td>FP 27/05</td>
<td>To adopt the Rural East Anglia Sub Regional Housing Strategy 2005-2009</td>
<td>December 2005</td>
<td>Internal and external</td>
<td>Report when complete Appendices; Final Draft of Strategy and Error! Bookmark not defined. Details of partnership to deliver strategy</td>
<td>Cabinet to recommend to Council</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet Office</td>
<td>FP 28/05</td>
<td>To approve the Internal Audit Strategy and Terms of Reference</td>
<td>December 2005</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Report to follow</td>
<td>Cabinet to recommend to Council</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>