

Strategic Housing Services

Oxford City Council

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Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

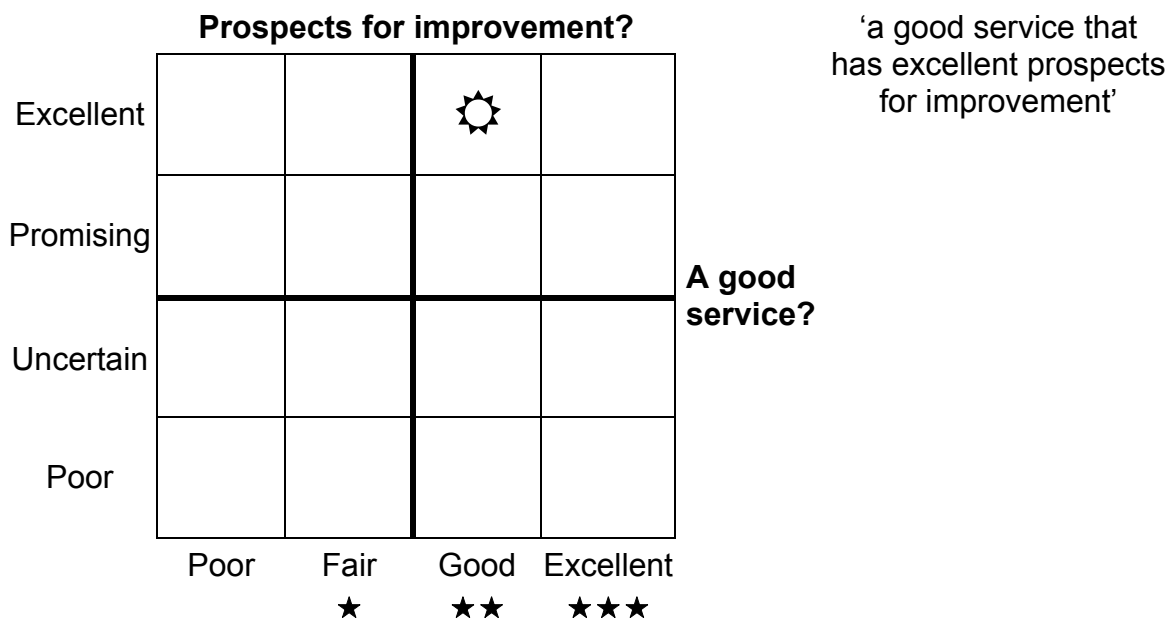
Summary

- 1 Oxford City Council provides a good strategic housing service that has excellent prospects for improvement.
- 2 There are a number of strengths. An up-to-date and comprehensive information base provides a good understanding of housing markets. This, together with effective public consultation and strong partnership working, has been used to develop a strong set of housing strategies and plans. The effective use of planning powers has resulted in a high number of good quality affordable homes being developed. A proactive approach to prevention is reducing the number of people becoming homeless and the Council is successful in finding accommodation for people in need through both the private rented sector and housing associations. Poor conditions in the private rented sector are being tackled well, particularly in relation to the large stock of houses in multiple occupation. Effective measures are taken to support vulnerable people in their own homes, with disabled adaptations provided promptly. The Council has been successful in driving efficiency gains within the service and using some of the savings to meet its key housing priorities.
- 3 However, there are still some weaknesses. An absence of comprehensive service standards and limited monitoring of customer satisfaction mean that opportunities for learning and improvement are not being maximised. Information on the needs of diverse groups is not comprehensive and diversity monitoring is not used to shape service delivery. There is not a robust approach to inspecting all accommodation used to house homeless applicants and the Council has not yet been successful in establishing an accreditation scheme for private landlords. Further work is required to establish if high expenditure on some strategic housing services represents value for money.
- 4 Prospects for improvement are excellent. In addition to having a strong set of housing strategies and plans, the Council has a track record of significant improvements in relation to housing over the past few years. Partnership working on strategic housing issues is particularly strong and the Oxford Strategic Partnership plays an active and innovative role in strategic development. Staff and councillors work constructively together with a shared purpose. Strong scrutiny by councillors of affordable housing delivery, together with generally effective performance management arrangements, ensures that weaknesses are addressed and plans and targets implemented. The Council is self aware and learns from others and its own experience. The Council has the staff, skills and general capacity to deliver the improvements set out in its strategies and plans.

Scoring the service

- 5 We have assessed Oxford City Council as providing a ‘good’, two-star service that has excellent prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 6 We found the service to be good because of the following strengths.
- Housing services are easily accessible through a centrally located Housing Options reception and written information is comprehensive and readily available.
 - Housing services and accommodation meet the needs of excluded and vulnerable groups including single homeless people and rough sleepers.
 - Effective public consultation is carried out which has influenced housing policies and strategies.
 - An up-to-date and comprehensive information base provides a good understanding of housing markets.
 - A comprehensive set of aligned strategies and plans supports a coordinated approach to delivery of strategic housing services.

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.

- Strong and effective partnership working adds to the Council's understanding of the local housing market and the development of effective solutions.
 - A proactive approach to prevention, particularly for vulnerable groups, is reducing the number of people who become homeless.
 - Effective use is made of the private rented sector to find accommodation for homeless people.
 - Poor conditions in the private rented sector are being tackled proactively with a strong focus on improving the large stock of houses in multiple occupation.
 - Effective measures are taken to support vulnerable people to stay independent within their own homes, with disabled adaptations provided promptly.
 - A robust planning framework clearly determines the type, tenure, density and affordability of new housing.
 - A high number of good quality affordable homes are being delivered.
 - The Council has been successful in making efficiency gains within the service, with some savings re-invested to meet key housing priorities.
- 7 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:
- service standards are not in place for all of the strategic housing service and the Council does not capture customer feedback and satisfaction consistently to drive improvements;
 - information on the needs of diverse groups is not comprehensive and diversity monitoring is not used to shape service delivery in this area;
 - the approach to reducing the number of empty homes is under-developed;
 - there is not a robust approach to inspecting all accommodation used to house homeless applicants;
 - the Council has not been successful in establishing an accreditation scheme for private landlords; and
 - the comparative costs of some strategic housing services are high and Council cannot yet fully demonstrate whether expenditure in these areas represents value for money.
- 8 The service has excellent prospects for improvement because there is:
- an excellent track record in delivering sustained outcomes that customers recognise;
 - an impressive record of implementing plans and responding well to the recommendations of external organisations;
 - a high degree of shared ambitions and commitment to strategic housing among councillors, managers, staff and partners;
 - effective, detailed scrutiny of affordable housing by councillors;

8 Strategic Housing Services | Scoring the service

- a coherent hierarchy of plans shows how housing plans fit into an overall framework;
- openness to learning from others and from previous experience;
- a strong and generally well applied performance management framework; and
- a strong capacity to improve supported by skilled and enthusiastic staff and effective partnerships.

9 There are a few of barriers to improvement. These include:

- there are some areas of the service in which targets are not clearly set and monitored;
- the Council is not using post-project appraisals to help it to learn about ways of improving in the future; and
- the amount of capital funding that is available to support improvement is very limited.

Recommendations

- 10 In order to rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs¹ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve the approach to access and customer care by:

- *establishing in partnership with service users a comprehensive range of challenging and measurable service standards for all aspects of delivery;*
- *developing systems to capture user feedback across all areas of service and using this to inform future service development;*
- *improving the consistency of written information across all areas of service delivery; and*
- *continuing the programme of equality impact assessments for all areas of service in line with the Council's wider timetable and making the changes that are necessary to ensure that services are provided fairly to all sections of the community.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved accountability to customers;
- improved customer satisfaction; and
- improved and more equitable access to services.

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

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

Recommendation

R2 Use performance management systems more effectively to drive improvement and achieve value for money by:

- *ensuring that all service plans include measurable outcomes;*
- *developing comprehensive strategic housing performance reports that highlight outcomes in making best use of the existing stock as well as the completion of new homes;*
- *setting value for money targets and routinely reviewing value for money of all strategic housing services; and*
- *introducing post project appraisals and using information available from partners on new housing developments.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- an enhanced ability to take a broad overview of performance;
- raised awareness of how services are performing and what success looks like; and
- improved cost effectiveness of services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by October 2008.

Recommendation

R3 Improve the approach to work in the private sector by:

- *developing a better understanding of and effective strategic approach to the reduction in the number of long term empty homes;*
- *engaging more effectively with private sector landlords and their agents; and*
- *ensuring that older and disabled people continue to receive the help that they need to maintain their independence.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved quality of private rented accommodation;
- more efficient use of the housing stock; and
- an improved range of services for older and vulnerable home owners.

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

- 11 We would like to thank the staff of Oxford City Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 12 to 16 May 2008.

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Report

Context

The locality

- 12 Oxford City Council is one of five district councils within Oxfordshire covering an area of 17.6 square miles. Oxford is best known for its world class university and is also an important centre of tourism, car manufacturing and light industry. The city is predominantly urban, with a high population density. However, significant areas of the city are of high landscape or heritage value and there are significant planning challenges. For example, 27 per cent of the land area is green belt, 20 per cent is located on flood plains and 17 per cent of the city has conservation status.
- 13 The city's population is growing. The 2001 Census put the population at 135,500 but 2007 population projections now estimate it to be 149,100¹. The number of households also increased by around 10,000 between 1991 and 2006, and is projected to increase further from an estimated 55,854 in 2006 to 74,500 by 2026, putting increased pressure on housing. Compared to other areas, the city has a young age profile, with two-thirds of the population under 40 and just 15 per cent aged over 60. The city is also diverse with an estimated black and minority ethnic (BME) population of 12.9 per cent at the 2001 Census (compared to 9.1 per cent for England and 4.9 per cent for the region). This includes established Chinese, South Asian and Black African/Caribbean communities, as well as more recent arrivals from Eastern Europe.
- 14 The resident population is increased by a substantial student population. Over 25,000 attend Oxford University and Oxford Brookes University each year and there is also a high volume of language students. This again places housing pressure on the city, especially the private rented sector. It is estimated that up to 10,000 students occupy 3,000 of the city's properties at any one time.
- 15 The local economy is generally healthy with only one of the city's 24 wards falling in the worst 10 per cent of wards in England and an overall deprivation ranking of 159th out of 354 Councils in 2004. Levels of unemployment in the city at December 2007 were equal to levels in the South East (1.3 per cent) but below the national average of 2.1 per cent. However, pockets of deprivation exist, notably on the Council's larger estates at Blackbird Leys, Barton and Rose Hill, all of which are located on the periphery of the city. The condition of the private rented sector is also an issue, with large concentrations of homes in multiple occupation in the east of the city, some of which are in a poor state of repair.

¹ Office of National Statistics (ONS)

- 16 In terms of housing tenure, levels of owner occupation in the city are among the lowest in the county (56.1 per cent, compared to a South East average of 76 per cent and national average of 69 per cent). In contrast, there is a very large private rented sector (22.1 per cent) and a sizeable social rented sector (21.8 per cent). Restricted land supply and a growing, generally prosperous population have resulted in high house prices, with prices increasing by 90 per cent between 2000 and 2006. Between January and March 2008, average house prices in the City were £345,231 (compared to the regional average of £263,740 and national average of £218,112). Oxford is one of the least affordable district in the South and levels of homelessness are among the highest in the region. A housing market analysis carried out in 2007 identified a need for affordable housing for a minimum of 3,050 households now due to overcrowding and rising to an annual need of up to 7,000 – 7,500 by 2026.

The Council

- 17 Oxford City Council consists of 48 councillors, with two councillors elected for each of the 24 wards. Following the elections in May 2008 the Council changed from no overall control to a minority Labour administration which holds 23 of the seats. The remainder of the seats are held as follows: Liberal Democrats (15), Green Party (7); and Independent Working Class (2). One seat is currently vacant.
- 18 The Council was rated as a 'weak' council when its comprehensive performance assessment took place in 2004. The weak rating reflected significant shortfalls in the quality of services and the capacity to achieve its ambitions and priorities, including shortfalls in capital funds. Performance management and systems for learning were also judged to be under-developed. A decent homes standard diagnostic carried out at the same time rated performance at level C (high need for improvement). Overall housing management performance in delivery terms was mixed and funding shortfalls were identified in terms of the long-term sustainability of the housing revenue account.
- 19 The annual audit and inspection letter for 2007/08 paints a more positive picture of the Council's performance, with the pace of change and improvement being described as impressive. There has been concerted cross-party leadership in pursuit of a more ambitious level of overall improvement. By restructuring the Council's management arrangements, it is beginning to direct its resources to respond more effectively to the future needs of the city, as well as to the needs of the residents and organisations.
- 20 Value for money (VFM) remains the Council's most significant challenge. Its overall performance on VFM has not improved relative to other councils as a result of its significant high costs. This limits some of the otherwise good progress on service improvement. This issue is now being addressed as a matter of priority, with ambitious savings targets set for both 2007/08 and 2008/09.

The service

- 21 This inspection covered the Council's strategic approach to housing and encompassed housing strategy and related strategies such as private sector renewal and homelessness, housing needs, enabling the provision of new affordable housing and planning. It is concerned primarily with challenging whether the Council and its partners are taking the right steps to alleviating the considerable pressures for accessing good quality, affordable housing in the city.
- 22 A recent restructuring means that all the key services involved in the delivery of strategic housing - City Development, Community Housing Development and Environmental Development - are within the responsibility of the same corporate directorate of City Regeneration. External providers also play a key role in delivering strategic housing objectives including housing associations, advice agencies and the County Council.
- 23 The service draws on a broad range of funding streams. The Council's general fund has allocated a total budget of £4,194,771 for community housing expenditure in 2008/09 including £1,450,972 for homeless accommodation, £766,043 for Home Choice and £132,625 for the single homelessness (rough sleeping) and housing development service. A budget of £800,000 is allocated for housing grants.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 24** The Community Strategy published in 2004 focuses on five key themes.
- A vibrant and inclusive economy.
 - Safer communities.
 - A better living environment.
 - Opportunities for life.
 - Active and healthy communities.
- 25** A draft Oxford Sustainable Community Strategy (2008-2012) has been prepared to replace the current strategy. It lists five flagship issues with affordable housing being listed as the top issue to which the Oxford Strategic Partnership can add value.
- 26** The Corporate Plan 2008-2011 describes the Council's vision as to become a world class city. The Plan sets out six key priorities.
- Provide more housing for Oxford, better housing for all.
 - Reduce inequality through social inclusion.
 - Improve Oxford's environment, economy and quality of life.
 - Reduce and prevent crime and anti-social behaviour.
 - Tackle climate change and promote environmental resource management.
 - Be an effective and responsive organisation, providing value for money service.
- 27** The Housing Strategy is currently under review. The current published strategy (2003-2008) lists the following housing objectives.
- Increase the supply of housing for people in need.
 - Improve the affordability of housing in Oxford.
 - Increase opportunities for choice and mobility within the housing stock.
 - Improve the condition of housing in Oxford.
 - Reduce homelessness in Oxford.
 - Improve housing-related services for everyone who needs to use them.
 - Improve the environment on estates and in areas of decline.
 - Develop housing strategy and policy work to support service improvements.
 - Address financial pressures on the Council for housing-related services.

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

Access and customer care

- 28 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in relation to access and customer care. Arrangements for gaining access to housing related services are flexible and ensure that hard to reach groups can access services that they need. Information about housing services are clearly publicised in printed form and on the Council's website. Effective public consultation influences housing policies and strategies. However, the Council is not capturing and learning from customer feedback in a systematic way; there is not a full set of housing related service standards; and performance in answering telephone calls is inconsistent and in some areas it is weak.
- 29 There are flexible access arrangements for people seeking housing-related services. The Housing Options team is located in central Oxford and provides advice and assistance to callers without the need for an appointment. The service is also accessible by telephone with one central number for all housing needs services. Outside of working hours an emergency duty officer is accessible through a freephone number. Outreach services are also available to provide advice and support to people living in night shelter accommodation and to people using the Youth Offending Service. Environmental health and planning services are also accessible through centrally based receptions. These arrangements help to ensure that customers receive timely access to support and services.
- 30 Steps are taken to reach people living in remote areas and individuals who are hard to reach. An assertive outreach service works out on the streets and has a great deal of knowledge of rough sleepers in the city. Housing Options, Allocations and Temporary Accommodation staff all carry out home visits. A Corporate One Stop Shop has been opened in East Oxford, an area of high housing need. These arrangements ensure that services are targeted at those with the highest needs.
- 31 A range of high quality printed leaflets provide useful information on the services that the Council and its partners provide. Of particular note is a Homeless Survival Guide which gives a wide range of useful information about the role that various agencies play to support people with housing problems. This information is also available on the Council's comprehensive website which has a dedicated section covering community housing issues. The site is easy to navigate and there are clear links with a separate site covering the choice-based lettings system. All community housing and landlord services leaflets have recently been revised and have a consistent format. Equally, all of the Council's Local Development Framework (LDF) documents to date and the 2001/16 Local Plan satisfy the requirements of the Plain Language Commission. Leaflets from other related services including Environmental Health, Benefits and Planning are in different formats and do not all carry a translation strap line or publication date. However, the quality and content of leaflets generally helps people to understand the range of options and support available.

- 32** Effective public consultation is carried out before new policies and strategies are introduced. A range of mechanisms have been used to ensure that community views have an influence on strategic decisions. Service users living in temporary accommodation and the night shelter were specifically consulted over the homeless strategy. A key message from the group was the need for help in obtaining training and access to employment and this is now being reflected in the revised strategy. The citizen's (Talkback) panel of some 1,000 residents receives four surveys per year. These have included consultation on the homeless and housing strategies and specific issues such as the extension of HMO licensing. This helps to ensure that policies and strategies reflect the aspirations of the community.
- 33** Area committees play a variable role in terms of consultation. Area committees have had some impact in shaping housing strategy; in particular, the East Committee was influential in proposals to extend HMO registration. However, the effectiveness of area committees as a method of public consultation varies. In some areas they have been used well and there is strong participation from voluntary groups but this is not consistent across all committees. Public ability to shape policy may be limited by the variable role of area committees.
- 34** Public consultation over planning issues is strong. The approach to consultation on the Local Development Framework is positive. The statement of community involvement meets planning regulations on consultation, is integrated into community strategy consultation arrangements, promotes early engagement using a wide range of existing and tailored forms of consultation, is adequately resourced and will be regularly reviewed. The Council uses a variety of means to ensure that all of the population has a reasonable opportunity to comment on the LDF. Lectures to students are used to capture the views of some of the younger population; accessible venues are used for displays to ensure that disabled people are not excluded; displays and mailshots are targeted on places where responses are known to be low; and consultations are timed to ensure that they do not conflict with school runs or other busy times. A particularly imaginative approach has been to make use of a car factory canteen to consult with blue collar workers at one of the biggest local employers. Shifting away from traditional forms of consultation will help the Council to gain more representative feedback on its proposals. However, although the service has a good understanding about who is responding to consultation by age (mainly over 45s) it has not so far assessed how diverse consultees are in other respects.

- 35** Strategic housing complaints are dealt with effectively. Problems identified in the Audit Commission's Citizens Engagement and Access Report (October 2007) have been addressed. There are clear and published arrangements for dealing with complaints handling. Each department has an identified officer responsible for managing complaints handling and there is a corporate tracking system to ensure responses are handled according to policy. Complaints are systematically recorded and show whether a complaint relates to staff behaviour, disputed decision, service delivery or is policy-related. Community housing logged relatively few complaints in the past year (20 between April 2007 and January 2008), mostly related to housing allocations. All these complaints were acknowledged and fully responded to promptly, without the need to escalate to stage two. Arrangements will be further improved with the introduction of Customer Relations Management software scheduled for the end of 2008.
- 36** The Council is not capturing or learning from user feedback in a systematic way. Satisfaction with housing or other homelessness prevention work is not routinely surveyed. Exit surveys have been trialled but have not proved successful. There is satisfaction monitoring of the recipients of private sector grants and these show a high level of satisfaction (over 90 per cent) but people using the private sector housing service who do not subsequently receive grants are not surveyed. Only limited use has been made of satisfaction surveys for those living in temporary accommodation. Although housing associations carry out surveys of residents moving into new homes this information is not shared with the Council. The failure to carry out comprehensive satisfaction surveys and to analyse and share the results means that there is a risk that services will not become more responsive to customers needs and previous mistakes could be repeated.
- 37** There is not a full set of housing related service standards. The citizen engagement and access report found that the Council's overall approach to using customer service standards is inconsistent, and compliance with standards is not monitored or enforced across all services. This situation is also reflected in housing related services. Housing needs service standards exist but some are not measurable. Environmental Health service standards are in draft format but have yet to be publicised. This means that service users are not fully aware of the quality of service to expect, limiting their ability to judge its performance.
- 38** Responsiveness to telephone calls is inconsistent and, in some areas, weak. The Council's reports indicate a wide variation in performance in answering telephone calls. In 2007/08, 8.46 per cent of calls were abandoned in Environmental Health, 10.19 per cent in Planning and 14.8 per cent in Community Housing. Twenty four per cent of calls to Council Tax and Benefits were abandoned. These figures do not show some very wide variations during the course of the year, nor improvements which are recorded during the year and some caution has to be taken in interpreting the statistics as they include days when offices are closed for public holidays. The average ring time before a call is answered is between seven and eight seconds for all service areas but with much longer waiting times at peak periods when callers are left waiting for an average of six minutes. Both actual performance and systems for recording performance need to improve.

Diversity

- 39** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in relation to diversity. The Council has been slow to strengthen its approach to equalities and diversity but it has now developed a range of clear, related strategies which should result in improved services for minority groups. Housing services are accessible and a broad range of services and accommodation meet the needs of excluded and vulnerable groups. However, information on the needs of diverse groups is not comprehensive and monitoring of services is not being used to shape service delivery. Robust equality impact assessments have been carried out in some, but not all, areas and there are some gaps in staff training on diversity.
- 40** The Council has been slow to strengthen the corporate approach to equality and diversity. The Council is at level one of the Local Government Equality Scheme, which is the lowest level.¹ There are a number of improvements required before it can achieve level two, including the completion of equality impact assessments (EIAs) and the development of monitoring systems. Corporate leadership has been strengthened, with the Chief Executive and Leader identified as equalities champions. Equalities issues are now embedded in all service plans and progress on delivering against targets is challenged at monthly performance boards. This is providing a stronger focus on diversity and equality issues.
- 41** The Council has demonstrated that it has strong ambitions in relation to diversity and equality. It has developed a range of related strategies to deliver its objective of being a 'world class city for everyone'. It has developed a corporate disability scheme and housing features strongly in the social inclusion strategy. A BME housing strategy has been adopted, which sets out three key strands of research, equality of opportunity and social inclusion. An older persons housing strategy sets out a clear range of actions which if implemented will have a positive impact on older people's lives. The development of clear ambitions and strategies is helping to deliver an improvement focus on equality and diversity issues.
- 42** Some arrangements are in place to promote accessibility to services. All the Council's public access points meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act and have level access and lowered counters. Translation and interpretation facilities are available on request. The housing management information system prompts staff where there is a record of communication difficulties. A portable hearing loop is used for public meetings and is available within the main reception area on request. This is important in helping to ensure that people are not excluded from receiving help and assistance.

¹ In 2006/07 105 councils were at level 1 but 274 councils were between level 2 and 5 (BVPI 2a)

- 43 A broad range of services and accommodation exist to meet the needs of excluded and vulnerable groups. There is a good range of services in place for single homeless people and rough sleepers. These cover the full pathway from rough sleeping through to independence and are tailored to different groups; for example there is a dedicated shelter for 16-25 year olds, with over 25 years old sheltered separately. There is also a relatively healthy overall supply of supported housing and Supporting People¹ services in Oxford. The City attracts a high proportion of the Supporting People budget and services for single homeless people are particularly well supported. The Bridge, the night shelter and women's refuges all provide emergency options for people fleeing domestic violence. These resources, together with lists of family support centres and the police domestic violence unit, are well-sign posted in housing leaflets.
- 44 New affordable housing developments meet high standards in terms of disability. All new homes must be built to the Lifetimes Homes standard. New sites integrate housing for a diverse range of needs, including a redeveloped school site which includes an assisted person bungalow to provide care and support to five tenants and accommodates an overnight carer. This approach helps to ensure that vulnerable and excluded groups become integrated into communities.
- 45 There is a lack of comprehensive information on the needs of some minority groups. The housing requirements study carried out in 2004 and a BME homeless study carried out in 2005 informed the strategies for BME and older people. However, the Council recognises that further analysis is required, especially of those BME communities where incidence of homelessness is high. Monitoring of applications and homelessness statistics is undertaken but there has been limited use of this data in shaping the delivery of services. Equally, the planning service has little useful information about the diversity of people who are applying for or responding to planning applications, or on the diversity of complainants. Knowledge of some other vulnerable groups is stronger. There is detailed knowledge of the rough sleeper community, in terms of numbers, those at risk, and in most cases, individual need. But without a comprehensive understanding of needs to help shape future strategies, there remains a risk that services will not be tailored to meet particular needs.

¹ Supporting People is the government funded programme which enables the provision of housing related support services

- 46 The approach to undertaking equality impact assessments (EIAs) is patchy. The Council has adopted a clear three-year plan for carrying out EIAs of all services and policies and has supported this approach with staff training. However, the quality of assessments to date has been mixed. For example, the EIA for housing needs provides a robust analysis of the choice based lettings (CBL) system and the impact it may have on race, disability, age, gender, religion belief and sexual orientation. Data has been analysed from a wide range of sources including national statistics and lettings reports. The assessment has looked closely at possible barriers to being housed and steps have been undertaken to address these. In contrast, EIAs carried out on the homes in multiple occupation (HMO) and disabled facilities grant (DFG) policies do not examine the barriers that might exist and have not used consultation to obtain a customer viewpoint. Where EIAs have been completed well, they have a positive impact, for example in ensuring that disabled people are not excluded from applying for housing.
- 47 Some staff and councillors have yet to receive training to understand the needs of different communities. All new staff and councillors receive induction training which covers diversity and equality, but long serving staff and councillors have not received any mandatory training in recent years. New service plans do however now make this mandatory. Without effective training, the Council will be less able to respond to and empathise with the needs of the whole community.

Strategic approach to housing

- 48 Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses in relation to the strategic approach to housing. An up-to-date and comprehensive information base provides a good understanding of housing markets. A set of aligned strategies and plans together with effective partnership working supports a coordinated approach to delivery. A strong planning framework clearly determines the type, tenure, density and affordability of new housing to be provided and regeneration is providing an integrated approach to creating new housing and employment.
- 49 The Council has a strong understanding of the dynamics of local and sub-regional housing markets. Through working closely in partnership with neighbouring councils there is robust and up-to-date information about housing markets. A county-wide housing market assessment was commissioned by the Oxfordshire Housing Partnership and published in January 2008. Oxford's strategic housing land availability assessment is nearing completion and will identify the land that will deliver the housing that the city needs. There is comprehensive data on the condition of the housing stock based on a private sector survey carried out in 2004 and a rolling survey of council housing stock. A high awareness of the nature and scale of the problems it faces means that the Council is well placed to identify the type of corrective action needed.

- 50 The Council's strategies are based on a comprehensive understanding of demand and need for affordable housing. The housing requirements study 2004 set out the level of need and desired tenures of affordable housing in Oxford. Data on the needs of homeless people is collected in a range of ways. A rough sleepers study was undertaken by Shelter, and an annual user survey is carried out by the housing needs section. The balance of dwellings study 2007 conducted research into the need for different sizes of housing in Oxford, in particular the need for family housing. The housing viability study 2004 and planning obligations viability study 2007 provided additional evidence which ensures that even where development costs are abnormally high the proportion of affordable housing is maximised. Planning policies require accommodation to be developed by colleges to meet any increases in student population and sites are earmarked in the Local Plan solely for student accommodation. The strong evidence of demand has helped to maximise delivery of affordable housing through the planning system and ensure that that the right type of accommodation is provided in the right locations.
- 51 Strong and effective partnership working adds to the Council's understanding of the local housing market and the development of effective solutions.
- The Oxfordshire Housing Partnership has been influential in ensuring that housing features prominently in the new Local Area Agreement (LAA).
 - Close working relations with the county's Supporting People team means that there is a detailed and shared understanding of the needs and demands for supported housing in the city.
 - Research jointly commissioned between the City and County Council has shown that improvements can be made when service providers help users to be better prepared for independent living. This has led to changes in specifications for hostel accommodation.
 - There is a high degree of partnership with health services, particularly in relation to the health needs of homeless people and families.
 - The Oxfordshire Data Observatory, a partnership between city, district and county councils, Oxfordshire primary care trust ('the PCT') and others, provides a broad range of statistical information.
 - Regular dialogue with the educational establishments ensures that the Council has a good understanding of student projections and the needs for student accommodation are built into planning policy.

This ensures that the development of housing strategy is effectively informed by robust information from key organisations involved in related areas of work.

- 52 A comprehensive range of high quality strategies is in place. The need for new affordable housing and action to tackle homelessness feature heavily and consistently among the overall aims and objectives of the Council and its partners. Affordable housing is one of the nine headline challenges in the LAA; it also features among all of the five priorities of the Community Strategy and is one of the six overall aims of the Corporate Plan. Strategies are supported by strong public consultation and stakeholders are involved in overseeing their implementation. Strategies are well-aligned with each other and consistent with other corporate and service priorities.
- A new Corporate Plan (2008-2011) was adopted in May 2008, replacing the 2007-2011 Oxford Plan. Affordable housing continues to feature as one of the Council's key priorities. The new plan is an improvement on the previous one in that it introduces a wider range of clear and measurable targets. These include targets for new affordable homes; halving the number of units of temporary accommodation; achieving the decent homes standard by 2011; and the introduction of a discretionary HMO licensing scheme by 2009. Significantly, the Plan received cross party support prior to the local elections and will not change as a result of political changes in control. The plan demonstrates a joined up approach with partners and the Oxford Strategic Partnership and links with the priorities set out in the Community Plan.
 - The Housing Strategy 2005-2008 was assessed as 'fit for purpose' by the Government Office. It set out clear aims and challenges based on strong research. The Council is on course for a new housing strategy (2008-2012) to be adopted by the end of June 2008. The draft strategy which is currently subject to final consultation is written to a good standard and is based on the up-to-date research described above. The impact of the research and consultation is made explicit within the strategy and the impact and outcomes of actions are clear. It addresses all of the main challenges faced by the Council and contains an action plan which identifies any additional resourcing requirements. It reflects a strong set of partnerships to deliver the strategy and makes clear linkages with the supporting plans for older people, homelessness and private sector housing.
 - The Homeless Strategy 2003-2008 was developed in partnership with key stakeholders and involved consultation with a wide range of service users. The action points from this strategy have been fully implemented, resulting in reduced incidence of homeless, less use of temporary accommodation and improved support services for homeless people. Progress on reviewing the strategy is at an advanced stage and a new strategy is scheduled to be adopted at the same time as the Housing Strategy.

24 Strategic Housing Services | How good is the service?

- The Private Sector Housing Strategy 2007/10 is strong in a number of respects. It is based upon good research and consultation and states what difference consultation has made, specifically in respect of the views of Area Committees and the Pensioners' Forum. It clearly prioritises disrepair and takes full account of recent legislation as well as local conditions, notably the very high proportion of privately rented homes. However, the strategy has little emphasis on empty homes and there is no separate strategy setting out how the Council will address this issue. The strategy also lacks clear descriptions of planned outcomes which mean that it is difficult to measure what success looks like.
- The Older Persons and BME housing strategies both provide solid foundations on which to address the needs of these two specific groups. They cover both public and private sector housing stock and demonstrate the depth to which sub strategies of the over arching housing strategy have been developed.

53 There is a strong planning framework. The Local Plan 2001-2016 is supported by the extensive research undertaken into the urban capacity and housing needs of the city. The plan seeks a contribution of 50 per cent affordable housing on sites of over ten units or 0.25 hectare. It also seeks contributions from commercial developers. Affordable housing is embedded into a range of supplementary planning guidance as well as the Local Plan and draft core strategy. Planning policy sets high standards for new development, such as a 20 per cent renewable energy target. This provides a clear framework for determining the type, tenure, density and affordability of new housing in Oxford.

54 The plans of other organisations reflect the housing needs of the city. The Public Health Action Plan for housing and homelessness 2008/09, for example, reflects an unusually high degree of partnership between the housing team and the PCT. The plan identifies improvements in the support that health agencies can give to homeless people. These include better discharge and referral arrangements, particular attention to the needs of families in temporary accommodation and people being discharged from prison, as well as better understanding of the health needs of homeless people and families. The Supporting People strategy takes account of local needs and the City Council has been actively involved with the county's Supporting People team in re-commissioning housing-related support services. This approach helps to ensure that housing services are contributing to wider quality of life issues for people with diverse needs.

- 55** Effective cross service working supports a coordinated approach to delivery. There is a strong coordinated approach to overseeing strategic development, both internally and externally. A high-level strategic team consisting of members of staff from housing, planning, environmental health and representation from housing associations and the PCT meets regularly. The group known as SHOP (Strategic Housing in Oxford Partnership) acts as a steering group to oversee strategic housing activity in the city. An example of the success of this multi-agency approach has been the effective expansion of services for single homeless people. Working relationships between Housing Enabling and Planning have been strengthened with the creation of an affordable housing post within the Planning section. This allows staff from different disciplines to contribute to a wide range of strategies and plans.
- 56** The Council has strengthened its approach to regeneration. Initially most regeneration activity was ad hoc and small scale. However, the Council now recognises the need for a more coordinated approach to its pockets of deprivation and the redevelopment of large sections of the city centre and their potential to deliver longer term benefits. Housing is well integrated with regeneration initiatives. For example the West End redevelopment is an integrated approach that will deliver housing and employment to a key city centre site and the proposed Greater Leys urban extension, while being primarily housing led, is focussing on how to deliver a more balanced community that is integrated into the existing stock.

Making the best use of existing housing

- 57** Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses in relation to making the best use of the existing stock. A proactive approach to prevention is reducing the number of people who become homeless and providing effective support to vulnerable people. Good use is made of the large private rented sector to find accommodation for people at risk of homelessness or those seeking a move to more independent accommodation. Partners play a key role in providing housing and support. Poor conditions in the private sector are being tackled effectively and there is a particular emphasis on improving the large stock of homes in multiple occupation. Effective measures are taken to support vulnerable people to stay independent within their own homes. However, there is not a robust approach to inspecting all accommodation used to house homeless applicants and the Council has not been successful in establishing an accreditation scheme for private landlords and agents.

Homelessness prevention

- 58** There has been a significant reduction in the incidence of homelessness in Oxford. Homelessness applications have reduced from 697 in 2003/04 to 501 in 2007/08. The number of homelessness acceptances has reduced from 382 to 198 during the same period. The Council no longer places families in bed and breakfast and the use of other temporary accommodation has reduced from 1,100 units to 496 between 2003/04 and 2007/08. The use of hostel-style accommodation has virtually been eliminated. This means that vulnerable people are being helped to settle into a more sustainable way of life more quickly.

- 59 There is a strong focus on the prevention of homelessness. Housing advice is readily available and options surgeries are also held at the night shelter. Individual staff take a lead on specific client groups including victims of domestic violence, prison leavers, young people, people with mental health problems and hostel move-on. This enables staff to develop expertise and provide effective signposting to other services. The Council also funds independent housing advice via a firm of solicitors. The solicitors also provide a court advocacy service, second tier advice to agencies, training and advice for landlords and debt counselling services. Tenancy Relations Officers work alongside enforcement officers to give advice to landlords and tenants. The service enables tenants to maintain their rights and ensures that landlords are aware of legislation. Proactive support and advice helps to prevent homelessness and the Government Office has declared the Council as a South East regional homeless champion in recognition of its work in homelessness prevention.
- 60 Multi-agency work to tackle and prevent homelessness among young people and vulnerable families is effective. Oxfordshire County Council, the city and district councils have established the Joint Housing Team (JHT) which works to identify those at risk, ensure good quality assessments and advice planning and provide access to housing and support. The team brings together staff from housing, social work and the voluntary sector and is responsible for managing a supported lodgings scheme, which provides housing and support for approximately ten homeless young people, and shared housing for care leavers. The team also works to improve the independent living skills of care leavers. The team has had a positive impact on the quality of assessments and has cemented relationships between various parties, including the Youth Offending Service and Housing Options. An accommodation panel which meets monthly tracks the progress of young people who have experienced homelessness. The team has also shared information about landlords with the county and city councils to prevent the repeat use of poor standard accommodation by the different authorities. The JHT has been awarded Communities and Local Government department (CLG) Centre of Excellence for Youth homelessness.
- 61 Rough sleepers have easy access to homelessness services. There is a good range of services in place for single homeless people and rough sleepers. These cover the full pathway from rough sleeping through to independence and are tailored to different groups; for example there is a dedicated shelter for 16 to 25 year olds, with over 25-year olds sheltered separately. The range is continuing to expand, with the Emmaus community and Baptist Church developments increasing the supply of move-on accommodation and a greater emphasis upon training and employment services. The Council has secured government grant to fund the assertive outreach team that makes contact with rough sleepers early in the morning and helps people into the most appropriate accommodation.

- 62** Move-on accommodation is comparatively easy to access in Oxford. Residents stay on average for 18 months in hostels before being able to live more independently. There are a number of initiatives to help facilitate their move. There is a core supply of 80 second stage units of dispersed move-on accommodation with floating support, as well as a range of specialist supported housing for enduring problems, such as mental illness. The Council funds £30,000 of deposits to help people who have been roofless to access the private rented sector; it has increased the number of homes being secured through nominations; and the CBL system is now increasing access to permanent accommodation with lettings plans setting challenging targets for delivering move on accommodation, with floating support if needed. It has also subscribed to the national reconnection framework, which helps homeless people to return to their last settled home. The development of more move-on accommodation promises to improve options further.
- 63** Effective use is made of the private rented sector to access accommodation. Relationships have been developed with individual landlords and lettings agencies. The Home Choice scheme has proved particularly successful in using rent bonds to secure accommodation. Approximately 300 lettings are supported by Home Choice every year making use of a homelessness prevention fund. In addition, the Lord Mayor's deposit scheme has enabled 67 single people to access rented accommodation. Home Choice also works with other agencies to ensure that clients of the Drug and Alcohol Team are able to access rented accommodation. This is important in ensuring that both statutory and non-statutory homeless people are able to secure accommodation more quickly than was the case with traditional temporary accommodation.
- 64** Housing benefit arrangements support access to housing for people in need. The Council's benefits section plays an important role in helping to maximise the stock of available housing for vulnerable people. There are close working relationships between housing benefits and the housing team. A member of the benefits team is seconded to the Home Choice team, giving landlords and tenants easy access to housing benefits advice and assistance. Processing times for new benefits claims have reduced significantly and currently stand at an average of 22 days¹. This approach encourages landlords to use the Home Choice scheme and has resulted in the scheme's expansion, with more accommodation being available to homeless people.
- 65** Effective use is made of discretionary housing payments. This is particularly necessary in Oxford because there is a shortage of two bed accommodation which is the type of housing most needed and a greater supply of larger accommodation. In 2007/08, 215 households were helped to access accommodation through these payments. The Housing budget contributed £29,000 to the scheme in 2007/08 to supplement DWP payments.

¹ Best quartile performance for district councils in 2006/07 is 24 days.

- 66 The quality of private sector leasing accommodation is closely monitored. A formal inspection of the 150 units of accommodation managed by the Council is carried out every fortnight by Temporary Accommodation Officers. The leases have been changed to help raise the quality of accommodation and the Council has moved from using shared units to self contained accommodation. This approach has a positive impact on the quality of temporary accommodation provided.
- 67 There is not a robust approach to inspecting all accommodation used to house homeless applicants. Although all landlords must provide up to date gas safety certificates, properties are not systematically inspected before rent guarantees are entered into. The quality of some supported housing is mixed. Supporting People has implemented a recovery plan for one hostel and continue to drive a programme of improvement. This presents a risk that the Council may be referring vulnerable people to poor quality housing.

Intervention in private sector housing

- 68 The Council is tackling poor conditions in private rented housing effectively. Enforcement work is targeted appropriately on houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). The city has a very high number of HMOs with some in very poor condition. It has therefore directed most of its resources to establishing the mandatory and additional licensing schemes to cover most of the HMOs in the city. Prior to implementing the mandatory scheme in 2006, there was a HMO registration scheme running in the east of the city from 1999 to 2004. This helped to ensure that preparations for implementation of the mandatory scheme were well managed.
- 69 Good progress is being made on licensing of houses in multiple occupation. A licensing fee was set at a level that enabled staff to be appointed and trained and allowed recovery of administrative costs. Steps were taken to identify HMOs and some 800 properties have been logged as either definite or possible HMOs. Over 350 HMOs are now registered and the Council is confident that it is on course for all properties to be licensed by its target date of 2011. The licensing scheme has resulted in significant improvements being made to 70 per cent of all properties prior to their licensing; these improvements include additional bathrooms, WCs, kitchens or facilities within them. The Council has applied to the government for permission to administer additional licensing to all HMOs. This work will help to improve the quality of accommodation for some of the city's most vulnerable tenants.
- 70 A range of interventions are used to tackle the problems of HMOs and to ensure that improvements are made to private sector housing. Advice and support is provided to landlords. Where this has failed, the Council has successfully prosecuted a landlord for failing to license a HMO and the property has been closed. Formal interviews between council officers and landlords have resulted in applications being submitted. This is having a positive impact on encouraging landlords to improve the quality of their accommodation.

- 71 The Council engages with the universities to improve the quality of HMOs. Officers meet with the college bursars group and this has resulted in information on student accommodation being openly shared. Oxford Brookes University has written to all landlords it is involved with to stress the licensing requirements. Officers have attended Oxford Brookes refectory and have provided information and advice to students explaining the mandatory licensing scheme. This has resulted in an increase in the number of enquires being received from students.
- 72 Although the Council has prioritised its HMO work, an active approach is taken to enforcement activity for other private sector housing. During 2007/08, 50 notices were served and around 20 works in default were carried out. Ten cases were taken to court. Enforcement officers carry out revisits to ensure that compliance is achieved. This all helps to improve the quality and safety of homes in the private sector.
- 73 Effective measures are taken to support vulnerable people to stay independent within their own homes. The Council administers a large programme of grant works. In 2007/08 works to 129 properties were carried out with expenditure of £692,000 through Disabled Facilities Grants. All applications come from Occupational Therapists (OTs) and there is a clear procedure for this, with a fast track approach for urgent cases. The average wait for referrals from OTs is three months and the private sector team deal with applications within five days of referral. The actual work takes an average of 50 days. This is well within the target guidelines set by the government and ensures that disabled people do not have to suffer a poorer quality of life for an excessive period of time.
- 74 Currently there is not a comprehensive home improvement agency service. The county Supporting People partnership has not yet entered into formal agreements with respective councils. However the city council has received informal confirmation that funding will be agreed and this should enable the Council to deliver a comprehensive service. In the interim, older and disabled people do not receive the support of a caseworker to provide support and advice.
- 75 There is scope for better engagement with private sector landlords. The Home Choice scheme has promoted positive relationships, particularly in providing advice and assistance and processing benefits claims. Landlords report that officers provide helpful support on the practicalities of HMO licensing and communications have been enhanced through the establishment of a landlords' e-group to communicate changes in policy and legislation. However, there is an adversarial relationship between some of the main lettings agencies and the Council. Landlord forum meetings have been held infrequently and landlords feel they have little control of the agenda. Landlords appear unclear on the extent of enforcement actions being taken and how the income from the licensing scheme is spent. There has been a lack of innovation in addressing these issues. An opportunity has been missed to provide greater incentives to good high performing landlords through the establishment of an accreditation scheme.

- 76 Only limited action has been taken to bring the limited number of empty homes back into use. Notices have been served using different legislation including HHSRS¹ and works have been carried out in default. The Town & County Planning Act has been used to place pressure on owners to improve the external appearance of properties. In total ten properties were brought back into use through various methods of intervention in 2007/08. There were 138 privately owned homes which were left empty during 2006 but Council tax records indicate that there are 1,512 second homes in the city. The Council has not carried out a full analysis of these records to understand whether any of this stock could be used as permanent accommodation. This means that the Council has not explored all available options for making best use of the existing housing stock.
- 77 The Council is on course to meet its HECA (Home Energy Conservation Act) target of 30 per cent reductions by 2010. Energy grants are being promoted well. Initiatives include council funding rising from £50,000 in 2006/07 to £100,000 in 2008/09, with resources targeted at people who are experiencing fuel poverty but do not qualify for help under other schemes. Government funding of £248,000 in 2006/07 provided 677 householders aged over 60 with cavity wall insulation and/or loft insulation and funded a part-time fuel poverty post. All benefits recipients are sent a leaflet which explains the availability of all other benefits including energy grants. Over the period 1995 - 2006, the Council reported an improvement in home energy efficiency of 25.2 per cent. This is having a positive impact on reducing fuel poverty.

The use of existing social housing

- 78 The landlord service has adopted an asset management plan to make better use of the existing stock. The Council is actively exploring options for its tower blocks (which are unpopular and add significantly to the cost of meeting the DHS), while an assessment has been carried out on the future of the sheltered stock and each property is now identified for improvement or disposal, with the latter funding the improvements. Some garage stock was transferred to housing associations for redevelopment, prior to the decision to retain the stock, and the plan of the landlord service is to earmark the remaining unpopular garages for redevelopment by the landlord service itself, using a special purpose vehicle. This will help to ensure that the number of affordable homes generated is maximised.
- 79 Housing associations play a key role in providing accommodation for homeless people. The establishment of the Oxford Register of Affordable Housing (ORAH) and a common housing register involving the nine key associations has replaced nominations agreements and ensures that a minimum of 90 per cent of housing associations lettings go to people on the register: in reality the partnership results in nearly 100 per cent. In 2006/07 it was among the best of its benchmarking group in terms of the proportion of lettings going to homeless families. This has been recognised as good practice by the Housing Corporation /CLG funded Homeless Action Team. This helps to reduce the reliance upon temporary accommodation and reflects a good partnership with housing associations that are prepared to play their part.

¹ The Health & Housing Safety Rating system is the risk assessment procedure for residential properties.

- 80 Steps are taken to make best use of council housing. The Council runs a successful incentive scheme to make the best use of its housing stock. An under-occupation scheme is operated for tenants wishing to move to smaller accommodation. The scheme is relatively successful with 48 tenants making use of the scheme in 2007, though take-up was higher in previous years. The time taken to re-let council homes has also improved significantly from 100 days to an average of 33 days in 2006/07¹ and 19.6 days in 2007/08.

Enabling the provision of more housing to meet needs

- 81 Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses in this area. The Council and its partners are working productively together to enable a high number of good quality affordable housing units to be delivered. The Council has demonstrated that it takes difficult decisions in the face of opposition to support its ambitions for affordable housing. Despite this, there are some delays in delivering new homes when councillors' decisions are swayed by local opposition.
- 82 The Council is enabling a high level of new affordable homes to be completed. The Annual Monitoring Report 2007 shows that current performance on planning and enabling is strong. A high proportion of all new homes completed in 2006/07 (267 out of 921 or 29 per cent) were affordable and the Council is well on track to meet its structure plan target of 6,500 homes between 2001 and 2016. It has achieved high levels of brownfield development and expects to maintain it above 95 per cent over the next five years. The number of affordable homes and permissions are both on track; there is now little recourse to cash in lieu of affordable housing and the size mix reflects local need. The city attracts relatively high levels of funding from the Housing Corporation (£30 million in Social Housing Grant between 2004/05 and 2007/08). This is helping to alleviate the high levels of homelessness and housing need within the city.
- 83 Planning control officers are strongly committed to achieving the development of affordable housing. They take a robust approach to negotiations on the affordable housing contribution and have successfully fought an appeal where a developer has claimed that a site fell short of the threshold of 0.25 Ha. Viability studies are used to support negotiations with developers and few now challenge the Council's arguments in favour of the affordable housing element. This has enabled the Council to achieve its target of 50 per cent affordable housing on all new sites of over ten units.
- 84 The Council takes a different approach in relation to tied accommodation by not requiring affordable housing on these sites. Oxford is synonymous with its student population and is also the home to a major health service employer. Where such employers need to build accommodation for staff who are unable to afford market prices, the Council does take this into account. This helps to reduce the pressure on market and affordable housing in the city. Through strong planning negotiations, the Council has also been able to minimise the requirement for social housing grant on section 106 sites. This allows Housing Corporation funding to be directed to those sites being developed outside of the planning system.

¹ BVPI 212 2006/07.

- 85 The Council is very likely to meet and exceed its target of 150 affordable homes a year. There is a detailed development programme which shows 372 homes currently being built. In addition there are ten homes that have funding but for which construction has yet to begin and 268 homes in the pipeline (effectively awaiting planning permission). Even if some schemes are lost and the housing market downturn persists, this should still produce a healthy supply. In response to this, the Council has recently increased its target to 250 per year.
- 86 There are strong delivery partnerships with the county council, universities and internal teams. The degree of commitment to affordable housing by the county council is clear from its appointment and funding since 2003 of an affordable housing project leader. A particularly important result of this is the 'off market' sale of four county council owned sites within Oxford alone for affordable housing, creating 178 additional homes. This is well in excess of the number of 125 homes created by open market sales. Internal communications between housing and planning have improved significantly following an external review of the service. As a result, housing enablers now get early warning of sites, an affordable housing planner has been part funded by housing and clearer design standards are being established.
- 87 Difficult decisions have been taken to enable housing developments to meet housing needs. Councillors have made difficult planning decisions, sometimes in the face of organised opposition. Early public meetings and options reports are used effectively to address contentious issues. The regeneration of the West End of the city which will involve a significant housing component demonstrates that the Council is prepared to overcome local opposition to see its ambitions realised. The City Council is championing the review of the green belt in the face of extensive opposition from other councils. This demonstrates that the Council is committed to meeting its corporate priority.
- 88 New affordable homes are designed to a high standard. For example, Owens Way, a former school site has been redeveloped sensitively, retaining the original building and its features and building new homes using a mix of materials and designs, to a high density. The quality of the hard and soft landscaping is particularly high. The development includes accommodation for disabled people and key workers, as well as social rented housing. There is little to tell the social rented housing from the market housing. Similarly, the approach to a scheme at Sunnymeade Court where temporary accommodation is being replaced by higher density mixed development has been well thought out and should enhance a high profile location.
- 89 The Council has also taken a positive approach to sustainability in its house designs. Energy efficiency and accessibility standards exceed the requirements of the Housing Corporation. In Rose Hill, existing poor quality 'Orlit' council housing is being replaced by new housing in partnership with a housing association using a cross subsidy partnership with a private developer. The design of the scheme incorporates solar water heating panels and has been subject to consultation with local residents. This contributes to well-integrated sustainable communities and helps address the issue of fuel poverty.

- 90 There are some delays in delivering new affordable homes, mainly due to planning issues. For example, decision making by councillors on planning applications are the main causes for appeals to be successfully made. Decisions delegated to officers are subject to successful appeals in 30 per cent of cases but for area committees the success rate is 63 per cent. Performance in deciding major planning applications has improved from 51 per cent being within 13 weeks in 2004/05 to 75 per cent in 2006/07; however this is still below best quartile performance of 80.8 per cent for single tier and district councils. There is recognition at the County level that the speed with which section 106 negotiations relating to highways, education and environmental issues are dealt with is also delaying the delivery of some new housing developments.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 91 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in relation to value for money. The Council has a growing understanding of its strategic housing costs and is increasingly benchmarking these against other providers. There is an increasing culture of value for money within the service and housing is making significant contributions to corporate value for money targets. Some efficiency savings are reinvested to meet key housing priorities and partnership working is helping to improve value for money. However, some strategic housing services do not yet demonstrate value for money, the comparative costs of some services, such as homelessness are high, and some important elements of a full value for money culture are not yet in place. Customer satisfaction measurement is not used to explore the relationship between cost and quality.

How do costs compare?

- 92 Oxford's homelessness services are comparatively high cost. Audit Commission data for 2007/08 shows that expenditure on the Council's community housing services overall is significantly higher than its near neighbours and other council districts. Homelessness unit costs are also significantly higher, taking into account the level of acceptances and preventions. The Council's own Housemark benchmarking data for South East council's on homelessness in 2006/07 equally found that Oxford had proportionally higher staffing levels in homelessness which showed as costly in relation to homelessness and decisions and acceptances, although its overall percentage reduction in total homelessness gross expenditure was best quartile. While some of the City's higher costs profile can be attributed to the high level of temporary accommodation in the city and wider preventative work undertaken by staff, there is still more work to do to demonstrate that the service area overall represents value for money.

- 93 The Council has a growing understanding of the costs of the components of strategic housing delivery. The annual budget round is the main means of challenging costs via zero-based budgeting. The planning follow up report carried out by the Audit Commission (April 2008) stated that the Council now has a clearer understanding of the value for money of its planning services and benchmarking of private sector housing services has helped the Council to learn that the cost of services is average per property and low per action. This has been used to help make the business case for additional HMO licensing staff.
- 94 However, the use of benchmarking is still developing. The Council is testing a new national homelessness benchmarking tool. Benchmarking of the enabling, register and options service is also being developed through the Oxfordshire Housing Partnership. Results of these comparisons have still to be fully analysed and reported, meaning that scope for efficiencies may not have maximised.

How is value for money managed?

- 95 Some elements of a well-established value for money culture are not yet in place. For example, the Council has not yet developed a comprehensive value for money strategy and the corporate procurement strategy is out of date. Staff are not set individual targets for improving value for money. There is only limited measurement of customer satisfaction to explore the link between quality and cost and the benefits of partnerships, particularly with housing associations, has not been fully analysed. This means that it is not possible for the Council to demonstrate in some key areas of investment that there is a positive relationship between cost and quality or that efficiency is a key improvement driver.
- 96 The Council's senior management restructure now provides capacity to push forward the changes required to achieve better efficiency. A Transformation Manager and Corporate Manager have been appointed and each service is now required to produce a Service Transformation Plan that includes sections setting out how the service will contribute to VFM through savings initiatives, invest to save proposals and market testing and demonstrate how unit cost reductions and workforce reduction targets are being achieved. These ideas will be included in the budget strategy for 2009/10 onwards to be presented to the Executive Board in July 2008 as part of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS). This should help to develop a stronger focus on VFM across the Council.
- 97 Steps are being taken to increase understanding of costs and performance. The Council's internal auditors are carrying out an independent review and challenge to a value for money analysis that was undertaken in-house in 2006 and 2007. The review will enable trend analysis to show movements in cost and improvements in performance. The work will be used to inform the selection of services for more in depth VFM reviews and identify areas for market testing. The analysis will also aid the selection of areas to target cost reductions by providing the starting point for understanding the costs versus quality matrix for each service. The information will also form the basis for the development of a corporate value for money strategy.

- 98 Efficiency savings in the strategic housing service are being reinvested to meet priorities. Although the Medium Term Financial Plan has applied tough targets for reducing costs, where a business case is made for investing in new resources this is approved. Examples of this approach include the appointment of an affordable housing delivery officer post within the planning service to help facilitate and negotiate housing. By redirecting resources the Council's corporate aim is being reflected well.
- 99 The Council's partnership working is helping to improve value for money. Work which has been jointly procured with neighbouring councils includes the Oxfordshire Housing Market Assessment. Independent housing advice is jointly procured with two other district councils and is currently subject to re-tendering. The Joint Housing Team has enabled the costs of delivering youth homelessness services to be shared. The procurement of temporary accommodation through Oxford Social Lettings Agency (a partnership with two housing associations) provides certainty over costs and reduces risk to the Council. Costs of administering the choice based lettings scheme are shared between the four other participation councils. This approach makes good use of the capacity, skills and resources available.
- 100 Housing is making significant contributions to corporate value for money targets. The Council has made effective use of 'invest to save' funding. Investing to save has increased the capacity of the housing needs service. Home Choice is estimated to have saved £500,000 per year in temporary accommodation costs. A proportion of the savings from the use of temporary accommodation have been reinvested in more staff to further improve the housing options service. The use of temporary accommodation has reduced by 45 per cent since 2003/04 and the use of bed and breakfast has almost been eliminated. The fees charged for HMO licensing ensure that the Council covers its administration costs. Cross subsidy from open market sales has enabled the re-provision of council housing at Rose Hill. As a result of the additional funding more people have been able to secure better quality housing, making better use of the limited funding available.
- 101 Some housing services do not demonstrate value for money.
- The Council does not yet know whether the cost per unit being spent by housing associations on new schemes represents value for money. There is no planning guidance on the maximum amount per unit that associations should be paying to landowners. In the absence of preferred development partner status, housing associations must compete against each other to offer the best deals to developers and this has the impact of driving up costs.
 - The independent housing advice service saw 58 cases of direct intervention to prevent homeless in the last quarter of 2007/08 at a cost of £120,000 per year and although it carries out significant prevention work beyond the scope of the contractual agreement (a total of 206 clients were seen in the last quarter of 2007/08) the Council cannot demonstrate how the current contract provides value for money.

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- The failure of all district councils to agree on establishing a county-wide home improvement agency was a missed opportunity in delivering better value for money. However the Council believes that the new in-house service will provide better value for money by reducing duplication.

These are isolated, but significant examples of ways in which a more sophisticated approach to procurement would help the Council and its partners to reduce the call upon the public purse.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 102** Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. There is a record of implementing change which has delivered improvement across the range of strategic housing services and offered tangible benefits to service users. The direction of travel on performance indicators is positive and improvements from plans and strategies and external challenge have been implemented well. However, the overall track record on value for money is mixed.
- 103** There is a clear track record of improving many aspects of the service in recent years. Trends across a wide range of performance indicators demonstrate improved outcomes for many users. Achievements include:
- the number of homeless applications has reduced from 697 in 2003/04 to 538 in 2006/07 and 501 in 2007/08;
 - the number of homeless acceptances reduced from 382 in 2003/04 to 233 in 2006/07 and 198 in 2007/08;
 - families spent an average of 1.76 weeks in bed and breakfast in 2006/07 compared to 14.37 weeks in 2003/04;
 - use of temporary accommodation reduced by 22.5 per cent in 2006/07;
 - new housing is increasingly built on previously developed land, with an increase from 95 per cent in 2003/04 to 100 per cent in 2006/07;
 - major planning applications are decided more quickly. An increase from 29 per cent in 2003/04 to 74.47 per cent in 2006/07; and
 - time taken to process new housing benefit claims reduced from 55.6 days in 2003/04 to 28.71 days in 2006/07.
- 104** Improvements from plans and strategies have been implemented well. The Council has successfully implemented the most important targets within the 2005/08 Housing Strategy. Included among these are 551 (net) new affordable homes (2004/05 to 2006/07); a detailed Housing Market Assessment ; the launch of the Oxford Register of Affordable Housing in 2006 and choice based lettings in early 2008 and the introduction of HMO licensing. Objectives and action points set out in the Homelessness Strategy 2003-08 have also been largely completed: of eleven objectives, all but one ('reduce the average time spent by homeless household in TA by 50 per cent by 2008') has been achieved. Successes include: achieving a 40 per cent reduction in homelessness acceptances by 2008; increasing the number of homes available to people in housing need by 40 per year and ending the use of bed and breakfast for families.

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- 105** There is a positive track record in responding to external challenge. There are strong indicators that a culture of continuous improvement within the landlord service has been embedded since the 2005 housing inspection. All of the recommendations on repairs performance, the customer focus and value for money of the service have been implemented. The planning follow up report published by the Audit Commission in April 2008 highlights important successes in improving the planning service. Planning policy has made significant progress with the Local Development Framework. However, the report also points out that the many changes to internal processes have only resulted in only limited change in terms of service outcomes.
- 106** As already indicated, there is a mixed track record in terms of improving value for money. There have been some notable efficiency gains in this service area, with the reduction in the use of temporary accommodation by 45 per cent since 2003/04 resulting in large budget savings. The homeless service has contributed cashable savings to the Council's annual efficiency statement of £113,000 since 2004/05. However, some strategic housing services do not yet demonstrate value for money, the comparative costs of some services, such as homelessness are high, and some important elements of a full value for money culture are not yet in place. As a result it is unlikely that the scope for efficiencies in this area has been fully maximised.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 107** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in relation to managing performance. There is a strong range of coherent strategies to support the Council's clearly stated housing priority and the Oxford Strategic Partnership plays an active and innovative role in developing housing strategy. The performance management framework ensures that plans and targets are implemented and detailed scrutiny of housing by Councillors ensures that actions are taken to address identified weaknesses. The Council and its partners demonstrate strong leadership and the Council demonstrates good self awareness. However, measures to ensure plans are delivered are not consistently in place. There has been little use of post project appraisals and performance management of private sector housing is not sufficiently focused.
- 108** Affordable housing is a clear priority for the Council and its partners. 'Provide more housing for Oxford, better housing for all' is one of six corporate priorities within the corporate plan. The Oxford Strategic Partnership places a high priority on the delivery of affordable housing. Housing is identified as the most important of five flagship issues within the new sustainable community strategy. Targets for new affordable housing have recently been revised from 150 to 250 per year and the plan to carry out additional licensing of HMOs indicates the high level of ambition for housing. This indicates that the importance of housing is understood by the Council and its partners and that action is being taken which should have positive outcomes for residents.

- 109** The Council and its partners demonstrate strong leadership. The Oxford Strategic Partnership is taking measures to actively address the shortage of affordable housing in the city. It has established a Select Committee to examine new measures for addressing housing. It is significant that the county council is playing a key role in this work with the Chief Executives of both councils sitting on the committee. The committee has a great deal of freedom in its terms of reference to explore and promote innovative solutions. Oxford City Council has taken the lead in negotiating the housing elements of the new Local Area Agreement and has been successful in gaining agreement to include additional housing 'stretch' targets. A high degree of political consensus means that the recent change in the Council's administration will not change the level of priority given to affordable housing. The strength of leadership will help to ensure that a sustainable and long term approach to improving housing in Oxford is delivered.
- 110** A coherent hierarchy of plans shows how housing plans fit into an overall framework. As stated earlier, there are clear links between the corporate plans and housing related strategies. Housing strategies are of a high quality, are based on a good understanding of need and are designed to address this need. The Medium Term Financial Strategy provides a clear position statement and identifies actions which will be taken to meet the corporate housing priority. It clearly aligns the budget to the priority. Directorate plans show how the work of individual services contributes to the Corporate Plan. This provides assurance that resources are available to achieve the actions set out within these strategies.
- 111** The Council is self aware and willing to learn from others and its own experience. A robust self assessment undertaken in preparation for the inspection recognised areas for improvement and drew on the learning gained from a peer review undertaken in 2008. The Council also responded positively to an earlier peer review of strategic housing carried out in 2005 and this has resulted in a more coordinated approach being developed between departments. The review of the Homeless Strategy 2003-08 is very thorough and demonstrates a high degree of self awareness. It has formed a robust basis for development of the new strategy. Through participating in a range of cross authority groups such as the South East Homeless Forum the Council continues to learn and share good practice. Visits to other councils have helped inform best practice in several key areas including implementation of the choice based lettings system. However, there are some areas where opportunities for learning have not been taken, with insufficient focus on learning from customer feedback and complaints.

- 112 The framework for performance reporting is strong. New performance management arrangements have been established with the creation of three corporate boards responsible for Strategy and Resources, Transformation and Performance. Detailed performance reports linked to the corporate priorities are provided to the Performance Board. The Council has invested in new software which is increasingly being used to facilitate stronger monitoring of performance. This performance tool produces monthly management reports and quarterly scrutiny reports. Team meetings are used to conduct monthly reviews of performance and staff are clear about their targets through these meetings, annual appraisals and one to one meetings with line managers. Performance monitoring of housing associations and allocations performance is jointly undertaken by the ORAH Partnership Board. Budget monitoring is effective and accountancy staff routinely meet with budget holders to review performance.
- 113 There is effective, detailed scrutiny of affordable housing. The Housing Scrutiny Committee reviewed affordable housing development in February 2007. This led to a broad range of recommendations for improving arrangements including the establishment of realistic targets for affordable housing, the development of a site register, introduction of quarterly housing association development meetings, involvement of the housing development team at an earlier stage in pre-application planning and legal services involved in affordable housing development work earlier. Quarterly reports to the Housing Scrutiny Committee provide a detailed analysis of housing delivery performance and highlight through traffic lights and commentary areas for concern. This ensures that actions are taken to address identified weaknesses.
- 114 The Council acts to address identified risks. For example, it has identified that the introduction of the Local Housing Allowance in April 2008 presents some risk to the success of the Home Choice scheme. In particular county-wide rent levels set by the Rent Officer present a risk that landlords will not want to let to benefit recipients. It is therefore taking steps to ensure that the Rent Officer is fully aware of the differential between rents in the city and elsewhere in the county. Room size restrictions introduced under the new regulations also places pressures on the scheme and the requirement to make payments direct to tenants' places a risk that landlords may no longer want to participate in the scheme. The Council has acted promptly to work effectively to mitigate against these risks.
- 115 Measures to ensure plans are delivered are not consistently in place. For example, the housing needs service plan does not describe outcomes from the actions listed and some tasks do not have clear target completion dates. No targets are set within plans for customer satisfaction levels. The Council is not monitoring the degree to which the target for 15 per cent of market homes to be accessible is being met. Performance targets within the private sector housing service are not as specific as they could be. Private sector activity does not form a part of the performance reports received by the Housing Scrutiny Committee. Unless targets are clearly set and robustly monitored there is a risk that tasks will not be fully completed.

- 116 There has been little use of post project appraisals. The impact of the new eco home developments was not shared between the partner housing association, the Council and other housing providers. The Council has not carried out a post project appraisal of the Lifetime Homes policy. Nor does it obtain evidence of satisfaction with new homes from each housing association, to help it to decide which are building the best homes and what design features are most popular. This presents a risk that past errors may be repeated or that successful innovative may not be applied to future developments.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 117 Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses in relation to capacity. The Council has the staff with skills and experience to deliver the improvements set out in its strategies and plans. Staff and councillors work constructively together to a common aim and the new corporate management structure adds to the capacity to improve. Extensive partnership working and the Council's success in attracting external funding further enhances capacity. The only notable barrier to capacity is the limited capital finance available to support the housing priority.
- 118 Staff are skilled, experienced and motivated. The Council has enhanced its staffing capacity through training and additional posts in housing needs, private sector housing and planning. This has been achieved through various measures including invest to save budgets to increase housing options staff, recruiting HMO enforcement officers funded from license income and using planning delivery grant to fund new planning officer posts. Staff, managers and councillors demonstrate a positive culture which is open to change and new ideas. Many have taken advantage of professional development opportunities as well as a broad range of internal training courses offered. Councillors and staff work constructively together to a common agenda of shared aims. This provides a sound basis for future improvement.
- 119 New corporate management structures add to capacity for improvement. The appointment of two new executive directors provides a clear distinction between a focus on city regeneration/place shaping and city services / front line delivery. For the first time, all strategic housing services are now the responsibility of the same executive director. This provides the opportunity to further coordinate inter departmental working. Operational housing management activity is now the responsibility of the city services executive director providing a very clear distinction between operational and strategic services. The appointment of a Transformation Manager is designed to enhance the capacity to drive through improvement and to communicate cultural change within the organisation.
- 120 Extensive partnership working is enhancing capacity. As already indicated, effective partnerships have enabled the Council to access additional funding and expertise. For example the Joint Housing Team has attracted funding for youth homelessness services. Partnership with the County Council has enabled new affordable housing sites to be purchased 'off-market'.

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- 121** The Council is successful in attracting additional external revenue funding. A wide range of additional funding sources have been used including: an increase in grant allocation from CLG for homelessness prevention; award of regional homelessness champions attracted additional funding of £15,000; 'reward money' of £20,000 was provided for excellent performance against targets; funding of £101,000 was granted to support the development of choice based lettings; significant funding was provided through the Place of Change programme for hostel improvements; PSA funding for meeting stretch LAA targets for affordable housing; planning delivery grant and energy efficiency grant funding. Additional resources have had a positive impact on developing new homelessness prevention services and improving the conditions of and access to existing housing.
- 122** There is sufficient land capacity to meet affordable housing targets. The strategic housing land availability study shows that Oxford has the land to be able to exceed its Local Plan targets up to 2016, but would fall 1,658 short of the 8,000 target to 2026 set out in the Panel Report on the draft South East Plan without relying on windfalls. The study shows that Oxford could meet its five-year deliverable housing supply target. The Westgate renaissance development should produce 850 city centre homes. In the event of new developments being affected by a falling housing market the Affordable Housing SPD allows for negotiations where viability is an issue. A 'cascade' approach can be applied which provides flexibility to ensure that sites can still be developed with an element of affordable housing. The Council has already demonstrated its ability to drive through difficult decisions when faced with opposition to new developments. Given the limited capital funding, which we discuss later, it is important that the Council is able to exercise its planning powers well and has the land available to produce the homes it needs.
- 123** The IT used by the Council is fit for purpose. New IT was procured jointly with other councils as part of the implementation of choice based lettings. This enables effective management of the new lettings systems. Environmental health IT is older but is adequate to manage private sector housing activity. The Council is currently procuring a new customer relations management system. This new system should provide the capacity to address the weaknesses described in the access section of this report particularly in relation to telephone answering performance.

- 124** The ability of the Council to invest further capital resources in the strategic housing service is very limited. The decision to retain the housing stock has reduced the capacity of the Council to address housing need. It means that there will not be a capital receipt which could have been reinvested in new homes. The Council has low levels of capital reserves and so the amount it can invest is already limited. In addition, the landlord service must now maximise its revenue in order to fund its decent homes programme. The landlord service is now more reluctant to dispose of land 'off market' because of the resources it needs to meet the decent homes standard. This risks impacting on the ability of housing associations to secure these sites for affordable housing, particularly where match funding is required to support the viability of new developments and improvements. However, it is recognised that the Council has limited scope for increasing capital resources and is being successful in overcoming this problem through attracting additional revenue funding from external sources where possible.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

	BVPI	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Total number of new homes developed		669	943	821
Target number of homes within structure plan		433	433	433
Percentage on previously developed land	106	99.85%	100%	100%
Major planning apps processed in 13 weeks	109a	51.00%	74.00%	74.47%
Up-to-date development plan	200a (amended 05/06)	No	Yes	Yes
Up-to-date proposals on deposit	200b (amended 05/06)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Successful appeals against refusal of planning permission	204 (new 04/05)	41.38%	37.0%	33.00%
Score against a quality of planning service checklist	205 (new 04/05)	94.4%	100%	100%
Target percentage of affordable being required on-sites in excess of the threshold size			50% on 10+ / 0.25 ha	50% on 10+ / 0.25 ha
Percentage of affordable housing being achieved on-sites in excess of the threshold size		44.60%	49.20%	40.4%
Total number of affordable rented homes completed		(138) 74.1%	(113) 67.5%	(164) 61.5%
Total number of affordable homes developed		186	167	267
Number of homes achieved through s106 agreements		38	157	137
Number of homelessness applications		637	635	538
Number of those threatened with homelessness for whom advice and support prevented the occurrence of homelessness		N/A	Homechoice 261	428
Number of homelessness acceptances		376	379	233
Number of families in B&B at 31 March		1	0	0
Number of families in other TA at 31 March		717	678	457
Number of households in temporary accommodation at 31 March		924	793	581

	BVPI	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07
Number of single people in B&B		2	0	0
Average number of weeks spent in B&B by families	183a	16	5.57	1.76
Average no of weeks spent in hostels by families	183b	12.00	12.55	11.69
Reduction in numbers of families placed in TA	203 (new 04/05)	13.81	-6.32	-22.50
Percentage of private sector homes that are unfit or in need of major repair		5.3%	--	--
Percentage unfit homes made fit or demolished	62 (deleted 05/06)	2.80%		
Percentage of vacant homes returned to use	64	0	1.4%	6
Number of homes vacant for six months or longer		138	--	--
Number of homes improved through the use of disabled facilities grants		135	84	101
Number of households to whom advice on repairs and improvements were provided		177	389	1422
Days taken for new HB claims	78a	33.5	38.53	28.71
Days taken for changes to HB claims	78b	16.9	23.34	17.61
Accuracy of HB calculations	79a	93.4%	93.4%	93.4%

Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
 - focus groups of staff, voluntary organisations, private sector landlords, development partners and representatives from registered social landlords;
 - interviews with senior managers, service managers, councillors and key stakeholders; and
 - a tour of the city.

Appendix 3 – Positive practice

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

Multi-agency partnership to tackle youth homelessness

- 1 Oxfordshire County Council, the city and district Councils have established the Joint Housing Team which works to identify those at risk, ensure good quality assessments and advice planning and provide access to housing and support. The team brings together staff from housing, social work and voluntary sector into a 'virtual' team. The team is responsible for managing a supported lodgings scheme which provides housing and support for approximately ten homeless young people and for managing shared housing for care leavers. The team also works to improve care leaver's independent living skills. The Team has had a positive impact on the quality of assessments and relationships have been built between various parties including the Youth Offending Service and Housing Options.

Scheme to help vulnerable people access accommodation in the private rented sector

- 2 The 'Home Choice – Singles' and 'Home Choice – DAAT' schemes help people who might, without support fail to gain access to rented housing. The schemes provide advice, support and financial help to single people and people with drug and alcohol issues and are helping people to move on from hostel accommodation.

The use of viability research to maximise the supply of affordable homes and other community benefits

- 3 Oxford uses viability studies excellently to support its arguments for affordable housing and other community benefits. The housing viability study 2004 and planning obligations viability study 2007 provided evidence which ensures that even where development costs are abnormally high the proportion of affordable housing is maximised. Planning control officers are strongly committed to achieving the development of affordable housing. They take a robust approach to negotiations on the affordable housing contribution and have successfully fought an appeal where a developer has claimed that a site fell short of the threshold of 0.25 Ha. Viability studies are used to support negotiations with developers. This has enabled the Council to achieve its target of 50 per cent affordable housing on new sites of over ten units.

Consultation arrangements with hard to reach groups

- 4 The Council uses a variety of means to consult with hard to reach groups. Service users living in temporary accommodation and the night shelter were specifically consulted over the Homeless Strategy. Lectures to students are used to capture the views of some of the younger population on the LDF; accessible venues are used for displays to ensure that disabled people are not excluded; displays and mailshots are targeted on places where responses are known to be low; and consultations are timed to ensure that they do not conflict with school runs and other busy times. A particularly imaginative approach has been to make use of a car factory canteen to consult with blue collar workers of one of biggest local employers. Shifting away from traditional forms of consultation will help the Council to gain more representative feedback on its proposals.

Partnerships with housing associations

- 5 Housing associations play a key role in providing accommodation for homeless people. The establishment of the Oxford Register of Affordable Housing (ORAH) and a common housing register involving the nine key associations has replaced nominations agreements and ensures that a minimum of 90 per cent of housing associations lettings go to people on the register: in reality the partnership results in nearly 100 per cent. This helps to reduce the reliance upon temporary accommodation and reflects a good partnership with housing associations that are prepared to play their part.