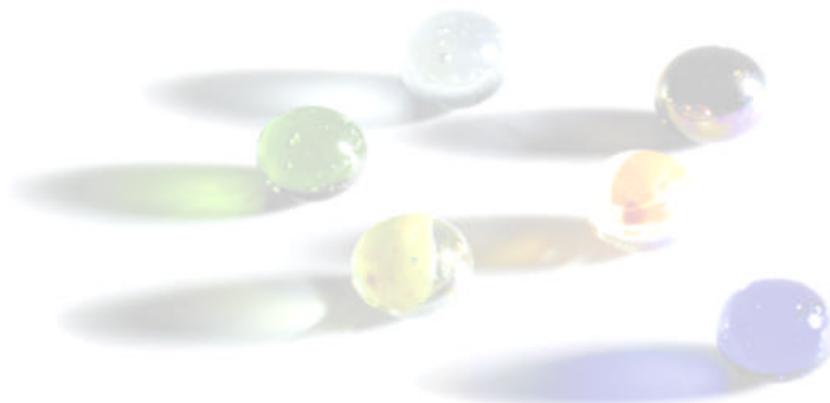


WMLGA & excellence in business
Accredited Peer Challenge Provider

North Warwickshire BC
Peer Challenge
Feedback Report

DECENT HOMES

March 2004



CONTENTS

	Page No
Introduction	3
Executive Summary	4
General Observations	5
What is the council trying to achieve in relation to the standard. Does the council know the condition of their housing stock and their compliance with the decent homes standard?	6-7
Is the council delivering its plans to meet the decent homes standard?	8
How well does the council monitor its progress and how effectively does this feed into future strategies and plans?	9
Additional Notes	10

INTRODUCTION

North Warwickshire Borough Council (“the Council”), as part of commissioning its peer challenge assessment through the West Midlands LGA/Excellence in Business partnership, an accredited provider, asked for an assessment of its diagnostic review of decent homes. A team, led by Keith Batchelor of Excellence in Business, carried out this work as part of the peer challenge process. The team comprised:

- ✂✂ Martin Baines – Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
- ✂✂ Ken Birch - East Staffordshire Borough Council
- ✂✂ Cllr Martin Heatley – Warwickshire County Council
- ✂✂ Keith Jones - East Staffordshire Borough Council
- ✂✂ Norman Jones – Stafford Borough Council
- ✂✂ Tricia Morrison – Shropshire County Council/Warwickshire County Council
- ✂✂ Sonia Robinson – East Staffordshire Borough Council
- ✂✂ Gill Taylor – Cannock Chase District Council
- ✂✂ Steve Twort – Independent consultant
- ✂✂ David Voysey – Independent consultant

Four of these worked exclusively on the three diagnostics and the rest worked on the corporate self-assessment document.

The process followed the same stages as outlined in the main report.

This report represents the team’s findings in relation to the decent homes diagnostic based on the interviews that took place and the documentary information made available during the site visit. It was not possible to validate fully all aspects of the decent homes diagnostic during the two-day site visit, therefore some of the findings may not entirely represent the Council’s actual position in respect of the three key questions asked of the diagnostic review. However, the team is confident that this report will help to strengthen the Council’s self-awareness and focus on the main strengths and areas for improvement identified by the peer challenge team.

Consideration could be given to how best to prepare staff and stakeholders for interview. This could include developing some short case studies to highlight the main messages relating to each of the key questions. This would help ensure consistency and accuracy of the message to the inspection team.

Finally, the assessment team would like to thank the Council for the hospitality extended to it during the site visit to Atherstone, as well as those who participated in the interviews for their helpful contributions to the process.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What is the council trying to achieve in relation to the standard? Does the council know the condition of their housing stock and their compliance with the decent homes standard?

The Council is aware of the problems facing the housing service. Its aim is for all properties to meet the Decent Homes Standard (DHS) by 2010, and stakeholders believe this is realistic.

There is a *Stock Condition Survey*, options appraisal is underway and building blocks are being put in place to make an evaluation.

The Council has diverse strategies and plans, which should help it to meet the DHS (eg *Housing Revenue Account Business Plan*, *Procurement Strategy*, and *Capital Strategy and Asset Management Plan*).

However, its information systems are inadequate, the *Stock Condition Survey* is in need of renewal, the options appraisal is yet to be concluded and the 2002 *Housing Revenue Account Business Plan* was graded as “well below average”.

Is the council delivering its plans to meet the decent homes standard?

The Council has undertaken an assessment of the resources potentially available to support investment in the DHS, and is seeking external assistance for the options appraisal and new stock condition survey.

The IBS Housing Maintenance System has been obtained and additional modules are being acquired as necessary.

For the past two years, DHS improvement targets have been achieved and the housing capital programme has been delivered within budget. Tenants are generally satisfied with improvement works carried out.

However, it is unclear whether a thorough evaluation has been made of the main budget headings in the *Housing Revenue Account Business Plan* and whether the Council has prioritised the use of its resources to help meet the DHS. Staff vacancies and changes have impeded progress and DHS improvement targets are not systematically reflected in staff and managers' appraisals.

How well does the council monitor its progress and how effectively does this feed into future strategies and plans?

There is a performance management framework, which provides for regular reporting to managers and members on DHS-related targets.

An appraisal system provides a mechanism for allowing staff to see the contribution they can make to the Housing Division's successes.

There is some evidence (eg best value review) of learning from other authorities.

However, the Council's information systems are inadequate, there have been several interim managers and there is limited evidence that performance and process benchmarking are routinely leading to improved strategies and plans.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The peer assessment team should like to record the following general observations, which may assist the Council in strengthening its decent homes diagnostic. They should not be read as formal recommendations.

- ✂✂ A lot of work went into drafting the Council's decent homes diagnostic, which is well structured, follows the format of the Audit Commission's framework and is easy to read.
- ✂✂ The size of the decent homes diagnostic currently exceeds that recommended by the Audit Commission in its document *Comprehensive Performance Assessment – Self-Assessment Guidance for District Councils*. The diagnostic runs to 10 pages, whereas the guidance requires a maximum of four sides for each diagnostic area of balancing housing markets, decent homes and public space. The Council may want to make the document terser, with greater emphasis on outcomes and examples, and less on narrative, perhaps summarising the key points and presenting the source of additional information in an appendix.
- ✂✂ Audit Commission inspection teams will be particularly interested in “outcomes” (ie what impact the Council's approaches are having and what is improving for local people). They will also expect the diagnostic to contain not only the Council's strengths but also key areas for improvement, thus indicating strong self-awareness.
- ✂✂ The Council's *High Level Action Plan* attached to the main self-assessment document should include key improvements that will be tackled as a result of the decent homes diagnostic.

WHAT IS THE COUNCIL TRYING TO ACHIEVE IN RELATION TO THE STANDARD? DOES THE COUNCIL KNOW THE CONDITION OF THEIR HOUSING STOCK AND THEIR COMPLIANCE WITH THE DECENT HOMES STANDARD?

Strengths

1. The Council understands the problems and opportunities facing the housing service.
2. The Council's ambition for its stock is that all properties should comply with the Decent Homes Standard (DHS) by 2010, and it has embarked on a programme to achieve this.
3. Stakeholders believe the Council's ambition to meet the DHS is realistic and through its land bank it has the means to do so.
4. One of the investment priorities in the *Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Business Plan* is to improve safety and security.
5. Options appraisal is in its early stages but all the necessary building blocks are being put in place to make a robust evaluation.
6. There is a strong commitment to tenant involvement. The *Tenant Participation Agreement*, signed by the Council and tenant representatives and reviewed annually, sets the framework for tenant participation and consultation. A good recent example has been tenant involvement in the *HRA Business Plan*.
7. Disability Discrimination Act assessments are being carried out as part of the stock condition survey. A full review of community rooms is currently being undertaken.
8. The Council has an approach to dealing with diversity issues.
9. A sustainability study has been carried out recently in conjunction with partner registered social landlords to inform decisions on future developments.
10. The *Capital Strategy and Asset Management Plan*, which has been rated as "good" by the Government Office for the West Midlands, sets out priorities for meeting the DHS, including the energy efficiency of older stock.
11. There are major references to housing issues in the *Corporate Plan 2003/04*, which has links to *HRA Business Plan*, and there are some links to housing in the *Procurement Strategy*, which allows for different forms of procurement.
12. There are some encouraging examples of the Council looking at a broad range of options for specific sites (taking into account broader sustainability issues for Arley Hill Top and Piccadilly, former National Coal Board stock).
13. There is a Tenancy Enforcement Officer and defined approaches for dealing with anti-social behaviour (eg notice of seeking possession, seeking an injunction or working with the Police to issue an anti-social behaviour order). The Council is currently drafting a harassment policy to support its *Equal Opportunities Policy*.
14. The Council has estimated future demands for stock and the market indicates insufficient property for needs.
15. There has been a recent development of relevant strategies and plans with effective member involvement in their development.

Areas for Improvement

1. The Council recognises that its information systems for recording important data are not sufficiently robust (eg properties coming into or out of the DHS, properties that are potentially non-decent and other works that may be needed, such as asbestos, paving or works to garages). Information systems are inadequate for day-to-day management by officers and for performance management by members and managers.
2. The *Stock Condition Survey* is not up to date (a new one is planned for 2004).
3. Options appraisal has not yet been concluded.
4. The legacy of former National Coal Board housing is hampering the Council's overall ambition to meet the DHS by 2010.
5. There is limited reference to housing in the *North Warwickshire Community Plan 2003*.
6. It is unclear whether the Council's ambitions are consistent with LA 21.
7. There is no evidence of contractors being involved in developing ambitions for services to Council tenants.

8. There is no evidence that, following the change of administration, a strong leadership on decent homes has yet emerged.
9. The Council is beginning to engage actively with tenants after a period of inactivity, but a culture of systematic engagement still is to emerge.
10. In absence of adequate training and development, there appears a lack of tenant capacity to make a full contribution to developing housing ambitions.
11. There was an apparent lack of staff involvement in the best value review for Housing Maintenance, which risks a lack of ownership in the actions for improvement.
12. The assessment of different forms of procurement or of partnering is recent. The Council has a long-standing reliance on the traditional contractor/client approach.
13. There is no high-quality *HRA Business Plan* yet in place.

IS THE COUNCIL DELIVERING ITS PLANS TO MEET THE DECENT HOMES STANDARD?

Strengths

1. The Council is seeking external assistance for the stock options appraisal and the stock condition survey.
2. The Council has assessed the resources potentially available to support investment in the DHS (eg through its registered social landlords, it has commissioned a sustainability study for each of the three areas of ex-National Coal Board properties).
3. Investment programmes covering the short term provide sufficient detail so that tenants and others are clear about what is to be done and when.
4. The programmes focused on the DHS also take account of other factors that impact on the service, such as hard-to-let property.
5. The Council recently acquired and installed the IBS Housing Maintenance System and is buying further modules as necessary (eg for asbestos recording). Outturn is monitored on a monthly basis.
6. The Council's land bank is seen by stakeholders as a valuable resource to achieve the DHS standard.
7. Since 2001, targets for making properties decent have been achieved and the housing capital programme has been delivered within budget. Tenants are generally satisfied with improvement works carried out.
8. Options appraisal is in its early stages but all the necessary building blocks are being put in place to make a robust evaluation.

Areas for Improvement

1. It is unclear whether the Council has made a thorough evaluation of the main budget headings in the *HRA Business Plan*.
2. It is unclear whether the Council has prioritised the use of its resources to help meet the DHS.
3. Partnerships have not been formed with contractors to deliver works, or with other organisations to jointly commission and procure works, to meet the DHS.
4. The recent best value review of Housing Maintenance recognised the need for better integration of various elements of maintenance work (eg work on void properties to meet the DHS).
5. The review of Housing Maintenance included tenant involvement, but some contractors and staff felt distanced from the process. The review showed a general downward trend in tenant satisfaction.
6. Targets set for the number of homes to be improved are not systematically reflected in staff and managers' appraisals.
7. The standards of housing and property-related services are clear for customers, but failures to meet the standards are not acted upon to the satisfaction of tenants.
8. Numerous staff vacancies and changes have resulted in lost momentum.
9. Although there are examples of operational joint working there appears little evidence of this at the strategic level (eg there is limited reference to Housing in the *North Warwickshire Community Plan 2003* and there was no Housing representative on the Local Strategic Partnership until recently).
10. Options appraisal has not yet been concluded.

HOW WELL DOES THE COUNCIL MONITOR ITS PROGRESS AND HOW EFFECTIVELY DOES THIS FEED INTO FUTURE STRATEGIES AND PLANS?

Strengths

1. The Council has a performance management framework, which is used for setting and monitoring the achievement of targets related to the DHS.
2. The performance management framework provides for regular reporting to managers and members.
3. Through the appraisal system staff can understand the contribution they are making to the success of the Housing Division.
4. Tenant perceptions are captured routinely after property works have been completed.
5. Benchmarking visits to better performing authorities during the best value review of Housing Maintenance helped managers learn a number of lessons, as a result of which there have been some changes in the way both the day-to-day repairs and planned maintenance services operate.
6. The Council is receptive to contractors' suggestions about working practices

Areas for Improvement

1. The Council recognises that its information systems for recording important data are not sufficiently robust. Information systems are inadequate for day-to-day management by officers and for performance management by members and managers. There is no remote access for members.
2. There is a difficulty in recruiting managers with permanent contracts and there have been several interim managers.
3. It is unclear whether the Council has worked to overcome barriers to change and learnt from these.
4. There is limited evidence that the Council is a learning organisation, where leaders encourage staff to contribute to the learning process.
5. There is limited evidence the Council routinely seeks out learning from others, through performance and process benchmarking and making use of critical friends and other external challenges, to drive improvements.
6. There is limited evidence of progress reported to or managed by members.
7. There is limited evidence of changes to Council practice as result of customer feedback and a perception amongst tenants that concerns about standards of work are not addressed.
8. There is no evidence that the Council has identified the risks of not meeting the DHS and related objectives and has developed contingency plans to deal with these risks.
9. There is no evidence of shifting resources to meet priorities.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

The team hopes that the Council finds this report constructive and helpful in strengthening its decent homes diagnostic, and focusing subsequent improvement activity. Throughout the peer challenge process, the team has sought to operate as constructive friends and be supportive of the Council's desire to open up to external challenge. If there are some aspects of this report with which the Council does not entirely concur, and evidence exists to support its view, the Council may find it helpful to include this evidence in the revised decent homes diagnostic or make it available to the Audit Commission during the scheduled inspection.

Should the Council wish to discuss or clarify any aspect of the report then the team will be happy to do so during the feedback presentation.

Keith Batchelor

*For and on behalf of the
West Midlands LGA & Excellence in Business partnership
Accredited Peer Challenge Provider*