

**Cheltenham Borough Council****Cabinet - 24<sup>th</sup> July 2002****Best Value Review of Managing Council Housing****Report of the Cabinet Deputy (Neighbourhood and Community)****1 Summary and Recommendation**

- 1.1 This report outlines the findings of the best value review of managing council housing. The purpose of this review has been to consider how the Council undertakes its role as a responsible landlord, through the co-ordination of a range of services to tenants, and how it seeks to create sustainable communities within a safe environment.
- 1.2 This review has always been viewed as a self-assessment exercise by the council of its housing services to tenants. The role of the project team has therefore been as much about drawing together the various elements of review and improvement work that has been going on, as it has been about undertaking original work itself. This latter aspect has therefore focused upon those elements of the review which have not been covered elsewhere. In effect, the work of the project team has sought to complement other activities in order to deliver a cohesive whole.
- 1.3 The report concludes by saying that, in the medium term, tenants are looking to have “decent homes in good areas”, but that, if forced to choose, the quality of “the area” is ultimately the most important factor. The quality of the area includes issues such as minimising crime, controlling bad neighbours and maintaining the streetscape and these need to be addressed. “Value-added” services such as Safer Estates, neighbourhood wardens and a robust, sustainable system for tenant involvement will contribute to the development of good areas, just as much as the establishment of an ALMO will enable all tenants to have decent homes.
- 1.4 Ultimately, the core letting and estate management functions influence the nature and the quality of the service provided to tenants. Improvements have taken place over the last four years, which have meant that the service is now externally recognised as being “well above average”. The improvement plan outlined in Appendix F seeks to build upon this in order to demonstrate that the service has the capacity to improve still further.

**1.5 I therefore recommend that the improvement plan set out in Appendix F of this report is approved.**

## **2. Introduction**

- 2.1 The purpose of this report is to consider the range and quality of the service that Cheltenham Borough Council provides as a landlord to its tenants, to consider this function in the light of the Council's corporate objectives and in the light of recent policy initiatives by the government.
- 2.2 The project brief is outlined in Appendix A. This identifies not only a clear set of objectives, but also defines the scope of the review. The review has sought to cover not only the core estate management and repair functions, but also service areas such as Safer Estates and sheltered housing. Since tenant participation was seen at the time the project brief was set as informing both housing management and strategic development it was not specifically included within this review, but the review has not ignored it. Indeed, it is recognised that the tenant compact is a cornerstone of the service. Therefore the review needed to not only understand the role and nature of any participation by tenants, but it also needs to be able to comment upon the way tenant participation is undertaken.
- 2.3 The other issue which has featured highly within the review process has been the need to balance tenant requirements and government objectives. The government has been very active in the sphere of social housing. Not only has it substantially increased the amount of resources going into social housing, but has also produced a number of initiatives outlined below in the section entitled: 'The National Context'.
- 2.4 Overall, the main difficulty with this review has been the sheer scale and complexity of the function. Clearly, the review could have gone into a great deal of detail and this could have easily overwhelmed the project team. The review has therefore sought to highlight a number of key issues as part of the improvement plan, which the service managers themselves have then been able to develop into a series of specific actions at a more detailed level.

## **3 Background**

### **The Present Service**

- 3.1 Housing management was the largest service in the Housing Directorate, and has recently been rated by the Government as "well above average". The service was decentralised to area offices in the early 1990s. A proposal to transfer the housing stock to an independent landlord in 1997 was rejected by the Borough's tenants.
- 3.2 In 1998 new initiatives such as man in a van were introduced (which is unique in the South West) and Safer Estates and intensive management developed and expanded in 2000. A restructure in 2001 built on these more focused team roles, and performance in all areas has increased, with the exception of the management of empty homes.
- 3.3 DLO 'contractor' activity has merged with the Housing Management 'client' role in April 2002. The Housing Management service now has 120 staff in six main teams

providing all landlord services for our 5,300 council tenancies. An options working group of members and tenants has backed the proposal to bid for Arms Length Management of the service, starting in shadow form in 2002.

### **The National Context**

- 3.4 Much of the housing function is statutory. While there is a large body of legislation which underpins the service, the two key Acts underpinning the present service are the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 and the Housing Act 1996. In December 1998, the Government issued a consultative paper entitled: "A New Financial Framework for Local Authority Housing: Resource Accounting in the Housing Revenue Account". This document led to the introduction of Resource Accounting, which has been implemented from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2001.
- 3.5 Also, in December 2000, the Government published: "*Quality and Choice: A decent home for all*", which seeks to:
- bring all social housing up to a decent standard by 2010;
  - ensure all local authorities adopt a more business-like approach to housing management;
  - support the transfer of up to 200,000 homes each year to registered social landlords (RSLs);
  - encourage the creation of new arms-length management arrangements;
  - promote new PFI schemes; and
  - ensure the consistent and rigorous application of best value and tenant participation compact principles.
- 3.6 In addition, the Government sees housing as integral to regeneration, while the introduction of "*Supporting People*" in 2003 will see funds for support services in housing, social services and health being combined into a single budget, which will be allocated to areas according to a needs formula. *Supporting People* seeks to benefit a number of groups, including:
- support to older people in sheltered housing, or support to those who wish to continue living in their own homes but need some help to do so;
  - supported housing for people with learning difficulties who can move out of institutional care and into the community if they are helped to do so;
  - housing for people with long term mental health problems;
  - help for young homeless people; and
  - support for women fleeing domestic violence.

### **Corporate Objectives**

- 3.7 Locally, Cheltenham Borough Council's corporate objectives ("Our town, our future") include reference to the work undertaken by housing management under the theme: "A decent standard of living", where the Council aims to ".....provide a wide choice of housing to meet the needs of the individuals and the town." Also, under the theme of "Living life to the full", Cheltenham Borough Council seeks to: "...provide support for people with mental or physical illness or disability to live as independently as possible in the community."
- 3.8 The Housing Strategy Division also produced a tenant participation agreement in 2000 which seeks to involve tenants in decision-making in all aspects of the housing service, and for the level and pace of the involvement to be decided by the tenants themselves. The Housing Management Division is necessarily heavily involved in ensuring that this agreement works. Indeed, there are now seven Neighbourhood Monitoring Panels set up and monitoring performance against the standards set.

### **Key Documents**

- 3.9 Underpinning the current strategic development of the service are a number of key documents. These include the housing needs survey, which provides an analysis of likely demand for social housing in the future; the housing stock survey, which considers the condition of the social housing stock owned by the Council and available to rent; the tenants compact, which provides the cornerstone of tenant participation and the housing revenue account (HRA) business plan. These documents are briefly outlined in Appendix B.

## **4 Review Methodology**

- 4.1 The review has built upon the foundations that already exist and has sought to supplement this with further consultation and comparative work. It has already been noted that there are a number of key documents which underpin this review and these are briefly outlined in Appendix B.
- 4.2 In addition, some benchmarking work had previously been carried out by the Housing Management Division in conjunction with other authorities within the Exeter Benchmarking Group. This work is featured within the HRA Business Plan. The Housing Management Division has sought to supplement this benchmarking work by joining Housemark, the benchmarking club run by Andersen, HACAS Chapman Hendy and the Chartered Institute of Housing.
- 4.3 Further benchmarking work was done in respect of housing repairs via the Checkmate Club, run by KPMG, while comparative data in respect of sheltered housing features within the HACAS Chapman Hendy report outlined in Appendix B. Efforts were made to gather comparative data for both grounds maintenance and cleansing but this proved unsuccessful, mainly due to the lack of data available through the benchmarking clubs identified and the lack of any enthusiasm by other authorities to compare this aspect of the service.
- 4.4 The key elements of the consultation work took place with tenants and staff, though other key stakeholders were consulted during the review process. Tenants were consulted through satisfaction surveys in both October 2000 (user satisfaction best value performance indicators) and in April 2001 in order to gauge their satisfaction with the present level of service. The two surveys have used different

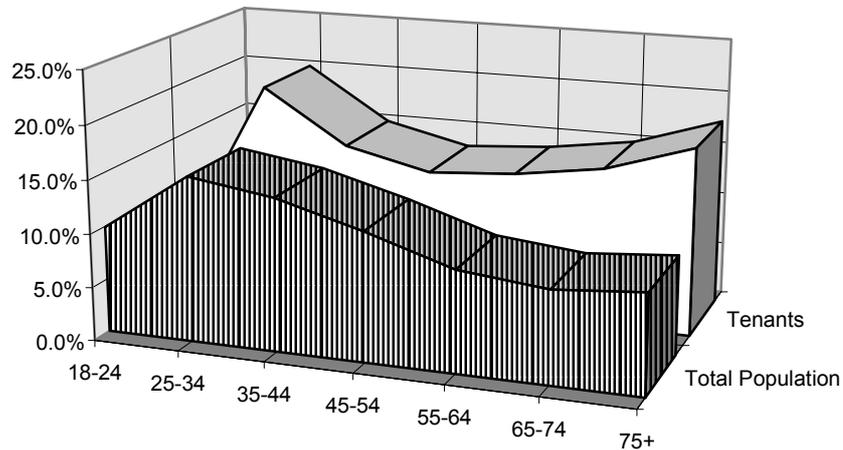
methodologies and both sets of results are not directly comparable. However, we feel that they do suggest an improvement in satisfaction levels. Further work was also carried out through the opinion research undertaken by Market Research UK in February 2002. The review team sought to supplement this by undertaking a survey of prospective tenants currently on the housing waiting list.

- 4.5 Staff have been consulted through a series of meetings during the course of the review so that they were both aware of what was going on and had the opportunity to join the debate about the future of the service. Staff were also invited to take part in a series of workshops from which action plans were drawn up and incorporated into the review's improvement plan. Plans had been made to undertake a joint staff-tenant meeting to consider issues which were of mutual concern. Timescales have meant that it has not been possible to undertake this area of work in time to inform the improvement plan, but this work has been undertaken in the past and indeed will be repeated shortly.
- 4.6 In accordance with the Council's best value methodology, the review produced a position statement which was presented to members at Overview and Scrutiny (Social and Environment) on the 21<sup>st</sup> February 2002, where members were asked to comment and to raise any issues pertinent to the review so that these could be incorporated into the report.
- 4.7 Finally, the Division has also undertaken a 'mystery shopper' exercise in order to discover what the service is really like for users. Again, further details of the results of this exercise are shown in Appendix B.

## **5 Housing Profile**

- 5.1 Cheltenham Borough Council has some 6,076 tenants. However, the tenant population is highly clustered with the main concentrations being in Pittville Ward (Whaddon - 14.7%), Hesters Way Ward (15.4%) and St. Marks Ward (23.0%). Conversely, less than 1% of the populations of College, Park and Swindon Wards comprise of council tenants. Figure 1 also graphically demonstrates two distinct tenant age groups with concentrations in the 25-34 and 65+ age groups.
- 5.2 The needs and aspirations of these two age groups are necessarily different, while it tends to be the older tenants that are willing to actively participate. This has an impact upon the way Cheltenham Borough Council consults with its tenants, who up to now have tended to be treated as an homogeneous group. The development of strategies for young people, older people and other specific client groups, is being supplemented by a more sophisticated mechanism for tenant involvement and participation which recognises the different needs and issues affecting different groups.

**Figure 1: Comparison of Age Profile of Tenants to Total Population**



5.3 Cheltenham Borough Council possessed some 5,349 dwellings in 2001/02. The stock condition survey undertaken in 2000 indicated that there is not only a repairs and improvements backlog, but that a significant amount of work needs to be undertaken to bring the stock up to the government's decency standard. The need principally arising from building elements nearing the end of their useful life which need to be replaced, as well as providing modern amenities and standards. In 2001/02, it was estimated that some 3,900 properties need investment to bring them up to the 'decency' standard. A summary of the investment needed is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1: Comparison of Investment Need with Available Resources**

	Investment Requirements		Current Resources	Total Investment Shortfall
	Decency Standard	All Repairs		
	£000s	£000s	£000s	£000s
<b>2001/02 - 2005/06</b>	47,226	62,586	26,232	- 36,354
<b>2006/07 - 2010/11</b>	55,588	71,696	51,935	- 19,761
<b>2011/12 - 2030/31</b>	109,081	147,122	120,390	- 26,732

5.4 Table 2 demonstrates that there is a strong correlation between Cheltenham Borough Council's tenants and deprivation. At a ward level, this correlation is as high as 0.94 for the index of multiple deprivation, and is 0.91 when compared to the child poverty index. The correlation index demonstrates a link between tenants and health problems which is also comparatively high at 0.83. Links with unemployment and crime are less pronounced. Overall, these indicate that council tenants are concentrated into a number of areas, whose population suffers from a disproportionately high level of deprivation and other social problems. Any service improvements need to go beyond simply improving tenants' homes. Consideration needs to be given to the community as a whole and how these areas can develop into thriving neighbourhoods.

**Table 2: Correlation Indices between Tenant Distribution and Social Factors**

## Correlation Index

Index of multiple deprivation	0.94
Child poverty index score	0.91
Unemployment	0.69
Health	0.83
Burglary	0.53

## 6 Tenant Aspirations for the Future

- 6.1 A series of focus group meetings were held with tenants during February 2002, and these sessions highlighted a number of issues which the service will need to work towards. Essentially, the improvement plan outlined in Appendix F of this report seeks to move the service forward from where it is now in order to better meet these aspirations in the future.
- 6.2 The single most significant aspiration to emerge was the need for tenants to have “decent homes in good areas”, but that, if forced to choose, “the quality of the area” is ultimately the most important. The quality of the area includes issues such as minimising crime, controlling bad neighbours and maintaining the streetscape.
- 6.3 Most groups recognised that turning bad areas into good is very difficult, and that improving existing homes should be much more straightforward. Priorities for improving existing homes include:
- new kitchens and bathrooms
  - new glazing and the upgrade of central heating
  - continued improvement to repairs system
  - better enforcement of tenancy conditions.
- 6.4 In terms of quality of life, the two key issues which emerge are crime and community safety and good local amenities. There is an argument to say that the housing service therefore needs to act as a catalyst for safety initiatives, employment initiatives and educational opportunity, though many tenants also feel that it should continue to focus purely on the physical provision of housing and its management. It is worth noting that the preferred service delivery option - the arms’ length management organisation - will enable better delivery of decent homes, but since it will focus upon housing management the need to deliver a broader agenda will necessitate better multi-agency working. This issue is highlighted in the improvement plan.

## 7 Current Targets and Comparative Performance

### Current Performance

- 7.1 The housing revenue account, the council budget for delivering the present letting and estate management service to tenants, is ring-fenced so that year-on-year income must at least equal expenditure. This is illustrated in Table 3. The main elements of expenditure other than rent rebates are major repairs and improvements (£5.03 million), reactive and cyclical repairs (£2.8 million) and general management (£2.6 million), while the key income item is dwelling rents (£15.4 million).

**Table 3: Summary Housing Revenue Account**

<b>(£000s)</b>	<b>2000/2001</b>	<b>2001/2002<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>2002/2003</b>
	<i><b>Actual</b></i> <i><b>£000s</b></i>	<i><b>Revised</b></i> <i><b>£000s</b></i>	<i><b>Projected</b></i> <i><b>£000s</b></i>
<b>Expenditure</b>	17,888	27,185	27,429
<b>Income</b>	17,453	29,372	29,561
<b>Net Operating Exp.</b>	(435)	2,187	2,132
<b>Appropriations</b>	511	(2,281)	(2,132)
<b>Surplus/(Deficit)</b>	76	(94)	0
<b>Balance b/f</b>	1,129	1,205	1,111
<b>Balance c/f</b>	1,205	1,111	1,111

- 7.2 The cost of providing the management function was £11.71 per dwelling per week in 2000/01, which is a little above the national average (£10.90), but compares favourably with other authorities within the Exeter Group.
- 7.3 The service's current performance levels and targets are set out in Appendix C, with a summary shown in Table 4 below. What these indicate is that the Division performs very strongly in a number of areas and is seeking to improve further over the next five years. For example, BVPI 66 - the proportion of rent collected - shows performance that is well within the top quartile nationally. Current tenants arrears as a proportion of the authority's rent roll fall outside the top 25%, but this reflects an issue that the service recognised some time ago and is currently addressing. BVPI 69 - the percentage of rent lost through dwellings becoming vacant - also falls outside top quartile performance, but this reflects the fact that many council dwellings are hard to let and is one of the problem areas that the Division has to contend with.

**Table 4: Extract of Current Housing Division Performance**

	<b>2000/01 Actual</b>	<b>2000/01 Top 25%</b>	<b>2001/02 Actual</b>	<b>2001/02 Target</b>	<b>Change 02/03 -</b>

<sup>1</sup> While figures for income and expenditure have changed significantly between the two years, this is due to a change in accounting treatment wherein depreciation for capital assets have been incorporated for the first time. There has not been any significant change in actual service levels.

					06/07
BVPI <sup>2</sup> 63	51.5	59	52.5	52.5	+ 5.5
BVPI 66a	99.3%	98.4%	99.3%	99.4%	+0.6%
BVPI 66b	2.13%	1.9%	2.65%	2.0%	
BVPI 69	1.38%	0.9%	1.71%	1.35%	
BVPI71 <£5k	72.3%	52%			
BVPI71 >£5k	35.4%	9%			
BVPI 72	93.6%	97%	99%	100%	
BVPI 184 <sup>3</sup>	Base = 85%		Base = 74%		- 68%

(Shaded cells denote areas where indicators have ceased to be collected)

- 7.4 From the perspective of repairs and investment BVPI 72 - percentage of urgent repairs completed within government time limits - shows that the service is now within top quartile performance. While the relevant local performance indicators show that the service is either meeting or exceeding its targets.
- 7.5 Some of the indicators also show how the service is picking up and progressing current policy. BVPI 71 - the number of local authority dwellings receiving renovation work as a proportion of need - shows that Cheltenham Borough Council is investing significantly more than the top quartile threshold, while BVPI 184 indicates that this investment is likely to accelerate further during the next five years if the arms length management organisation goes ahead. These improvements should also see better energy efficiency - BVPI 63, the average LA housing SAP rating - is also expected to improve, which is not only better for the environment, but reduces tenants' heating bills too.

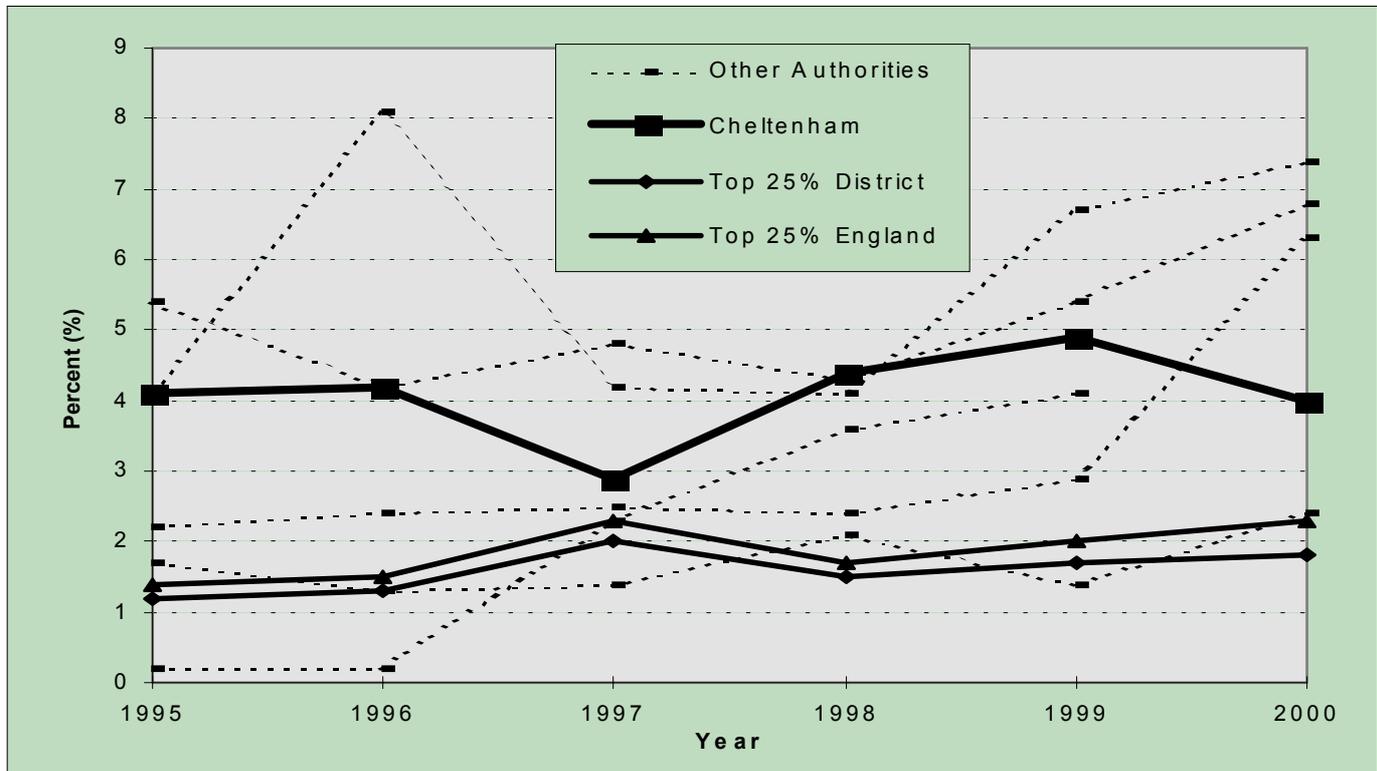
### Comparative Performance

- 7.6 At an early stage in the review, Cheltenham's council house stock was compared to other authorities within the Exeter Benchmarking Group. Generally performance in all areas had deteriorated for some time up to 1999, and has improved in most since. Performance in most categories compares well with other Exeter Group authorities, and is beginning to achieve or exceed national 'top 25%' performance in many areas. The proportion of tenants who were over 13 weeks in arrears started to climb in 1998 and 1999, (see Figure 2), but is now beginning to decline again: it was 4.0% in 1999/2000 and 3.85% in 2000/01.

### Figure 2: Proportion of Tenants Owing Over 13 Weeks Rent

<sup>2</sup> BVPI stands for 'Best Value Performance Indicator' and represents the government's measure of the service. Definitions for these indicators are available upon request.

<sup>3</sup> BVPI 184 which concerns the proportion of homes achieving the decency standard was not established until 2002/03. The two baseline figures shown are figures which have been reported in both the housing condition survey and the business plan.



- 7.7 One of the main points to emerge from the comparison was that Cheltenham has a significantly higher proportion of flats than the other authorities. Just over half of Cheltenham Borough Council's social housing stock comprises of flats, compared to an average of around 38% for the Exeter Group. This necessarily presents a problem since prospective tenants prefer more traditional houses to flats, often making the latter harder to let. Cheltenham Borough Council did have a problem in letting properties, but recent indications are that performance in this area has improved significantly with the time taken to re-let down from 64 days in 2000/01 to 38.7 days in the second quarter of 2001/02. The district council top quartile performance for 2000/01 was 26 days.
- 7.8 The Checkmate benchmarking exercise undertaken in January 2002 indicated that Cheltenham Borough Council's maintenance cost per dwelling was higher than average - £1,261 per unit, compared to the group median of £1,193. However, this cost is made up principally of expenditure on works (£1,176, compared to a median of £973), with very little going on administrative overheads. (Cheltenham's overheads as a percentage of total maintenance costs are only 7%, compared to a median of 13% and a lower quartile figure of 9%). The reason for this high expenditure comes down to the age of the housing stock, with some 24% of Cheltenham's social housing stock being built before 1945. Much of the rest was built in the 1950's.
- 7.9 The proportion of responsive costs to total repair costs is also low - 18%, compared to a median of 25%. Cheltenham Borough Council also gets good value for money from its repairs with the prices for a sample of jobs showing that the cost is consistently within the lowest quartile. A breakdown of responsive repairs costs is shown in Appendix D.

- 7.10 The two key points to note with the sheltered housing and Lifeline service are that it is comparatively low cost. The weekly rent for sheltered housing in May 2001 was £60, compared to a national norm of between £65 to £70 per week. Similarly, the weekly charge for the Lifeline service in May 2001 was £1.80, compared to a national norm of £2.00 to £2.25.

## **8 Consultation**

### **Tenant Satisfaction Survey**

- 8.1 The principal point to note with this survey was the fact that 81% of tenants were satisfied with the way they are treated as a customer. BVPI 74, which used a different methodology, came out with 71.7%. The BVPI 74 figure compares to a top 25% threshold of 86%. The result is therefore good, but highlights the fact that there is scope for improvement. It is also worth noting that most tenants contact the council by telephone. 75% were satisfied with the way their telephone calls were handled.
- 8.2 The most interesting results are found in respect of housing repairs. Only 59% of tenants were satisfied with routine housing repairs, which is the weakest area in terms of tenant satisfaction. The quality of the repairs and length of time were the main problems, and this may reflect the fact that the work teams are paid according to a schedule of rates (SOR), which means that they need to work as quickly as possible if they are to increase their pay. Satisfaction with Man in a Van, which deals with minor housing repairs only, and which was designed to partly off-set the problems of SOR was 94%. Most complaints received by the council were about repairs, but officers are looking to address this by making some significant changes. It is therefore proposed to extend Man in a Van to other areas, while the building repair work force are being merged with the client team in order to streamline the service.

### **Staff Consultation**

- 8.3 Staff consultation<sup>4</sup> identified a mixed picture, with a number of areas improving. For example, void turnaround which was slow (see Appendix D) is perceived as improving. However, there are areas where the service is coming under pressure, through an increase in the number of clients with mental health problems and a decline in the number of attractive properties to let due to Right to Buy legislation. This picture needs to be seen against a background of a strong team culture. Staff results are summarised in Appendix E.

### **Waiting List Survey**

- 8.4 The waiting list survey of prospective tenants proved the most unexpected in terms of results. Most prospective customers have been on the waiting list longer than they expected, and the council is poor at keeping people informed about what is going on, or how long they are likely to need to wait. Explanations tend not to be given. Having said that, staff are perceived as friendly and easy to contact.

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<sup>4</sup> It is important to point out that in this context staff were simply consulted as stakeholders, and this consultation does not represent the statutory requirement to consult upon TUPE transfer. This will need to be dealt with separately as part of the ALMO criteria.

8.5 People see council housing as offering affordable, good-quality homes. Most people on the waiting list are currently in private rented accommodation or live with family, and council housing is perceived as a positive alternative as opposed to a last resort. However, where an offer has been made, people may still turn a property down principally because of the area, rather than because of the property itself.

## **9 The improvement plan**

9.1 The improvement plan is a substantial document in its own right. A summary, including key recommendations, is attached to this report. However, in essence, it covers the following areas:

- tenant involvement
- management of lettings
- neighbourhood management and sustainable communities
- management of voids
- sheltered housing
- responsive repairs
- planned repairs
- maximising income
- management of garages
- management of the housing register
- asset management
- development of the community alarm service

## **10 Conclusions**

10.1 The first point to make is that the bulk of the service is statutory. There is therefore no option but to continue providing the landlord function, though the Council does have options about how the landlord function is delivered. Provision of the service is also seen as an integral aspect of the Council's aims and objectives, as set out in '*Our town, our future*'. The question of how the service should be delivered is a different issue, and this is clearly bound up with the need to secure sufficient investment in the future so that the entire housing stock is brought up to the 'decency' standard.

10.2 The options working group have already considered this issue and it is clear that Cheltenham Borough Council would be unable to fund the necessary repairs. Therefore, status quo is not a viable option. The council must therefore choose between large scale voluntary transfer (LSVT) or an arms-length management organisation (ALMO). Cheltenham Borough Council has decided after some debate to opt for the ALMO option (see Appendix B, B10).

10.3 The service has many strengths and weaknesses, as well as a proven capacity to change and innovate. Obvious examples of this being the move towards the management of neighbourhoods, and the introduction of Man in a Van. Tenant participation has moved forward a great deal in recent years. However, much more needs to be done to involve hard to reach groups and the vulnerable, and this is a feature of the improvement plan. Tenant participation is very much a dynamic process and it is worth mentioning that a district-wide compact has been agreed with the tenants' federation, while neighbourhood compacts are currently being negotiated.

- 10.4 The service provided to customers is also good, but the mystery shopper exercise highlighted the fact that front-line staff could be much more forthcoming in their approach. Also, while staff do all that they can for existing tenants, much more could be done for prospective tenants by keeping them informed and providing them with a more personal service. Satisfaction ratings with Man in a Van are also very high, but there is a lingering problem with tenants' perceptions of the rest of the repair service. The improvement plan therefore outlines a fundamental shift in the way that repairs are delivered from both the customers' and the operatives' point of view.
- 10.5 In the medium term, tenants are looking to have "decent homes in good areas", but that, if forced to choose, the quality of "the area" is ultimately the most important. The quality of the area includes issues such as minimising crime, controlling bad neighbours and maintaining the streetscape, and these need to be addressed. "Value-added" services such as Safer Estates, neighbourhood wardens and a robust, sustainable system for tenant involvement will contribute to the development of good areas, just as much as the establishment of an ALMO will enable all tenants to have decent homes.
- 10.6 Ultimately, the core letting and estate management functions influence the nature and the quality of the service provided to tenants. Improvements have taken place over the last four years since then, which has meant that the service is now externally recognised as being "well above average". The improvement plan outlined in Appendix F seeks to build upon this in order to demonstrate that the service has the capacity to improve still further.

## **11. Implications**

- 11.1 Financial** Members are referred to the accompanying report on this agenda '*Project initiation for the ALMO*' which summarises the additional budget requirements to implement the best value improvement plan and achieve an excellence rating from the Housing Inspectorate.
- 11.2 Legal** None flowing directly from the review and implementation of the proposed improvement standards set out in the improvement plan other than any which relate to the formation of new or the variation of existing contracts for goods and services.
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### **11.3 Personnel**

The proposal to move towards an arms-length company will have a profound impact upon housing staff and upon other support functions within the council. In the event that it proceeds, statutory consultation with expected employees and their trade union representatives, and will need to take place in advance of the transfer in accordance with TUPE regulations.

The staff training needs identified within Appendix F will need to be met as soon as possible.

### **11.4 Equal opportunities, social justice and anti-poverty**

The ALMO will be actively working with other agencies to ensure that a broader approach to social inclusion will lead to quality communities, not just decent homes.

### **11.5 Environmental**

The ALMO will be actively working with other agencies to ensure that a broader approach to environmental issues will lead to quality communities, not just decent homes.

Investment in the housing stock should also see an improvement in energy efficiency which will not only help to alleviate fuel poverty, but will contribute to a reduction in the consumption of fossil fuels.

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### **11.6 Accountability**

Deputy (social and community)

Social and Community overview and scrutiny committee

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### **Background Papers**

Project Working Papers

### **Contact Officer**

Nick Hatton, Best Value Manager, 01242 775035, NicholasH@Cheltenham.gov.uk

## **12 Appendices**

12.1 The following appendices have not been attached to this report. However, they are available on the shared area at: S:/Special Projects/Managing Council Housing/Appendices and Improvement Plan.doc

- A: Project Brief
- B: Key Documents
- C: Best Value Performance Indicators
- D: 'Checkmate' Benchmarking Results
- E: Staff Consultation Summary
- F: Improvement Plan

## Attachment

### Managing Council Housing Improvement Plan

#### Tenant Involvement

The implementation of this improvement plan will ensure more tenants are able to have a say and get involved in way that suits them. To do this we need to we need to improve awareness of opportunities to be involved and ensure tenants are able to take up these opportunities through training and more informal involvement mechanisms.

- Continue to develop the sheltered housing forum
- Develop a sheltered housing compact
- Develop a disability forum
- Continue to develop the leaseholders forum
- Increase the number of tenants associations
- Develop street representatives scheme

#### Management of Lettings.

This will result in a higher standard of accommodation being offered, greater flexibility in letting 'difficult to let' properties, more information for prospective tenants concerning the property and neighbourhood, increased support for new tenants, especially potentially vulnerable tenants, and post-let customer satisfaction surveys.

- Review of the content of offer letters.
- Agree improved void repair work standards and void refurbishment standards.
- Apply more flexible approach to void standards for 'difficult to let' properties, i.e. decoration of sheltered flats.
- Carry out research concerning sheltered accom. & residents:
  - analyse dependency levels and care needs on the Schemes
  - information on facilities and disabled accessInformation to then be provided to Area teams to assist with lettings.
- Evaluate the feasibility of an incentive scheme to encourage older council tenants to transfer into sheltered accommodation, including paying removal costs
- Accompanied viewings on all lettings (where appropriate).
- Joint viewings with Estate Manager and Housing Support Assistant as standard for all sheltered accom. Lettings.
- Post-let visits within 28 days.  
Establish 'property boards' to display void properties and Mutual Exchanges
- Send out 'estate agent style' information sheets, with picture of property on offer, with pre-offer letters.

#### Neighbourhood Management and Sustainable Communities

Tackling anti-social behaviour needs to become more of a part of day to day estate management so that problems are identified and dealt with as early as possible, in as simple a way as possible. Better information needs to be obtained and analysed to gain a greater understanding of what is going on and where, when and why it is happening so that resources can be targeted. Joint agency

work on ASB cases needs to be improved so that information can be exchanged more efficiently and effectively and responses can be co-ordinated to produce better outcomes..

More intervention work is needed on ASB cases where problems are being caused by those with support needs - drugs, alcohol, family, mental health problems so that the damage they may cause their communities is reduced and prevented and the need for action against them may be detrimental to their needs, is avoided.

### **Management of Voids.**

This will result in improved procedures, improved performance, void works that leave the property in an improved lettable standard, less refusals per property, increased tenant satisfaction levels, and the demonstrable improvement of partnership working both within the HMS/council and with other partnership agencies.

- Agree improved void repair work standards and void refurbishment standards.
- Clarify responsibility for managing in-house workers in relation to minor void repair works.
- Positive marketing of void properties (see IP Management of Allocations & Lettings improvement plan).

### **Sheltered Housing Physical Environment and Conditions**

This will ensure that the physical environment is appropriate for the needs of service users and meets the requirements for independence, privacy and dignity.

- Achieving accreditation to the Code of Practice for Sheltered Housing and related Support for Older Persons in the Community - a specialist quality assurance kitemark.
- Develop an induction pack for new Sheltered Housing residents, which would include the tenant's handbook and specific information relating to their scheme and locality.

### **Responsive Repairs Service**

The Man in a van service is very popular with tenants and has been a great success. Over the past year the service has been expanded to cover the whole of Cheltenham, we now need to add extra value to this service.

- Pilot to develop a repair by appointment scheme, to be reviewed after three months.
- Dedicated electrician MiV to cover electrical repairs formally passed on to the DLO.

### **Planned Repairs Programme**

- Produce contract review forms and contractor recommendation forms.
- Produce contractors code of conduct.
- Contact other social housing providers to ascertain how they hold their data for gas service records.
- Implement re-servicing to re-let properties, link to estate managers for new tenancy start dates.
- Programme of annual scheme appraisals to include: profile of scheme residents and facilities, access for people with disabilities and physical improvement and refurbishment work needed.

### **Maximising Income**

The outcomes of the improvements will result in maximisation of income, improved advice and information for our customers and increased levels of customer satisfaction. Improved levels of performance will result in more available income for service improvements to our customers.

- Review of Rent Arrears Letters
- Leaflets and Publicity
- Arrears Surgeries
- Working Procedures
- Housing Benefit Surgeries
- To carry out more detailed analysis of arrears causes by age, family type and location by using GIS system
- Results of analysis to be used to target initiatives geared to differing profiles
- Staff Training

### **Management of Garages.**

By implementing the improvements it is hoped that demand will increase, this will in the main be due to reduced supply and improvements to the remaining garage sites. Improvements will include repairs & maintenance and site security.

- Establish an option appraisal working party to review the viability of each site
- Complete survey of every garage site.
- Identify sites for development of social housing & potential partners.
- Review the site security for the remaining sites.
- Implement a garage improvement programme.
- Market garages.

### **Management of the Common Housing Register (CHR) & the Housing Allocation Policy.**

CBC & HMS want to enable applicants to 'engage' with the service provided by both HMS and the local RSL's at an earlier stage. They want to see applicants have greater choice and a greater understanding of the councils policies, procedures and the constraints that impact on the time applicants are registered on the CHR before property offers are made. The applicants expectations need to be known and taken into account in both shaping the service and the type of properties available.

- Provision of leaflets to explain the policy to prospective and actual applicants.
- A review of management processes & the publishing of new working procedures.
- Provision of an annual newsletter to all applicants.
- CBC to provide centralised RSL nominations scheme.
- Annual review of the Allocations Policy.

### **Asset Management**

The present stock condition survey measured 100% external and 80% internal stock data, the remaining 20% internal information needs to be collected. To keep the information fully up to date 20% of the stock will need to be re-surveyed year on year.

One of the key service objectives in our Business Plan is making best use of existing stock through ensuring empty homes are brought back into use quickly. Void performance is one of our key performance indicators and improved performance in this area will result in more available income for

service improvements to our customers.

- Re-surveying 20% of the stock and updating the currently held information on an annual basis, linked to properties included in each years cyclical painting programme.
- All new gas heating systems and replacement boilers to be condensing boilers where practical.
- Pilot partnering contracts for Kitchen & Bathroom refurbs, encapsulation.
- Review with contractors, suppliers, T/Fed, tenant groups. Amend & extend to other works and service contracts.
- Reactive repairs team linking up with the sheltered team to attend the sheltered blocks coffee morning and give talks to the residents.

### **Development of the Lifeline Community Alarm Service**

In response to increased demand, we need to review our services to ensure that they are what the customer wants and we need to improve the efficiency, viability and sustainability of the service.

- Develop and implement a comprehensive database of stock
- Introduce new system of marking Lifeline units to identify that they are the property of CBC and where they need to be returned to.
- Develop and implement a comprehensive database of customer information.
- Training for Housing Support Staff on installation and demonstration of the products