

Summary

1 The borough of Brent is situated in north-west London. The rising population is currently 263,000, living within 104,000 households. Fifty per cent of the population are from the black and Asian communities. Unemployment stands at 6.5 per cent compared to the London average of 3.6 per cent.

2 The council has 63 elected councillors and control is held by the majority Labour group. The council adopted the modern cabinet style structure with a leader in May 2002.

3 The council's overall budget for the year 2002/03 was a net expenditure of £287.5 million for day-to-day running costs (revenue budget) and £41.2 million for major works (capital budget). It employs approximately 6,000 members of staff.

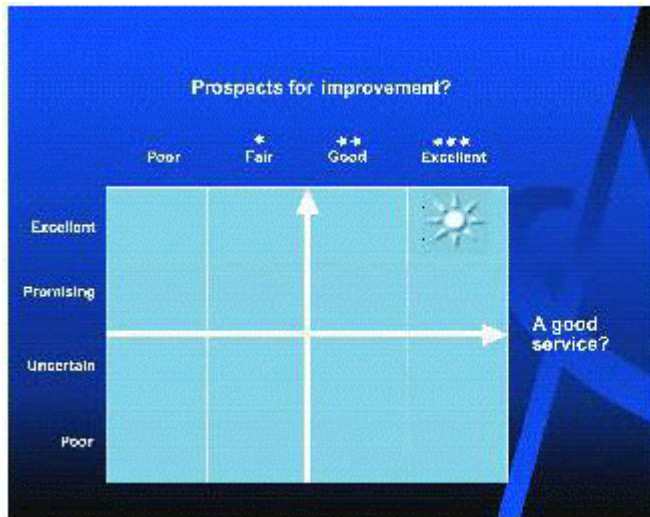
4 The council has a housing stock of 10,409 homes, and 3,000 leaseholders. During 1999/2000, the council carried out a best value review (BVR) of its housing management services. The review covered rent accounts and arrears recovery, tenancy management, tenant participation, estate management (building, grounds and cleaning of estate roads), responsive and programmed repairs [Footnote 1](#) and void management [Footnote 2](#). This was subsequently inspected and our report was published in June 2001. We judged it as a 'good' (two star) service with promising prospects for improvement. The service was also given the Local Government Chronicle Housing Team of Year award in 2002.

5 The council established an Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO) called Brent Housing Partnership (known as BHP) and delegated responsibility for providing housing management and maintenance services to the ALMO on 1 October 2002. BHP will receive a management fee of £ 6,827,030 for 2003/04 and it will also manage the council's £13.6 million budget for repairs and maintenance, and £22 million capital improvements budget for this year. BHP employs approximately 175 staff along with a range of contractors who are engaged in carrying out repairs, maintenance and improvement programmes to its homes. The BHP board consists of six tenants and leaseholder representatives, six councillors and six independent members.

6 The inspection looked at the services provided by BHP, its governance arrangements and the relationship between BHP and Brent Council.

Scoring the Service

7 We have assessed the council as providing an **three** -star service that has **excellent** prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.



'an excellent service that has excellent prospects for improvement'

Scoring chart [Footnote 3](#): – LB Brent: Arms Length Management Organisation (ALMO)

8 We consider the housing management services provided by BHP to be excellent. BHP have clear and relevant aims which are linked to the council's strategic objectives. Resources are focused on achieving identified priorities. Services are of a good quality and users are actively involved in their planning, monitoring and delivery. Housing management services are seen as an intrinsic part of a comprehensive and inclusive approach to achieving sustainability on estates.

9 We found the following aspects of the service to be excellent because:

- services are very accessible and customer care practices are of a high standard;
- BHP produces a publication called 'Customer care policy - statement and standards' which sets out expected corporate service standards as well as ones for each of its service areas;
- the BHP website is easy to navigate and displays a lot of useful information, including the customer care policy and standards and the individual service standards for each service area. It also provides an on-line capability to report repairs and pay rent, both of which are easy to use and innovative;
- complaints are monitored closely and data is used to improve services;
- BHP regularly conducts customer satisfaction surveys on many aspects of its service. These are broken down by ethnicity to aid service planning;
- a vulnerable tenants register is maintained to record life episodes and assist in tenant support arrangements and the giving of welfare advice. Vulnerable tenants are visited twice yearly as part of this service;
- BHP has worked closely with tenant representatives to produce a three-year programme to complete the decent homes standard (DHS)

work [Footnote 4](#) and tenants have been closely involved in selecting management contractors;

- BHP produce a quarterly newsletter called major works which is sent to every tenant and leaseholder as a means of communicating with them over future works. It is a well presented and informative publication;
- customer satisfaction surveys are carried out regularly on major works projects. A survey conducted in March 2003 indicated that 98 per cent of those surveyed were satisfied or very satisfied with the major works carried out. This was against a target of 95 per cent;
- the introduction of an estates security warden service is extremely popular among residents and has been successful in reducing anti-social behaviour on estates;
- residents community groups have been developed to bring together residents who feel isolated or vulnerable through age, infirmity or work demands. Focus groups have also been developed as informal gatherings allowing residents to get their views across in an alternative setting to that found at the more formal tenant and resident association (TRA) meetings;
- diversity issues are high on BHP's agenda and this has led to a number of positive initiatives;
- an innovative electronic document management (EDM) system and other IT developments have helped staff to adopt a more customer focused approach to dealing with their tenants and leaseholders. Information is available more quickly and allows customers to access services at any council office;
- there is a well embedded culture of performance management and appraisal within the organisation;
- BHP's performance in re-letting empty properties is one of the best in London and there are good clear processes in place which run concurrently to reduce delays;
- the proportion of programmed maintenance carried out in proportion to responsive repairs is good (67:33 respectively);
- BHP intends to meet the DHS by 2006, four years ahead of the governments target of 2010;
- the estates are clean and well maintained;
- comparisons demonstrate that BHP's services compare favourably with other London boroughs, with a number performing in the top 25 per cent of councils in London;
- BHP is contributing in very practical ways to the council's desire to improve the quality of life for its residents by helping to:

- support the green agenda by improving the quality of the environment; and
- reduce crime and promote community safety; and
- BHP have implemented all the recommendations from our previous inspection.

10 However, there are a number of areas which require further attention by BHP and the council:

- the level of emergency repairs and post inspections are too high;
- customer satisfaction with the overall service is low, particularly among black and minority ethnic (BME) residents, although there have been improvements since our last inspection in 2001;
- the number of tenancy verification [Footnote 5](#) and vulnerable residents visits have not kept up with their targets;
- more work needs to be done to identify the reasons for the apparent under reporting of domestic violence and racial harassment cases at the area offices;
- more work is needed to increase the of number BME tenant representatives and the coverage of estates by TRAs; and
- the fall in the number of TRAs has been high over a short period of time.

11 We have judged BHP to have excellent prospects for delivering improvements in its services because:

- the council and BHP have strong track records of managing change and working with external partners;
- there are clear service improvement plans which address the weaknesses identified in our previous inspection and through other reviews;
- councillors, BHP board members and staff are clear about the division of responsibilities between BHP and the council;
- the BHP board has a strong range of skills and experience, and there is a training and development plan in place for board members;
- it can already demonstrate continuous improvement in performance, for example on time taken to re-let properties and on the collection of rent;
- there are effective performance monitoring mechanisms in place to measure whether or not targets are being achieved;
- there is commitment at all levels for continuous improvement; and

- there have been tangible benefits for residents as a result of service improvements and initiatives, for example the estate warden security scheme.

12 However, the following areas require further attention:

- the monitoring arrangements for service level agreements (SLAs) [Footnote 6](#) between BHP and the council need to be fully implemented;
- service plans for all the service areas have not been produced; and
- performance management information needs to be more effectively collated.

Recommendations

13 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement councils need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. In this context, the inspection team feels that the council and BHP should now take action to resolve a number of general, political, managerial and partnership issues.

14 We recommend that BHP:

- Improves the external directional signage to their offices by March 2004.
- Reviews the ways it carries out the tenancy verification and vulnerable tenant visits, ensuring that existing targets are achieved by October 2003.
- Assesses the reasons for the under reporting of racial and domestic violence cases and act on the findings by December 2003.
- Investigates the reasons why the coverage of estates by TRAs has declined over the last two years and develops an action plan, with suitable milestones, to reverse this trend by March 2004.
- Considers all options (including external help) to continue the work to encourage BME tenants and leaseholders to become members of the board.
- Review all services provided under SLAs with the council in accordance with the existing timetable agreed between the parties. The reviews must have regard to the principles of best value. In the meantime, the proposed monitoring arrangements for SLAs should be implemented and reported to the operations sub-committee by December 2003. This will allow for early warning of unsatisfactory performance.
- Puts in place measures that will ensure service plans are produced consistently across the organisation and are synchronised to be in place by the beginning of each financial year.

- Identifies ways of reducing the level of emergency repairs, with the aim of bringing them into line with Audit Commission guidelines.
- Ensures that the best value performance indicator for non-urgent repairs is correctly calculated.
- Examines the cost-effectiveness of the current high level of post-inspections, particularly in light of the recent partnership arrangements. This should be achieved by March 2004.
- Ensures as part of the partnering negotiations with contractors, that provision is made for the:
 - development of local employment and training schemes to address local needs; and
 - use of local BME businesses as part of any sub-contracting arrangements.
- Ensures there are provisions in the draft rent strategy 2003–05 that addresses the need to write off former tenant's arrears that cannot be realistically recovered.
- Ensures medium and long term targets are set for the collection of outstanding debt for leaseholder services and major works charges by April 2004.
- Reviews the articles and memorandum of association to include reference to scheme of delegation [Footnote 7](#) and procedures for the appointment of sub-committees by March 2004.
- Reviews the code of conduct for the board by December 2003 with particular reference to:
 - what actions the board can take where there are complaints or allegations made against board members;
 - the code's relationship with the council's code of conduct for councillors and the role of the council's standards committee; and
 - developing a code of conduct between board members and officers.
- Ensure that board meetings are open to the public, taking account of the government's modernisation agenda and the interests of openness and accountability. A solution must be agreed and implemented by the board by October 2003.
- Ensure that its risk management strategy includes the assessment of any risks involved with the management of private sector leased properties [Footnote 8](#).
- Addresses all other weaknesses identified in the report.

- Submits this report to the ALMO board and ensure a summary of its contents (including areas for improvement) is circulated to tenants.

15 We recommend that the council:

- Works with BHP to improve external directional signage to its one stop shops and housing offices by March 2004 (as set out above).
- Works with BHP to identify the causes of under reporting of racial harassment and domestic violence.
- Conducts a risk assessment with regard to the possibility that a number of the SLAs currently in place with BHP may be terminated following review.
- Ensures that properties that it retains in South Kilburn New Deal for Communities (NDC) area meet the DHS by the government's target date of 2010.
- Present this report to the appropriate council committee.

16 We would like to thank the staff of Brent Council and BHP who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

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