

Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council

Customer Involvement in Housing

April 2002

Best value

The Government has placed a duty of best value on local authorities to deliver services to clear standards – of cost and quality – by the most economic, efficient and effective means available.¹ Best value is a challenging new performance framework that requires authorities to publish annual best value performance plans and review all of their services every five years.

Authorities must show that they have applied the four Cs of best value to every review:

- ◆ **challenging** why and how a service is being provided;
- ◆ **comparing** their performance with others' (including organisations in the private and voluntary sectors);
- ◆ embracing fair **competition** as a means of securing efficient and effective services; and
- ◆ **consulting** with local taxpayers, customers and the wider business community.

Authorities must demonstrate to local people that they are achieving continuous improvement in all of their services. The Government has decided that each Council should be scrutinised by an independent inspectorate, so that the public will know whether best value is being achieved. The purpose of the inspection and of this report is to:

- ◆ enable the public to see whether best value is being delivered;
- ◆ enable the Council to see how well it is doing;
- ◆ enable the Government to see how well its policies are working on the ground;
- ◆ identify failing services where remedial action may be necessary; and
- ◆ identify and disseminate best practice.

¹ This report has been prepared by the Audit Commission ('the Commission') following an inspection under Section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999, and issued in accordance with its duty under Section 13 of the 1999 Act.

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Summary and recommendations

Summary

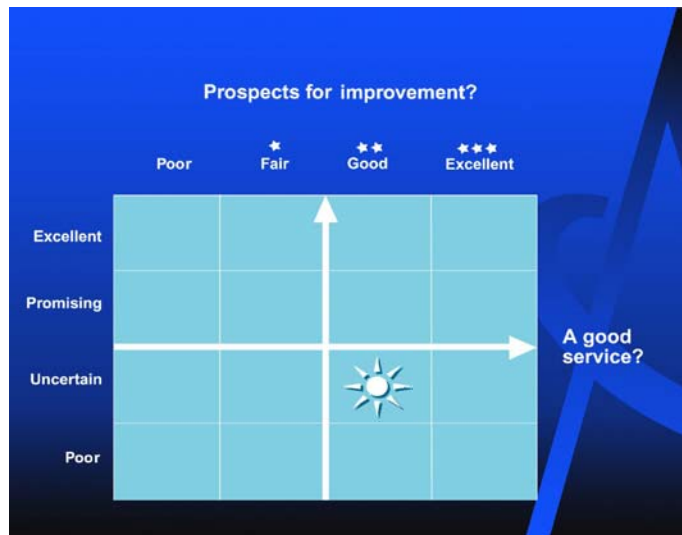
- 1 Bolton is a Metropolitan Borough Council in the north west of England. The population is 267,000 of which 9 per cent are from ethnic minority communities, although this rises to 46 per cent in some wards.²
- 2 The Population is highly mobile with a turnover of council tenancies averaging 15-17 per cent over the past five years. The results of a STATUS survey in 2000 identified that 60 per cent of tenants had lived in their present homes for less than two years.
- 3 The population of Bolton is 267,000, living within 144,000 households. Bolton is home to 40 ethnic minority communities. Nineteen per cent of the population are over 60 and 22 per cent are under 16; these figures mirroring the sub-regional averages.
- 4 Unemployment in the Borough has reduced over the last six years and, in March 2001, stood at 3.9 per cent (below the regional average of 4.6 per cent but above the national average of 3.6 per cent). However, Bolton has the second lowest average gross earnings in Greater Manchester, around £155 less than the national average.
- 5 Of the total population, 48 per cent live in the worst 25 per cent of deprived wards in the country (seven of these wards are within the 10 per cent most deprived nationally). The Council has also targeted 12 estates because they suffer from high deprivation - these constitute Bolton's priority 'target' areas.
- 6 The Council is Labour led with 34 of the 60 seats. Twenty six are held by the opposition.
- 7 The Council employs 8,000 staff across all services. The housing department employs 1,111 staff. The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) base expenditure budget for 2001/2002 is £70 million. In addition, the HRA capital programme for 2001/2002 is £14.9 million.
- 8 The best value review of customer Involvement covered both tenant participation, and all forms of customer involvement in delivering and influencing the housing service in both the private and public sector. The service is estimated to cost £945,000 for 2001/2002 - 1.35 per cent of the HRA. The service is delivered by all sections within the housing department.

² Bolton's Housing Strategy, 2002-2005

Scoring the service

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

Scoring chart³: Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council – Customer Involvement in Housing



‘a ‘good’ two star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement’

- 10 We believe that the service provided is a **‘good’ two star** service because there are a number of positive features including:
- ◆ the Council has an established tenant participation structure in place, which is well supported by the Council in terms of funding, facilities and training opportunities for tenants;
 - ◆ there is good partnership working with the tenant representative body, the Bolton Association of Tenants and Residents Associations (BATRA);
 - ◆ a Borough-wide Tenant Participation Compact exists which has been operational for two years. An ‘action plan’ supplements the compact which is monitored by tenants and elected members at a ‘Tenant Participation Reference Group’;
 - ◆ there is a range of formal and informal participation structures in place which provide comprehensive coverage within the Council’s area with over 50 tenant and resident groups which are supported;
 - ◆ customers have the opportunity to ‘dip in and out’⁴ of participation processes through Local Community Panels on targeted estates;

³ 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.

⁴ ‘Developing Good Practice in Tenant Participation’ page 38 section 3,6 (DETR July 1999)

- ◆ there are clear objectives in place which aim to encourage and develop involvement of customers in the management of their estates and communities through a Local Community Planning process;
- ◆ the tenant participation service compares well to other authorities in two benchmarking clubs in terms of resourcing tenant participation and delivering benefits to it's customers;
- ◆ BATRA have a role in monitoring the housing service through having seats on Scrutiny Committee and various Council meetings;
- ◆ BATRA has helped to shape the Repairs and Maintenance Service and is involved in monitoring that service through 'Service Quality Meetings' with senior officers;
- ◆ BATRA is planning to become independent from the Council and the housing department is supporting them in this objective;
- ◆ there is effective, good quality communication between the Council housing department and their customers on a full range of housing matters;
- ◆ there is evidence of efforts being made to reach the harder-to-reach groups;
- ◆ the service has moved towards meeting a wider remit in terms of addressing community needs and issues both in the public sector through Local Community Planning, and also in private sector regeneration initiatives;
- ◆ there are examples of personal empowerment and capacity building for customers;
- ◆ there are examples of innovative approaches to customer involvement such as a project where 1 per cent of capital funding valued at £40,000 is earmarked for community arts based involvement in regeneration; and
- ◆ 63 per cent of tenants believe that Bolton is good at keeping them informed about housing management issues and 56 per cent are satisfied with the way the housing department takes account of their views when making its decisions.⁵

11 However, in our view there are a number of areas that are in need of improvement.

- ◆ Bolton is in the bottom quartile compared to other metropolitan authorities with only 41 per cent of tenants are satisfied with opportunities to influence the housing service; whilst this in itself is not a determinant of good or poor practice, our view is that it is an indicator of customer aspiration and currently there are no targets to address low satisfaction.
- ◆ Despite attempts by the Tenant Participation Team to improve the involvement from Bolton's ethnic minority population there is currently only one active resident group with a majority BME membership.

⁵ STATUS survey 2001

- ◆ The Council does not have a clear delivery strategy for customer involvement, which ensures a fit with other corporate strategies for Tenant Participation, Customer Care, Customer Relationship and the Housing Strategy.
 - ◆ The Council's Tenant Participation Compact⁶ fails to encourage and develop customer involvement in the management of housing and decisions on Housing strategies, programmes and services; and it does not underpin all the sections of the Housing department delivering customer involvement.
 - ◆ There is a reliance on using the tenants' federation (BATRA) as the only vehicle for allowing tenants onto the influencing levels of customer involvement.
- 12 In our view the service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:
- ◆ although the Council has a track record of implementing changes in the services it provides, and there is a clear legacy of tenant participation and a commitment from Councillors and senior managers to the principles of customer involvement, there is no customer involvement strategy in place. We therefore believe that the Council lacks a specific direction for the service. However, we acknowledge that the Council intends to implement a strategy by October 2002;
 - ◆ the best value review (BVR) failed to sufficiently address all aspects of Customer Involvement in the Housing service. It concentrated on the role of the Council's tenant participation service and did not consider in depth the role of other staff in the housing department or customers other than tenants;
 - ◆ the Council acknowledged that the improvement plan initially provided was not sufficiently robust to deliver significant improvements from a customer perspective. We were provided with a new improvement plan which although it addresses many of the points raised in this report, is still not in our opinion sufficient to bring about significant improvement from a customer perspective; and
 - ◆ many of the improvements identified are subject to the availability of additional resources, which are yet to be identified.
- 13 We therefore conclude that although the customer involvement service is good, for it to improve it needs to have a clear strategy, which will provide the necessary direction. The BVR process has not been used to determine this strategic direction and has not been fundamental in challenging the service to ensure that it will deliver improvements that customers will recognise.
- 14 In our view, without this strategic direction, the service has uncertain prospects for improvement.

⁶ National Framework for Tenant Participation Compacts - DETR 1999

Recommendations

- 15 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 should now take action to resolve a number of general, political, managerial and partnership issues.
- 16 We recommend that the Council:
- ◆ ensure that the findings and recommendations of this report are formally reported to the Council, BATRA and to the wider tenant body;
 - ◆ takes steps to address all other weaknesses identified in this report;
 - ◆ ensure that the planned customer involvement strategy sets targets to achieve top quartile performance in customer satisfaction and to offer opportunities for ‘empowerment’ as defined by the Council’s own ‘customer participation scale’;
 - ◆ take steps to involve traditionally excluded groups in Customer Involvement in housing services, giving particular attention to engaging the ethnic minority population;
 - ◆ revisit the tenant participation compact and review it with all tenants and consider how it can address opportunities for tenants to influence housing policy, service delivery and also underpin the whole of the customer involvement service;
 - ◆ ensure there is a co-ordinated approach to Customer Involvement from all sections within the housing department and that clear procedures and targets are developed to ensure consistent best practice from all;
 - ◆ ensure there is a consistent standard of opportunity for customer involvement in all locations of the Borough and through all the varied mechanisms provided;
 - ◆ set clear targets to ensure that all available opportunities are used to promote customer involvement in the housing service; and
 - ◆ ensure that performance measures are in place to achieve value for money.

- 17 We would like to thank the staff of Bolton Council, particularly the housing department who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

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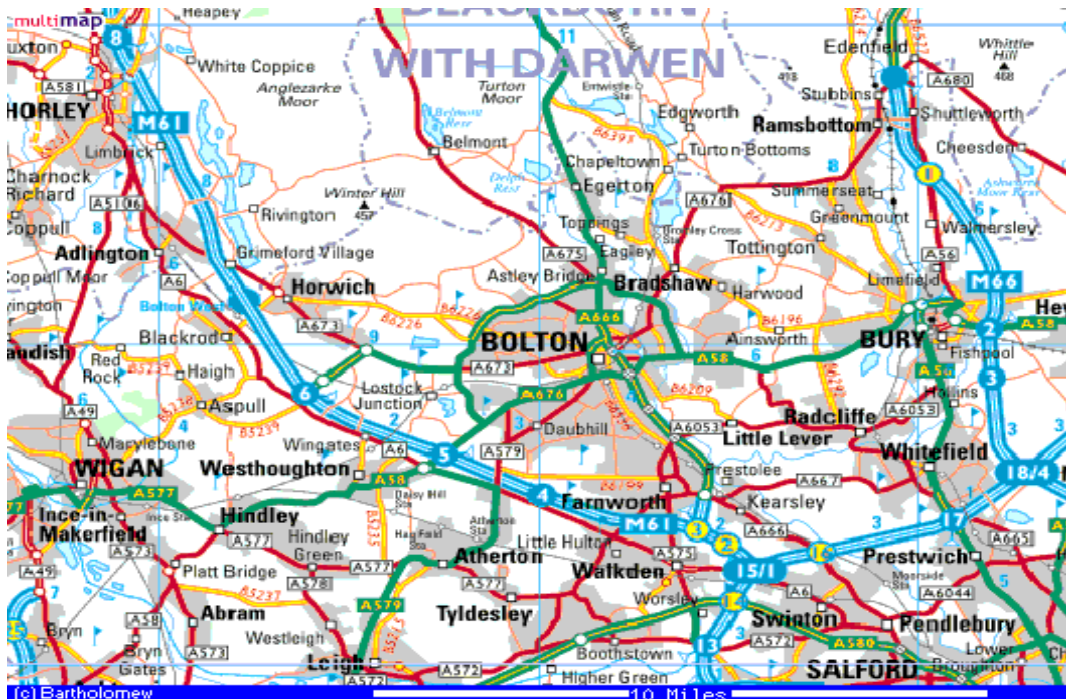
Report

Context

The locality

- 18 Bolton MBC is situated in the north west of England. It is one of 10 Metropolitan Councils in Greater Manchester and comprises eight townships, each of which have their own distinct socio-economic profiles. It is one of the largest Boroughs in the country covering 54 square miles, 45 per cent of which is urban.

MAP 1: Location of Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council.



- 19 The population of Bolton is 267,000, living within 144,000 households. Bolton is home to 40 ethnic minority communities which represents 9 per cent of the population - although this rises to 46 per cent in some wards. Nineteen per cent of the population are over 60 and 22 per cent are under 16; these figures mirroring the sub-regional averages. The largest ethnic minority population is of Indian and Pakistani origin.
- 20 Unemployment in the Borough has reduced over the last six years and, in March 2001, stood at 3.9 per cent (below the regional average of 4.6 per cent but above the national average of 3.6 per cent). However, Bolton has the second lowest average gross earnings in Greater Manchester and around £155 less than the national average.

- 21 Fifty five per cent of households have a family member(s) with a long term illness or disability and 62 per cent have incomes entirely derived from state benefits and pensions.
- 22 Of the total population, 48 per cent live in the worst 25 per cent of deprived wards in the country (seven of these wards are within the 10 per cent most deprived nationally). The Council's Housing department has also targeted twelve estates because they suffer from high deprivation - these constitute The Department's priority 'Target' areas.
- 23 There is considerable turnover of Council tenants averaging 15-17 per cent per year over the past five years. The STATUS Survey in 2000 identified that over a third had been tenants for less than two years.

The Council

- 24 The Council comprises 60 elected members from 20 wards and is controlled by the Labour party with 34 Councillors. Currently the business of the Council is governed by an executive of 14 members which includes Councillors from opposition parties. Scrutiny Committees and Area Forums are also part of the new political structures.
- 25 The Council's overall budget for the year 2000/2001 was £260 million; it employs 8,000 (FTE) staff in seven departments. One of these is the housing department, which delivers a range of housing services and consists of four divisions employing 1,111 staff.
 - ◆ The Regeneration Division - Housing Management Services delivered by generic housing officers supported by service development teams specialising in arrears recovery, voids and repairs.
 - ◆ Community (Housing) Support Service Division - housing access and advice, warden service, Careline, tenant participation, housing performance, community liaison, equal opportunities and Bolton mediation.
 - ◆ Central Services Division - financial services, organisational and development section, IT, personnel, research & development.
 - ◆ Technical Services - Direct Labour Organisation and Housing Project Services. There is also a project team responsible for the introduction of business planning, stock valuation and condition surveys, rent reform and alternative funding.
- 26 The Housing Revenue Account (HRA) base expenditure budget for 2001/2002 is £70 million. In addition, the HRA capital programme for 2001/2002 is £14.9 million.
- 27 The overarching aim of the Council is 'to create a Bolton that is a great place to visit and in which to work, live, learn and do business'.

- 28 The Bolton Plan 2001/2002 also sets out the Council's nine corporate priorities:
- ◆ developing Bolton's partnerships and 'Vision for the Future';
 - ◆ improving Council Services;
 - ◆ improving the Environment;
 - ◆ improving educational achievement for all;
 - ◆ improving health care and supporting people in the community;
 - ◆ tackling poverty and disadvantage;
 - ◆ combating crime, fear of crime and drugs misuse;
 - ◆ supporting the local economy; and
 - ◆ encouraging community involvement and participation.

The Council's best value review

- 29 The Council undertook a best value review (BVR) of its tenant participation service in 2000/2001 and concluded that, although tenant participation represents the greatest level of housing customer involvement activity, it is carried out by more than just that one team and is part of a larger process of listening, engaging and involving the users of its services. The Council therefore decided to widen the scope of its review and to look at tenant involvement in a wider customer involvement service context.
- 30 The budget for the customer involvement services provided by all sections of the housing department for 2001/2002 is £945,000 approximately (see Table 1). This equates to 1 per cent of the HRA after a contribution of £125,000 from the GRF is deducted.
- 31 The Council identified that the Housing department provides a customer involvement service to 21,000 tenants in the public sector, and on average 3,000 customers benefiting from the service each year from Private Sector Renewal teams and Tenant participation officers.

Table 1: Customer Involvement Budget 2001/2002

Community Support Division	
Tenant Participation Team	£284,600 (see Table 3)
Budgets supporting BATRA & TARAs	£65,300
Elderly Services	£5,436
Access and Advice	£2,182
Technical Services Division	
Housing Project Services	£237,452
Direct Labour Organisation - DLO	
Equivalent of one full time senior manager	£31,593
Central Services Division	
Finance Team	£200
Personnel & Organisational Development	£824
Regeneration Division	
Housing Management Services	£136,000
Private sector renewal	£125,262
Percentage for art ⁷	£39,738
Project Team	Not quantified
Departmental Management Team - DMT	£17,000
TOTAL	£945,000

⁷ Bolton Council and all Bolton Community Homes members (RSLs) have made a commitment to make 1 per cent of all capital money available for arts based community regeneration with customer involvement.

- 32 The Customer Involvement BVR Plan produced in April 2001 defined the scope:
- ◆ to review tenant participation in a context of broad customer involvement;
 - ◆ to review and assess the tenant participation compact in improving customer involvement in services;
 - ◆ to assess if the customer involvement function is efficient, effective and economic in meeting customer needs; and
 - ◆ to review the way customer involvement is carried out throughout the housing department.
- 33 The BVR was undertaken by a review group consisting of a cross-section of staff from the Housing department, an elected member and a tenant representative from BATRA. The review concluded in December 2001 that:

*'despite the high level of commitment and resources, improvements are required to achieve the high standards of service and customer satisfaction that Bolton aspires to and the higher levels of involvement that customers want to see.'*⁸

- 35 Members accepted this opinion and also accepted recommendations resulting in an improvement plan aimed at four areas of service:
- ◆ involving the majority and minorities;
 - ◆ communications and e-government;
 - ◆ enhancing and expanding customer involvement service; and
 - ◆ performance and continuous improvement.
- 36 In our view, the scope of the review was clear but the actual practice diverged away from it which led to a poor review which is discussed later in this report.

How good is the service?

- 37 Inspectors look to see how a Council has agreed the key aims for the service being inspected, how clear these aims are to the people that receive the service and whether these reflect the corporate aims of the organisation as a whole.

⁸ Bolton Council's Best Value Review of Customer Involvement

Are the aims clear and challenging?

- 38 Challenge is the key to achieving significant improvements in performance and targets set by the Council and Government. Without challenge best value will be ineffective. It requires the Council to consider and demonstrate how a service contributes to its wider corporate aims and community plans.
- 39 The Bolton Plan 2001/2002 has nine corporate priorities; the one with links to this service is: 'encouraging community involvement and participation'.
- 40 The aims of the service are set out in Housing Revenue Account Business Plan and can be summarised as: 'to increase customer involvement, interaction and empowerment'.
- 41 The Council has introduced a corporate 'Customer Relationship Strategy'. As such this considers the whole of the Council's interface with its customers including Housing department customers. The aims of the strategy in relation to the Customer Involvement Service are:
- ◆ to develop customer services that are informed and influenced by Borough wide community plans consistent with best value;
 - ◆ to improve the experience of the customer when dealing with the Council and to develop a customer-centred culture of owning contacts and problems; and
 - ◆ to move towards the goal of actively managing relationships with the individual customer so as to achieve quality assured targets and meet wider social and community objectives.
- 42 The Tenant Participation Marketing Strategy 2000/2001 identified the following aims:
- ◆ to promote tenant participation internally and externally;
 - ◆ to promote and clarify the role of the tenant participation team;
 - ◆ to promote the tenant participation compact to all staff and customers;
 - ◆ to raise awareness of tenant participation to non-involved people;
 - ◆ to change the corporate perception that numbers of groups equates to successful tenant participation;
 - ◆ to determine the level of understanding from staff of tenant participation and its changing role;
 - ◆ to increase the numbers who get involved with the Housing service and to monitor their arrival/departure; and
 - ◆ to develop performance monitoring systems.

- 43 The BVR identifies the aims of the tenant participation service are:
- ◆ to increase the level of customer and community involvement in the services they receive from the Housing department;
 - ◆ to provide opportunities for all customers to have a say about the services they receive and to influence service delivery;
 - ◆ to assist in the development of communities;
 - ◆ to encourage and support the development of tenants and resident groups in Bolton; and
 - ◆ to assist customers in shaping the future direction of the services they receive.
- 44 The Tenant participation Compact contains three principles:
- ◆ involving customers in the services they receive;
 - ◆ supporting tenant involvement at a level and pace decided by tenants; and
 - ◆ tenant involvement is about helping to set the agenda on issues concerning their homes, neighborhoods and environment. A senior officer told us:

‘although we got nowhere near it in terms of the document (BVR), there is a clear vision; an ideal for customer involvement, and that is empowerment - that people run it themselves with Bolton Council there to support customers, rather than just consultation or participation. The term customer is felt to be positive because it brings these overtones with it - of power and choice’.

One manager told us that the strategic direction for housing needs to be strongly influenced by customer priorities, so that the spend incurred meets the needs of the customer base.

- 45 However, there is currently no customer involvement strategy in place, which draws together all the various strands of strategy and policy including the tenant participation compact, the tenant participation marketing strategy and the customer relationship management strategy. This was acknowledged by the Council whilst we were on site and has been included in the revised customer involvement service improvement plan. This supports the following comment made in the BVR itself; ‘customer involvement needs to be more focused and accountable with clear standards and targets.’⁹

Legal requirement

- 46 Section 105 of the Housing Act 1985 requires public sector landlords to have arrangements to inform and consult secure tenants who are likely to be ‘substantially affected’ by some proposed changes in matters of housing management.

⁹ Bolton MBC Customer Involvement BVR

- 47 Local authorities in England have powers under Section 101 of the Local Government Act 1972 to delegate functions to a committee or sub-committee. Section 102 provides that persons who are not elected members of the Council may be members of such sub-committees. There are no rules as to the number of non-councillors permitted to serve on a sub-committee, so it is possible to have a majority of tenant members.
- 48 Under Section 167(1) of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989 local housing authorities in England had a duty to provide their tenants with an annual report on housing management performance. This information is now included in best value performance plans, (BVPPs) which local authorities are required to produce under section 6 of the Local Government Act 1999.
- 49 In our view, Bolton is currently meeting all of these legal requirements.

Conclusion

- 50 We noted that the tenant participation marketing strategy came out of the BVR of customer involvement. It concentrates on the tenant participation service and does not cover customer involvement in the private sector or within other housing department sections. It does, however, provide a clear focus for the work of the tenant participation section.
- 51 In our view, the aims of this specific service as identified by the BVR and strategy documents are clear and challenging. This clarity made it easy to make an assessment of how well the service was delivering against these items. This is discussed in the next section.

Does the service meet these aims?

- 52 Having considered the aims the Council has set for the service, Inspectors make an assessment of how well the Council is performing in meeting these aims. This includes an assessment of performance against specific service standards and targets and the Council's approach to measuring whether it is actually delivering what it sets out to do.
- 53 We have divided this part of the report into eight sections in order to cover the various elements of the BVR. These are:
- ◆ customer focus and access to services;
 - ◆ delivering the customer involvement service;
 - ◆ tenant participation;
 - ◆ the tenant participation compact;
 - ◆ private sector regeneration;
 - ◆ valuing diversity;
 - ◆ value for money; and
 - ◆ performance management.

Customer focus and access to services

- 54 We obtained a Councillor view that with the regeneration focus to housing work, came a realisation that services must be customer focused:

'every opportunity we get, that's the message that the organisation will be focused on the needs and aspirations of tenants, and we go at that pace'.

- 55 There were a number of positive aspects to customer access to services in Bolton. We noted the following:
- ◆ customers can access the Housing service through any of 18 local estate based offices. We inspected a number of estate offices and found that they were accessible and had a comprehensive range of numbered information leaflets available;
 - ◆ private interview rooms were available and all offices made translation services available too;
 - ◆ the Housing department produces quality newsletters and those we inspected clearly advertised the tenant participation service and the tenant participation compact;
 - ◆ we noted an article on 'New Race Laws' in 'Apna News', a regionally based free colour paper for the Asian community and available in local shops and we confirmed that the housing department have regularly used the free paper; such as an article advertising the Council's website and describing how ethnic language voice-overs or written translations of information on the site are available;
 - ◆ Bolton's tenancy agreement contains a clause relating to the right to join a tenant's association, or receive support and advice should there not be an existing association and the tenant is interested in forming one;
 - ◆ all new tenants receive an information pack, 'welcome to your new home' which is comprehensive and user friendly although it does not contain information about tenant participation; however, a separate 'tenant participation' information pack is provided upon request; and
 - ◆ a hard-copy calendar has been piloted which provides information on all community events planned each month and any meetings that tenants may wish to attend. This is distributed to all TARAs; BATRA; all housing offices; all sheltered schemes and all elected Members.
- 56 We noted some good examples of how the housing service is focused on customer involvement. These included:
- ◆ all new staff attend a four-day induction programme which includes a module on the importance of customer involvement;
 - ◆ the 'Tenant Participation Consultation Meeting Guide' available to all housing sections, and we consider it to be a well-written and useful document;

- ◆ individual tenants are given an extensive choice of products in improvement programmes such as kitchen unit layout and design, colours of woodwork and we were given an example of there being up to 151 options on doors styles, types, furniture, and glass; and
 - ◆ tenant participation officers have a clear awareness of the nine corporate aims for Bolton, the housing strategy and how their team's service action plans fit into the wider corporate commitment to achieve sustainable communities; 'customer Involvement is the responsibility of everyone who works in the housing department'.
- 57 We also identified that there were some positive examples of using IT to provide information about the customer involvement service and to improve customer access to services:
- ◆ Bolton's website has links to information about TARAs;
 - ◆ an electronic calendar of events had been developed via an in-house website intranet which is also available to all staff, elected members and all tenants via the BATRA office and the five BATRA representatives for each of the five BATRA sub-districts;
 - ◆ IT is also used across the Council via touch-screen IT kiosks in a number of pilot locations. The kiosks provide a range of information on Council services and tenant associations in the local area. If successful there is a plan to provide these in all Council offices and buildings; however we found that the one TARA that had access to it had not used it; and
 - ◆ the 'Bolton Information Network' (BIN) was established in a community building as an alternative to the kiosk approach;¹⁰ We found this to be well used and a successful project. (see 'good practice' examples at the end of the report).
- 58 However, we identified a number of areas that would benefit from improvement. We carried out a number of reality checks to gauge the awareness of the Customer Involvement Service. We telephoned twenty four tenants who had taken up a new tenancy within the last six months and fifty longer standing tenants. We also carried out random exit surveys at the estate offices and spoke to 13 tenants (see Table 2).
- 59 In our view, the data obtained provides a strong indication that the Housing Management staff are failing to promote the opportunities for customer involvement. It also suggests that there is little or no follow up by the Tenant Participation Team to promote their service after a new tenancy commences. The reality checks identified the following:
- ◆ tenants we interviewed were in the main unaware of the clause in the tenancy agreement relating to TARAs which leads us to question whether the clause is pointed out by housing management staff (see Table 2);

¹⁰ BIN is a network of computers that is available to anyone in the community to access the internet, the Bolton website and to receive and send emails. Support and training is made available as part of the project.

- ◆ although the Tenant Participation Compact is advertised in reception areas, there are no summary leaflets produced and the document is not given out unless requested. We saw that a copy of the corporate commitment page (signatories) from the Compact is displayed, but no notice explaining what it is or inviting tenants to ask for more information; and
 - ◆ tenant participation officers receive training on tenant participation, but other service providers with a customer involvement role do not as a matter of course.
- 60 Overall, in our view, although it is limited through lack of promotion, customers have good access to the service provided by the Housing department generally through local offices, information and use of IT. We also noted that there was a clear corporate customer focus to delivering customer care.

Table 2: Awareness of the Customer Involvement Service

	Percentage Yes	Percentage No
Are you a member of a TARA?	0	100
When you signed up for your home, what were you told about the tenant participation service?	11	79
When you signed up for your home, did you receive any information about your local tenants group, or about BATRA?	30	70
Have you heard of the tenant participation team?	12	88
Have you ever heard of tenant compacts?	4	96
Do you know whether you can influence the kind of housing services you receive?	10	90
Do you think you might be interested in joining your tenants group?	42	58

Delivering the customer involvement service

- 61 The tenant participation team is located within the community support services division of the housing department and comprises a manager, six tenant participation officers and an administration post. The service budget is £350,000 in 2001/2002. This includes staffing costs and all on-costs and overheads of £284,600. An analysis of time spent on different tasks has been carried out and 10 per cent of two tenant participation officers are charged to the general revenue fund (GRF) for work they do with private sector regeneration residents (see Table 3).

- 62 The balance of £65,300 is paid in grants to BATRA (£22,000), start up grants for new TARAs (£1,000), tenant newsletter production and distribution (£25,000) and funding to TARAs for premises, translations and crèche facilities. This is an increase of 66 per cent on the 2000/2001 budget of £43,300 and due in the main to increased staffing being dedicated to and located at the BATRA central office.

Table 3: Funding the work of the Tenant Participation Team

Tenant Participation Team Income	£ Budget 2001/2002
Housing Revenue Account	210,560
General Revenue Fund	52,640
Local Community Planning Budget	21,400
Total Income	£284,600

- 63 The training budget for tenants groups is £4,300 and used for external conferences and training events only. All training and support for tenants is provided by the housing department's training team including design and delivery of courses, room hire, refreshments and support for BATRA Training Group. This is in addition to the £4,300. This contribution to the customer involvement service is not accounted for in the spend breakdown in table three.
- 64 We noted that the tenant participation team have a service action plan which is contained in the 'making the compact happen' document. The team have targets to achieve and key performance indicators are monitored via the tenant participation group.
- 65 We were told by a senior manager that the role of the tenant participation team and other officers involved in customer involvement is different but not exclusive. Tenant participation officers bring an expertise to engage communities and have the skills to help with tenant empowerment through capacity building. Other staff concentrate on the customer care aspect in the various improvement programmes, or through the grant process for private sector renewal. However, we obtained a view that some staff in other sections already have additional customer involvement skills, and provide an added value aspect to residents through participation techniques.
- 66 Another view from a senior member manager was that the tenant participation officer role is to act as a catalyst for community involvement and not to be a carrier of the service provided. That is the role of the other divisions of the housing department. We noted a view that there are still 'tensions' between the divisions in respect of the role of tenant participation although all are focused on customer care.

- 67 The housing project services section is within the technical services division and are responsible for customer involvement in major improvement and renewal programmes in the public sector. We were told that housing liaison officers (HLOs) spend 90 per cent of their time carrying out a customer involvement function. At a cost of £237,000 they are the second largest provider of customer involvement services to tenants after the tenant participation team. There are examples of HLOs attending TARA meetings and carrying out surveys and consultation with tenants on capital improvement/regeneration programmes, especially through the LCPs. However, in our view this function is largely a customer care role and is not always customer involvement.
- 68 Housing management services section staff charge £136,000 to the HRA for their contribution to the customer involvement function. Housing officers attend TARA meetings and are involved in local community planning. However, as we noted above, they see their role as providing predominately 'customer care' rather than facilitating tenant participation. Whilst we found individual examples where this was not the case, there was no clear policy or procedures and targets in place to ensure that housing management staff promoted customer involvement.
- 69 The elderly services section are responsible for all the Council's elderly accommodation including sheltered housing. A small proportion (£5,500) of the budget is attributed to customer involvement including monthly attendance at an elder persons forum .
- 70 Customer involvement in Bolton's housing department is not restricted to its tenants. The regeneration division carries out private sector renewal through its private sector renewal team. Funded entirely from the general revenue fund the current budget for the section excluding 'Percentage for Art' is £125,000. Their involvement falls into three main areas:
- ◆ targeted renewal area activity - includes setting up focus groups with residents; arranging open days to publicise the work proposed; carrying out door-to-door surveys; Planning for real; encouraging the establishment of resident associations and forming local community panels;
 - ◆ programmed activity - includes the production of newsletters and carrying out satisfaction surveys; and
 - ◆ the 'Percentage for Arts' team.
- 71 Tenant participation officers also support four non-tenant resident groups. The HRA recharges the GRF for this and any other work carried out in the private sector, to ensure that tenants are not subsidising the GRF (see Table 3).
- 72 Housing regeneration officers are employed who support the section's surveyors in achieving regeneration targets. They also are responsible for arranging decanting and provide assistance to residents applying for grants and also disabled adaptations which accounts for 40 per cent of their time.

- 73 We noted that the delivery of the service had a number of weaknesses:
- ◆ many TARAs were supported by the Tenant Participation Team many years after their establishment when they should have reached an acceptable standard of self sufficiency or be supported by housing officers;
 - ◆ tenant participation officers do not have a clear 'exit strategy' for when their role as support and training ends and other staff should take over;
 - ◆ although the tenant participation team have targets to achieve, there are no individual officer targets set;
 - ◆ there are different levels of customer involvement in the various sections of the housing department. We found that in the public sector there is no opportunity for tenants to influence decisions on each project and they cannot choose contractors, whilst for private sector regeneration work, residents do have contractor choice; and
 - ◆ we also were informed that tenants are sometimes involved in monitoring the contracts, but this is not a consistent approach across all contracts.
- 74 In summary, we noted that the approach and attitude of officers from each division was inconsistent and there were no clear targets in place to ensure a consistent quality of service. There are good examples of a 'tenant participation' service and evidence of tenant and resident involvement in some services such as the repairs and maintenance service. However, no targets for improving the customer involvement service in housing management and in private sector renewal were evident.
- 75 In our opinion this demonstrates the lack of a clear customer involvement strategy. We found a general awareness of customer care and listening to customers, but in our view this is not the same as customer involvement in shaping and delivering the service.

Tenant participation

- 76 Tenant participation is often seen as a continuum leading from simple provision of information through to participation and ultimately to tenant control with the higher levels considered to be inherently more desirable. Where this a valid approach consistent with Arnstein's 'Ladder of Participation',¹¹ we consider it more important for landlords and tenants to seek mutually appropriate levels of engagement, with sufficient flexibility to modify their approach if circumstances change. We are therefore looking at the ways landlords and tenants agree appropriate mechanisms for customer involvement, having considered a range of alternatives. The diversity of Customer Involvement practice therefore forms a spectrum of activity, which offers a range of possibilities for dialogue and negotiation between landlord and tenant, rather than a one-dimensional ladder. However it is important that concentrating on 'lower' forms of customer engagement does not ignore the opportunities for 'higher' levels of involvement.

¹¹ Arnstein's Ladder is used by the Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS) to describe in a visual form a scale of tenant involvement from basic information being given through to tenant empowerment.

- 77 The Council provided us with a ‘Customer Participation Scale’ (see Table 4) and we were told it is used to illustrate where the Housing department feels it is currently in terms of customer participation in certain mechanisms of the delivery of housing services to Bolton’s communities.
- 78 The Council feels that local community panels (LCP) straddle the line between communication and consultation. The Council accept that on occasions, decisions are made by officers and then communicated to the LCPs (see Table 4).

Table 4: Bolton Council’s Customer Participation Scale

Empowerment	Customers lead on crucial decisions regarding their community, supported by the Council	None
Participation	Customers actively participate in design, development and delivery of all organisational programmes	None
Democratisation	Customer given opportunity to vote on major decisions regarding policy and practice	None
Involvement	Customers asked opinion and involved in making decisions	LCP, BATRA
Consultation	Customer asked opinion, but not necessarily acted upon	LCP, DHWP, EPF
Communication	Customer bombarded with information, but not asked for comment.	LCP, DHWP, EPF
Tokenism	Customer is given information once decisions have been made	None

- 79 The Council also acknowledge that although the LCPs and BATRA are able to influence decisions this is not to the extent that is possible and they further acknowledge that these mechanisms are not always representative.

- 80 In contrast to this we asked tenants to consider how they would stand on a simple ladder of participation, and asked them to consider their answer as an individual tenant, as a member of a TARA and as a member of BATRA. (see Table 5). It is clear from the results that BATRA does not see itself as having opportunities to make decisions, but interestingly TARAs do. We were told that this is through local community panels.

Table 5: Bolton Tenants Ladder of Participation

	Tenants	TARAS	BATRA
Making decisions	0%	64%	0%
Influencing decisions	72%	18%	91%
Consulted	18%	0%	0%
Information	10%	18%	9%

- 81 There are 12 local community panels linked to the twelve targeted areas, which are the vehicle for any resident to drop in and out of the information and consultation process on any Council service. They are run via a panel of elected members, officers from all relevant Council departments such as the youth service, police and housing. They are informal and residents are invited to raise any issues. They have a budget for sustainability and environmental projects which can be obtained via a bid process. They meet monthly at various locations and times to suit local needs. All local TARAs are invited and sent minutes. Attendance is varied between LCPs. The LCPs are the mechanism for prioritising housing capital resources and decided by the panel which included tenants.
- 82 There are five district housing working parties DHWPs which are not open to the public but are for tenant representatives from BATRA, elected members, local TARAs, officers from housing and repairs, and an area co-ordinator. They discuss any housing issues raised in advance in writing to area co-ordinator and hold a budget (currently £80,000), which anyone can bid from to fund community or environmental improvements. This could be housing officers on behalf of un-represented tenants and bids from TARAs themselves. They meet bi-monthly and are the mechanism for monitoring the Housing performance at the district level. Non-housing issues relating to community sustainability are also discussed as well as monitoring of key performance indicators (KPIs) for voids, rent arrears, homelessness, repairs and tenant participation. TARAs are encouraged to provide reports on tenant participation activity at the meetings but this is not consistently happening.
- 83 The elder persons forum (EPF) is made up of tenants representatives and elected members and officers. It is open to any Bolton elder regardless of tenure. Tenant participation officers support this group. It holds a £30,000 budget for any identified community improvement priorities.

- 84 District housing working parties and the elderly persons forum are graded in the Council's own view as between communication and consultation (see Table 4).
- 85 The primary route for customer involvement in influencing the housing service is through BATRA. This is Bolton's traditional structure for mainstream 'tenant participation', with a 'federation' of tenant and resident groups, which has five sub-groups throughout the Borough. BATRA has its own premises and staffing seconded from the Council.
- 86 BATRA representatives and senior officers meet on 'policy development groups' to consider new policies in housing services. Area forums, scrutiny committee, service quality meetings, and a tenant participation reference group.
- 87 In 2001/2002 BATRA was funded by a grant of £22,000 and a subsequent top-up grant of £13,000. This covered £5,000 for £100 grants paid to TARA members, £3,500-£4,500 for office overheads; £1,800 Bursary provision for training and £9,000 for expenses. This fund is raised via a levy on the rent but this is not optional for tenants.
- 88 In 2002/2003 BATRA have been awarded an extra 0.5 pence levy (equating to £5,000) so they will receive a grant of £27,000 which is less than last year (taking account of the top-up). However, we were told by the Council that should BATRA need additional funding they would guarantee that it would underwrite any overspends that the Council agree were for essentials.
- 89 BATRA themselves have a target of becoming independent. They told us that the current funding they receive from the council limits their potential for expansion and want to seek new funding opportunities.
- 90 We noted that the Council support BATRA's wish to become independent. We obtained a senior officer view that:

'without this it can not function properly as a customer 'voice' and pressure group. Therefore it is preferable that they have separate long-term funding, to avoid the danger of some Members potentially not supporting the funding of an organisation that may be being critical of the Council'.

- ◆ however, the Council and BATRA agree that TARAs are not always representative of the communities they serve and that there is a need to widen both their membership and to support wider community involvement through alternative consultation mechanisms. This has been the approach with the LCPs which are open to any resident and not just TARAs;

'customer involvement isn't just tenant participation we are good at consulting our tenants and working with groups, but we are not so good at engaging the individual tenants and we need to improve'.

- 91 Housing organisations are being challenged to become more accountable to their tenants as part of the Government's agenda to increase local democracy and modernise local government. The challenge is to improve local services through the introduction of best value; and to help tenants decide how they wish to participate through the introduction of 'tenant participation compacts'.¹²
- 92 Bolton Council has responded to these challenges by adopting a new Council structure with tenant representatives holding seats on the Housing Scrutiny committee, and by introducing the United Kingdom's first tenant participation compact which is reviewed separately in the next section.
- 93 A tenant participation 'summit' is held each year where all tenant groups are invited to a conference. Recent conferences have been used to consult on the tenant participation compact.
- 94 There are 43 traditional tenants and residents associations in Bolton who have to meet formal criteria for recognition and support by the tenant participation team. A monitoring inspection 'health-check' is carried out annually to ensure all the criteria is being met. The length of time these groups have been in existence ranged from three months to 12 years. They are dispersed around the Borough and they represent approximately 70 per cent of Council tenancies.
- 95 In addition there are 12 unofficial action groups and three steering groups that the team support throughout the Borough which do not receive financial support but are still supported by the tenant participation team. Eight are in the public sector and four in the private sector.
- 96 Tenants have two BATRA representatives on the housing and social security scrutiny committee but to date none has chosen to become involved in any topic groups. We obtained a view from some elected members that tenant representatives do not always get actively engaged in discussions and believe that this is because of the formal structure of the meetings. However, we obtained a contrasting view from a senior manager who has recently been actively challenged and questioned by the BATRA representatives after a presentation made to scrutiny committee. Our view is that the tenants role on scrutiny is unclear.
- 97 The tenant participation reference group is the main corporate body for monitoring and evaluating the work of the tenant participation team. It is made up of eight elected members and eight BATRA representatives. It receives TARA health checks, approves new TARAs, and approves and distributes grants to TARAs over and above the standard annual grant provided via BATRA. It looks at a range of information such as KPIs and has recently been reviewing KPIs to see if more or different indicators are necessary. They also monitor progress on the team's action plan - 'Making the Compact Happen' for 2000/2001.

¹² Developing Good Practice in Tenant Participation' - DETR publication July 1999

- 98 There are five area forums which meet every six weeks. They are open to the public. These forums are advertised in local offices and the press and organised by area co-ordinators. Although these are predominately Council led corporate mechanisms, they are attended by BATRA representatives and senior officers from all departments who are available for one to one discussions with members of the public for the first 30 minutes of each session. They can award up to £500 from Community Chest to suitable community or environmental bids.
- 99 We noted the range of activities and meetings in Bolton but asked if they should not be 'rationalised' so that the opportunities for involvement were much clearer for customers. The Council's response to this was mixed. Some officers agreed that the system should be simplified whilst others did not. When we pressed the Council on this issue they told us that they did not think there was a need to rationalise but rather to ensure more effective communication processes including information which explains the different mechanisms.
- 100 In our view the plethora of meetings is confusing for tenants and there are overlaps. They are time consuming for tenants and resource heavy from Council officers. A key issue that we identified from BATRA's perspective was that they feel they are 'stretched to the limit'. They are heavily involved in the Council's meeting structures and felt that whilst they welcome this, without more support, they are in danger of becoming ineffective.
- 101 We also noted that although there are clear opportunities for involvement for customers, there were no examples of tenant empowerment to the extent that they controlled budgets or managed services. We noted that an action group had explored the right to manage with section 16 support¹³ 10 years ago culminating in a report to Council in April 1992 seeking a management agreement but instead a joint management board was agreed but this later dissolved. Since that time the right to manage has not been explored by any other group of tenants and we established that the Council has never promoted it.
- 102 We asked the Council to provide us with any examples of where they had changed policy to accommodate tenant wishes but were repeatedly given examples of how they were consulted. We asked tenants at a district BATRA meeting if they had any experience of where they had influenced Council policy to the extent that the Council had changed proposals to accommodate resident wishes. We were told that it happened only once in nine years when the Council proposed to change the rent-free weeks and they conceded when BATRA objected.
- 103 They told us that BATRA had looked at Salford Council's 'introductory tenancy' to tackle anti social behaviour and asked the Council to consider introducing them, but were refused.

¹³ Section 16 funding: A Government Grant available through the DTLR to resource tenant involvement and training.

- 104 To summarise, the council clearly has a range of opportunities for customers to be involved in the housing service and whilst acknowledged 'good practice' does not require that 'tenant participation' must have examples of higher levels of involvement as recognised in the Council's own 'scale of participation' , there should be clear opportunities for tenants to move to those higher levels should they choose to do so.
- 105 In our view there are a number of areas that the Council should improve upon:
- ◆ whilst there is a plethora of meetings and opportunities to receive information and influence the service, this is confusing and time consuming for tenants;
 - ◆ whilst BATRA influences the housing service, it does not have the authority to vote on major decisions regarding policy and practice (see Table 4); and
 - ◆ the Council has not promoted or given opportunity for resident empowerment where the Customers lead on crucial decisions regarding their community.
- 106 But, in our view tenant participation in Bolton has some good examples of customer involvement. They include:
- ◆ information, which is provided through customer leaflets, newsletters, IT kiosks and a housing website intranet;
 - ◆ consultation, which is used extensively and a range of techniques being employed from traditional customer surveys to focus groups and planning for real events (see Table 6); and
 - ◆ involvement in the management of services via TARAs, BATRA, and participating in developing estate and community agreements.
- 107 BATRA are involved in monitoring the Housing service through attendance at the Council's scrutiny committee, service quality meetings, district housing working parties and the tenant participation reference group.
- 108 They also can influence the service through, policy development groups and local community panels. The latter is also an option for any resident in the targeted estates.
- 109 We also identified some positive examples of customer involvement in the lower levels of the decision-making processes, through LCPs.
- 110 We therefore conclude that opportunities for Tenant Participation are good but could improve further.

Table 6: Consultation Techniques Bolton Benchmarking Club¹⁴

Consultation Methods	Bolton	Authority A	Authority B	Authority C
Focus groups	Y	N	Y	Y
Survey	Y	Y	Y	Y
Database Panel	N	Y	Y	Y
Telephone survey	N	N	Y	Y
Seminars	Y	Y	Y	Y
Newsletters	Y	Y	Y	Y
Mystery shoppers	Y	N	N	N
Working parties	Y	Y	N	Y
STATUS Surveys	Y	Y	N	Y

Tenant participation compact

111 Bolton was the first Council in England to produce a tenant participation compact. It was produced jointly between BATRA and the tenant participation team. It largely followed the national framework for tenant participation compacts produced by the DETR in 1999 following the 'core standards'¹⁵ set out. It did not contain an improvement plan and so a second document, 'Making the compact happen' was produced. This document contains all the tasks that the tenant participation team are responsible for and establishes key performance indicators to measure progress against.

112 The Council told us that:

'there had already been a review of tenant participation when the Tenant Participation Compact draft framework came out in 1999, so we used that and worked to the draft DETR Framework headings. It contains the broad principles of tenant participation but it needed more user-friendly advice documents to support it ...this is why the 'Making It Happen' document was produced'.

¹⁴ Customer Involvement BVR

¹⁵ National Framework for tenant Participation Compacts – DETR 1999

- 113 Our view of both documents is that they concentrate on the tenant participation service and not on empowering tenants. Although the first compact document reproduces the core standard for Housing services as set out in the national framework, it does not set any targets for achieving them in the supplementary document. For example, it fails to show how tenants can be involved in 20 core standards for housing services, three of which are for example:
- ◆ drawing up the Council's capital and renovation programmes;
 - ◆ setting, monitoring and reviewing services, performance standards and targets for housing management and neighbourhood services; and
 - ◆ sheltered housing services.
- 114 The Council acknowledged that the compact does not underpin all the customer involvement processes in housing. This view was confirmed with liaison officers and housing regeneration officers who were unaware of the compact.
- 115 Never the less, in our view the compact is a starting point for reaching higher levels of customer involvement and we noted that the Council does have effective mechanisms in place through the tenant participation reference group to ensure that it can build upon the work it has achieved in partnership with the tenant representative body, BATRA.

Local community planning

- 116 Local community planning (LCP) is Bolton's initiative to move to a more customer-based approach to regeneration. The selection process was based on a range of indicators which happen to be confirmed by the national index of deprivation with eight public and one private estate being within the top 15 per cent of the worst English estates. A further three estates were also included when identified as being 'at risk'. One of the areas is in the private sector.
- 117 We obtained a view that LCP is intended to achieve a different relationship with customers from tenant participation. The challenge here is keeping people involved in a way that they want to be - 'we've just got to be flexible in responding to that'. In our view this is also the principle that should underlie the compact and why Bolton's compact should underpin all customer involvement in the housing department.
- 118 We noted that the LCP Budget is £2.5 million for 2001/2002. The process has been fully operational for two years since 1999. The current main source of funding is through the neighbourhood renewal fund. £21,400 is contributed to the budget for tenant participation staff - 0.8 per cent.
- 119 Regeneration is felt to be closely connected to the important aim of empowering communities. One elected Member told us; 'we came here to give ordinary people power, not just a say'.
- 120 Each part of the LCP is worked on at ongoing sessions and residents are kept informed via newsletters of results of meetings held, and dates of future meetings. Staff with Bolton's common ethnic minority community's language skills are present at all meetings where required.

- 121 A variety of initiatives have been put in place in the hope that local people will take ownership of the process. Different ways of communicating with local people have been adopted, this includes targeting specific streets and finding community champions or street representatives. Also through specifically funded initiatives targeting youth and schools such as the 'Tidy Britain Campaign', and also inviting local schools to be part of LCP process.
- 122 Action plans produced to date identify what the community issues are and how they can be best tackled. These are the product of what the community themselves think are priorities in their area. The local community planning panels provide the overseeing role for their estates and all projects developed on estates go through these forums. However when we attended one LCP we identified that the action plan was being monitored for the first time in 12 months.
- 123 A senior officer pointed out that some of the longer established groups are starting to ask for greater involvement, such as being involved in choosing contractors and/or specifying the timing of works. The regeneration division is therefore starting to think about how they will re-engineer this, with particular help from specialist consultants. Whilst we welcome this, this is an example of how a single strategy for customer involvement is absent at present.
- 124 Although we acknowledge that all the LCPs are relatively new, there was a lack of evaluation on the effectiveness of the meetings. Low attendance in some meetings and perceptions from some tenants that we obtained of them being officer led are indicators that some action needs to be taken.
- 125 LCPs are seen as positive by those having access to them but residents outside of the target areas feel they get a lesser service. We obtained a view from some elected members that the 'target areas' are the right areas in terms of needing most investment, but also a feeling that residents in the 'outer ring' miss out. We noted, however, that the Council plans to address this in its improvement plan.
- 126 In our view the LCP process is a positive initiative and clearly fits in with the Government's agenda to achieve sustainable communities through customer involvement. We found that customers we spoke to that are involved in the process are generally positive about it but there is still some work to be done to ensure that there is consistency and transparency across all the 12 LCPs.

Private sector regeneration

- 127 We noted a number of examples of positive customer involvement in the private sector regeneration service.
- 128 Local community planning has extended to one targeted estate that is entirely within the private sector, having no council tenancies within the area.
- 129 Four resident groups have also been established which are supported by the tenant participation team.

- 130 We also noted one regeneration initiative which had a number of positive examples of customer involvement.
- ◆ The Ocky Grove Ucan Centre is a private sector renewal based community resource centre, which has been developed with the local residents. housing regeneration staff support the project until the contract finishes, and are working then to leave the centre in the control of the local community. Capacity building support is therefore being provided to residents.
 - ◆ The aim of achieving environmental regeneration runs alongside the goal of involving customers in the process through the use of arts, planning for real, and consultation. There have been customer capacity building spin-offs as a result of this. For example some residents have been supported to access skills training and higher education. These individuals are now working in a voluntary capacity from the UCAN centre providing childcare/crèche/ play, pensioner clubs, and homework clubs.
 - ◆ Another resident we spoke to now worked voluntarily for the Citizens Advice Bureau and was taking a degree course in social and community work, which they attributed to the help and encouragement they had received from the housing regeneration staff. The centre is also used and managed by local people as a social drop-in and information centre. We saw a range of information leaflets including information about Bolton's area forums. A residents association (Oxford Grove Area Residents Group) has been established and they have received training to produce a newsletter for the local community - 'Not Another Newsletter'.
 - ◆ A European regional development fund (ERDF) funded BIN project based in the centre has been supported by staff from the libraries division, and local people are acquiring IT skills through training and access to the four networked computers. We noted that access to individual TARA websites is therefore possible. Local people use the BIN facility to access individual e-mails on a daily basis.
 - ◆ A Community Charter has been developed between the Council, private landlords and the community.
- 131 However, we identified that there were some weaknesses:
- ◆ we identified from a focus group with liaison officers and regeneration officers in housing that there is no formal, structured training given around resident liaison and customer involvement; and
 - ◆ we were told that Bolton rely on the experience and skills of the staff they take on, and staff learn from each other.

- 132 We noted the Council's induction programme does include one day for customer involvement and an explanation of LCP process. There is a opportunity to push for specific training through personal development programme¹⁶ process. One attendee told us they had shadowed a tenant participation officer: 'I feel confident that training is available if it is asked for'.
- 133 In our view, the service provided by the housing regeneration division's private sector renewal team has some good examples of customer involvement.

Valuing diversity

- 134 'Valuing Diversity' is the Council's equal opportunities policy. We obtained a view from the housing department's equalities team: 'our job is to influence the housing department's thinking'. The corporate process starts with a corporate race advisor group led by the Finance Director and serviced by the Council's fairness team where the Council's overall policy is developed. This filters down to each Council department.
- 135 The Customer services and community support division have a specialist 'Equalities Team' who assist the tenant participation team as required.
- 136 The current strategy for the housing department has recently been reviewed and the equalities team was charged with producing a draft document for 2002-2005. A 'Fairness & Equality' steering group was established in January 2002 and has reviewed the draft. The draft document was then presented to the minority issues working party in January 2002. It contains a detailed strategy implementation plan.
- 137 However, we were told by a manager that the tenant participation team do not have the specialist skills required to engage effectively and thereby involve more ethnic minority community (BME) customers; 'it is one of our less successful areas of work'.
- 138 The department has therefore recently engaged a specialist BME consultant to advise them as a critical friend. An action plan for improvement is to be produced by summer 2002. We noted that this was not considered as part of the BVR.
- 139 The tenant participation team recognise that more work needs to be done on increasing the involvement of the BME community. A minority issues working party has been established with representatives from the ethnic minority communities on it.
- 140 Staff attended a training session with TPAS who recommend the establishment of BME TARAs. Dean LCP have a large Asian population and this area was targeted by the tenant participation team to try and support the community. As a consequence, an existing TARA which was struggling for membership, identified through the carrying out of annual health checks, was targeted and now has new membership with many BME members.

¹⁶ PDP is a method of linking Corporate need and individual staff needs through an appraisal process or regular monitoring meetings with supervisors.

- 141 We held a focus group with 12 residents from the peace street residents association, including ten from the local Asian community. The group is recognised as an official TARA as it meets the 60 per cent coverage Council requirement, although most residents attending own their properties under the Right to Buy. This is permissible under Bolton's recognition criteria. They told us that since their Asian officer left there has been a gap in provision. Although Tenants News is hand-delivered, the majority said they did not see them or receive a copy. Only two had heard of the LCP in the area and the tenant participation compact.
- 142 We circulated a copy of the Minority Issues Working Party minutes from January 2002. This included an Improvement plan and strategy for Bolton's BME community. People told us that although they recognised the names of the group attendees, including two local community leaders, they had never been consulted about the strategy and did not know that these individuals were involved with the Council.
- 143 We noted that the Council does comply with the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) Practice in rented housing and the CRE standard for local government.
- 144 In our view, the Council is actively trying to ensure equality of opportunity for the ethnic minority population of Bolton. It acknowledges its weaknesses and is taking steps to address them.

Value for money

- 145 The Council spends almost £1 million on Customer Involvement. However, there are no evaluation processes in place to determine whether this amount of spend is delivering value for money. We noted that there was comparative information with other service providers to ensure cost effectiveness as part of the BVR (see Appendix 2 & 3). We noted that Bolton spends £16 per tenancy on tenant participation which was lower than two other authorities in it's benchmarking club at £18 and £35. Value for money can be seen in that tenants are receiving comparable and in some instances better benefits such as training out of this lower expenditure.
- 146 However, we noted that the cost of the private sector renewal is £125,000 and is provided to only 3,000 customers. This equates to over £41 being spent out of the GRF per household and is more than double the expenditure being spent on tenants from the HRA. We were concerned that the Council had not identified this and because the BVR had not considered the work of the renewal team in detail, there was no information to justify what appears to be a dual standard.
- 147 We expressed concern that meetings were over-represented by housing management staff and that this was not a cost effective use of time.
- 148 We noted that the rent payer was not subsidising the private sector tenants by funding staff from the tenant participation team who are supporting four non-tenant resident groups.
- 149 We also noted that the cost of supporting BATRA and TARAs is funded through a levy on the rent which is agreed with BATRA annually although tenants cannot 'opt out' of the levy.

150 In our view, the level of customer involvement carried out will naturally have associated costs due to the amount of staff input. Although there is no overall customer involvement strategy there are clear aims throughout the service to maximise customer involvement, but the time spent on this activity needs to be justified and we consider this was a failure of the BVR to consider this issue.

Performance management

151 We noted a comprehensive system of monitoring the performance of the housing service.

- ◆ Portfolio holders who concentrate on KPIs and areas of concern carry out monitoring of the housing department at weekly briefings. The Director of Housing also attends. The briefings allow elected members to feed in their own particular concerns, and they are used for the early sharing of ideas or papers with members prior to the formal decision making process.
- ◆ Monitoring of the housing service is a primary function of the housing and social services scrutiny committee. They see all reports that have been submitted to the executive and can request reports on any housing issue.
- ◆ Housing department performance is monitored at departmental management team (DMT). The tenant participation reference group is the main corporate body for monitoring and evaluating the work of the tenant participation team.
- ◆ The performance team of the community services division take a lead in helping to develop local PIs and provide 'an overview of information provided by managers. BVPIs are collated monthly by the team and passed to DMT and scrutiny committees for monitoring. KPIs are provided to BATRA and service quality meetings, which are attended by the team. They also act as a support to the Housing department in benchmarking with other partners, such as the Greater Manchester best value group, and produce reports on good practice.
- ◆ The Housing department have a service action plan which filters down to each division through individual section plans. This is currently being revised to ensure that all Council departments use corporate styles of plans from the next financial year and the 'joined-up' aspect of service delivery in meeting the nine corporate aims is clear. A new corporate planning procedure has been produced to ensure all departments are joined-up in their understanding and approach to service priorities and delivery.
- ◆ The tenant participation team have a service action plan which is enshrined in the 'Tenant Participation Compact – Making it Happen' document and the tenant participation manager meets with tenant participation officers monthly to monitor individual performance.
- ◆ We noted that a corporate briefing had been circulated to all department teams and all staff received a leaflet with their payslips and consider this to be an effective approach to communication important issues to staff.

- ◆ We also noted an innovative in-house website called the 'Housing Intranet' which is used to keep staff, members and BATRA reps up to date with policy and topical issues. This is supplemented by a monthly news-sheet called 'Team Briefing' in a hard-copy.
 - ◆ The Council's complaints procedure is advertised in the Tenant News. We noted that according to the Citizen's Panel Survey September 2000, approximately a quarter of respondents had used the Council's complaints procedure and 39 per cent were satisfied with the process.
- 152 The Council acknowledged that currently there are not effective performance measures or service level agreements between the community services section and the other housing department divisions to ensure that staff are delivering tenant participation. Although the tenant participation team have a service action plan - 'Making the Compact Happen', the other divisions do not. A senior officer told us; 'we are not good at this and have taken it for granted.' In our view, this is a key issue that needs to be resolved when considering the cost of the service.
- 153 We obtained a view from elected members that scrutiny committee is not rigorous because there is insufficient time given to the meetings (one to two hours maximum). There was also concern that it is chaired by a Member from and nominated by the controlling party, and although they feel a good job is done by the individual concerned, they believe that as a principle the committee itself should select the chair and vice chair.
- 154 The tenant participation team are in the process of reconsidering the way in which they measure their performance. Senior management acknowledged that 'we need to get a lot sharper about our PIs'. and a need to be better about evaluating the effectiveness of regeneration work.
- 155 In our view the performance management systems that are currently in place are robust in considering individual sections in isolation. They are weak in that there is currently no process for bringing all these sections together into a corporate performance management system. This has been acknowledged by the Council who are taking steps to address this.

How does the performance compare?

- 156 In order to judge the quality of a service, it is important to compare the performance of that service against other suppliers across a range of sectors. The aim is not exact comparison, but an exploration of how similar services (or elements of services) perform in order to identify significant differences, the reasons for them, and the extent to which improvements are required.

- 157 Bolton Council provided us with comparisons with seven authorities they had benchmarked against as part of their BVR (see appendix 2 & 3). We noted that Bolton Compared favourably against the other authorities on a range of indicators including:
- ◆ 26 per cent of resident groups have dedicated premises-second highest;
 - ◆ 82 tenants benefited from training -second highest (see Chart 4);
 - ◆ spends £16 per tenancy on Tenant Participation- third highest, whilst it has the second highest number of dedicated Tenant Participation staff - 10 (see Chart 3).
- 158 We compared Bolton against other metropolitan authorities and found that Bolton is in the bottom quartile for satisfaction with the housing service and also for opportunities to participate in decision making (see Chart 1).
- 159 We then compared the same statistics with registered social landlords in the North West of England and noted that housing association tenants report higher levels of satisfaction with both the housing service and opportunities to take part in decision making (see Chart 2).
- 160 Bolton provided comparative information with other authorities in the north west as a member of the Greater Manchester tenant participation networking group. That identified that on average Bolton is resourcing tenant participation well in comparison with other members (see Appendix 2). This included:
- ◆ providing start-up grants to TARAs;
 - ◆ providing annual grants;
 - ◆ providing premises grants; and
 - ◆ providing sundry grants.
- 161 The Council had also done some benchmarking with private companies, but had a limited response which made it difficult to gauge comparative performance.
- 162 The Council had also benchmarked itself with nine local registered social landlords (RSLs). Two RSLs provided data on the percentage stock covered by their TARAs – both lower than Bolton at 55 per cent and 36 per cent. Bolton coverage is approximately 70 per cent.
- 163 In our view, we can say that although the tenant participation Service compares unfavourably with other Metropolitan authorities and local RSL landlords in terms of customer satisfaction, there is evidence from the Council's own benchmarking indicators that Bolton's tenants receive a favourable service compared to other authorities.

Chart 1: Audited benchmarking of MBCs 2000/2001

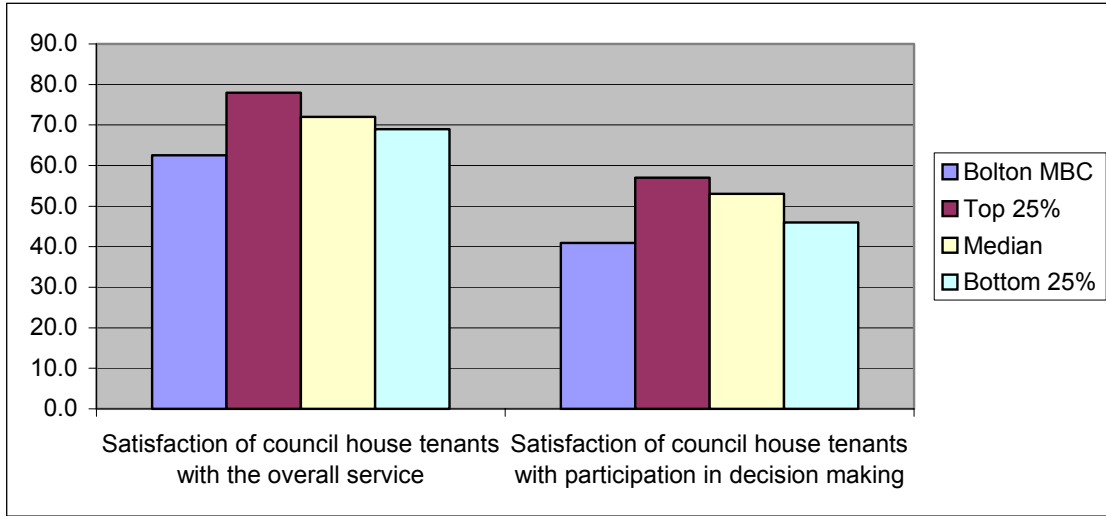


Chart 2: Benchmarking with North West RSLs

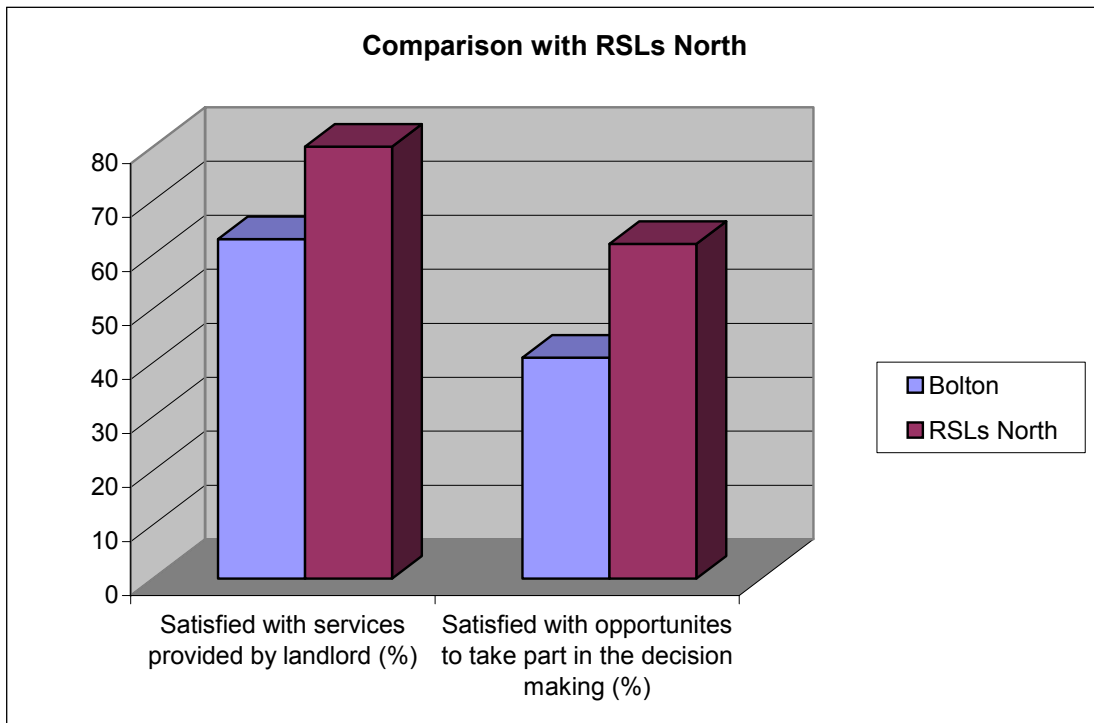


Chart 3: Tenant Participation Budget Spend per Tenancy

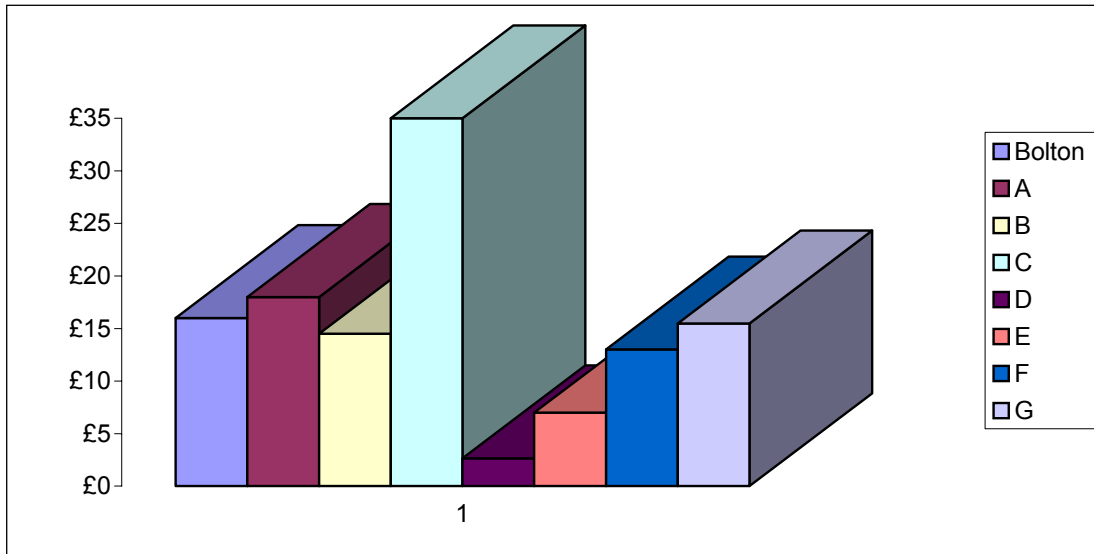
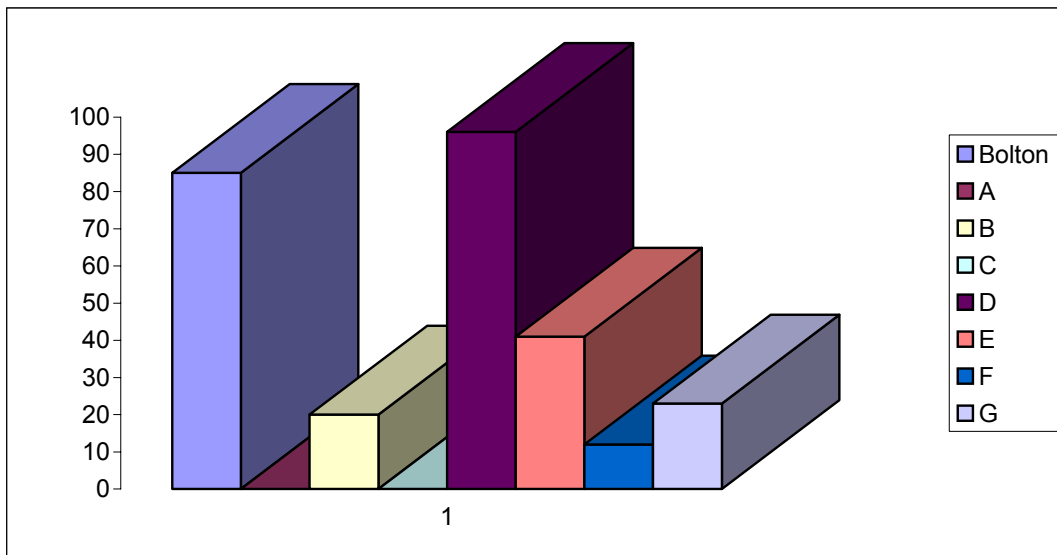


Chart 4: Tenant s Benefiting from training courses (internal & external combined)



Summary

- 164 In conclusion, our view is that the individual aims and objectives for each strategic area are clear, wide ranging, challenging and relevant to the current Government's agenda.
- 165 In relation to whether this service meets the aims, there is evidence that tenants are consulted and that their views do have an impact on service development. We have some concerns over the way that the service is promoted and tenants have indicated that they feel they have a lack of information about the service and in particular the Compact.
- 166 We found there to be a wide range of opportunities for customer involvement throughout the housing service and that this went beyond the traditional TARA by engaging individuals in the local community planning process. We have some concerns that this is not consistent throughout the Council's stock and note that the Council intends to address this as part of the service improvement plan.
- 167 We found that the tenants could 'opt in and out' of involvement through the local community planning process and all tenants received regular and good quality information about the housing service and opportunities to get involved. There were also examples of tenants being involved in the monitoring of services and some opportunity to be involved in the decision making process, although this was acknowledged to be at lower levels and did not constitute empowerment.
- 168 In our opinion the service meets many of the factors that are put forward as good practice in the DETR's guidance.¹⁷ Although the tenant participation compact has room for improvement it is a starting point for future improvements in the service and it was negotiated jointly between tenants and the Council.
- 169 Best value PIs show that the tenant participation service compares less favourably with other Metropolitan Authority's services in relation to satisfaction with the housing service overall and opportunities to influence decisions. However, the current lack of PIs on other aspects of the customer involvement service made it difficult to reach a definite conclusion on how the authority compares. We found that the service is well resourced in comparison to its benchmark neighbours and indicators provided show that customers are benefiting from the service favourably compared to other benchmarked authority's tenants.

¹⁷ 'Developing Good Practice in Tenant Participation' DETR 1999

How likely is the service to improve?

Does the best value review drive improvements?

- 170 The best value review (BVR) is the mechanism for ensuring authorities deliver continuous improvement in the Services they provide. Inspectors are therefore looking for a BVR that is clear in its methodology, scope and clearly defines what is being reviewed.
- 171 We noted a statement from an officer at the tenant participation summit meeting in September 2001, 'it was agreed that we need to be radical with this (customer Involvement) review and the improvement plan'.
- 172 Our inspection found that this had not been the case in the Council's BVR of customer involvement and our reasons are outlined below.
- 173 A senior officer told us that the BVR initially was focusing on the tenant participation service but the departmental management team felt that this was unsatisfactory and the scope should be broadened to include the whole customer Interface carried out by the housing department. Because the timetable was already fixed insufficient energy and time was dedicated to the other aspects of the service.
- 174 Another manager told us that the customer involvement strategy for the future was not within the BVR. We were told that what exists is an emerging strategy for how customers are dealt with, referring to the customer relations management strategy.
- 175 In our view this highlights a fundamental problem with this BVR. Although the scope included the whole housing service, the review team failed to ensure that it considered the whole service and how that fits in with corporate strategy. It also identifies what in our opinion is a misperception about what customer Involvement is. It should be about how all recipients of the housing sector in the public and private sector can be involved in the service provided by participating in the management, monitoring and influencing of that service. We found that there was often a belief that by staff being involved with customers in carrying out their function, this was customer involvement. One manager told us that the BVR hadn't been precise enough and that it should have defined its scope as the tenants and residents of Bolton.
- 176 The critical friend used by the Council as part of its BVR said 'have you defined the service so you know what it is you are exactly reviewing?' In our view, the review team did not do this and assumed it was tenants receiving the tenant participation service with some additional involvement in planned maintenance and regeneration.
- 177 The Council confirmed this and said that the scope of the review was the tenant participation service' and how it supports customer involvement in both the public and private sector. Regeneration activity was not considered within the review.

- 178 We were told it started out as tenants of the Council but then was put in a broader context of all that the housing department does. Customers therefore were felt to be everybody who potentially uses the housing service. This was confirmed as being all public and private sector services, including elderly services which are treated as coming under housing management customer involvement; vulnerable groups receiving housing advice; and registered social landlords and Bolton community homes (BCH) under the housing strategy role.
- 179 Staff from the planned maintenance and private sector renewal sections were asked about their involvement in the BVR of customer involvement. We were told that everybody had been asked to fill out a questionnaire. One member of the group was asked to attend the BVR group and explain what they do, 'the input was there but it did not seem to get taken up somehow. Our activity was described in a very general way'.
- 180 The scope of the BVR included an objective 'to review and assess what success the tenant participation compact has had in improving our involvement of customers'. However, the process followed in meeting this aim was not described within the BVR itself, but ran alongside ('in tandem') through a series of meetings between BATRA and two staff under the title 'TP Compact Working Group'. We noted that there was no evaluation of the effectiveness of the compact as stated there would be in the aims of the BVR.
- 181 Another senior officer told us; 'the customer involvement BVR has 'hazy links' to the tenant participation compact. It was introduced by the DETR at a time when the Council were thinking about producing a tenant participation strategy and it seemed opportune therefore to use the compact for this purpose.'
- 182 We looked at the four Cs to determine how effectively they have been applied, overall.

Challenge

- 183 The challenge processes of the customer involvement BVR were:
- ◆ a review of the tenant participation compact;
 - ◆ appendix F of the national framework for compacts;¹⁸
 - ◆ an internal challenge with staff;
 - ◆ a SWOT analysis; and
 - ◆ comments from external critical friends.
- 184 In our view the compact review did not challenge the way service of customer involvement is provided.

¹⁸ National framework for Tenant Participation Compacts - DETR 1999 – Appendix F 'How to check the quality of tenant participation'

- 185 The TPC review was not documented in the BVR but instead ran alongside it. It was carried out by a joint working party with BATRA representatives and reported its findings to the tenant participation reference group. It did not make any changes to the existing compact booklet but did make changes to the 'Making it Happen document.' However, this was not comprehensive because any issues identified as being within the remit of the tenant participation teams were picked up as part of their work or within the revised improvement plan. They were not included in the compact review findings.
- 186 We were told by a senior officer that the 'tenant participation compact working party' looked at other Councils' compacts but 'we decided not to start from scratch because if we came up with something very different from the current format it could cause confusion.'
- 187 Our view is that the compact should be a living document which spells out the rights and responsibilities of both parties and which has a clear action plan which shows how performance will improve over the following year. It should have been part of the BVR proper so that clear links could be made between the 'separate' improvement plan for the service and the improvement plan for the compact.
- 188 There has been no consultation on the proposed changes with the wider tenant body despite this being a key aim in the customer involvement BVR improvement plan.
- 189 In our view, checking for quality against framework appendix F is not a challenge to the service. It is important and should be part of the comparison 'C'. We note, however, that the Council claims to score highly against good practice indicator one: 'The Council has a policy on tenant participation.' We have demonstrated above that there is no strategy currently in place and this comment obviously links to the view that the Compact was the policy document.
- 190 Bolton used two critical friends to assist them in challenging the existing service. In effect one critical friend was asked to comment on a draft of the BVR. The feedback received pointed out that asking if the service could be delivered better externally would need information on costs. Bolton received poor responses to 25 authorities they had contacted about costs and no further efforts were made. In our view this highlights that the challenge was not comprehensive enough. 'I am not sure if you are using BV as a pre-conceived outcome if you do not provide examples of costs etc.' (critical friend)
- 191 Another comment made was that it would have been useful to explore the role of all housing staff in relation to customer involvement to improve or firm up the whole of the housing staff's commitment. This would address the; 'lack of ownership mentioned in your weaknesses section'. The Council's response to this in the BVR was to provide training for staff in the improvement plan. In our view this is not challenging the way the service is provided but rather mending a fault so as to retain the status quo.

192 The second critical friend attended one meeting. The BVR explains that by having this officer present, the input helped to generate more diverse discussion on new methods of working and ‘while all of these new methods or innovation may not have been suitable for Bolton, this input provided a more in depth challenge to the current service.’ However, there is no detail of the diverse discussion and when we contacted the critical friend, they recall the focus had been on comparison and KPIs, rather than discussion about alternative ways of delivering the service (Challenge). They recall a lively debate about whether KPIs on satisfaction should be included and Bolton view was strongly ‘what do they really tell us’? Our view is that the BVR did not do what it set out to do and it avoided ‘difficult’ questions like addressing satisfaction.

193 In conclusion we find that the challenge aspect of the BVR was weak.

Comparison

194 The customer involvement review was discussed at the tenant participation summit in September as were the reported survey results showing that only 37 per cent of tenants were satisfied with opportunities to get involved which was a concern. The Performance team carried out an analysis, which showed that Bolton is in bottom quartile of performance for BVPIs but this was not discussed in the BVR document. Our view is that this is evidence that a partial picture was provided.

195 Although the BVR demonstrates that there was extensive comparison of processes made with other authorities and RSLs in the North West, there was no comparison of customer satisfaction in the BVR. We have identified that it was discussed and that there was poor satisfaction but this did not come through in the BVR.

196 The Council’s own critical friends both pointed to customer satisfaction as being the driver for the service but the BVR did not reflect this. It also did not try to compare itself with top 25 per cent performers and learn from their practice.

197 In our view the comparison exercise was limited, and this affected the conclusions reached and the effectiveness of the review.

Consultation

198 Elected members told us that housing is seen to have a good history on consultation, and to be up to speed on that. With consultation for any BVR the major concern is always to ensure that it has gone out to the wider population and is representative of their views ‘not just those who shout loudest’.

199 We noted that consultation took place through a number of methods; a random street survey of 454 customers, a customer questionnaire to two resident groups; customer focus groups; consultation with staff and also with elected members.

200 We noted that considerable effort was made to contact the more ‘difficult to reach’ customers such as single parents, younger people, those with disability and women from ethnic minorities. We also noted that response from elected members was poor.

- 201 We confirmed that BATRA were not formally consulted on the revised improvement plan, were not involved in drawing it up and did not see it until after it was submitted.
- 202 The Council's critical friend raised concerns that there were no consideration of empowerment of tenants through tenant management organisations or involvement in delivering services and managing budgets. The BVR response was to say that this would have been possible but would have required explaining a number of different options and would have made the consultation exercise far more complicated than required. Again this demonstrates that the BVR was not thorough.
- 203 In our view although there was some good examples of engaging customers in the exercise, the consultation failed to widen the 'questions' to include empowerment options and alternative ways of delivering the service.

Competition

- 204 The BVR considered seven options under the 'competition' C:
- ◆ restructure the service;
 - ◆ joint commissioning;
 - ◆ partnerships;
 - ◆ externalise;
 - ◆ market testing;
 - ◆ renegotiation with suppliers; - not appropriate as no external suppliers; and
 - ◆ cessation of the service.
- 205 We found that there had been no clear assessment of whether customer involvement is economic in meeting customer needs which had been a desired outcome as defined in the scope.
- 206 The option to externalise was considered as 'only appropriate for a failing service where alternative providers exist'. It was not considered appropriate because any failings could be addressed through the Improvement plan and the Council consider there are no other providers willing to take on the role.
- 207 However, this conclusion is not reached by any obvious process. It states that some providers may wish to take on part of the service such as training. This was evidenced through its' market testing exercise. The Council has not considered 'packaging' the various parts of the service to make this possible, although it does intend to use external providers to supply some services in the future.
- 208 Under cessation of the service, this was considered to be a non-option but it did refer to the potential role that BATRA might play in delivering the service in the future when it becomes independent. In our view this fits more with the last option of externalisation possibilities.

- 209 Joint commissioning with Bolton Community Homes is seen as a real possibility and extending work to private sector landlord tenants .
- 210 The outcome of the compete aspect of the four Cs was to restructure the existing tenant participation service.
- 211 In our view the Council considered a broad range of options but there was insufficient consideration of housing project services and the private sector regeneration team. It discusses the role of both sections but it points out that they are different sections and subject to their own reviews.
- 212 In conclusion, our view is that the BVR of customer involvement was poor.

How good is the improvement plan?

- 213 A best value review should produce an improvement plan that sets out what need to improve, why, and how that improvement will be delivered. It should contain targets which are not only challenging but also designed to demonstrate and ensure the continuous improvement necessary to put the service amongst the top 25 per cent of Councils within five years.
- 214 In our view, the initial improvement plan suffered from a number of deficiencies;
- ◆ it was not SMART¹⁹; and additional resourcing was not identified;
 - ◆ it concentrated on the work of the tenant participation team and had tenuous links to planned maintenance carried out by housing project services, but not to other customer involvement service providers in the housing department;
 - ◆ it failed to consider the wider corporate strategy such as the customer relationship management strategy to ensure joined up approaches; and
 - ◆ it failed to address the need to consider alternatives to BATRA in obtaining a representative tenant's voice.
- 215 The Council accepted our criticism of the improvement plan and produced a revised plan. This was consulted on through:
- ◆ a BATRA focus group;
 - ◆ an open seminar for TARAs;
 - ◆ two focus groups with private sector housing customers; and
 - ◆ scrutiny committee were given the opportunity to review it but declined.
- 216 It was approved by the Council in March 2002.

¹⁹ Specific, Measured, Achievable, Resourced and Timeed.

- 217 The new revised plan contains two new project areas which the Council accepted as being gaps in the original plan;
- ◆ ‘building a cross-housing services customer involvement strategy and delivery plan;’ and
 - ◆ ‘establishing a and developing representative customer bodies from housing’s broad customer base.’
- 218 In addition it categorises the improvements into six other areas;
- ◆ building a Customer Involvement strategy and delivery plan;
 - ◆ developing a framework to foster and develop empowerment;
 - ◆ supporting BATRA to gain independence;
 - ◆ expand and strengthen performance management systems for departmental Customer Involvement activities;
 - ◆ extending local community involvement opportunities for residents of non-targeted estates; and
 - ◆ raising awareness of and access to customer involvement opportunities through publicity and marketing.
- 219 We noted that there were a number of omissions from the original plan including:
- ◆ to investigate outsourcing of training through joint commissioning and to develop a plan of activities where alternative service providers could be engaged; and
 - ◆ to increase the level of customer involvement in planned maintenance.
- 220 There is no apparent justification for these omissions given and the first one would have helped to tackle the acknowledged resourcing problem.
- 221 The Council states that five of the six projects which are intended to deliver the new plan are to be resourced within existing budgets and we question whether this is realistic since the BVR identified a need for additional resources, most of the activities in this plan will be achieved by re-focusing staff time and budgets to those activities.²⁰
- 222 The Council states that the tenant participation team is assigned as main co-ordinator of activity and their time will be freed up by the ongoing, planned, tapered decrease in routine support to TARAs which will become self-reliant or supported by local estate management staff.

²⁰ Revised Customer Involvement BVR Improvement Plan - 18 March 2002

223 Our concern is that we did not see any evidence that support for TARAs by the tenant participation team was decreasing and there were no targets to achieve this. Also the absence of a service level agreement between the tenant participation team and the other housing divisions will make the role of co-ordination of the service Improvements difficult if not impossible.

224 In our view there are a number of positive aspects to the plan:

- ◆ it has a new aim of developing a customer involvement strategy to be implemented from October 2002;
- ◆ it plans to introduce customer involvement compacts for all service areas;
- ◆ it plans to secure section 16 funding to explore empowerment/independence options with BATRA;
- ◆ there is an objective to set up a representative customer body for the private sector; and
- ◆ it plans to measure the quality, effectiveness and the value for money of customer Involvement in all the housing department.

225 However, in our view there are a number of weaknesses in the new plan:

- ◆ it is not a five year plan;
- ◆ many of the tasks are process orientated in saying what needs to be done rather than describing the outcomes and how they will benefit customers, for example, a project to develop a marketing strategy;
- ◆ resourcing of the plan is not clear and it does not say how support for BATRA in gaining independence will be achieved if section 16 funding is not obtained;
- ◆ it has objectives stating 'to explore' and 'to create a process'; in our view these are not SMART and do not commit to any improvement;
- ◆ although it attempts to address the need to transfer responsibility for some of the customer involvement function to other staff, it fails to address the need to set up individual division targets for achieving these improvements; and
- ◆ it talks about restructuring and joint working of the service but 'dependent upon alternative finance model decisions'; in our view this is not a clear objective and should not be in an improvement plan if it cannot be achieved (SMART) without something else happening.

226 We conclude that whilst the revised improvement plan has new and positive targets, this is outweighed by being non specific in its desired outcomes, lacking in resource requirement detail and not wide enough to cover all aspects of potential customer involvement, such as elderly services and transient groups that remain to be reviewed separately.

Will the Council deliver the improvements?

227 Inspectors look for evidence that a Council will deliver what it has set out in the improvement plan. We look for a track record of managing change within the Council and, ideally, within the service itself. The plan should also have sufficient support from Councillors, management, staff, service users and other stakeholders, particularly those responsible for delivering it.

Drivers for improvement

228 Although it has weaknesses, the new revised Improvement plan if implemented fully would, in our opinion, bring about some improvements from a customer perspective.

229 We note that the Council is setting up new performance management systems to ensure that there is a sharing of experience and good practice across the department and corporately.

230 We note that Bolton as a Council has a track record of high levels of performance. The Council's overall service performance is amongst the best of the 25 Metropolitan authorities.²¹

231 The Council claimed to have learned a lot from other Councils in terms of year one reviews and the role of best value at Bolton is seen to be to introduce a culture change and to ensure service delivery patterns are customer focused. This is perceived as challenging 'more for some than for others'. 'Best value is about putting customers at the heart of things you shouldn't be doing anything without doing that.'

232 The Council has consistently performed well in delivering its services and the government office north west has found Bolton's performance to be 'well above average' consistently for 11 years.

233 We acknowledge there is senior officer and a Council culture of customer care and engagement. The Council responded positively to our criticism of their BVR and initial improvement plan and demonstrated a clear willingness to learn from the BVR and inspection process.

Barriers to improvement

234 The BVR carried out was weak due to insufficient scope and a lack of a joined-up approach. It failed to sufficiently address all aspects of customer involvement in the housing service. It concentrated on the role of the council's tenant participation service and did not consider in depth the role of other staff in the department or customers other than tenants. It did not stimulate any changes that were not already planned or in effect such as local community planning.

235 The new improvement plan which although addresses many of the points raised in this report, is still not in our opinion sufficient to bring about significant improvements.

²¹ District Audit Report 2001

236 The other main area of concern is the capacity to deliver major improvements within existing resources. The Council had set great store in attracting alternative funding through the establishment of a new community regeneration company to manage the housing stock and raise finance. That option is no longer open to the Council and it is now looking at other options such as ALMO, LSVT and PFI to take plans forward. In their own words, 'the housing department is on the verge of a watershed, as it explores new sources of investment funding'.

Summary

237 In our view, the BVR process was not robust and it failed to identify the issues necessary to bring about significant improvements in the customer involvement service. The BVR did not identify the need for strategic direction beyond the tenant participation service.

238 The revised improvement plan did not come out of the BVR but rather was the result of learning from the inspection we carried out. Whilst we acknowledge this positive response to our comments, the revised improvement plan still has a number of deficiencies. Never the less, it does address many of the concerns we have raised in this report.

239 In our view, although the Council has a track record of implementing changes in the services it provides and there is a clear history of tenant participation and a commitment from Councillors and senior managers to the principles of customer involvement remains, there is no customer involvement strategy in place. And for it to improve it needs to have a clear strategy, which will provide the necessary direction. The Council has acknowledged this and included a target to develop one in their revised improvement plan.

240 We therefore conclude that the Council lacks a specific direction for the service and without a robust joined-up improvement plan in place, the service has uncertain prospects for improvement.

Appendices

What the Inspectors did

The purpose of best value inspection is to make two judgements. The first is, how good is the service being inspected? The second is, how likely is it to improve? We carried out a range of different activities to enable us to reach our judgements.

Documents reviewed

Before going on site, we reviewed a range of documents which had been provided in advance by the Council for us. This included the following:

- ◆ The Best Value Review of the Customer Involvement Service
- ◆ The Council's Housing strategy
- ◆ The Tenant Participation Compact
- ◆ Best Value Review Corporate Methodology
- ◆ Best Value Performance Plans and Summary
- ◆ Corporate Plan
- ◆ Housing Revenue Account Business Plan
- ◆ Customer Care Policy and Standards
- ◆ Customer Charter
- ◆ Committee Papers
- ◆ Tenancy Agreements & Rent Cards

Reality checks undertaken

When we went on site, we carried out a number of different checks building on the work described above in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on site 'reality checks' were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and see how well it works on the ground. We also followed up on issues relating to the management of the review and the improvements flowing from it. Our reality checks included:

- ◆ BME Association Focus Group
- ◆ Private Sector Regeneration Tour
- ◆ Focus Group with Area Housing Officers
- ◆ Focus Group with Community Housing Managers
- ◆ BATRA Farnworth & Bolton South Meeting

- ◆ Customer Telephone surveys
- ◆ Customer Exit surveys
- ◆ Focus Group with Liaison Officers Housing Project services and Housing Regeneration Officers
- ◆ Visit to BATRA office
- ◆ Visit to five Estate Offices & Exit Surveys
- ◆ Local Community Panel: Great Lever
- ◆ Focus Group with BATRA
- ◆ Attended Service Quality Meeting
- ◆ Focus Group Tenant participation officers
- ◆ Focus Group Non-BATRA Tenants & Residents
- ◆ IT Tour of Housing website

List of those interviewed

We also met with a range of different people involved with the service.

Councillor Noel Spencer	Elected Member and Portfolio Holder for Housing
Councillor Kilcoyne	Elected Member and Portfolio Holder for Best Value
Councillor Clare	Chair of Housing Scrutiny Committee
George Caswell	Director of Housing - Services Department
Jeff Smethurst	Assistant Director - Community (Housing) Support Services Division
Joan Herne	Assistant Director - Regeneration Division
Steve Jordan	Customer Services & Community Support Manager
Shohab Muqtadi	Equal Opportunities Officer
Richard Smallman	Chair BATRA
Marcus Connor	Housing Performance Team Leader
Phil Lukes	Critical Friend - Manchester City Council
Vicky Ramsden	Tenant Participation Manager
Marilyn Thornby	Critical Friend Salford City Council

Appendix 1

Good practice examples

- 241 BATRA obtained a £26,000 Innovation to action grant obtained from the Chartered Institute of Housing to develop GIS²² system for mapping customer involvement. The grant funds IT equipment, and training to use the system. The purpose of GIS is to provide a visual picture of involvement, which people should find easier to relate to. It is intended to help to interpret ‘the complexity of what is going on, and through the overlaps, what is happening and what is not’.
- 242 ‘Percentage for Art’ is a commitment from Bolton Community Homes, a partnership of Bolton MBC and nine Housing Associations, to fund arts-based work from 1 per cent of their capital and development programmes. Programmes have so far included play consultation at Highfield and All Saints; three year arts project at Brightmet; young travelers identity project through photography; Rushey Lea Close local history panels; Lantern procession at Johnson Fold and a children’s drama performance about bullying. It use a variety of techniques to engage communities in regeneration. These include seminars, focus groups, drama, dance, video, photography and getting residents involved in art based work shops.
- 243 BIN project based in the UCAN centre - local people are acquiring IT skills through training and access to the four networked computers. There is access to individual TARA websites. Local people use the BIN facility to access individual e-mails on a daily basis.
- 244 A customer involvement initiative that came out of the Local Community Planning process is Streetworks’. It is an area-based approach to the delivery of the full range of environmental services through partnership between Council departments delivering street based services and the residents of the area. It is being piloted in three areas and the measure of its success will be customer satisfaction. Funding is from mainstream Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and General Revenue Fund (GRF) with some contribution from a range of challenge funds. We noted that a research and training day for local residents was held and a baseline of current satisfaction was measured for future comparison. However, the results had not been analysed as yet.

²² Geographical Information system

Appendix 2

Bolton MBC Benchmarking Club 2001 Figures

	Bolton	A	B	C
Total Stock	21,749	28,269	16,500	8,500
Total TP staff	10	12	8	9
Ratio TP staff: Stock	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.9
Some outsourcing	N	Y	N	Y
Budget	£349,900	£500,000	£240,000	£297,000
Spend per tenant	£16	£18	£14.50	£35
Formal tenant groups	41	115	34	28
Informal groups	12	0	0	2
TMOs/EMBs/Co-ops	0	0	2	1
Provide start up grants	Y	N	Y	Y
Annual grants	Y	Y	Y	Y
Premises grant	Y	N	N	N
Sundry payments	Y	Y	N	Y
Tenants receiving Internal training	44	0	5	0
External training	41	N/K	15	
Percentage groups with dedicated premises	26	20.1	5.9	N/K
Percentage groups with free access to premises	100	100	100	100
Monitoring of Federation	Y	N	N	N

Appendix 3

Greater Manchester TP Benchmarking Club: July 2001 Figures

Authority	D	E	F	G
Total Stock	18,797	34,144	13,305	10,335
Total TP staff	4.5	9.5	5	5
Ratio TP staff: Stock	1:4	1:3	1:2	1:1
Some outsourcing	N	Y	Y	Y
Budget	£50,000	£240,421	£173,000	£160,000
Spend per tenant	£2.66	£7.00	£13	£15.48
Formal tenant groups	28	83	N/K	17
Informal groups	7	0	N/k	10
TMOs/EMBs/ Co-ops	2	3	0	0
Provide start up grants	Y	Y	Y	Y
Annual grants	Y	Y	Y	Y
Premises grant	Y	Y	Y	N
Sundry payments	Y	Y	Y	Y
Tenants receiving Internal training	32	11	12	0
External training	0	4	0	0
Percentage groups with dedicated premises	64	30	0	23
Percentage groups with free access to premises	100	100	0	0
Monitoring of Federation				