

# Achieving the First District Double Excellent in Housing Services in the Country

## Summary Sheet

Wychavon District Council has radically improved in recent years with top resident satisfaction scores for services including leisure, parks, waste and recycling and 70% of PIs are top quartile or above average. It's just got the first double excellent score for housing services in the Country following an Audit Commission inspection. But it wasn't always doing so well and housing was previously our worst service with a poor strategy, backlogs of work and low team morale.

Volunteering to pathfind for CPA provided the momentum to sort out a number of corporate and service based issues. Our presentation covers our housing turnaround from where we were, where we are now and the Top 10 things that have really made the difference. We'll draw out the essentials... **a positive attitude, a focus on the right things, brave decisions and constructive challenge.** It's only now that we feel able to share our journey to help others – when you're in the thick of change it's hard! We've learnt that what makes for effective services and organisations comes down to **a simple formula for success...**

**People** – strong leadership, good relationships and staff pride  
+  
**Plans** - exciting vision, practical things to deliver  
+  
**PR** - strong communication, in the council and the community  
=  
**Great Performance**

## Top 10 turnaround – things that have helped improve housing

- 1. Improving for our residents, not the Audit Commission** - inspectors saying the service wasn't good enough is one thing, really recognising the need to change is quite another. Our initial denial gave way to wanting to improve the service - for our residents, not auditors. Seeing housing rise up on residents' priorities helped – we could see we had a role to play that cut across lots of services, like planning, benefits, communications and finance.
- 2. Having the guts to confront poor performance** – we put two departments – Revenues/Benefits and Housing together, we changed the management and joined up services that need to work together anyway. Getting a handle on just how bad things had got e.g. backlogs of work on grants, waiting list and homelessness, meant we could tackle performance.
- 3. Political buy in** – as a low cost Conservative council and one of the first to devolve stock in 1994 the general view was that housing wasn't our concern. Officers felt their voices weren't heard so it took our new portfolio holder's boundless enthusiasm, and hard won member 'conversion programme' to win hearts and minds and pull in resources.
- 4. Money matters** – get real - turning around services needs money – and building capacity meant new people with new skills on key issues like empty homes and property standards. We were creative and trained people up internally where open recruitment yielded no joy. New IT systems like Document Image Processing meant the processes got quicker so we could spend more time with people and less on the paper chase.
- 5. Real teamwork** – Members and officers being on the same side, liking and respecting each other meant we could be open and honest and put our efforts into making progress, not allocate blame for the state of the service, far more constructive.

6. **DIY and knowing what matters** – we could have brought in consultants to interim manage or write the housing strategy. But we didn't. We built that expertise from within using skills across the council to help, such as seconding a Revenues and Benefits Manager to bring a fresh insight and involving our Deputy Managing Director to set out a new strategy. Being clear what we needed to focus on meant we sent letters to people on the 'waiting list' that we could never help and pointed them to other avenues. And we were clear what we were not going to do too – we knew we didn't want to become a social landlord again. That's why we work creatively with house builders, planners and RSLs – we can't deliver without them.
7. **Motivating and empowering the team** – it's the little things that have made a difference – moving to a new part of the office, regular contact with the portfolio holder so the team feel valued - as well as the big things like new managers, new staff, focusing on the important priorities and re-building team confidence. Letting people get on with the job, empowering people to make decisions and a new culture of trying out new ideas such as a spend to save budget – paying arrears and removals helped get people re-housed and reduced temporary accommodation costs.
8. **Seeking solutions with the RSLs and the private sector** – we've worked with our RSL partners to provide excellent quality temporary accommodation, reducing the use of B&B substantially when we had been told this wasn't possible previously. We've improved our relationships with RSLs – fast tracking benefits is one example and temporary accommodation another. We've had an excellent response from partners along our journey and found they've always been willing to help.
9. **Listening and never standing still** – hearing the feedback from our housing customers on how we've changed people's lives gives us the motivation to keep improving the service and through our texting clients on issues relevant. Using all our resources to help from money and debt advice, ongoing support after rehousing homeless, modular units for disabled, loans and creative spend to save money so we provide lots ways to help people. And we support people and help them to be independent.
10. **Above all, a feeling of failure if we didn't invest in success** – how did we as an organisation treat housing so much as a Cinderella service when it is pivotal to the well being of many of our residents? How did we not react to poor performance quicker than we did before external inspection? The drive for improvement was motivated for the right reasons and we now manage performance.

## Our journey as others see it...

### Where we were

"Wychavon provides good services overall with the exception of housing which, although in the process of recovery, is currently poor" **Audit Commission CPA report, March 2004**

### Where we are now

"We have assessed Wychavon District Council as providing an excellent three star service that has excellent prospects for improvement.... The pace of change and improvement has been rapid and sustained" **Audit Commission Housing Services Inspection report, April 2005**

"Everyone was very supportive in my time of need – thank you so much" **Feedback from customer we rehoused, April 2005**

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