

Supporting People Programme

Reading Borough Council

Inspection 2005-2006

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Supporting People Inspections

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively and delivers high-quality local and national services for the public.

Within the Audit Commission, the Housing Inspectorate inspects and monitors the performance of a number of bodies and services. These include local authority housing departments, local authorities administering Supporting People programmes, arms length management organisations and housing associations. Our key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) set out the main issues which we consider when forming our judgements on the quality of services. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing.

This inspection has been carried out by the Housing Inspectorate using powers under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. In broad terms these principles look to minimise the burden of regulation while maximising its impact. Supporting People inspections are carried out with the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP).

'Supporting People' is the Government's long-term policy to enable local authorities to plan, commission and provide housing related support services which help vulnerable people live independently.

The Supporting People programme brings together significant funding streams including transitional housing benefit (THB), which has paid for the support costs associated with housing during the implementation phase; the Housing Corporation's supported housing management grant (SHMG) and the probation accommodation grant scheme (PAGS) into a single pot to be administered by 150 administering local authorities (ALA). Unitary and metropolitan authorities and counties are designated as an administering authority with the county taking the lead in most cases for the districts in their area.

Administering local authorities work in partnership, with districts where this is relevant, to agree Supporting People strategies and delivery mechanisms for housing-related support services with housing, social services, health and the probation service providers. Negotiation and consultation is also required with service users, all housing and support service providers, other statutory service providers, the private sector and voluntary organisations to plan and commission support services to meet identified needs.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) has published a number of consultation papers on the developing programme and a work plan setting out what local authorities and their partners will need to achieve in order to deliver the programme effectively. All the relevant papers for Supporting People can be found on the Supporting People k-web that can be accessed through the Supporting People website: www.spkweb.org.uk.

Summary

- 1 Reading Borough Council (RBC) is one of the principal regional and commercial centres of the Thames Valley located in Berkshire close to the M4. The population is 144,100 (mid-year 2002 estimates) of which 13.2 per cent are from minority ethnic backgrounds. The population has been growing by 6.9 per cent since 1991 which is in excess of the national average of 4.1 per cent.
- 2 Sixty-five-year olds are under-represented in the population at 14.2 per cent against a national average for England of 18.5 per cent, while 12.5 per cent of those responding to the 2001 census classify themselves as having a limiting long-term illness, significantly below the national average of 18.5 per cent.
- 3 The Council is a unitary authority and has been Labour controlled for many years, 35 of the 46 seats are held by Labour councillors. The Council has adopted a leader and cabinet model of political governance and employs 4,822 staff, not counting those who work in schools. The Council's revenue budget for 2005/06 is £159.2 million, which includes £25.7 million for social services.
- 4 RBC acts as the administering authority for the Supporting People programme in its area. The Council works in partnership with Reading Primary Care Trust (PCT) and the Thames Valley Probation Service.
- 5 The Council receives a Supporting People grant of £5.093 million for 2005/06, which is a reduction of £270,000 (five per cent) on the grant for 2004/05. The Council also received an administration grant of £135,189 for 2005/06, a reduction of £34,000 (25 per cent) from 2004/05.
- 6 RBC has a lower level of provision of supported housing at 12.68 units per thousand head of population by comparison to the English average of 16.53. This reflects a lower than average level of older people, low employment rate and higher proportion of younger adults who have moved into the area for work. Sixty-nine services are delivered through 38 contracts for 1,831 people by a mixed range of providers. The highest cost service is an average of £589 per person per week for people with learning disabilities. The lowest cost is for support in sheltered housing schemes and community alarms at an average of £1.09 per week.
- 7 The current pattern of grant expenditure shows that 36 per cent is spent on single homeless people, 17 per cent on those with learning disabilities and 13 per cent on older people and the frail elderly. There is limited targeted provision for some rough sleepers, people with substance misuse problems, dual diagnosis or mental health problems or mentally disordered and high-risk offenders.

Scoring the service

- 8 We have assessed Reading Borough Council as providing a 'fair', one-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹:

		Prospects for improvement?				
Excellent						'a fair service that has promising prospects for improvement' A good service?
Promising		☀				
Uncertain						
Poor						
		Poor	Fair ★	Good ★★	Excellent ★★★	

Source: Audit Commission

- 9 During our inspection we identified the following strengths in the way in which the Supporting People programme has been administered as follows.
- User, carers and advocates from across all client groups were widely consulted in the development of the five-year strategy which affected the determination of the programme's priorities.
 - All services receive a validation visit to check the quality of provision and service users' views. Action plans are agreed as an outcome of both visits and service reviews which have resulted in improvements for the benefit of users.
 - Providers support the service review process as being fairly applied and helping to drive service improvements.
 - The Supporting People team have a good range of skills and experience and are well-motivated and managed.

¹ 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.

- There is a good understanding of Supporting People at a senior level and priorities for the programme link well with the Council's strategic objectives.
 - Joint reviews have been undertaken where there is cross-authority joint commissioning, for example on the Women's Aid Service and the Home Improvement Agency reducing duplication of effort and impact on the providers and service users.
 - Supporting People expenditure is well-monitored and the use of financial modelling and a value for money policy has provided the Council with a sound basis for contract negotiation. This has already resulted in savings.
- 10 However, there are a number of areas where performance is weak and needs to improve:
- accessibility to services has been undermined with limited appropriate information for users in suitable formats, lack of updates and links to services on the website and little ongoing training and information for frontline staff in the Council and health staff;
 - governance arrangements have been weak with inconsistent involvement by partners, service users, providers, carers and advocates;
 - the Supporting People team has lacked capacity for a considerable time leading to a very slow start to the service review programme. In addition, a range of tasks in the annual and service plans for 2004/05 have not been delivered or are delayed;
 - the original IT system has been inefficient and ineffective since implementation requiring the Supporting People team to spend time attempting to resolve problems and undertaking manual work to produce limited performance information; and
 - there are limited scrutiny arrangements for Supporting People performance and performance management is under-developed.
- 11 We have judged that the service has promising prospects for improvement for the following reasons.
- A range of additional supported housing services were delivered in 2002/03.
 - The Council has been successful in drawing additional funding for services from external sources such as £200,000 from the rough sleepers initiative.
 - Service improvements are being driven through the strength of the service review arrangements and application of the quality assessment framework (QAF).
 - The five-year strategy provides a firm foundation for the delivery of the programme in the future and is well-supported with priorities for all client groups, plus plans and policies which are agreed and supported by stakeholders.
 - Some additional services have been delivered through joint commissioning, such as a drugs service for rough sleepers and supported living for people with mental health problems.

- Choice for service users is being increased through the promotion of direct payments.
- Performance management has been improved through standardisation and will be developed to be able to demonstrate beneficial outcomes for service users.

12 However, there are a number of areas of weakness that need improvement:

- service performance in key areas for adults and in housing has been variable;
- the recent plan developed by the Council to address known weaknesses is not yet supported by a detailed action plan to show that it can be effectively delivered;
- delivery of tasks in 2005/06 is slipping against the target dates and will be further delayed where they are linked to the outcome of the service reviews; and
- joint procurement with other authorities to deliver efficiency gains for Supporting People grant aided services is not yet being undertaken.

Recommendations

13 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. In this context, the inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendations

R1 Provide better information for service users, carers and other stakeholders through their involvement by:

- *expanding the range of information on Supporting People services in a range of formats and on the Council's website;*
- *ensure that there are clear links to relevant websites and detailed information on services available, their objectives and service standards and how to access them;*
- *regularly review content to make sure it is up-to-date and new services are included;*
- *work with PCT and other health services to ensure staff are informed about Supporting People services and how to access them; and*
- *encourage and assist service users who wish to do so, to champion services and raise the profile of what Supporting People services can achieve.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- *people who use services, potential services users and carers will have better access to relevant, timely and current information that will help them to access services; and*
- *service providers, their staff, stakeholders and other interested parties, particularly Health Service, Probation and Council employees will have a common point of access to information and are encouraged to help people to access the services they need.*

The implementation of this recommendation would have high impact and incur low costs.

This should be implemented by March 2006.

Recommendation

R2 Develop a detailed action plan for improvement, involving stakeholders, to cover the following areas and setting out key milestones for delivery together with reporting mechanisms to stakeholders by:

- *reviewing governance arrangements to ensure they have appropriate and consistent representation and involvement of the partners and other stakeholders on the Commissioning Body and Core Strategic Group;*
- *widening the involvement of stakeholders generally to include representatives of service users, carers and advocates to enable them to effectively influence the commissioning and outcomes of services;*
- *reviewing the appeals process for providers following service reviews to ensure the partners are adequately represented at all stages; and*
- *accessing and learning from good practice being delivered by high performing organisations in particular with reference to access to services, involvement of stakeholders and strong governance arrangements which are achieving expected outcomes.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- *the development of leadership of the programme;*
- *strengthening of decision-making across all partners;*
- *effective working of the Core Strategic Group to support decision-making;*
- *developing the consultation of service users and other stakeholders into effective involvement;*
- *delivering key action plans and day-to-day administration of the programme for current and medium-term needs;*
- *operating a transparent process of appeal with the involvement of all partners; and*
- *improvement of performance in areas of identified weakness by tried and tested means.*

The implementation of this recommendation would have high impact and incur low costs.

This should be implemented by March 2006.

Recommendation

R3 Strengthen performance management and scrutiny arrangements for the Supporting People programme by establishing an agreed format for reporting to the Commissioning Body at each meeting which covers the following areas. In addition to ensure that the information is shared on a routine basis with stakeholders.

- *Financial performance and risks.*
- *Key BVPI related to Supporting People.*
- *Local PI developed to demonstrate how well outcomes are being achieved.*
- *Summarised results of provider performance returns.*
- *Outcomes of service reviews and monitoring of provider action plans.*
- *Supporting People Performance against the service and annual plans.*
- *A self-assessment of the Commissioning Body's performance against the priorities established in the five-year strategy.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are as follows:

- *The improvement of the governance of the programme;*
- *Encouraging objective challenge to ensure performance improves;*
- *Early establishment of risk;*
- *Better monitoring of the action and service plans;*
- *Better monitoring of service improvements of direct benefit for service users and;*
- *Ensuring that the Commissioning Body is delivering against the priorities of the Council.*

The implementation of this recommendation would have high impact and incur low costs.

This should be implemented by December 2005.

- 14 We would like to thank the staff of Reading Borough Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously, especially Lorenza Soffiantini and Debbie Wright.

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Report

What has the service aimed to achieve?

Context

The locality

- 15 Reading is one of the principal regional and commercial centres of the Thames Valley. The town is strategically well-located, with important transport and communication links. It lies approximately 65km west of London in the county of Berkshire, close to the M4 and Heathrow airport.
- 16 The population of the borough is approximately 144,100¹. This is characterised by fewer people over 65 years old at 14.2 per cent against a national average for England of 18.5 per cent. The population is growing more rapidly at 6.9 per cent against the national average of 4.1 per cent. 12.5 per cent of the population classify themselves as having a limiting, long-term illness which is significantly below the national average of 18.5 per cent.
- 17 Black and minority ethnic people (BME) account for 13.2 per cent of the population which is higher than the average for the South East and the national average of 10.4 per cent. Four per cent of the local population state that Islam is their religion, although on one estate this rises to 11 per cent.
- 18 Reading has grown and changed substantially in the past 20 years, particularly in commercial and employment terms. Unemployment at 1.9 per cent is below the national average of 2.3 per cent. Computer software/IT, business and professional services are the largest sectors for employment.
- 19 Reading's buoyant economy and proximity to London, with the subsequent high income levels, has put pressure on the housing market. House prices continue to rise steeply; increasing by 101 per cent from 1999 to 2003, raising issues of affordability for low income families and problems for those in supported housing securing move on accommodation. Reading is perceived to be a magnet for vulnerable people due to the lower levels of supported housing provision in the surrounding areas.
- 20 While the town has an image of relative prosperity, there is one ward out of 15, which ranks among the 5 per cent most deprived in the country. Violent and sexual offences have continued to rise over a five-year period by 13 and 45 per cent respectively.

¹ Mid 2003 census revised estimates.

The Council

- 21 Reading Borough Council (RBC) is a unitary authority and has been Labour controlled for many years. Thirty-five of the 46 are held by Labour councillors, 6 by Conservative councillors and 5 by Liberal Democrats. The Council is governed by a leader and cabinet. The Supporting People programme comes within responsibilities of the Community Care and Health portfolio holder and portfolio holder with responsibility for housing.
- 22 The Council's revenue budget for 2005/06 is £159.2 million, which includes £25.7 million for social services. The Council is one of the major employers in the area with 4,882 staff, excluding those who work in schools.

The service

- 23 RBC acts as the administering authority¹ for the Supporting People programme in its area. The Council receives a Supporting People grant of £5.093 million for 2005/06, which is a reduction of £270,000 (five per cent) on the grant for 2004/05. The Council also received an administration grant of £135,189 for 2005/06, a reduction of £34,000 (25 per cent) from 2004/05.
- 24 The administration of the programme is managed within the community care division of the Housing and Community Care directorate. The small Supporting People team consists of 3.7 full-time equivalent staff of strategic manager, principal contracts officer, principal strategy and development officer, and a part-time administration officer which is filled on a temporary basis.
- 25 The Commissioning Body was established in June 2003 with representation from RBC, the PCT and Probation. Each organisation has a vote. Terms of reference, a Memorandum of Understanding and dispute resolution procedures are all in place.
- 26 The Core Strategic Group was established in November 2000 and was revised in June 2003 for the development of the five-year strategy. The group has been further revised and re-launched in January 2005 and has draft terms of reference in place.
- 27 There is an inclusive forum and a provider forum in place to consult on stakeholder views.
- 28 The Accountable Officer role rests with the Director of Housing and Community Care. The chairs of the Commissioning Body and Core Strategic Group are the Head of Community Care and Deputy Head of Community Care respectively.
- 29 RBC has a lower level of provision of supported housing at 12.68 units per thousand head of population by comparison to the English average of 16.53. Sixty-nine services are delivered through 38 contracts for 1,831 people by a mixed range of providers. The highest cost service is an average of £589 per person per week for people with learning disabilities. The lowest cost is for support in sheltered housing schemes and community alarms at an average of £1.09 per week.

¹ Accountable Local Authority – ALA.

- 30 The current pattern of grant expenditure shows that 36 per cent is spent on single homeless people, 17 per cent on those with learning disabilities and 13 per cent on older people and the frail elderly¹. In addition:
- too many services are focused on low to medium generic support;
 - too few services are available for specialised or high-level support needs; and
 - there is no specialist service provision for some rough sleepers, people with substance misuse problems, dual diagnosis or mental health problems or mentally disordered and high-risk offenders.
- 31 There is a clear vision for Supporting People set out in the new five-year strategy which was submitted, by agreement of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on 11 April 2005.
- ‘To enable vulnerable people in Reading to maximise their independence through the provision of a range of high-quality cost effective housing-related support services’.*
- 32 The strategy has four major objectives and eleven priorities to be achieved over the five-year period 2005 to 2010. The objectives are as follows:
- to shape our Supporting People programme to fit with joint commissioners and partners' major priorities;
 - to obtain value for money as well as ensuring top-quality services from providers;
 - to actively promote inclusion for clients and other stakeholders to influence the direction of Supporting People services and quality of service delivered; and
 - to make Supporting People services accessible to those that need them.

Is the service meeting the needs of the community and customers?

Governance

- 33 Governance arrangements have not been effective, although recent changes have been made. The arrangements have been characterised by weak leadership in the past, poor and inconsistent attendance at meetings and forums, and a lack of inclusiveness at various points in the arrangements leading to variable involvement by stakeholders. The Council has relied on good working relationships with individuals from partner agencies. Although there is good understanding of the Supporting People programme at a senior level, and clear links to support delivery of the Council's strategic objectives, the Council has been slow to deal with lack of capacity and understanding the implications of the late delivery of the service review programme.

¹ Source - Supporting People five-year strategy - 2005 to 2010.

- 34 RBC began work early on to put the Supporting People programme into place. The objectives and priorities of the programme are closely linked with those set out in the community plan. They are also in accord with the overall commitment of the Housing and Community Care directorate to develop independent living options for individuals and move away from residential care.
- 35 There is a clear understanding of the Supporting People programme, the objectives and priorities across the senior levels of the partners, councillors and senior officers in Housing and Community Care. Senior Housing and Community Care officers and the Supporting People team members attend a wide network of meetings of partnership boards, local implementation groups. This allows for the sharing of information, co-ordination of strategies and priorities, and planning for services.
- 36 The Commissioning Body has demonstrated it can take difficult decisions. Following consideration of service reviews, the Commissioning Body has taken formal decisions on eight providers, all of which will deliver contractual savings. The local eligibility criteria has been agreed with the 16-hour cap on support which will impact on the individuals as commissioning managers. It was agreed at the Commissioning Body that the contract for the IT system would be terminated and a new system purchased because problems were intractable. This indicates that there will be robust decision-making in respect of decommissioning and recommissioning services following the completion of the service reviews.
- 37 Although the Commissioning Body has been in place for some time, it has not given a good lead to the Supporting People programme until recently. The Commissioning Body has been reactive to government requirements. This was a result of a poor shadow strategy which failed to give proper direction. While the Commissioning Body benefits from an individual's knowledge and skills, Probation is not represented at a senior management level which undermines the overall contribution to the programme. Attendance by the PCT has been limited to seven out of twelve meetings. A designated deputy from the PCT has now been agreed to ensure consistent involvement. Inconsistent attendance at meetings particularly by representatives of health and probation puts a limit on direct input into discussions on which decision-making is based.
- 38 The Commissioning Body approach to performance management is weak. There are no local performance indicators for instance. The impact of under-capacity within the Supporting People team and the problems with the IT system were not addressed early enough leading to a delay in undertaking and completing service reviews. As RBC is reliant on savings to be achieved through the service reviews, this has had a significant impact for the Council and to some extent for service users, for example to commission new services to fill identified gaps.
- 39 Grant expenditure and monitoring of the administration grant is regularly presented to the Commissioning Body. However, poor progress against the annual plan and the team service plan has only recently been tackled in respect of additional resources. This has meant that progress has been slow with important items such as the development of steady state contracts delayed missing the Council's own targets.

- 40 The Core Strategic Group is weak and inconsistent over time. The major achievements of the group have been the gathering of information on the major client groups and undertaking consultation with them which has fed into the five-year strategy. Other client groups were not represented and the work had to be undertaken by the Supporting People team to gather needs information and undertake consultation, for example with travellers (now being reviewed on a county-wide basis) and those with HIV/Aids. This contributed to the delays in undertaking the service review programme, and undermines ownership of the issues and solutions from other key partners.
- 41 There is no active representation by Probation on the Core Strategic Group and representation from health has been inconsistent. The meeting in May 2005 was poorly attended despite there being agenda items on funding cuts and service reviews for discussion. These discussions were delayed until the July meeting which was dominated by the commissioning officers of RBC. In addition, there is a lack of involvement of service users, carers and advocates at this strategic level, in particular for client groups other than mental health, learning disability and older people who have established forums for this purpose. The result is a lack of transparency and a barrier to influencing decision-making.
- 42 As the Director of Housing and Community Care, the Accountable Officer is well-placed to promote the Supporting People agenda at a senior level. Leading councillors confirm they are kept up-to-date on the strategic development of the programme, and are supportive of the intended outcomes. They were fully aware of the impact for the authority of the potential level of grant funding reductions.
- 43 The Accountable Officer is separated from membership of both the Commissioning Body and Core Strategic Group and is able to act as the first line of conflict resolution in either group. This has not yet been put to the test.
- 44 Health and Probation staff are now firmly engaged with the Supporting People programme through the Commissioning Body. There are strong links at this level evidenced by their involvement in the development of the five-year strategy and agreement to a range of policies and protocols.
- 45 Accommodation issues for high and very high risk offenders are tackled effectively through MAPPA¹. Accommodation issues are automatically considered as part of the referral to MAPPA where housing services are represented. Initial provision has usually been appropriate, but lack of move-on accommodation has been problematic on occasions.
- 46 The Council is a member of the regional implementation group, but working with neighbouring councils is limited. A recent example is the production of a briefing note for the ODPM on the effect of the proposed distribution formula on the Thames Valley sub-region. Future plans for the group are to consider shared accreditation, evaluate opportunities for joint procurement and share information on reviews. At the present time outcomes from the group are limited.

¹ MAPPA - Multi Agency Public Protection Agreement.

- 47 There is a lack of recognition that Reading has acted as a magnet for people with supported housing needs. Services have tended to be developed in the town which has drawn in people living in the surrounding rural areas; this increases the pressure on service provision through Supporting People grant. The Council is responding by requiring the new draft contracts to have a requirement to give first consideration to people with local connections. The exceptions are identified cross-authority groups such as women's refuges, rough sleepers and some offender provision.
- 48 The Supporting People team has undertaken work with the voluntary sector, which has resulted in improved relationships, improved networking and increased the exchange of information.

Delivery arrangements

- 49 The strengths of the delivery arrangements are in the quality of the Supporting People team who have delivered a high quality five-year strategy, service review arrangements and operational requirements of the programme. The effectiveness of the team has been undermined by under resourcing and unproductive time spent on the previous IT system - both areas have taken a long time to resolve. The effectiveness of the five-year strategy will be undermined unless there are active arrangements to update, in particular, the housing and support needs information. Performance management is under developed resulting in limited challenge, and access to services is limited where staff lack knowledge and information on Supporting People.
- 50 The Supporting People team is motivated and well-managed and has a good range of necessary skills and experience. The team has supported the Commissioning Body with timely reports on the changing aspects of the programme and developed a strong approach to the service reviews. They have also contributed greatly to delivering a very detailed five-year strategy which puts in place the building blocks for the future delivery of the programme.
- 51 However, the capacity of the team has been over-stretched by the production of the five-year strategy, as well as the delivery of the day-to-day administering of the programme. In addition, the team has spent a great deal of time trying to resolve the inadequacies of the IT system. This has meant that a number of key aspects of the work are not being undertaken, or have been significantly delayed. These include the following:
- delays in undertaking the service reviews;
 - limited performance information;
 - limited progress against the annual and service plans for 2004/05; and
 - no meetings with providers to discuss contracts with the exception of some who are seen by housing officers if they are in receipt of grants for voluntary work.

- spot checks on the quality assessment framework (QAF) are only undertaken if issues are raised with the Council. The strategy states they will be undertaken to monitor quality of service provision and ensure identified service improvements have been undertaken;
 - training and promotion of Supporting People services particularly for frontline staff; and
 - developing accessibility of services through information for service users, carers and advocates.
- 52** There is recognition that Supporting People needs to be treated more as a corporate issue, for example, joint commissioning is being undertaken but on a patchy basis; it needs to be joined up more robustly. This is work that was identified by the Council but has not yet been undertaken due to the under-capacity of the Supporting People team. There is potential here for better procurement of services in respect of cost and innovation, in addition, to a stronger strategic approach.
- 53** The Council has supported the Supporting People programme financially by not charging for support costs of legal, finance and IT services. Additional skilled resources were made available in 2005 to assist in getting the service review programme underway. However, RBC was slow to provide these additional resources, which has resulted in lengthy delays for the service reviews.
- 54** The original IT system has undermined the work of the team, although payments to providers have been made. The team were unable to produce information to support the development of the five-year strategy, service reviews or ODPM returns. The work has had to be undertaken manually, which delayed the start of service reviews until September 2004 with the first validation visit being completed in February 2005. Although a decision was taken in late 2004 to purchase a new IT system, problems had been ongoing from the implementation.
- 55** The new IT is now live and can be used as a database for information but it will not be fully operational until 1 November 2005. The team has produced an analysis of QAF scores but staff are still testing the system before it can be used to make payments and produce the reports needed. This has impacted on the development of performance information.

- 56 The new five-year strategy is very detailed. This can make it difficult for others to read and assimilate, but the strategy is supported by an executive summary, which draws out the key issues. The strategy provides a firm foundation for the delivery of the programme because it contains a series of appendices, which provide a clear strategic approach to all client groups. Also included are a range of plans and policies which are being applied now, unless they are linked to steady state contracts, such as:
- risk assessment plan including contingency planning;
 - financial plan assuming a reduction in grant of 22 per cent over the five-years;
 - annual plan for the Supporting People programme which is due to be refreshed each year;
 - charging policy which is linked to fairer charging guidance, Supporting People grant conditions and sets out the service user support costs that will be subsidised; and
 - value for money policy which is now being used to inform the service reviews.
- 57 The Council has determined in the local eligibility criteria that a cap will apply to Supporting People grant funding at no more than 16 hours per week; over this amount is expected to be funded by community care. The Council has applied this cap sensitively, for example, by averaging hours over time, and takes account of high input for short periods of time.
- 58 Consultation on the strategy was wide ranging and undertaken over a number of months and through a variety of different methods. The Core Strategic Group played an important role in monitoring the progress of the strategy against an agreed timetable.
- 59 The strategy has been agreed by the main partners demonstrating their commitment to the programme. Support has been given internally in a number of areas particularly safer communities, housing and the leaving care teams. The strategy highlights a number of areas where greater needs detail is required. This is as a result of difficulties in making progress on some areas of the strategy because some Core Strategic Group members did not take ownership of the tasks, for example consultation with some hard-to-reach groups. An additional resource was engaged to undertake this work.
- 60 Contracts have been managed efficiently in their interim state, although effectiveness could have been improved with spot checks and ensuring that all services were visited. Eleven services have been decommissioned and discussions have taken place with providers where concerns had been raised, which have resulted in changes in services for the benefit of service users.

- 61 There are no clear and consistent plans in place for all client groups in place for updating and further analysis of supported housing needs information. This will undermine the effectiveness of the five-year strategy as needs information becomes quickly out-of-date; some of the original source information is already dated, especially as the population changes are so rapid in the Reading area. The intention is to undertake this through the Core Strategic Group membership linked to the review of the five-year strategy. At the operational level, there is a housing access forum. Gaps and trends to meet needs are identified here and are fed into strategic processes. Care management information regarding service gaps has informed the Supporting People programme.
- 62 The Council has mapped providers, type of service, number of beds and primary client groups. There is recognition that further work is required in order to more effectively map all providers, including non-Supporting People providers, onto a database. This work is programmed to be completed by December 2005, which will meet the ODPM guideline target. This will reduce duplication of provision and help to achieve one overall strategic direction for all Supporting People services.
- 63 Performance management for Supporting People is underdeveloped and has not allowed for sufficient challenge. There is close monitoring of Supporting People and administration grant expenditure which is presented to the Commissioning Body at each meeting. In addition, progress on plans and the service review programme are reported. However, due to the poor IT system and capacity issues, no performance indicators have been developed. Councillors receive an annual update report for the Supporting People programme only; leading councillors receive regular briefings.
- 64 The Commissioning Body have not formally developed a plan to enable them to measure their own effectiveness. The intention is to adopt the Supporting People annual plan as a measure of their performance.
- 65 Relationships with providers are largely positive and high regard was consistently expressed over the strength of the Supporting People team members. The service review process was felt to be rigorous and fairly applied which would assist in driving improvements to services.
- 66 A snapshot survey of providers by the inspection team found that there was satisfaction with provision of advice and information, service review arrangements and the development of the five-year strategy. The survey and discussions with providers highlighted dissatisfaction with the following areas.
- Short time given to consult on the large and detailed strategy without the inclusion of proposals and priorities from the forum being reflected. This work was undertaken through the inclusive forum strategy special meeting in January 2005. Priorities highlighted at this meeting were included in the five-year strategy.
 - Limited arrangements for access to move on accommodation from supported housing.
 - Experience of gaps between validation visit for the service reviews and feedback – more than three months.

- Lack of clarity for some on how strategic relevance of a service is determined and delays in producing the value for money policy for discussion.
- Not enough information on service review timetables, although each provider was notified separately of any changes and the timetable was presented at the inclusive forum.

- 67 Further criticism was attracted about the ineffectiveness of the provider forum which is poorly attended, and fails to provide smaller providers with sufficient support. The forum is seen by some providers as being dominated by adult services over issues for young people, and not having sufficient relevance for all providers who have very different perspectives.
- 68 However, the Council can demonstrate an average attendance level of 28 over quarterly meetings from April 2004 to April 2005. Providers from young peoples' services and representative from children's services and the youth offenders team do attend. Guest speakers have included Connexions and the Leaving Care team representatives, and items on Job Centre Plus and work and training initiatives have also been included on the agenda.

Service reviews

- 69 The service review process is a strength for the Council and the first reports delivered to the Commissioning Body have been of high quality. The impact is undermined by the delay in undertaking them, although this has been offset by negotiated savings and improvements where they were identified. There are positive outcomes from cross-authority working in this area, and the process is widely accepted and well-received by stakeholders.
- 70 Service reviews were programmed in June 2003 on the basis of risk assessment, against agreed criteria, and in accordance with government guidance. The timetable was reviewed in July 2004 to take account of the need for savings and was grouped by client to allow for a strategic approach against needs, which were being identified through the development of the five-year strategy.
- 71 The programme of service reviews has been substantially delayed; the first validation visit took place in January 2005. This has meant that although savings have been made elsewhere through negotiation the Council has not maximised their savings. Although some services have been identified as providing poor services through other means and have been tackled, the Council cannot be sure that poor quality services have not continued for some service users.
- 72 In addition, there have been no reconfigured services as a result of service review. The outcomes of the five service reviews so far reported to the Commissioning Body show the approach has been to secure contract savings to cater for funding reductions. The net savings are intended to be used to commission services against the identified priorities.

- 73 The impact of under-capacity was recognised by the Commissioning Body in late 2004. Additional resources were secured from within the directorate to progress the service review programme. There is a detailed programme of reports to be submitted to the Commissioning Body which, despite the short amount of time remaining, are on course to meet the 31 March 2006 deadline.
- 74 The service reviews fully cover the providers, and are detailed, thorough, well-researched and frank in the delivery of judgements on the cost and quality of services. The reports consider strategic relevance, funding streams, service provision, compliance with QAF, policies and procedures. Service users are routinely interviewed and stakeholders are asked for their contributions. The recommendations, if achieved by providers, should deliver improvement for service users.
- 75 Savings have been identified in the reports due to reductions in contract prices due to either too high a level of support, or loading of overhead costs. As a result of the service reviews so far undertaken, one service has been decommissioned due to poor value, and one is threatened with decommissioning if their services do not improve within a short time span.
- 76 RBC has made good use of cross-authority working and the involvement of partners in respect of services reviews. A joint review with West Berkshire and Wokingham councils on the Women's Aid Service has been undertaken, and with Wokingham Council on the review of the Home Improvement Agency. The Council is using the standard Supporting People accreditation requirements and the Commissioning Body has agreed to accredit providers already accredited by other South East regional councils. This reduces the impact and duplication of the process on providers who work in more than one local authority area and helps to promote consistency of provision for service users.
- 77 Managers and five-year staff of community care, housing, health, probation and voluntary sector agencies were canvassed through questionnaires, one-to-one meetings and focus groups. This has allowed for a wide ownership of the process and outcomes by agencies and providers alike.
- 78 The review process, along with the QAF, has driven service improvements for the benefit of users. The five providers who have received drafts of the reports have started to address areas in need of improvement. Other providers have seen their assessment against the QAF and are addressing shortcomings following the informal discussions with the reviewing officer.
- 79 Particular examples are highlighted in services for people with learning disability. One private sector provider responded well to informal feedback that the service had not moved from the culture of residential care. An induction and training course for staff was developed to help them understand the shift to greater independence for service users. An internal provider used the process to help staff understand what was required of them in terms of service delivery because the expected standards are very clear. This helped staff to refocus their roles.

- 80 The Council has taken a pragmatic approach to gaining approval for the service reviews by the Commissioning Body by batching them for programmed meetings. This has led to a time lapse between the validation visit and the final decision by the Commissioning Body. Some providers have raised concerns that they have waited some time for the outcomes and they were unaware of the reason for the delay. The impact is offset to some extent by the informal feedback given by the review officer. Now the programme is underway there is no need for batching and delay is therefore minimised.
- 81 Providers may appeal against a decision of the Commissioning Body on a service review report. This is set out in a clear procedure, but has yet to be tested.

Value for money

- 82 The Council has made positive progress in establishing savings through decommissioning services and negotiations with providers. Well thought through policies and financial modelling tools are in place and the Council has adopted a prudent approach to expenditure of grant funding. The Council has not achieved value for money in the use of the administration grant as the team has been under resourced. The impact of this is set out in detail in the section on **Delivery arrangements** and shows the areas of work not undertaken by the team, and the opportunities to achieve value for money that have been lost.
- 83 Underspends on the administration have been set against the costs of replacing the IT system. The total costs of this are estimated to be in the region of £114,000. Savings on the administration grant were profiled in July¹ 2005 as £114,000 including, a £95,500 under spend from 2004/05 which was brought forward into the budget for 2005/06. This needs to be set against the under resourcing of the Supporting People team which the Council are now addressing.
- 84 Supporting People grant savings have been made through negotiated savings with providers as a result of decommissioning services, or voluntary reductions on existing contract prices. Further savings have so far been agreed with the approval of the Commissioning Body through the service reviews of £81,000 per annum, although these will not begin until the steady state contracts are put into place. Savings have been used to meet shortfalls in funding for five providers due to transitional housing benefit not transferring into the Supporting People 'pot' owing to housing benefit errors. This amounts to £69,000 per annum.
- 85 The following table shows the grant savings made as a result of decommissioned services over 2004/05 and 2005/06. These figures are below the cumulative amount estimated by the Council at over £400,000 to date from the implementation of the programme.

¹ Figures produced by the Head of Finance and Administration for the Commissioning Body.

Figure 1 Estimated Savings on Service Provider Contracts up to March 2006

Provider name	Date decommissioned	Platinum cut 'Pot' figure	Estimated savings in 2004/05	Estimated savings in 2005/06
Paramount HA	4.4.2004	24,432	24,432	24,432
RBC Social Services Floating Support	4.4.2004	50,254	50,254	50,254
Advance Housing and Support Ltd	11.4.2004	9,872	9,872	9,872
Paramount HA	17.5.2004	5,594	5,007	5,594
Turnstone Support	11.6.2004	10,113	9,355	10,113
Solutions Community Support	17.8.2004	7,295	6,748	7,295
Advance Housing and Support Ltd	24.3.2005	15,149	0	15,149
Onestep (Support) Ltd	30.4.200	91,088	0	83,497
Charles Clore Court	15.5.2005	39,040	0	34,160
J V Chandler and Co	28.8.2005	14,543	0	8,483
J V Chandler and Co	28.8.2006	15,170	0	8,849
Totals		282,550	105,667	257,699

Source: Reading Borough Council - SP team

- 86 The Council has been prudent in their use of underspent grant. Savings so far achieved have been used to offset grant reductions and against those projected up to 2010. No new services have been commissioned utilising Supporting People grant funding. RBC has brought forward £77,000 in underspend from 2004/05, and the forecast for the end of 2005/06 is projected to be £67,000.¹ Given the projected reduction in grant against the identified savings so far there is potential for more than £200,000 per annum to be available for re-investment. This is a conservative estimate based on known savings to date and does not take into account service reviews due to be presented to the Commissioning Body.

¹ Based on the figures supplied to the Commissioning Body in July 2005.

- 87 A well-considered approach to value for money is contained in a policy agreed by all partners. The policy has been applied to the service reviews and makes good use of benchmarking information-based on hourly costs using a model which has been developed in-house. The model showed sensitivity across a range of hourly costs for types of service, rather than being based on client group. This provided the Council with a reasonable basis on which to renegotiate contracts and drive down unreasonably high costs particularly in respect of support and overhead costs. Reductions are being applied on a phased basis to allow for efficiency savings to be made by the provider and reduce any adverse impact on highly regarded, strategically appropriate services. The impact to date has generally been to reduce high cost overheads.
- 88 Financial contingencies for the Supporting People programme can be assessed from a model of scenario planning which has been developed in-house. This will allow Supporting People to model different scenarios of budget and contractual changes down to service level. The model gives a long-term time span and allows for changes to take place in the future, for example, for contract reductions to come on board on a phased basis, and allows for new services to be added. The model is a very useful management tool and aid to future planning.
- 89 Most of the Supporting People legacy services have received a validation visit with the exception of the sheltered housing services. However, until the service reviews have been completed, and the value for money aspect applied, RBC has not established that all services represent value for money in the context of strategic relevance, and benchmarking. This will not be until the deadline of 31 March 2006.
- 90 There is no evidence to show current services are not eligible for Supporting People grant. The Council has taken a pragmatic approach to eligibility for funding taking into account the potential funding cuts. Under the local eligibility criteria, support is being capped at 16 hours per week. Anything over this amount is felt to be appropriate for consideration for community care funding. Evidence from the service reviews shows a considered approach to the application of this cap, for example, hours are averaged over time to allow for fluctuations in need and crisis points.
- 91 However, until the service reviews have been agreed by the Commissioning Body the impact for the community care budget is unclear. This will leave only a short period before budgets have to be approved for 2006/07 and the potential impact for service users, if the funding levels cannot be maintained, is unclear.

Service user involvement

- 92 The Council has been effective in using a wide range of methods to consult with all appropriate service user groups in the development of the five-year strategy. Issues of concern have been established through interaction between leading councillors and members of the public. Ongoing consultation has areas of strength, but is inconsistent, and the Council has more to do to develop meaningful involvement at the strategic and operational levels.

- 93 The Council has undertaken effective and extensive consultation with stakeholders in the development of the five-year strategy. Detailed feedback was obtained through the process referred to as the 'one size does not fit all' approach. This has not only ensured methods of consultation are culturally appropriate for the diverse Reading population, but also has catered to the needs of the different client groups. This included visits to see potential service users in prison, one to one interviews with travellers and meetings with the Reading Centre for Racial Equality, and the Muslim Women's Group.
- 94 A wide range of methods were used such as written comments on the draft, posting the strategy on RBC's spkweb and inviting feedback, use of existing forums and meetings, discussions at the Inclusive Forum and through working groups. RBC also monitored the breakdown of people they consulted on ethnic background, gender, and age. A Strategy Special workshop in January 2005, attended by 44 people from a variety of agencies, voluntary services and including carer representatives, agreed priorities for all client groups.
- 95 Ongoing consultation is undertaken through established groups which cover the main client groups. User feedback is also obtained through exit questionnaires and the complaints process. In a review of the complaints file we found only one recorded complaint which could suggest that the process is not well used or known about. The complaint was properly dealt with.
- 96 There are examples of where service users are involved at a strategic level; the principles and values for the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy were established through a key stakeholder workshop. Two users and two carer representatives are members of the learning disabilities partnership board. The Supporting People team are represented on this and other boards which allows for a two way flow of information and understanding of the needs of people with learning disabilities.
- 97 Leading councillors were able to demonstrate that they have sought and used direct user feedback in addressing social issues. This had been undertaken in closed sessions between councillors and witnesses with reference to fostering and drug issues and demonstrates a commitment to user involvement.
- 98 The Council recognises that further work needs to be undertaken to consistently include 'hard-to-reach' groups, and those presently using Supporting People funded services. Some providers routinely involve service users in residents' committees and forums. One provider interviewed during the inspection, enables service users to attend their organisation's regional and national meetings. The requirement for routine service user feedback to the Supporting People team is intended to be a feature of the steady state contracts, although none of these are yet in place.

- 99 Service users, carers and support and care agencies are consulted during the service reviews. Service users are contacted on a one to one basis. The feedback is reported in the service review reports to the Commissioning Body and features in the recommendations for improvements to the service with direct benefit for users. In one case, the provider was recommended to improve communication with service users and ensure roles and responsibilities were clear.
- 100 However, the Council has not yet put in place ongoing service user involvement. Concerns were raised during site visits that there was a lack of understanding, among service users about the concept of Supporting People. Service users were probably the best advocates for the services but the current lack of formal involvement is a problem. The Core Strategic Group has no ongoing involvement in the development of service user involvement, and reports on this to the Commissioning Body only relate to the five-year strategy and as service reviews are reported. The Council plans to address this through an inclusion strategy which is in development, but not due for completion until March 2006.

Access to services and information

- 101 There are a number of barriers for people to access supported housing services. There is limited published information which is not produced in a range of formats or community languages. The current directory of services is basic and health and community care staff are not consistently updated to ensure they can signpost people to the range of services available. The information on the website is neither consistent nor linked to all appropriate agencies. Positively, the referral systems for services once applied for are working well and there is support for applying for housing benefit.
- 102 The Council has developed some good examples of accessible strategic documents such as the learning disability workforce development plan 2003/06. This makes links to the policy framework and to what people with learning disabilities say they want. The day opportunities framework (for people with learning disabilities) has an accessible format for users with learning disabilities incorporating pictorial illustrations.
- 103 Leaflets on Supporting People are well written but limited in targeting different client groups and do not contain community languages strap lines. They are not produced in different formats to assist those with vision or literacy difficulties, for example.
- 104 Access to services is in the main through frontline staff. There are variable standards of awareness of Supporting People and eligible services among care management staff which reduces accessibility. This is despite Supporting People information having been distributed at some point to all RBC staff and a basic service directory being available on the intranet. Training has been spasmodic due to a lack of capacity within the Supporting People team.

- 105** The problem is being addressed in a limited way through weekly care management panels, where staff show they have explored all care resources including supported housing services. Further support is given through the joint training programme STRIVE with Wokingham Borough Council. However, health staff have little awareness of Supporting People services. Limited training and information has been given to frontline staff and none for health staff since the implementation of the programme in 2003. Service users have raised issues about access to other Supporting People services they were not aware of.
- 106** We came across one example where a user was in supported accommodation and was anxious to leave but felt she could not do so without support; she was unaware of the possibility of floating support. Not only was she not receiving the information she needed from the provider, but the Council has no system to alert officers that this was an issue.
- 107** A new service directory, which can be generated from the new IT system, is planned to be published in October 2005 and this will assist with accessibility. The existing, basic directory links into the ODPM website, but was not produced in partnership with providers and advocacy groups.
- 108** The inspection team undertook a series of mystery shopping phone calls to test the accessibility of services. In most cases, the calls were dealt with effectively, efficiently and with respect. The callers were given useful information and help where required. The notable exception involved a woman experiencing domestic violence who spoke little English trying to get help out of office hours. The response was poor and resulted in the caller not being able to access help at the time. A subsequent call two weeks later, while the inspection team were onsite, on the same basis but from a caller who was English was dealt with very well.
- 109** The website is easy to use for mainstream services and directs in some cases to good information. However, it is not consistent; for example, the site on domestic violence does not include information on making a homeless application, although contact details for housing advice and the police are included. This was amended immediately following the inspection. Access to the home improvement agency, together with aids and adaptations for the home through grant aid, requires knowing about the existence of home improvement agencies. This service is run by an external provider, but there is no obvious link to their website or information about getting help or making an application.
- 110** The Council's publication Better Care: Higher Standards has only passing reference to Supporting People and contains very little relevant information, for example it does not highlight supported accommodation. There are no plans in place to review the document and it will continue to be a weakness in the information provided by the Council in respect of Supporting People.
- 111** The Council provide an enhanced service in respect of fairer charging. The visiting officers who undertake fairer charging assessments also offer welfare benefits advice. There are low numbers of those benefiting from the assessments as most Supporting People service users are eligible for housing benefit. There were eight in 2004/05 and currently there are five. The visiting officers will refer everyone who is entitled to housing benefits and will assist them to apply.

- 112 Referral arrangements between the agencies and provider services are working well. Some arrangements are run by external agencies, particularly for homeless people. They also manage the process of allocation to move on accommodation where a percentage of suitable void properties are made available on an annual basis. This approach helps to move people through supported accommodation in to independent living and makes space for others needing higher levels of support.
- 113 There are effective partnerships between housing and the leaving care team. This has resulted in facilitating effective access to move on accommodation for care leavers. The Supporting People team have facilitated the development of provision for care leavers including Hamble Court and Beacon Youth Trust.

Diversity

- 114 There is clear commitment to identifying diverse needs, making provision for excluded groups and encouraging services to develop cultural sensitivity for the benefit of Supporting People funded service users. Reconfiguring services to meet gaps in provision are delayed, to some extent, because of the late completion of service reviews; the impact is potentially a serious one for those with no access to support.
- 115 The Council shows a high level of commitment to furthering the equalities agenda to reflect the diversity of the population. They have undertaken this through developing policies and funding support. Examples of activity include the Leader addressing the community on Pakistan Day about the value of diverse populations, giving land for a new Mosque, providing major funding for a new community centre for the African Caribbean community, and undertaking regular discussions with the black communities forum, which are very well-attended. Councillors regularly attend an active Pensioners Working Group and an Access and Disabilities Working Group, both of which are well-attended.
- 116 Projects have been commissioned to shape and develop services for people from BME backgrounds, which will also include an audit of people with learning disability needs to provide more up-to-date information. Funding has been provided by RBC to voluntary organisations to assist in monitoring diversity issues. The Council also provides advice on a variety of issues including capacity building. A BME housing and support needs survey is underway to improve the information on needs. This survey is using peer surveyors from local BME communities and from it the Council hopes to develop a sustainable network for ongoing communication.
- 117 Examples of related five-year services which people from BME communities can access are translation services, race and refugee support groups, and a specialist refuge for Asian women experiencing domestic violence.

- 118** The five-year strategy has clearly identified the priorities for all groups and the gaps in provision. Priorities for development include temporary accommodation for vulnerable young people, those with multiple needs and for those with high-level support needs. The mini strategies for each client group contained in the five-year strategy will inform the reconfiguration of services following on from the completion of the services reviews. This has yet to fully take shape because of the delay in undertaking the reviews.
- 119** Equality and diversity assessments are undertaken as part of the QAF and are reported in the service review reports. The outcome of one of the reviews is highlighted here as a case study demonstrating how a provider has approached cultural issues through the services they deliver.

Figure 2 Case Study 1

The provider has an equal opportunities policy, an anti-oppressive policy and a racial harassment policy. Staff were familiar with the anti discrimination principles. In one of the services there was a map on the wall, which indicated where all local amenities were and included all different types of places of worship. The service also had a sun painted on the wall of each bedroom for those who wished to worship there and a jug of water in each toilet. In another of the services, users from minority groups were able to confirm they had been informed of local shops where food and clothes could be purchased appropriate to their cultural needs. English language classes are arranged for those who require help. A newborn baby required a circumcision and this was arranged by the support worker. The staff made efforts to celebrate religious and cultural festivals of any of the service users present at the time and one of the services celebrated Diwali last year where all the women had their hands painted and they had an Indian meal.

Source: RBC Service Review Report to the Commissioning Body

Outcomes for service users

- 120** Although no new services have been commissioned by Supporting People, considerable effort has been undertaken to achieve service improvements through the QAF and service reviews. While significant benefits are being achieved, choice for service users is limited. The results of visits to services were variable in respect of quality of accommodation and service users' satisfaction.
- 121** RBC has concentrated on improving legacy services from the implementation of the Supporting People programme and is making a considerable difference to people's lives where services are provided. Providers have been encouraged to refocus services to meet the objective of increasing independent living. The Supporting People programme is providing a greater focus on vulnerable groups.

- 122** An example of where services have been improved is a floating support scheme for homeless people. They are now developing support plans with service users from an assessment of needs and risks. Progress is monitored on a three-monthly basis to ensure progress is being made. Referral to the scheme comes from a variety of services including housing, community care, occupational therapists, community mental health team, nuisance team and allocations. They all use a standard referral form which is available on the Council's website and from offices. Staff have received additional training, and now use exit surveys and a complaints process to take on service user feedback.
- 123** Service users of the floating support scheme were contacted and they confirmed a high-level of satisfaction with the services provided to them. They felt the service was flexible and supportive, and they were consulted on what they wanted from the service.
- 124** Service improvements are, in the main, being delivered through the service reviews. Those so far completed show recommendations which are geared to improving the provider's ratings against the QAF. The target set by the Commissioning Body is for all services to work towards achieving an A rating. Most services have received a validation visit which shows that 74 per cent of a total of 50 services are achieving a C rating or higher. Of the remaining 26 per cent (13) services are achieving D but five of these have missed a C in only one of the QAF objectives. There are no A rated schemes at the moment indicating that this is an unrealistic target for providers to meet. Also, it is not clear from the current action plans that accomplishing the recommendations would give providers an A rating.
- 125** The development of choice for service users is at an early stage. Users can, for example, access an Asian women's refuge rather than a mainstream refuge. There are no arrangements in place for users to exercise choice of provider in most other cases. Choice is being channelled within the services themselves with the Supporting People team's encouragement to develop formal feedback arrangements and respond to requests for change. Users are able to exercise some choice over the type of service they receive and during the course of the inspection we met people who were moving from supported accommodation to general needs accommodation with floating support.
- 126** Visits took place to a diverse sample of 12 services. The results were variable. In the main service users were happy with the services they received although users in temporary accommodation in particular lacked accurate information on their future housing options. At one location, users believed they had to register with the rent deposit scheme for private rented accommodation and this would prevent them from joining the housing register. This is not the case. Other users were unaware of the availability of floating support once they had found alternative accommodation.

- 127 In most of the premises visited, the standards were high and users were provided with good quality, homely accommodation, but in a small number the physical environment was poor or institutional. Support plans were viewed and the quality varied considerably between providers. These matters are being addressed through the service review process and access for providers to training through the STRIVE project and by the Supporting People team.
- 128 The impact for people of Supporting People services is demonstrated in the following case studies.

Figure 3 Case 1 - Outreach support and supported housing

Case 1 is of an elderly man who had been sleeping rough for several months. When he first applied he was in poor health, having a severe infection in his arm as well as a scabies infection. He had a long-term alcohol problem and risk assessments from previous hostel accommodation from which he had been evicted and other agencies indicated challenging behaviour including violence, aggression and a high degree of anti-social behaviour, including racism, sexism and homophobia. His behaviour was such that he was barred from many agencies.

Due to his situation, the outreach service offered support to him, meeting him weekly, helping him access medical treatment and eventually building a good relationship with him. Eventually he was able to move into supported accommodation and with some intensive support managed to maintain his accommodation successfully. His drinking reduced and there were few management problems during his stay. There were no incidents of anti-social behaviour and he had a good relationship with several staff. He moved into private rented accommodation after a year and continues to maintain this accommodation. At the time of his application, concerns had been expressed that he would be unlikely to survive sleeping rough for long.

Source: RBC Supporting People Team

Figure 4 Case 2 - Floating support

Case 2 is of a person who has a mild learning disability, spent many years living in a damp bed-sit, in appalling conditions. He received no support and was intimidated and bullied by his private landlord and became withdrawn and frightened.

He was re-housed into a newly built one bedroom flat and floating support was arranged. Through his support package, he had help in learning how to manage his tenancy and developing other skills to help him live independently. He has received support with various aspects of life including help with furnishing his new flat. His employer of 15 years was so impressed with his gain in confidence that they promoted him into a supervisory role. His support worker also advised and encouraged him with his goal of being re-united with family members. This goal has been successfully achieved and he also now receives invaluable emotional support from his sister.

Source: RBC Supporting People team

- 129** Although the outcomes indicated above are positive, they have been delivered through existing services rather than newly commissioned services through Supporting People funding. Service improvements are being driven through the application of the QAF process, but further significant improvements are due through the development and implementation of the steady state contracts.
- 130** In addition, targets are not yet in place to demonstrate beneficial outcomes for service users. Local performance indicators are intended to be agreed between providers and the Supporting People team as part of the contract renewal. This will include indicators which show the delivery of partner's strategic objectives. This is work that is still outstanding due to under-capacity within the Supporting People team.

Summary

- 131** We judge that Reading Borough Council is providing a 'fair', one-star Supporting People programme.
- 132** There are strengths in the way the programme is being administered and service users are benefiting from the greater flexibility of responses the Council are able to provide. The Supporting People team is highly skilled, motivated, experienced and well managed providing efficient administration of the programme within the limits of their capacity. They are highly regarded within the Council and by providers. There is commitment to the programme at senior levels in the organisation and priorities are linked to the Council's objectives through a strong five-year strategy. This has been developed with wide ranging consultation. Service reviews are thorough, address the right issues and recommendations will produce service improvements if they are taken on board by providers. There is considerable effort involved in developing and maintaining partnerships internally and across agencies. Financial modelling and benchmarking is developing well and there is a prudent approach to contractual savings following the service reviews which avoids undermining services.
- 133** Governance arrangements have not been effective resulting in IT issues taking a long time to resolve and a reactive response to the implementation of the Supporting People programme. There is under-capacity in the Supporting People team leading to substantial delays in undertaking the service review programme, and a failure to deliver many of the tasks in the annual and service plans. The outcome is service users waiting longer for service improvements, delays in reducing gaps in service provision, and a reduction in potential savings on the contractual arrangements. Planning for future services is undermined by gaps and use of out-of-date needs data. Performance management is under developed and external challenge is limited; this is linked to the present inefficient IT system. Access to services needs improvement in respect of published and website information and signposting by some frontline staff.

What are the prospects for improvement to the Supporting People programme?

What is the Council's track record in delivering improvement?

- 134** Improvements of direct benefit to service users have been promoted and delivered through the use of the QAF and validation visits. Joint commissioning and use of transitional housing benefit has delivered additional services, but not through Supporting People funding. There are limited outcomes in respect of value for money from cross-authority working, but forward planning projects have been commissioned providing a building block for the future. Performance monitoring is limited and performance is variable, particularly in services for adults. Delivery against action plans is weak due to the under-capacity of the Supporting People team.

- 135 Corporately, the Council was judged to be 'good' through the comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) in 2002. Service scores are generally good in related services to Supporting People. Education, social care children, housing and benefits scored three out of four, and use of resources scored the maximum of four. Overall, the social services score was two stars in 2002 but this fell to one star in 2003 as a result of some poor performance. The service improved in 2004 to two-star.
- 136 The 2004 CPA update described strategic partnerships as progressing well and becoming effective. The Council's clear ambitions and priorities for improvement and links to a new community strategy were commended, but concern was expressed with overall capacity to deliver.
- 137 RBC has implemented the Supporting People programme on time having established a lead within the Authority with effect from January 2000. Interim contracts are in place for all services, payments to providers have been made on time.
- 138 Service improvements have been driven from the early part of 2005 when validation visits began as part of the service review process. Service providers confirmed this had provided a catalyst for change and it is clear there is greater focus on service standards and outcomes, greater emphasis on all services promoting greater independence and more effective joint working.
- 139 Supporting People services have decreased since the implementation of the programme despite the gaps in provision. Seventy units of service have come out of the programme, 59 of which are now funded from the community care budget. However, this has been offset to some extent through joint commissioning between Supporting People, housing community care and the drug action team. Additional services have been delivered through a drugs service for rough sleepers and supported living for people with mental health problems
- 140 There are positive outcomes from the priorities established in the shadow Supporting People strategy. Examples of services developed from transitional housing benefit are a range of floating support services, day centre for rough sleepers and joint assessments for young people at risk or leaving care. Extra care facilities have been developed, as have intermediate care although there is not yet a formal section 31 pooled budget for this. There are well-developed plans in place to provide 24-hour home care. Other outcomes include an improvement in hospital discharge figures and sheltered schemes taking clients with more support needs that are being met through Supporting People.
- 141 The cross-authority working group has produced no formal outcomes in respect of value for money. However, forward planning projects have been commissioned such as the strategy for future adult needs of children with autism, including the appointment of a full-time short-term co-ordinating officer, and service provision needed for those experiencing domestic violence and racial harassment. Reports are due within the next six months.

- 142** There has been limited improvement of performance in the key performance indicators (PI) related to Supporting People. Full details are set out in the **Appendices**, but relate to 2003/04 for audited figures. Figures provided by RBC for the first quarter of 2005/06 indicate that people over 65 years helped to live at home (70 households per thousand population against a target of 75 for the year) has improved from two-star to four-star.
- 143** A key area of expanding choice has been delivered through direct payments. RBC has improved year-on-year against its own targets, 40 in 2004/05 was achieved and good progress is being made at 34 for the first quarter of 2005/06 against a target of 50. However, this is below average when compared to other authorities performance¹.
- 144** In respect of housing key PIs, performance is variable and poor accuracy points to problems with information collection. When the 2002/03 BVPIs are compared with 2003/04, performance improved on four out of eight PIs, three stayed the same (one of which cannot be improved on [compliance with CRE code]), and tenant satisfaction marginally declined. In the bottom quartile, there are two indicators, energy efficiency and BME tenant satisfaction when compared to other unitary authorities. Housing indicators which need to be accurately reported in 2004/05 are the level of decent homes, percentage change in proportion of non-decent homes, energy efficiency and level of private sector vacancy. Details of performance are set out in **Appendix 1**.
- 145** Delivery against action plans has been weak, largely due to under-capacity within the team. A progress update against the Supporting People action plan for 2004/05 showed that many of the tasks were linked to the signing off of service reviews. Key examples of outstanding work includes the following:
- at review outcome stage when future direction of service has been agreed, identify appropriate PI targets and reporting systems required and agree with providers and Core Strategic Group. Agree how performance will be disseminated;
 - draw up new contract for Supporting People providers and get approved by other funders and RBC legal;
 - to draw up contract schedule which specifies agreed access routes, criteria/client group and units; and
 - identify at service reviews issues with physical condition of stock.
- 146** Many other tasks were not completed and were brought forward to 2005/06. Current progress on the 2005/06 action plan is also weak with little completed and target dates for completion slipping and the prospects for completion within the target times is poor.

¹ Department of Health star ratings - source Reading Borough Council.

How well does the Council manage performance?

- 147** The Council has put in place some key, effective building blocks for the administration of the programme through a strong five-year strategy, clear leadership and strength of the outcomes from the service review programme. Savings identified through the service reviews should cover the expected reductions in grant funding. Performance management is weak with limited performance information being produced and acted upon. However, the implementation of a new IT system and strengthened performance management monitoring should support improvements in this area.
- 148** The five-year strategy provides a strong basis for the future planning of the programme. The effort and information which has gone into developing the strategy, along with the wide ranging consultation make it a good driver for improvement. The aims, objectives and priorities are clear and the detailed requirements for all client groups are building blocks for the combined output of internal and external partners and a greater level of joint commissioning. The links between feedback from service users and carers can be seen in the determination of priorities, for example, in demand for move on accommodation and development of further floating support for older people.
- 149** There is some good support for future planning and informing the five-year strategy in the future. There is in place strong health needs assessment based on the layering of information from the census, health directorate, education and social care along with information on population, disease and crime profiles. Probation have developed a new database for their housing advisors, which will track referrals, acceptances, rejections and reasons, to enable identification of particular gaps in provision or exclusion of any vulnerable groups. The Core Strategic Group has the role in updating housing and supported housing needs are to be kept up-to-date in the future which will inform the direction of the annual updates of the five-year strategy.
- 150** The Commissioning Body is well-supported with financial information and advice at each meeting. In addition, financial meetings take place regularly with the chair of the Core Strategic Group and Head of Community Care. Discussions have taken place on the impact of potential funding reductions. Regular meetings also take place between the Head of Finance and Accountancy and the Strategic Manager of Supporting People on financial matters affecting Supporting People and they have developed scenario planning to map future changes in grant funding and contract prices.
- 151** Performance monitoring of outcomes from the Supporting People team has not been systematic, and monitoring of the action plans has been weak leading to a lack of corrective action when targets were missed and many tasks not delivered. Discussions at the Commissioning Body have focused on responding to implementation issues, and monitoring grant and administration spend. The Core Strategic Group has no role in monitoring the work of the Supporting People team. The performance of the Supporting People team is discussed during line managers' monthly performance meetings, eventually with the Director as the Accountable Officer and lead councillors.

- 152** Although local performance information will not be developed until the steady state contracts are in place, performance management has been improved recently. Action plans have been prioritised and risk areas are highlighted at each Commissioning Body meeting in a standard format to enable proper monitoring. An additional resource to support financial monitoring is in place and the directorate performance team will be producing performance information on behalf of the Supporting People team easing their work load. The Core Strategic Group have the role of monitoring outcomes from the five-year strategy which strengthens their role and participation in driving outcomes from the programme.
- 153** Projected savings from the outcomes of the service reviews are likely to significantly cater for the reduction in grant funding. The projected budget for 2006/07 is £5,097,604 based on the assumption of a 22 per cent decrease over five-years. Contract savings of approximately £258,000 are projected on the basis of the decommissioned services and the outcomes of the first five finalised service reviews. This leaves a small shortfall of £35,000 to be found which can comfortably be funded from the savings of the remaining service reviews.
- 154** The Supporting People programme is well-supported at the policy making level and by senior officers. Councillors have given a clear steer on the outcomes the Supporting People programme needs to achieve and they link well with the Council's priorities. The potential for grant funding reductions have been raised with cabinet members, and early discussions have taken place about the potential impact on Supporting People services and community care budgets.
- 155** The Annual Audit Letter of 2004 states that the Council needs to be more customer-focused and to use IT to meet customer needs in a more flexible way. This was reinforced during the inspection with the variable response to mystery shopping of the out-of-hours service. Improvements are planned across the Council to improve response to service users through the use of customer relationship management technology. A roll-out change programme of IT is underway with planning and building control services and housing all to follow in the 2005/06 financial year.
- 156** There is evidence of learning from high performers and stakeholders leading to improvement. The Supporting People team have made good use of ODPM tools, particularly in the development of service reviews and the use of the QAF. User feedback has been incorporated into the five-year strategy and feedback from users during the service reviews has informed recommendations for service improvements. Further examples of where the Council has made good use of learning from others are as follows:
- use of the Supporting People website to develop the implementation of the Supporting People programme;
 - drawing on good practice for the value for money strategy and eligibility criteria; and
 - visiting users of the new IT system to observe the payments system in operation.

157 However, learning from high performers could have assisted with the improvement of known weaknesses. Examples of where this could have taken place are as follows:

- consideration of other forms of governance arrangements to deal with the weaknesses previously identified in the report;
- comparison with other Supporting People teams to see how capacity issues were being dealt with at an early stage; and
- review of access arrangements elsewhere to address the weaknesses the Council were already aware of.

Does the Council have capacity to improve?

158 The Council acknowledged many of the weaknesses identified in the onsite inspection and it has produced a series of key objectives for addressing them, in some cases with increased resources and in others with identified responsibilities. The effectiveness of the objectives, however, is undermined by a lack of a detailed action plan; there is a commitment however to address this. The new approach to procurement is in the process of being implemented, it does not take a partnership approach and has yet to deliver value for money savings in areas that impact upon the Supporting People programme. The impact is less grant available for services.

159 Improvements in respect of attendance and leadership of the Core Strategic Group have been made recently. A new chair is in place and the role of the group has been strengthened with a clear remit to monitor outcomes from the five-year strategy and provide updated needs and supply information for all client groups. This should deliver stronger support from all areas of commissioning to the future updating of the strategy and updating the information base.

160 The Council has responded to the issues of under-capacity raised during the onsite inspection week. In a report endorsed by the departmental management team (DMT) extra resources are to be made available to support the work of the Supporting People team through a series of key objectives. Funding is to be found from the community care budget over which senior managers have delegated approval. However, when the report was presented to the DMT, neither the Commissioning Body nor Core Strategic Group had been consulted - this has been undertaken subsequently and they have indicated their approval.

161 Support is to be given in the following areas.

- Development of broader service user representation guided by the development of a broader service user involvement strategy through additional resources for the benefit of Supporting People programme and community care generally.
- Additional external capacity to undertake the older people sheltered housing reviews to free up the Supporting People team to undertake completion of the rest of the programme of the reviews and development work with the Core Strategic Group, commissioning framework and provision of communication and service information. This will result in the completion of the service review six weeks ahead of target.
- Development of the Supporting People contracts, linking grants to Supporting People contracts and potentially contract developments through a new departmental resource.
- The new IT system should provide reliable and regular reporting on PI and information for the planning bodies. The Core Strategic Group will have a strengthened role in monitoring performance information.
- A Supporting People directory is planned to be developed by October 2005. In conjunction with a rolling programme of training for frontline staff on Supporting People provided through STRIVE this will assist staff in advising people about access to services.
- Accessibility of services is to be improved through better communication, through a quarterly newsletter for service users, updating the website and providing leaflets and other information for frontline services in Reading. There is no additional resource for this and will be undertaken by the Supporting People team.
- Training of frontline staff, community care and health staff is to be developed together with access to Supporting People service providers through the STRIVE¹ programme.

162 The key objectives are to be supported by the development of a detailed action plan subsequent to the outcome of this inspection. It will also include a commitment to review the team functions by January 2006 to take account of the developing commissioning framework.

163 Until the detailed action plan is developed it is difficult to see whether all the outstanding tasks within the annual plan and the Supporting People service plan will be included, and whether the approach will meet all of the identified weaknesses.

¹ STRIVE - training partnership of RBC, Wokingham District, Bracknell Forest Borough and West Berkshire Councils; pooled together 50 per cent of allocations of the National Training Strategy Grant, provided by the Department of Health. The funds have been used to commission a series of free training courses to enable care workers from the independent and voluntary sector acquire relevant skills and knowledge in line with the national minimum standards.

- 164** By October 2005, the new IT system was in place and operational with the exception of payments to providers which is being undertaken by the current system until the support agreement runs out in 2006. The new IT system will allow for the analysis of the PI information submitted by providers. Only basic monitoring is currently being undertaken, although this has been assessed by Internal Audit and judged to be satisfactory. There are further constraints of time because staff are heavily involved in ensuring the service reviews are completed by the end of March 2006. The effect of this is that there may be shortcomings in provider services, for example lack of sickness cover, or trends which are not being picked up.
- 165** The new IT system provides an enhanced module for service reviews and monitoring. The team were able to report performance information at the Commissioning Body and Core Strategic Group meetings in September 2005. Reporting on service reviews has been improved with submission of the full report and an executive summary to the Commissioning Body.
- 166** The Council's procurement strategy has recently been reviewed and is now in the process of being implemented against a detailed work programme. The impact on steady state contracts is unclear as they have yet to be written. It is anticipated that value for money, quality, specialist supply and a proven history of provision of services that meet cost and quality requirements will be the basis on which contracts are awarded. They will be informed by the outcome of the service reviews.
- 167** There is no joint procurement in place with other authorities to deliver improved value for money which impact on the Supporting People programme with the exception of the joint equipment services. The potential to do so for corporate savings have been identified in areas such as agency staff, office supplies, paper, and photocopiers. Work is also being undertaken in respect of social care contracts but progress and impact have not been provided by the Council.

Summary

- 168** Our judgement is that the Council's Supporting People programme has 'promising' prospects for improvement.
- 169** Delivery arrangements are a strength and should deliver service improvements for current service users. Transitional housing benefits were maximised to produce additional services in line with the shadow strategy objectives. The extensive work undertaken on the five-year strategy has put in place key, effective building blocks for the future delivery of the programme in respect of clear priorities for the all client groups, agreement of policies and mapping of needs. This is supported by a rigorous and effective methodology of service reviews which should deliver sufficient savings by March 2006 to take account of grant funding reductions. Performance management has been improved.

- 170** However, the Council was slow to respond to capacity issues despite poor delivery against action plans. A slow start to the service review programme means that savings and improvements in services have not been maximised. The revised corporate procurement strategy is being implemented but as yet does not deliver value for money savings that impact on the Supporting People programme. The impact is that there are vulnerable people whose needs cannot be met, and those who have had to wait longer for support than they might otherwise have done.

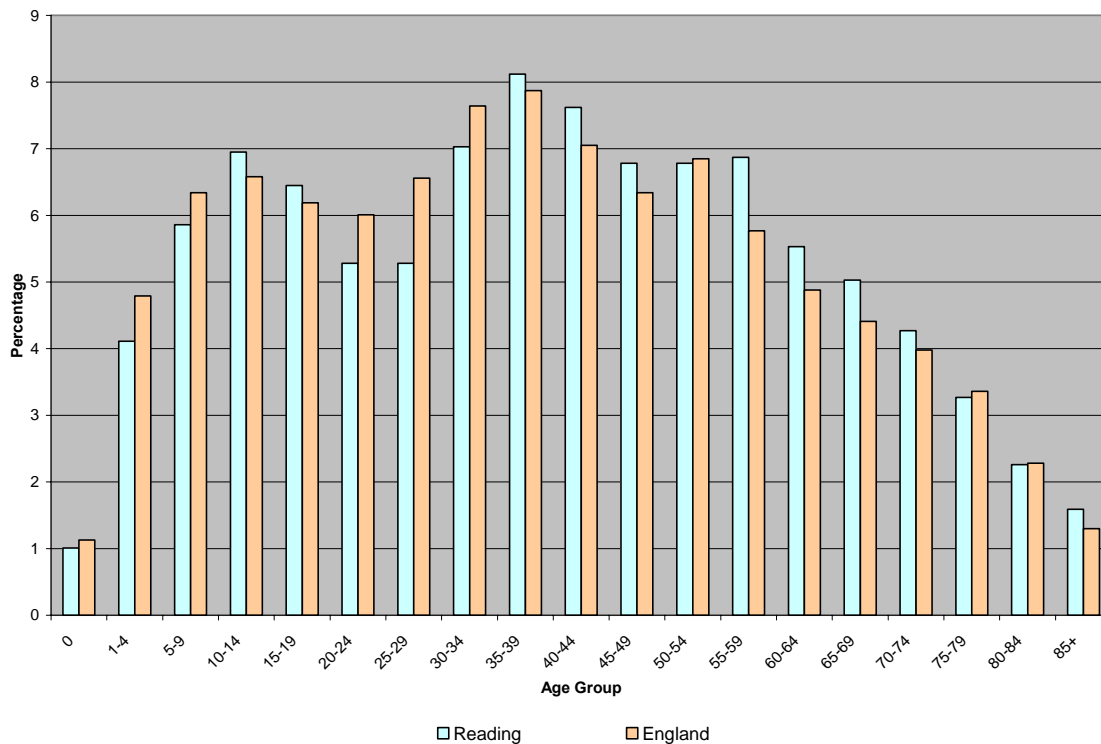
Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Demographic information

171 This section includes demographic information relevant to Supporting People, comparing the Council and with England.

Measure	Reading	England
Population (mid-2003) ^x	144,100	57,851,100
Percentage of the population aged 65+ (mid-2003)	14.2	18.5
Percentage from minority ethnic groups (all groups other than White – British 2003)	13.2	10.44
Percentage unemployment (claimant count rate) ^{xi}	1.9	2.3
Deprivation Index (1 highest, 354 lowest) ^{xii}	180	-

Figure 5 Percentage of the population ^{xiii} in each age group compared with England



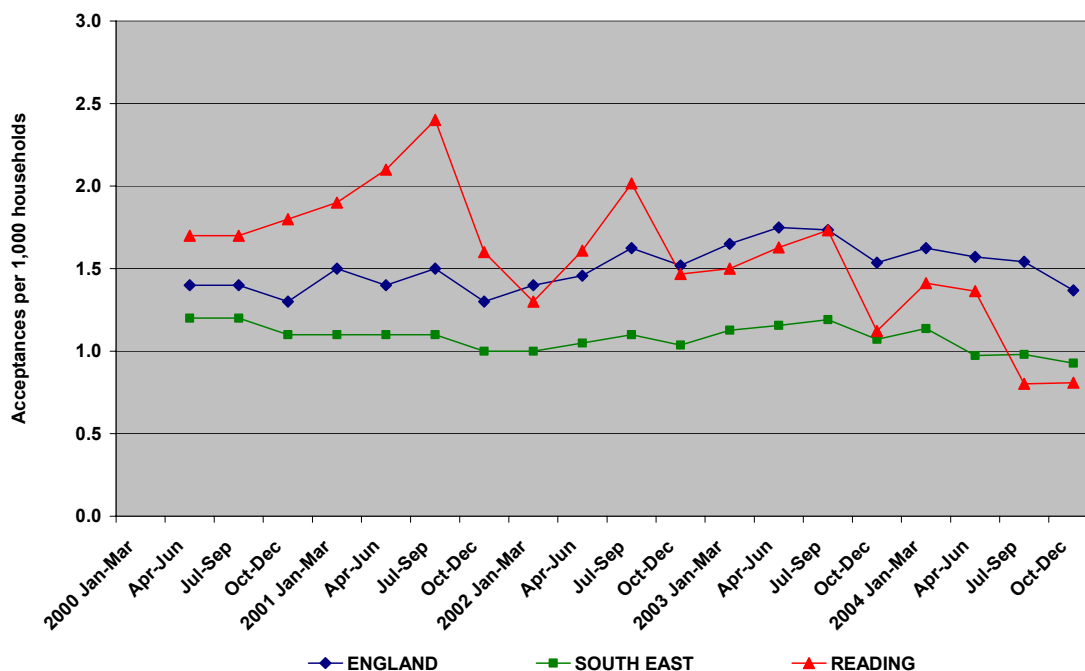
^x Source: mid-year population estimates (2003).

^{xi} Source: claimant count with rates and proportions (February 2005).

^{xii} Source: deprivation Index 2004, average ward score for the authority.

^{xiii} Source: mid-year population estimates (2003).

Figure 6 Households accepted as homeless between 2000 and 2004 compared with the region and England (acceptances per 1,000 households)



Performance information

172 This section highlights strong and weak areas of the Council's performance in services that are relevant to Supporting People. We have used the following information to help us reach our judgements:

- data for services funded through the Supporting People programme;
- comprehensive performance assessment scores;
- star ratings for social services;
- Performance Assessment Framework indicators for social services; and
- relevant best value performance indicators.

Supporting People data

Figure 7 Total service provision funded through Supporting People

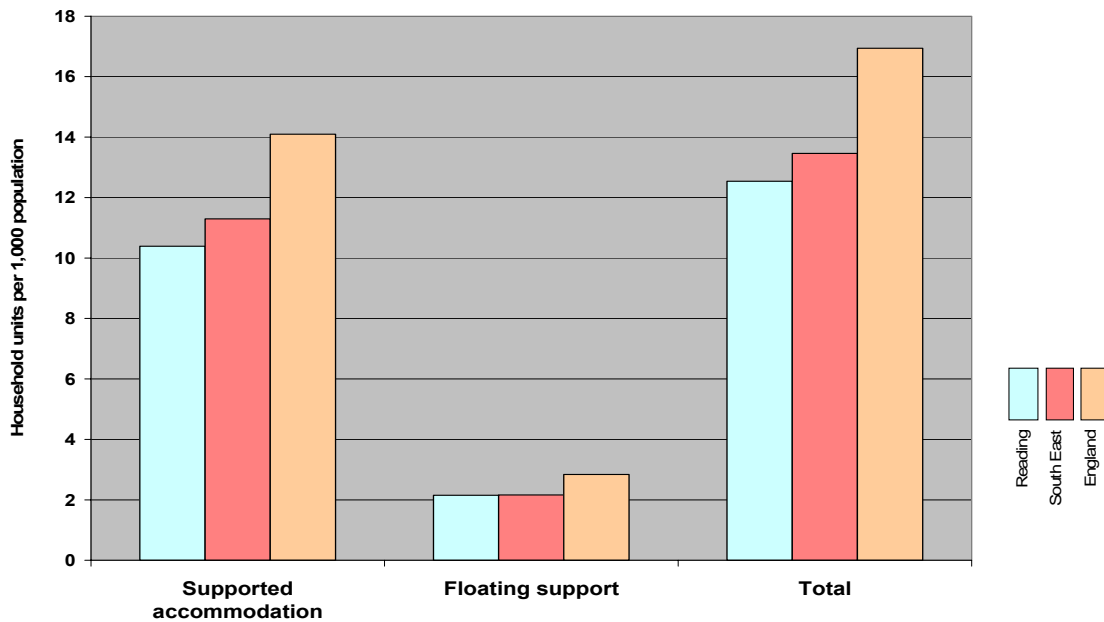
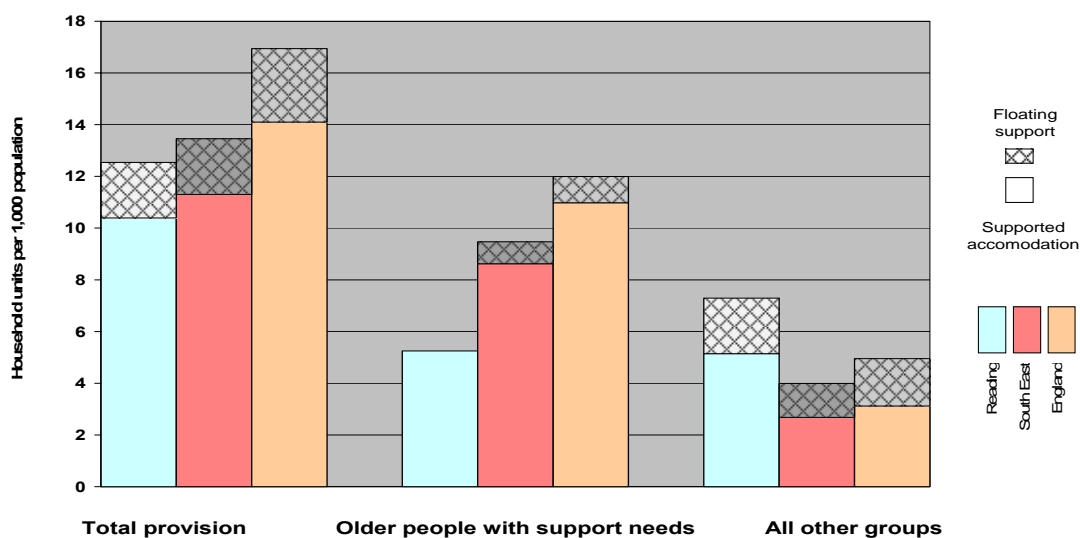
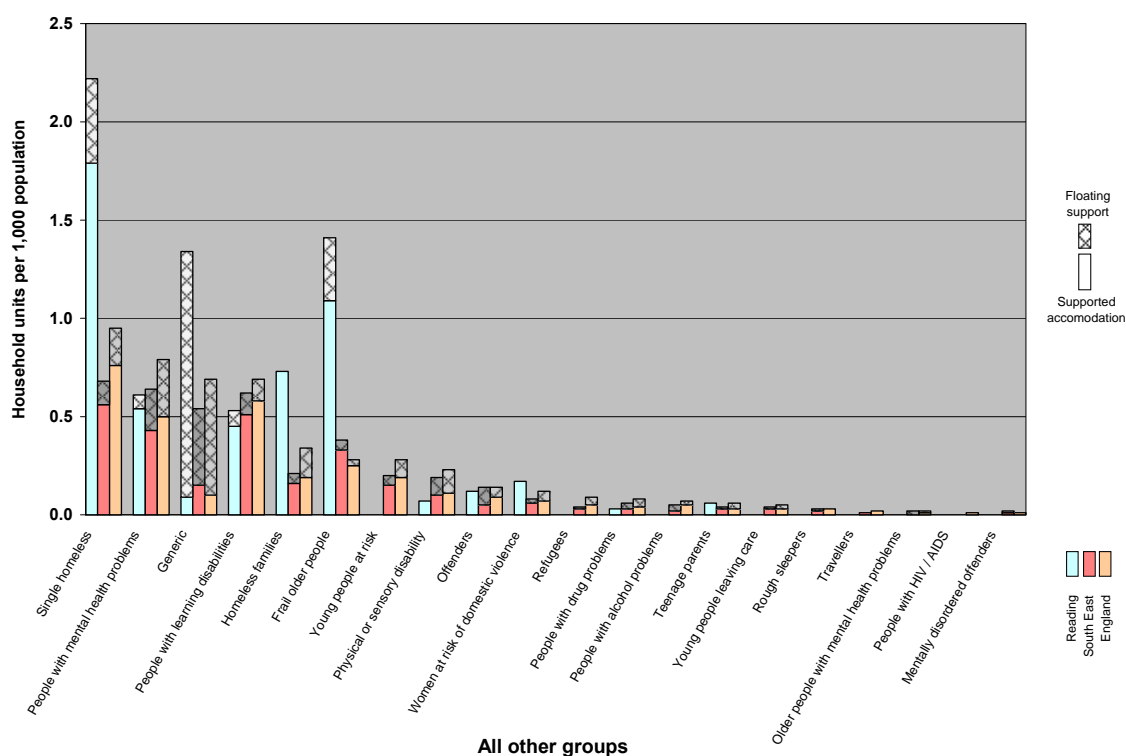


Figure 8 Services for older people with support needs compared with the region and England^{XIV}



^{XIV} Source: Platinum cut data, ODPM November 2003. Excludes community alarms, home improvement agencies, leasehold schemes and pipeline services.

Figure 9 Services for other groups compared with the region and England^{XV}

Table 2 Funding for Supporting People

Reading	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
Final Supporting People grant	£ 5,493,973	£ 5,363,177	£ 5,093,057
Pipeline allocation	£ 26,021	£ 29,606	£ -
Administration grant	£ 194,966	£ 168,986	£ 135,189

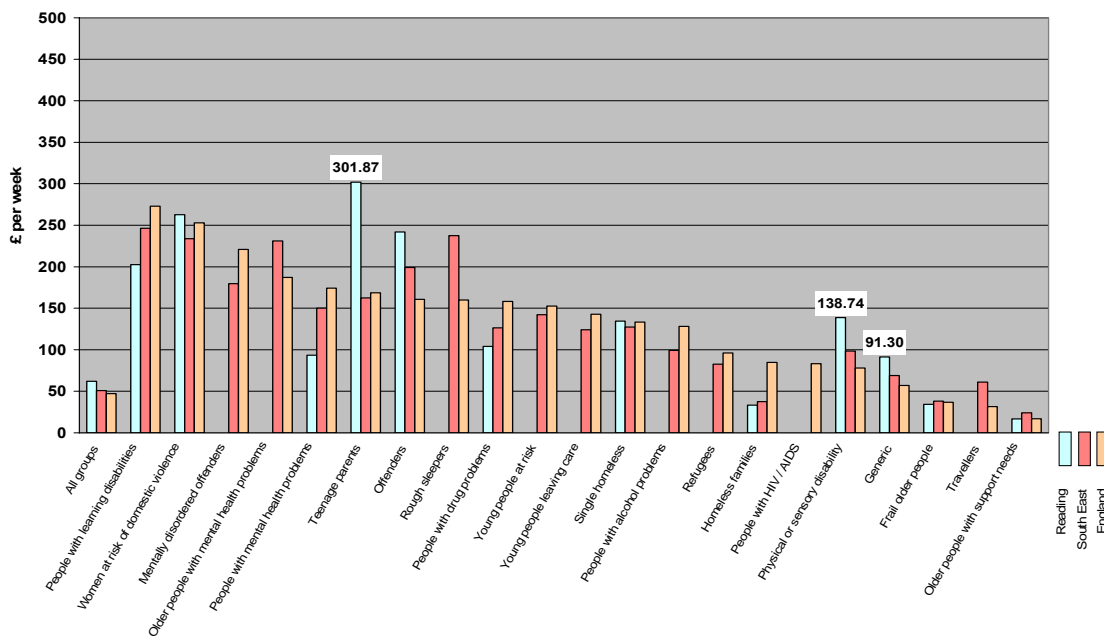
^{XV} Source: Platinum cut data, ODPM November 2003. Excludes community alarms, home improvement agencies, leasehold schemes and pipeline services.

Table 3 Unit costs of Supporting People services in 2003/04 (£ per week)^{XVI}

	Per head of population	Per unit	Per unit excluding community alarms	Per unit excluding community alarms and sheltered housing
Reading	£ 0.73	£ 47.57	£ 47.57	£ 65.48
South East	£ 0.52	£ 24.94	£ 32.26	£ 71.78
England	£ 0.70	£ 28.30	£ 34.71	£ 76.37

Source: 'The data quoted is taken from ODPM sourced material 2003/04. This is the only data currently available. ODPM will be able to provide updated data from September 2005 and this will then be used.'

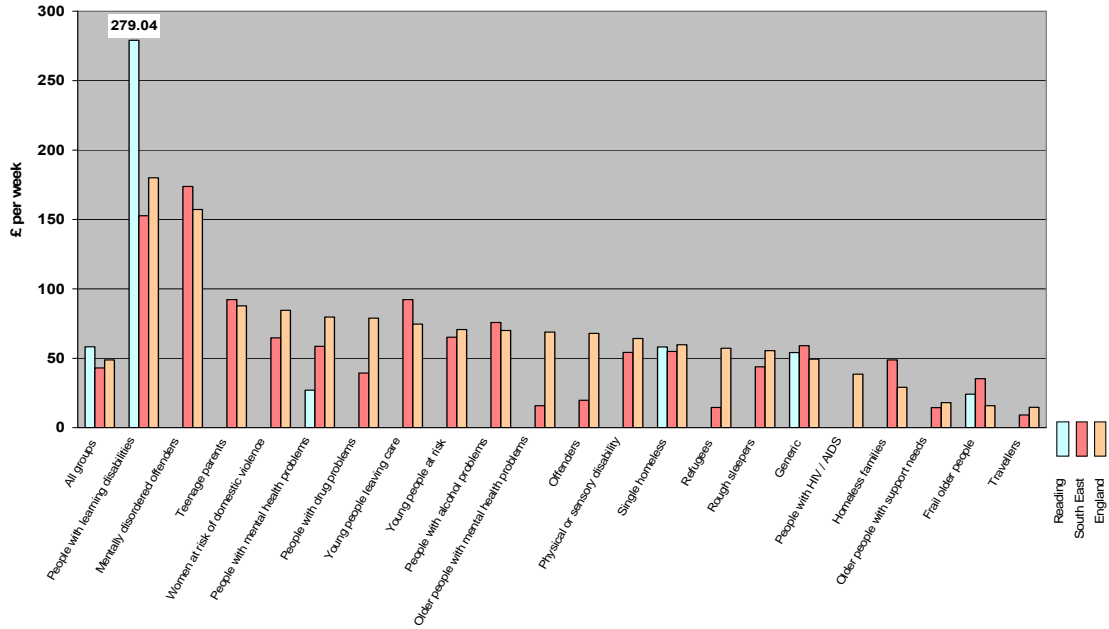
Figure 10 Unit costs of supported accommodation compared with the region and England (labels show costs in the highest 25 per cent)^{XVII}



^{XVI} Source: Platinum cut data, ODPM November 2003.

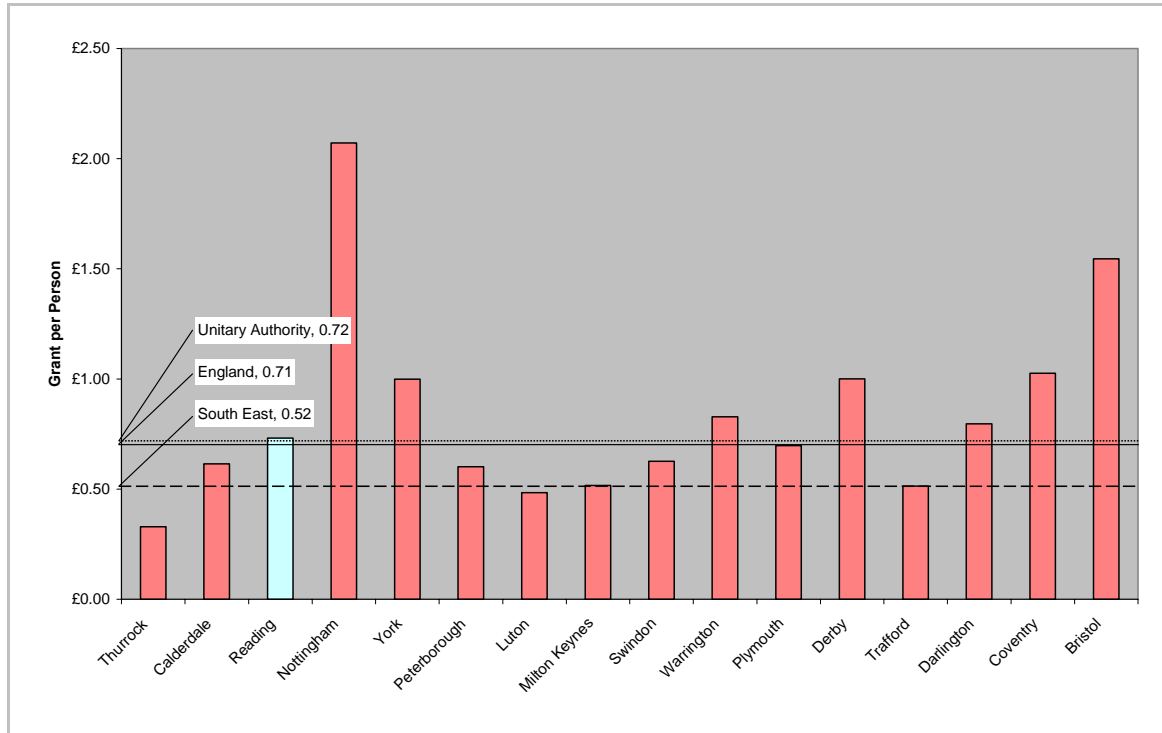
^{XVII} Source: Platinum cut data, ODPM November 2003. Excludes community alarms, home improvement agencies, leasehold schemes and pipeline services.

Figure 11 Unit costs of floating support services compared with the region and England (labels show costs in the highest 25 per cent)^{XVIII}



^{XVIII} Source: Platinum cut data, ODPM November 2003. Excludes community alarms, home improvement agencies, leasehold schemes and pipeline services.

Figure 12 Supporting People grant per head of population per week compared with nearest neighbours^{XIX}, all unitary councils and all English councils (2004/05)



^{XIX} A comparator group of similar councils.

Figure 13 Pipeline allocation per head of population compared with nearest neighbours^{XX}, all unitary councils and all English councils.

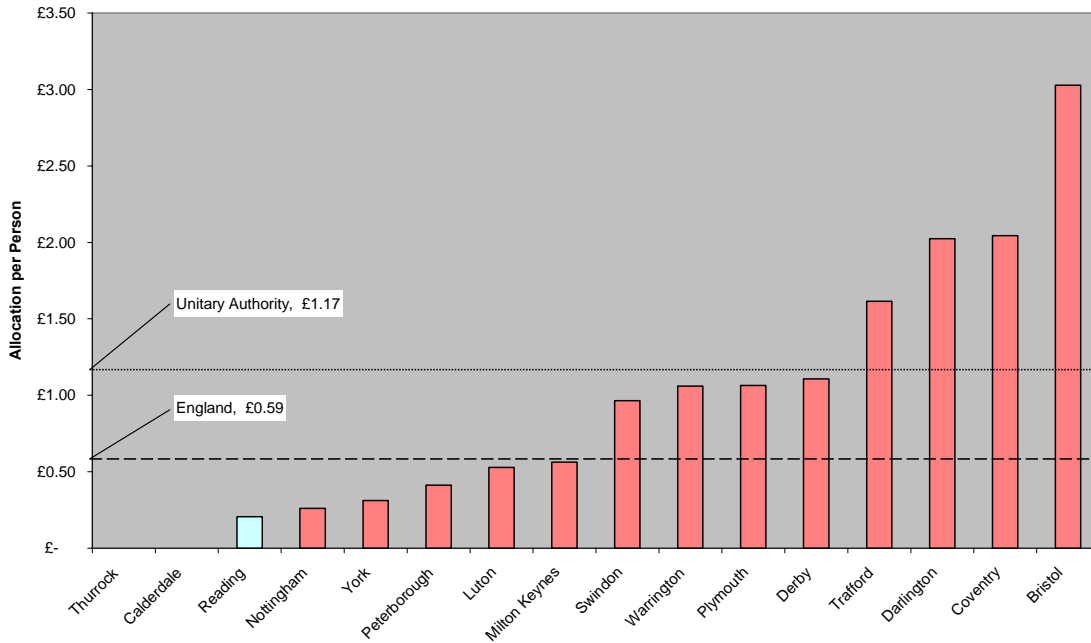
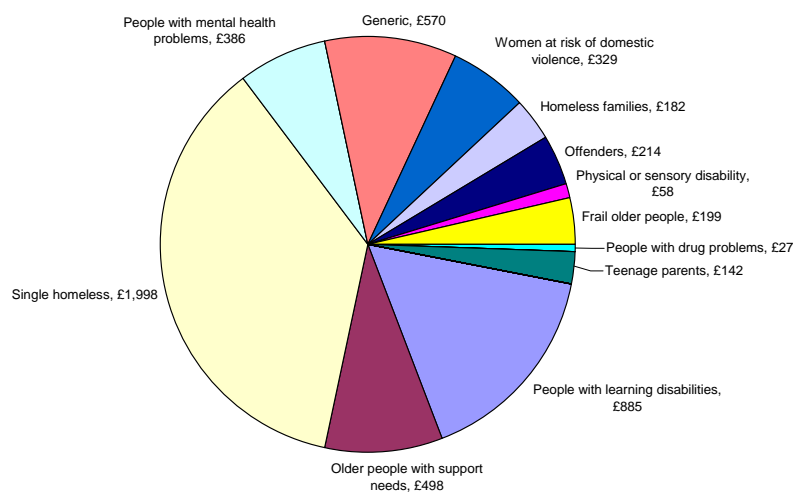


Figure 14 Share of spending between user groups (£000s)^{XXI}



^{XX} A comparator group of similar councils.

^{XXI} Source: Platinum cut data, ODPM November 2003. Excludes community alarms, home improvement agencies, leasehold schemes and pipeline services.

Figure 15 Share of spending between types of provider (£000s)^{XXII}

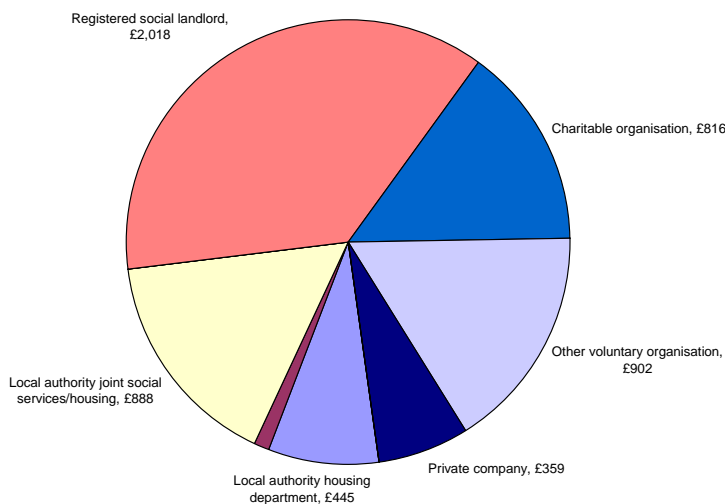


Table 4 Social Services star ratings November 2004

The table below shows the Social Services Inspectorate ratings of the Council's performance.

	Serving people well?	Prospects for improvement?	Performance rating (CPA equivalent)
Adults' services	Some	Promising	★★ (3)
Children's services	Most	Promising	

^{XXII} Source: Platinum cut data, ODPM November 2003. Excludes community alarms, home improvement agencies, leasehold schemes and pipeline services.

Social services performance indicators

Table 5 Performance Assessment Framework indicators 2003/04

The table below shows how the Council's social services performed on indicators relevant to Supporting People.

Reading	
Significantly above average (•••••)	Adults with mental health problems helped to live at home (C31). Admissions of older people to residential/nursing care (C26).
Above average (••••)	Admissions of supported residents aged 18 to 64 to residential/nursing care (C27) Adults with physical disabilities helped to live at home (C29). Adults with learning disabilities helped to live at home (C30). Older people helped to live at home (C32). Physically disabled and sensory impaired users who said that they can contact social services easily (D58). Percentage of items of equipment and adaptations delivered within seven working days (D54).
Average (•••)	Emergency psychiatric re-admissions (A6). Adults and older people receiving a statement of their needs and how they will be met (D39).
Below average (••)	Percentage change on previous year in total emergency admissions to hospital (A5). Adults and older clients receiving a review as a percentage of those receiving a service (D40). Delayed transfers of care (D41). Physically disabled and sensory impaired users who said that their opinions and preferences were always taken into account (D57).
Significantly below average (•)	Adults and older people receiving direct payments at 31 March per 100,000 population aged 18 or over (C51).

Best value performance indicators

Table 6 Performance on relevant indicators in 2003/04 compared with unitary councils

The table below shows how the Council performed on best value performance indicators relevant to Supporting People.

Reading	
Within the best 25 per cent	The level of the equality standard for local government to which the Authority conforms (BV2). Domestic violence refuge places (BV176).
Average	Length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation (BV183a). Council homes which did not meet the decent homes standard (BV184a). Average time for processing new housing benefit claims (BV78a).
Within the worst 25 per cent	Energy efficiency of local authority owned dwellings (BV63). Length of stay in hostel accommodation (BV183b).

Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

Before going onsite and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included the following.

- RBC corporate strategies that impact upon Supporting People including the community plan, housing and homelessness strategies, corporate procurement and strategy review.
- Plans and strategies from other planning groups such as person-centred Planning Framework and Quality Assurance Framework.
- The five-year Supporting People strategy, supporting appendices, annual plan, service plan and the service review programme.
- Minutes of the Commissioning Body, Core Strategic Group and the inclusive forum.
- Supporting People newsletter, the Fairer Charging Policy and various advice leaflets.

Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

When we went onsite 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 onsite reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:

- a questionnaire survey which was sent to all providers of housing related support services;
- focus groups with frontline staff, housing staff, service users, Core Strategic Group members, providers and councillors;
- visits to 12 supported housing schemes, talking to service users and frontline staff;
- calls to test the accessibility of services; and
- interviews with a wide range of key individuals including the Chief Executive of RBC, Director (Accountable Officer), Head and Deputy Head of Community Services, Supporting People Strategic Manager, Supporting People team members, Councillors, Community Care commissioning managers, Head of Finance and Accountancy, representatives of the Probation Service and Reading PCT, Youth Offending Team, Drug Action Team, Head of Safer Communities.