

Strategic Housing Services

East Dorset District Council

July 2009



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Local Authority Housing 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 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. To meet these principles this inspection:

- is proportionate to risk and the performance of the Council;
- judges the quality of the service for service users and the value for money of the service;
- promotes further improvements in the service; and
- has cost no more than is necessary to safeguard the public interest.

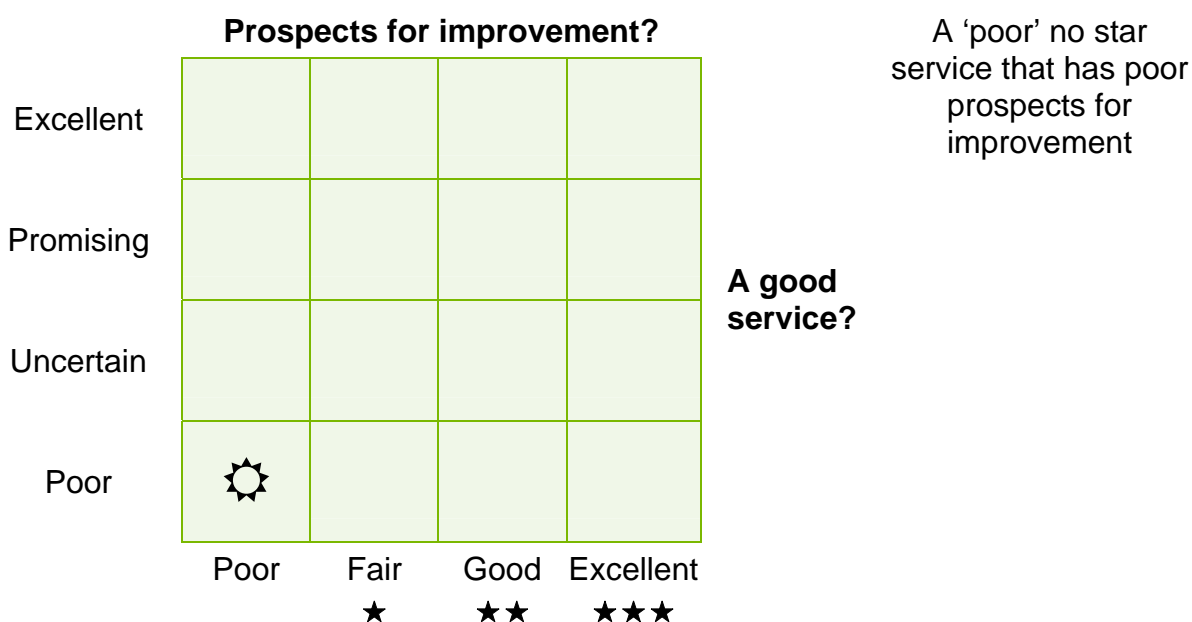
Summary

- 1 East Dorset District Council's strategic housing service is poor.
- 2 Services can be difficult to access for local people, key services are not delivered in a customer-focused way and the range of services for the most vulnerable members of the community is variable. The Council does not understand the diversity of its community and equality and diversity is not embedded in the service. There are significant weaknesses in the framework of strategies and plans to support improvement in the service. Reasonable numbers of market homes have been built, but very few affordable homes have been developed. Those that have do not meet the identified needs of the district. The Council is not engaging effectively with town and parish councils to promote the development of affordable housing or with developers to deliver it. The Council is not proactively ensuring that owner occupied or privately rented homes meet minimum standards or dealing effectively with empty homes and mobile homes. The Council is failing in its legal duty to provide written decisions to all households who are threatened with homelessness. The service does not have a clear understanding of its costs and how they compare and does not yet have a value for money 'culture'.
- 3 However, there are some areas of strength. The Council has developed an effective choice based lettings service and is working well with private landlords and the Citizens Advice Bureau to prevent homelessness. There is a strong partnership with private landlords, good work to improve energy efficiency and disabled adaptations are completed quickly. The housing association stock is in good condition and is let quickly, with a successful transfer incentives scheme helping to reduce under-occupation. The Council corporately is taking steps to manage value for money more effectively and some important cost savings and efficiency improvements have been achieved by the service in recent years.
- 4 The service has poor prospects for improvement. Capacity in the service is a significant weakness and the track record of improvement is poor. There are significant weaknesses in the approach to performance management and its approach to service delivery in a number of areas does not reflect learning from good practice.
- 5 There are some drivers for improvement. There is now clear and visible political commitment to the service, which gives more confidence that improvement will be delivered. The service is generally learning well from customer feedback and from local partners and there is a good self-awareness. High-level plans seek to address most of the weaknesses although the supporting action plans are weak. There are good quality IT systems.

Scoring the service

6 We have assessed East Dorset District Council as providing a 'poor' no star service that has poor prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

7 We found the service to be poor because it has a range of weaknesses including:

- face-to-face access to the service is difficult, internet access is poor and telephone calls are not answered quickly;
- service standards are underdeveloped and the service is not routinely monitoring customer satisfaction;
- written information is of a high quality but it is limited and poorly distributed;
- the homelessness and private sector housing service are not delivered in a customer-focused way;
- the range of services for some of the most vulnerable members of the community is variable;
- the Council does not understand the diversity of its community and equality and diversity is not embedded in the service;

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 are significant weaknesses in the framework of strategies and plans to support improvement in the service;
- the Council is not engaging effectively with town and parish councils to promote the development of affordable housing and with developers to deliver it;
- despite reasonable numbers of market homes being built, very few have been affordable and they do not meet the identified needs of the district;
- the Council is failing in its legal duty to provide written decisions to all households who are threatened with homelessness;
- there is very limited little assistance for home owners to improve their homes to meet the decent homes standard;
- the Council is not proactively ensuring private rented homes meet minimum standards or dealing effectively with empty homes and the condition of mobile homes; and
- the service does not have a clear understanding of its costs and how they compare and has not embedded a value for money 'culture'.

8 However, there are some areas of strength. These include:

- the Council has a wide range of research to support strategy development and consultation on countywide plans has been effective;
- there is a strong partnership with private landlords, good work to improve energy efficiency and disabled adaptations are completed quickly;
- housing association homes are well maintained let quickly and a transfer incentives scheme is helping to reduce under-occupation;
- the Council has developed an effective choice based lettings service and is successfully reducing the level of homelessness; and
- the Council corporately is taking steps to embed a value for money culture and it is positive that some important cost savings and efficiency improvements have been achieved by the service in recent years.

9 The service has poor prospects for improvement because:

- staff and management capacity is weak;
- financial capacity is also currently weak and increasingly under significant pressure;
- some important partnerships such as with town and parish councils, developers and East Dorset Housing Association are underdeveloped;
- the track record of improvement in the service is poor; and
- there are significant weaknesses in the approach to performance management and the service is not routinely learning from national best practice.

Scoring the service

10 However, there are some drivers for improvement. These include:

- there is now clear and visible political commitment to the service, which gives more confidence that improvement will be delivered;
- the service is generally learning well from customer feedback and from local partners;
- there is a high degree of self-awareness;
- high-level plans are in place to address most of its weaknesses although the supporting action plans are weak; and
- there are good quality IT systems.

Recommendations

- 11 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve access to services by:

- improving opportunities for face-to-face access;
- improving the range and distribution of information and advice on housing Matters;
- improving the speed and quality of telephone responses; and
- improving the quality of the Dorsetforyou website.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the profile of the Council will be increased and the service will be easier to access by low income households; and
- the public as a whole will be more satisfied with the service.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This recommendation should be implemented by April 2010.

² Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendations

Recommendation

R2 Improve the standard of customer care offered to service users, by:

- developing with customers a comprehensive range of service standards and involving them in setting and monitoring these standards, as well as satisfaction with each service;
- implementing the plans for ongoing consultation arrangements with key groups;
- completing homelessness applications and providing written decisions with details of how to appeal and obtain independent advice, whenever there is a threat of homelessness;
- completing equality impact assessments on key policies and procedures and developing an improved understanding of the diversity of the community; and
- setting and meeting targets to ensure that the workforce is representative of the working population as a whole.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- service users will be better able to influence the policies and practices of the Council, as a result of which they will be better tailored to local needs.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. Changes to the homelessness service should be implemented immediately and other recommendations should be implemented by March 2011.

Recommendation

R3 Strengthen the strategic approach to affordable housing by:

- developing an up-to-date housing strategy;
- ensuring that it and all other strategies and plans contain specific, measurable and challenging outcome-focussed targets;
- developing robust strategies in respect of disrepair, housing enforcement and empty homes;
- reviewing the threshold for affordable housing and other planning policies to ensure that a substantial number of new affordable homes are completed; and
- working with the County Council to find ways of meeting any gaps in supported accommodation in the district.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- councillors and managers will be more able to drive improvement, judge success and manage the pace of improvement if this is clearly defined in the plans for the service.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. A new housing strategy and corporate plan should be in place by May 2010 and the revised planning policies should be adopted in accordance with the Local Development scheme.

Recommendation

R4 Ensure that best use is made of the existing housing stock, by:

- developing a comprehensive approach to addressing non-decent housing;
- proactively identifying and addressing poor housing conditions in the rented homes;
- setting and meeting ambitious and realistic targets to bring empty homes back into occupation; and
- establishing an inspection regime to ensure that residential mobile homes meet minimum standards.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a reduction in illness and accidents arising from poor quality housing; and
- any homes brought back into use will help to meet the housing needs of the district and at a lower cost than building new homes.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. The improved service should be implemented by April 2010.

Recommendation

R5 Ensuring that a much higher proportion of the homes being built in the district are affordable for local people, by:

- ensuring that targets for the proportion, size and tenure of affordable homes on all sites are met;
- working much more closely with parish councils to identify small exceptions sites in each parish where there is a housing need;
- ensuring that the large volume of organised opposition to development is balanced by the needs of local people who have been priced out of the market; and
- Improving the consistency of performance with which pre-planning application negotiations take place by agreeing a format and service standards for this aspect of the service.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- new homes will be more likely to meet local needs; and
- the Council will be able to meet one of its top corporate priorities.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. The new planning policies should be implemented as part of the Local Development Framework timetable, while an improved enabling service or an interim solution) should be in place by September 2010.

Recommendations

Recommendation

- R6** Improving the value for money and capacity of the service by:
- benchmarking the cost and quality of planning, grants and outsourced services;
 - adopting modern procurement processes for those services that have not been the subject of any form of market testing for many years;
 - accelerating the move towards joint provision of services;
 - expanding the private sector loans scheme to make a significant impact upon disrepair in private sector housing;
 - comparing staffing levels and management structures with the best performing providers and implementing the lessons learned; and
 - improving the quality of performance management of both contractors and staff.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- savings and new income generated in both housing and outside of housing may be directed towards the weaknesses in capacity of the enabling and private sector housing services; and
- improved performance management will make better use of the capacity of both staff and contractors.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. A review of how all services are provided (both in-house and outsourced) should take place by March 2010 and new forms of provision introduced by March 2011.

- 12** We would like to thank the staff of East Dorset District Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of Inspection: 23 to 30 March 2009.

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 The District of East Dorset covers an area of 354 square kilometres. It encompasses a range of communities, including a significant urban fringe that borders the coastal towns of Bournemouth and Poole to the south, and widely scattered rural villages across most of its area. East Dorset has 87 per cent of its land within environmentally sensitive areas, with 45 per cent within an area of outstanding natural beauty, 48 per cent green belt, including 12 per cent within the scope of heathland protection and 18 conservation areas. This is a significant barrier to development.
- 14 The largest towns are Wimborne Minster, Ferndown, and Verwood, with much of the population concentrated in these towns. The District has a population of 85,800 made up of 38,465 households in 2007. The area's population grew significantly by 40 per cent between 1971 and 2001 and is continuing to grow at this higher than average rate. The area has a high proportion of older residents, and below average numbers of young people. The proportion of residents from ethnic groups – other than 'White British' – is low, at 2.8 per cent, compared with 4.6 per cent in the south-west and 13 per cent across England ³.
- 15 The District is among the least deprived areas in the country, ranked 302 out of 354 English councils⁴. Unemployment grew from 1 to 3 per cent between 2004 and 2006, but remains below average for Dorset. Life expectancy for men is the highest in the United Kingdom. Levels of crime at 43 per 1,000 are among the lowest. The proportion of homes that are detached is over 60 per cent, which is over twice the national average and by far the highest in Dorset. However, high house prices combined with low wages for many means that affordable housing is increasingly in demand. In addition, the population is getting older rapidly because young people and families in the 20 to 29 age group are moving away from the district - migration into the district exceeds out-migration by over 1,000 a year.
- 16 A relatively high proportion of the local workforce is employed in manufacturing, while almost 3 million tourists visited the ⁵district in 2003, spending £470 million in the area. Unemployment was low, at about one-third of the national rate in 2003 but this has risen to above regional and national average in 2006.
- 17 Transport is an issue with congested roads along the south of the district and poor links between north and south. Private car use is high and public transport coverage is patchy. Access to services and the location for affordable housing and employment is therefore a key challenge facing the Council.

³ 2001 Census

⁴ ODPM Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2000

⁵ HM Land Registry

Report

The Council

18 The council has adopted the 'alternative arrangements' for the way that it manages its business, incorporating a revised and updated committee structure. A newly established housing sub-committee reports to the policy and resources committee on housing issues. A separate policy and scrutiny sub-committee exists to challenge performance and review emerging strategies. The Council is Conservative controlled and comprises 25 Conservative councillors and 11 Liberal Democrats.

The service

19 Strategic Housing Services in East Dorset are delivered by a number of different parts of the Council. The policy planning division produce the framework for the delivery of new open market and affordable homes; the legal services division produce the housing strategy; and the health services division who are responsible for the condition of homes in the private sector. Other services including advice to disabled people and the homelessness, housing advice and housing register are contracted out.

20 There are 38,000 homes in East Dorset of which a high percentage - 84 per cent - are owner occupied, with 46 per cent owned outright. The proportion of affordable homes is low at 8 per cent, as is the proportion of privately rented homes at 7 per cent. The affordable homes are owned and managed by 19 housing associations. By far the largest is East Dorset Housing Association, created as a result of the transfer of the council housing stock, who own 2594, with the second largest owning only 127 homes. A fifth of homes are sheltered, but there are only 40 other supported homes for vulnerable people. Shared ownership accounts for 91 properties, or 3 per cent of the stock.

21 Strategic housing services account for a small proportion of the total expenditure of the Council, which was estimated to be £12.4 million in 2008/09. The revenue budgets for the services being inspected are estimated to be:

- private sector/enabling role - £129,300;
- the administration of disabled facilities grants - £97,000; and
- housing the homeless - £393,000.

There is a capital budget of £402,000 for disabled facilities grants, of which the Council contributes £161,000 from capital receipts and the remaining £243,000 comes from the Regional Housing Pot.

22 In the 2004 comprehensive performance assessment the Council achieved an above average 'B' rating for its work on balancing the housing market. The diagnostic report identified the Council's understanding of the housing market, some positive outcomes (including the minimal use of bed and breakfast hotels) and effective monitoring arrangements as strengths. It also identified the need for plans to be SMARTer⁶, for there to be more localised research and plans for key groups and for an improvement in the approach to learning and performance management.

⁶ Specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-based

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 23** 'Affordable, appropriate and sustainable housing' is a key priority in the Dorset Community Strategy. This sets out six objectives.
- more affordable and appropriate housing provided through planning policies;
 - better and more co-ordinated use of land through a countywide asset register;
 - increased investment;
 - new ways of meeting housing need;
 - sustainable housing development; and
 - more effective local authority enabling;
- 24** The East Dorset Sustainable Communities Strategy contains two housing related strategic objectives:
- develop sustainable communities and decent homes; and
 - improve Housing, Health and Well-being.
- 25** The action points are identified for housing are:
- encourage the providing of social housing for people in their local area;
 - ensure sufficient affordable and social housing is planned for the local development framework;
 - introduce energy efficient building standards;
 - support the provision of increased affordable housing opportunities for young people in order that they can have the same opportunities to live and work within their own local communities;
 - support initiatives which seek to prevent homelessness and improve services to the homeless;
 - support initiatives which seek to ensure families are appropriately housed near to services they require; and
 - support services which assist people to stay in their own homes.

How good is the service?

- 26 The District Council's own key priorities are:
- increasing the provision of affordable housing;
 - protecting the environment;
 - improving facilities for young people;
 - promoting a safe environment and reducing crime;
 - reducing isolation; and
 - improving the Council's overall performance and reputation.
- 27 The objectives of the Housing Strategy 2005/09 are to:
- meet affordable housing needs;
 - meet the needs of the homeless; and
 - improve housing stock conditions.

Is the service meeting the needs of the local community and users?

Access and customer care

- 28 Weaknesses significantly outweigh strengths in access and customer care. Face-to-face access to the service is difficult, internet access is poor and telephone calls are not answered quickly. Service standards are underdeveloped and the service is not routinely monitoring customer satisfaction. Written information is of a high quality but it is limited and poorly distributed. Complaints are monitored and managed well.
- 29 Face-to-face access to the service is difficult. The offices of East Dorset are not easy to access, being located over a mile outside of the centre of Wimborne and not on any bus route. They are poorly signposted. There is a minibus that can be caught from the town centre, but this only operates one morning a month and is poorly publicised. The housing advice service is provided by East Dorset Housing Association and is located in Ferndown, but is still remote from the town centre. There are no housing surgeries taking place to compensate for this, although housing benefits days are held around the district. While the Council will offer to undertake home visits when it is requested (and also when it is necessary) it does not publicise this well, relying on occasional mentions in the Council newsletter. This means that the local people who want to meet council staff on a face-to-face basis will find it difficult compared with the majority of other districts.

- 30** Internet access is poor. Internet access is increasing, with the Council playing its part by funding access through Town and Parish Councils. However, the 'Dorsetforyou' website does not yet provide local people with good and accessible information about strategic housing services. The website is a positive attempt at joint working, but two years after its failings were identified in inspections of other Councils in the county it is still not fit for purpose. Common searches such as 'housing application' reveal 1,854 documents from each of the Districts and the County. If residents are aware that East Dorset Housing Association manages the housing register, they can access this service from the Association's front page. The use of the internet as a quick and cost effective way of accessing local housing information is not being maximised.
- 31** Telephone calls are not answered quickly. Most contact with the Council and its contractors is by telephone, but where evidence exists it shows that responses are relatively slow. Corporate targets for telephone answering are not challenging and the Council does not have the ability to monitor telephone responses by the housing and planning services. The housing advice service has a target to answer all calls within 25 seconds, which does not match the best performing councils, though this has been the subject of consultation. The proportion of abandoned calls, at between 6 and 14 per cent, is high. The attitude of staff responding to calls is friendly and helpful, but without a satisfactory telephone system many callers will be frustrated.
- 32** Written information is limited and poorly distributed. There are only two housing information leaflets in the Council's own reception. The Council does not use libraries, doctors' surgeries, town and parish council offices or any of the imaginative approaches taken by other rural Councils to disseminate written housing advice. Press releases, the annual Council Tax letter and the quarterly East Dorset News are the only systematic methods being used to distribute written information. In a large and sparsely populated area where the Council offices are difficult to get to, it is important that the Council ensures that people are able to obtain housing advice. This and the difficulties of internet access demonstrate that the Council is not achieving its ambitions to provide a good standard of information to the local community.
- 33** The service is not routinely monitoring customer satisfaction to drive improvement. Satisfaction monitoring is patchy. The planning service carried out a limited survey of visitors to its reception between April and June 2008. Applicants for housing are asked to provide feedback on several aspects of the service and the initial results are very positive, particularly given that most questioned had yet to be housed. The questionnaire was only introduced in December 2008 and is based on the views of only 66 of over 2,000 applicants, but is a useful start. Customer satisfaction with the private sector housing service, apart from the handyvan and home improvement agency service is not monitored. There are no other formal or informal ways in which the Council involves service users to identify ways in which their experience might improve. By monitoring and sharing the results of these surveys the Council will be better able to draw upon the experience of customers and also achieve its aspiration to consult local people more effectively.

How good is the service?

- 34** Service standards, which provide a further means of assessing the quality of housing and planning services, are underdeveloped. Corporate standards are in place (for example, telephone answering and letter responses) but there are few service specific standards. Where they exist, as in planning, the Council has not involved customers in defining the standards or targets and monitoring the results. Standards do not exist and performance is not monitored in such obvious areas as the waiting times experienced by the customer for home improvement assistance. Service users will not know what to expect and be able to provide informed feedback on the quality of services if they are not clearly defined.
- 35** Written information is of a high quality. East Dorset news is well designed and has carried well written articles on disabled facilities grants, energy saving measures, home improvement assistance, housing benefits, affordable housing and planning applications. The Homefinder Bulletin, produced quarterly, is a professional presentation with a good range of information provided including numbers of properties available, bids made and successful applicants. It also gives details of the under-occupation incentive scheme and a range of contact numbers.
- 36** The Council, East Dorset Housing Association and the Home Improvement Agency have a complaints and compliments system in place and can show how services have changed as a result. Reports to councillors summarise all planning complaints and what has been learnt. Examples include a change to procedures as a result of the wrong plans being issued to an applicant and the redesign of planning comments forms as a result of feedback from parish councils. Councillors are not so regularly informed about general compliments and complaints on homelessness, housing advice or choice based lettings services. However, the most serious cases with the potential for ombudsman involvement are reported to the Standards Committee and include a commentary on what has been learnt from the experience. By taking complaints seriously the service will be better able to improve.

Diversity

- 37** Weaknesses outweigh strengths. The range of services for vulnerable members of the East Dorset community is variable. Services are not tailored to meet the needs of vulnerable residents. There is a high level political commitment to fairness and equality and the Council is now taking active steps to improve its approach to equality and diversity but at present the Council does not understand the diversity of its community and equality and diversity is not embedded in the service.
- 38** The supply of services for some groups is very limited or absent. East Dorset has no housing related services for single homeless people, drug and alcohol users and ex-offenders. It has the lowest supply of services for people with mental illness and people with a physical disability of any district in the county, although the Council has consistently increased the budget to take account of the need for adaptations. Only 15 residents are benefiting from floating support, with referrals from the housing advice service very low. It is the only district in the county without a gypsy site. More positively, there is a reasonable level of support for 29 young people. While it would be impractical for every group to be able to access services within the district, overall the picture is poor.

- 39 However some groups are well served. There is a reasonable supply of sheltered housing, including two extra care schemes, reflecting the older population. The provision of a domestic violence outreach service (jointly with Christchurch Borough Council) since December 2003 has helped 60 women in the East Dorset area and the Council can identify some real success stories as a result. Supporting People data shows that people with a learning disability are also adequately provided for and a new scheme is providing accommodation for teenage parents.
- 40 Access arrangements are not well tailored to the needs of vulnerable groups.
- The Council's offices are not fully accessible. There is no lift and so wheelchair users would struggle to get beyond the reception area. The Council has a sign in the reception to offer to meet people with mobility difficulties, but is not meeting its duties under the Disability Discrimination Act well over a decade since these duties were made clear. This sends out the wrong signals to disabled customers and also means that in spite of being awarded 'two ticks'⁷ for its recruitment practices, disabled people and wheelchair users are (using the limited information to date) under represented in the workforce.
 - The Council has attempted to ensure that information is accessible to all by making it available in different formats, but the information itself is limited.
 - The Council has signed-up to referral protocols that help put accommodation and support in place for young people leaving care, ex-offenders and gypsies and travellers - although the actual supply of accommodation means that it can offer few solutions locally.
- 41 The Council does not have a clear understanding of the diversity of its community. Other than that supplied by East Dorset Housing Association and some specific private sector housing data is held on ethnicity, there is limited information on who is accessing each service. This will make it difficult for the Council to know how to target services on people who should be, but are not taking them up. Given the difficulties in accessing services already mentioned this is a key weakness.
- 42 The Council holds only limited data on staff and councillors and this shows that neither group actually reflects the community that it serves. The Council has information on only 27 per cent of employees and 75 per cent of Councillors. This information is not broken down into service area or committee. It shows, with limited reliability, that the workforce contains fewer disabled people and generally matches the ethnic origins of the working age population. Women are well represented among staff (a common feature in local government) but only two of 12 senior managers are women. Councillors are older and more disabled than the wider population and include no members of the Black and Minority Ethnic population. In some respects this is not unusual; Councillors generally tend to be older than the population (though East Dorset has attempted to encourage greater diversity among election candidates) and older people tend to be more disabled. However, the reluctance of staff to provide information on diversity indicates that there remain some obstacles to services being delivered fairly.

⁷ The symbol is a recognition given to employers who have agreed to make certain positive commitments regarding the employment, retention, training and career development of disabled people. They are then able to use it on recruitment literature.

How good is the service?

- 43 Equality Impact Assessments have not been completed and consideration of equality and diversity is not embedded in some important practices. The Council has not undertaken robust impact assessments to test the degree to which housing and planning services are delivered fairly. This is a particular weakness because housing is a high priority services and these were intended to be the first to be assessed, but this has yet to happen. It cannot therefore show whether these services are being delivered fairly, though it has now taken expert advice and is in the process of consulting on revised assessments. Consideration of equality and diversity on policies is not thorough. For example, the equality implications of one report state that 'action arising from today's report will have regard to the Council's equality and social diversity agenda.' This indicates that managers are not well trained and that diversity is not embedded in some of the Council's practices.
- 44 The Council believes that it meets level three of the current local government equality standard⁸ although the evidence from this service suggests that this may be an overstatement. In particular the requirements to carry out a robust impact assessment for housing and involve community stakeholders in the scrutiny of service delivery for housing and planning have not been met.
- 45 There is a high level political commitment to fairness and equality. The corporate plan contains the objective of 'an inclusive society where people do not feel marginalised and have the opportunity to realise their potential' as well as specific ambitions for young people. The Council undertook a best value review of Social Inclusion, Diversity and Equality in 2004/05. Extensive consultation was undertaken to support the review including the use of an external consultant to engage with people from ethnic minority groups. A Disability Equality Scheme was adopted in 2007 based on a series of focus groups with people with disabilities and carers and a household survey, while a Gender Equality Scheme was also adopted based on focus groups. The Council is now taking active steps to improve its approach to equality and diversity with the aim of being externally validated at level 3 of the local government equality standard by September 2009. This work should ensure that diversity becomes embedded in the work of the Council.

The strategic approach to housing

- 46 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in the strategic approach to housing. The Council has a wide range of research to support strategy development but there remain some significant gaps in its knowledge. Consultation takes place locally on a regular basis with other agencies, but the Council does not engage effectively with town and parish councils and service users. Critically, the Council has yet to use the research and consultation to inform its own housing strategies and plans. Further significant weaknesses exist elsewhere in the framework of strategies and plans to support the service.

⁸ This will be replaced by a revised standard from late 2009

Understanding the housing needs of the district

- 47 The Council has worked well in partnership to produce Dorset-wide research including a housing market assessment, housing needs survey, a stock condition survey, Gypsies and Travellers and supported housing needs. The most recent research has been a strategic land availability assessment and this shows clearly what the theoretical impact of changes to planning policies and urban extensions would be on the Council's ability to generate affordable housing. This research adds further to the knowledge base upon which the Council can develop its housing policies.
- 48 There has been some effective consultation at a countywide level on the homelessness, sheltered housing and private sector housing strategies, as a result of which the plans are better informed. For example, the countywide homelessness strategy is derived from a review completed by each Council. This was considered at a countywide consultation event in January 2008 with over 100 attendees with themed working groups. Feedback from the event helped to shape the resulting countywide strategy and action plan.
- 49 Consultation takes place on a continuous basis with local organisations. A housing theme action group that consists of local representatives including housing associations, landlords, developers and other interested parties meets quarterly. There is also an in-house team of officers and a housing district operational group which focuses on vulnerable groups. Each group works to an action plan that builds upon the housing strategy. This approach should ensure that the strategic approach is updated rapidly as the political and social environment changes.
- 50 There are some gaps in the Council's knowledge relating to vulnerable groups. It does not have a complete picture of the number of houses in multiple occupation, including high risk properties, located within the District. There is no information available on the level of under-occupation of homes in the district. Nor does it have a clear understanding of the amount of rough sleeping that takes place locally. There is a lack of information relating to the needs of Black and Minority Ethnic groups. Though in each respect the numbers are likely to be low, the risk to the health of rough sleepers and people living in houses in multiple occupation is disproportionately high.
- 51 The Council does not engage effectively with town and parish councils. The Council has not ensured that town and parish councils have a good understanding of the role that rural exceptions sites can play in meeting need, or of emerging approaches such as community land trusts. There is little evidence of a partnership approach to identifying small schemes that will provide housing for local people in perpetuity. These are important weaknesses for a rural district council.
- 52 The Council does not involve housing service users effectively in its strategic planning. Involving housing association tenants will help the Council to gain a better insight into which housing associations it should be investing in, as well as obtaining a customer perspective on each of the policies it develops.

How good is the service?

The quality of the Council's housing strategies

- 53** There is a significant gap between the Council's high-level ambitions for the delivery of affordable housing and the plans in place to ensure delivery. Affordable housing is identified as a key priority in the Dorset Community Plan, it is one of the Council's six priorities and Town and Parish Councillors are clear that it is the area's biggest challenge. However, the role that housing can play in meeting wider objectives is not clearly identified in the corporate plan for example:
- COM1 - Improve the provision of services for young people - through the provision of an adequate supply of housing and support;
 - COM2 - Reduce crime and the fear of crime - through the design of estates and homes (planning design guidance also omits this);
 - COM3 - Support local people in identifying and meeting their own needs - an opportunity to promote community land trusts, exceptions sites and parish needs surveys; and
 - COM4 - Promote equality and accessibility for all - by addressing the significant gaps in supported housing provision.
- 54** Critically, the Council does not at present have a robust planning framework to ensure the delivery of sufficient affordable housing. The current policy fails because almost all sites fall below the threshold of 15 that the Council adopted in 2005. It aims to address this by reducing the threshold (possibly down to zero; in other words requiring every home developed to make a contribution) but progress on the local development framework is stalled. This is because the Regional Spatial Strategy requires 6,400 homes by 2025 but to the Council is opposed to this scale of development. Until this conflict is resolved the Council will be unable to reduce the threshold and this may take as long as two more years. The overarching debate over numbers undermines any ability on the part of the Council to deliver a significant number of affordable homes.
- 55** The situation is further exacerbated by a weak approach to rural housing. The Council adopted a rural exceptions policy as part of its Local Plan but has struggled to develop any homes through the policy. Neither the parishes nor the District Council has taken a more leading role in identifying and garnering support for sites and few parish needs surveys have been carried out. Six towns and parishes (out of 17) have adopted parish plans, while another two are in progress, but these are of variable quality and sometimes conflict with the policies of both the district and parish councils. As a result there is little awareness among the parish councils of the role that small affordable housing schemes can have in providing attractive homes for local people and sustaining local communities.

- 56** Design guidance is helping to ensure that new housing is of an attractive appearance, but the Council is not using it to promote innovative, low energy housing development. Design guidance has been in place since 1999 for new and existing housing. The guidance highlights some of the high quality developments that existed prior to its adoption and many new examples of attractive design have been created since. The guidance is helping to ensure that some of the unimaginative estates created in the 1980s will not be replicated. The guidance focuses primarily on the appearance and materials used for new homes. Some aspects are sustainable, such as the use of local materials, but parts of the guidance on, for example, densities, has been overtaken by national guidance. Consequently densities have increased but remain well below levels that exist elsewhere due to the character of the district. Some of the guidance on, for example, the avoidance of cul-de-sacs and boundary walls is at variance with secure by design principles, but in an area that currently has the lowest levels of crime in the UK this has less impact. An important omission is that energy efficiency does not feature in the guidance. Given that domestic energy consumption is a major source of CO2 emissions, this is a missed opportunity, since energy efficiency was a national concern well before the guidance was produced. Because the Council is not encouraging developments of sustainable housing there are few positive examples of this.
- 57** The housing strategy 2005 to 2009 was of a relatively high quality, but is now well out-of-date. It clearly explains the wider national, regional and countywide priorities and how they impact on East Dorset. It also gives specific examples of how stakeholders have influenced the strategy. The three overarching priorities of the strategy are clear and the way in which it will be monitored and managed is explained well. It is backed up with a set of actions, although only a minority are specific, measurable and outcome focussed. However the strategy is fundamentally flawed because it has not been updated to reflect the research that has taken place throughout the intervening years, nor of the changed social and political landscape. For example, the significant reduction in the number of new affordable homes being developed has not led to an increased focus on making better use of the existing stock, or of a focus on 'off the shelf' purchases. The Council is not using its resources well if it helps to fund good quality research and consultation but then does not make good use of it.
- 58** There are important weaknesses in the plans that sit above and below the housing strategy. These are summarised as:
- the Dorset Community Plan identifies housing as a high priority and sets some clear objectives but with a narrow focus principally on new homes, when this only accounts for a fraction of the stock;
 - the Dorset Supporting People Strategy Update 2008 contains priorities around how services are managed and which services are most in need of growth, but does not say where or how any growth will be funded in a reducing budget. It is difficult to see therefore how the significant gaps in supported housing services in East Dorset will be filled;

How good is the service?

- the Dorset Homelessness Review and Strategy 2008 to 2013 action plan sets out a wide of actions which reflect the findings of the review. However, they are expressed in terms which are not specific or measurable. Most actions are expressed in terms of 'improve' or 'ensure provision of' or 'develop'; and
- the Council lacks a robust strategy for private sector housing. The housing strategy sets out a clear approach to energy efficiency and help for older and disabled people to remain in their own homes. It accepts that a reactive approach to the quality of housing, particularly houses in multiple occupation, is 'no longer appropriate' but does not say what it wants to achieve and how it will do so.

The use of existing housing

59 Weaknesses outweigh strengths. The Council is failing in its legal duty to provide written decisions to all households who are threatened with homelessness. There is very little assistance for home owners to improve their homes to meet the decent homes standard. The Council is not proactively ensuring private rented homes meet minimum standards or dealing effectively with empty homes and the condition of mobile homes. Both the homelessness and private sector housing service are not delivered in a customer-focused way. However, housing association homes are well maintained and the Council and its agent have developed a high quality, effective choice based lettings service. The number of families and single homeless people becoming homeless and having to occupy temporary accommodation is falling as a result of an effective rental deposits scheme and an increased supply of privately rented accommodation. Homes are let quickly and a transfer incentives scheme is helping to reduce under-occupation, although this remains an area for improvement. There is a strong partnership with private landlords, good work to improve energy efficiency and disabled adaptations are completed quickly.

Homelessness and housing advice

- 60** The Council is failing in its legal duty to provide written decisions to all households who are threatened with homelessness.⁹ Homelessness applications are only completed on the day that households become homeless - and only then if they are placed into temporary accommodation. This is contrary to both the legislation and the Code of Guidance. It means that applicants do not have the opportunity to challenge the Council's implicit decision that they are not homeless, or any other reason for not providing alternative accommodation. This creates further uncertainty and stress to those facing homelessness. It also shows that the reported speed of decision making and incidence of homelessness is incorrect.
- 61** Rough sleeping is believed to be low, but the Council has not tested this. This is an area of research that is missing, without which the Council will be unable to identify what it should be doing to help people into settled accommodation.

⁹ Homelessness Code of Guidance for Local Authorities (2006) paragraph 22.

- 62 The homelessness service is insufficiently customer-focused. Aside from homelessness decisions, there is very little correspondence with potentially homeless people to advise them of progress and of their right to independent advice. There are few service standards and those that are in place have not been published or the subject of consultation. Consultation has not been taking place with current or previously homeless people until recently. Customer satisfaction monitoring is underdeveloped (only ten users and agencies have been surveyed to date) and the results, which are not yet statistically reliable, are disappointing. The service will be less able to address weaknesses if it does not engage properly and fairly with users of the service.
- 63 A wide range of activities have been adopted to help prevent people from becoming homeless.
- Close working relationships have been developed with major private landlords and so housing advisors can access a supply of homes in this way. Since starting the rent deposit scheme in 1993, the Council has supported over 500 applicants, with 56 in 2007/08 alone. Financial incentives of £500 are also offered to private landlords in return for an extended 12 month tenancy.
 - A private sector leasing scheme has grown from 35 at 2003 to 72 as at April 2008.
 - A homeless prevention fund assisted 31 households between 1 April 2003 and 30 June 2008. A recent example of this is the payment of mortgage arrears accrued by a family with two disabled children. The arrears do not need to be repaid until the sale of the house. This outlay provides very good value for money compared with the human and financial cost of homelessness.
 - There is reasonable access to independent housing advice and debt advice. There is a good day-to-day relationship between the housing advice team and the Citizens Advice Bureau who undertake most of this work. The quality of advice provided by the agency is however a weakness revealed in two independent checks carried out by Shelter and in our own file checks; and
 - Relationships with the housing benefits team are good – they are prepared to revise decisions quickly when approached by the housing advice team. For example, they deal immediately if a person approaches the Council as a result of a court order for arrears.

The impact of this is detailed below by the significant reduction in the numbers in bed and breakfast hotels and temporary accommodation.

- 64 The number of households in temporary accommodation and bed and breakfast hotels is relatively low. At the end of three of the last four years there were no families in bed and breakfast hotels. During this time just one family has been in occupation for over six weeks. This is important because there are no bed and breakfast hotels in the district that will provide shelter for homeless families. As a result those who do need this type of accommodation have to leave their home towns and support networks. The number in temporary accommodation has also fallen substantially from 53 to 12 over the past four years as better solutions, such as leasing and rental deposits, have made an impact.

How good is the service?

- 65 The Council does not support a women's refuge but has access to a number of women's refuges in surrounding districts and a shared outreach worker. The creation of an outreach service (provided jointly with Christchurch Borough Council) in December 2003 has assisted 60 women to date in the East Dorset area. The Council can identify success stories as a result of the outreach service. The two councils have also jointly facilitated a multi agency domestic violence forum since November 2003. This work is having a real impact on the lives of vulnerable women and their children.
- 66 When applicants have the opportunity to apply for a review of a homelessness decision, the approach taken is fair. Reviews are carried out by the Council and in the last two years there have been five applications. Of these two were upheld, two overturned and one was withdrawn. However if two in five decisions are overturned it casts doubt on the effectiveness of the agency's own internal controls and because few decisions are issued most applicants do not know that they have the right to a review.
- 67 Some support is provided to vulnerable people faced with homelessness, but this service is not fully exploited. The contractor has an in-house tenancy support service and can refer people in temporary accommodation to a county wide floating support service funded by supporting people. However the number of referrals is well below that of other Councils and there is a risk that homeless people will go from one crisis to another if they are not supported.

Private sector housing

- 68 The majority of homes in East Dorset are in a good condition. The proportion of private sector homes that fail the decent homes standard falls well below the national average of 32 per cent. Energy efficiency ratings in the private sector exceed regional and national averages and fewer households are in fuel poverty. This means that most people occupy good quality homes, in part a reflection of the relative affluence of the district. However our concerns focus on the significant minority of residents, including some of the most vulnerable, who occupy homes that are in poor repair and potentially unsafe.
- 69 The Council takes very little formal enforcement action. It argues that informal action is always successful, but there are many local people who continue to live in poor quality accommodation with the Council doing little about it. The regulation work is not proactive, the Council has not taken any formal action for some time and workloads and staff absences have meant that the sector which shows the highest level of non-decency – that of houses in multiple occupation – has not been effectively regulated. We found that some of the rented accommodation owned by a major national charity is in a very poor condition. Others stated that property has been left vacant or demolished and the land left undeveloped, some for over five years. While there are many responsible landlords who have been accredited by the Council and need little persuasion to maintain their homes properly, formal action will always be necessary for the minority of irresponsible landlords.

- 70** The Council is not proactively ensuring private rented homes meet minimum standards and has been slow to respond to its statutory duty to license Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs). It estimates that there are only two properties that fall within the definition (a further property is now in the ownership of a housing association and so is exempt) and only one has been licensed to date. The methodology used to locate houses in multiple occupation uses a number of sources, but falls short of best practice. There is no proactive regulation work programme in place to ensure that houses in multiple occupation are regularly inspected to ensure compliance with all standards. The health and safety of people living in the poorest form of housing is an important risk that the Council should have addressed sooner.
- 71** There is insufficient focus on bringing empty homes back into use. The Council has inconsistent information on the number of empty homes. One estimate states that of 915 long term empty dwellings, 224 have been empty for over six months without good reason (such as being in probate or the occupant being in care). A further 234 have been empty for up to six months. Other estimates are of 711 empty homes, with 99 empty for over six months. However the Council has only a small budget of £30,000 for this work and has only been able to bring three properties a year back into use. It has not taken formal enforcement action against the worst offenders. Failure to utilise this wasted resource puts pressure on the housing market.
- 72** The Council is not effectively addressing housing conditions on mobile home sites. There are 12 which provide over 1000 park homes. There is no programmed, risk-based, proactive strategic approach to ensure that they are regularly inspected or to address the poor thermal efficiency which is associated with this type of construction. Mobile homes provide accommodation for a sizeable proportion of local people, but there is little protection for the most vulnerable residents.
- 73** There is very limited little assistance for home owners to improve their homes to meet the decent homes standard. The budget for this work is £60,000 and the Council has been slow to develop the more cost effective alternative of loans, as was encouraged with the Regulatory Reform Order of 2002. So far there have been three loans provided and the Council has successfully bid for funding to support an expansion of the service. There is however a very limited range of home improvement assistance offered to owner occupiers at present.
- 74** The customer focus of the private sector housing service is poor. There is little engagement with tenants in the private sector or with residents of mobile homes. There are no service specific standards and the outcomes that matter most to residents, such as the speed with which improvements are arranged or enforcement action is resolved, are not monitored. Satisfaction with the home improvement agency and handyvan service is monitored and both result in very positive feedback, but in the more challenging areas of enforcement there is no monitoring taking place of either complainants or landlords.

How good is the service?

- 75** The way the adaptations service is delivered is inefficient. In some circumstances three different organisations visit the disabled person requiring the work. It is also unclear whether the home improvement agency provides value for money. While the service is having a positive impact in terms of access to benefits and other increased income (as shown below) it was only required to assist seven disabled people to obtain adaptations in the last year, out of 104 grant applications. The Council is providing an increasing amount of funding for the service, in addition to contributions from the Primary Care Trust, grant fees and Supporting People grant, but until this year the service has not been subjected to any form of competition or cost benefit analysis. A tendering process is currently taking place, which should address this. In the meantime, the administrative work of processing grants is being managed by highly paid environmental health professionals.
- 76** There is a successful landlord accreditation scheme in place. The scheme is run in partnership with the National Landlords Association (NLA). Landlords are required to comply with all the basic legal standards and the requirements of the Housing Health and Safety Rating System. Compliance is based primarily on self certification, subject to periodic inspections. It is a requirement of the scheme that all accredited landlords are members of the NLA and agree to comply with the Code of Practice. To encourage landlords to become accredited the Council will offer a grant to a landlord to cover the reasonable cost of roof insulation and cavity wall insulation to the properties that are subject to accreditation. An accredited landlord can recommend their tenants for accreditation status, which they can use as a reference when looking for new accommodation. Accreditation schemes encourage responsible landlords to maintain their homes in good condition.
- 77** Landlord forums take place regularly, provide an important source of information and are well attended. A range of topical and useful subjects are covered including energy performance certificates, portable appliance testing, benefits and the local housing allowance, risks from boilers and tax advice. Landlords find the forum useful and informative, with the result that they now provide a major source of housing for Council nominees.
- 78** The Council is helping residents improve the energy efficiency of their homes. A partnership agreement with the Dorset Energy Advice Centre ensures a single point of contact for specialist advice and support to improve energy efficiency. This year £58,000 has been committed to improve the energy efficiency of low income owner occupiers in fuel poverty, reflecting a substantial increase over the original budget. The programme is used to support residents where their contribution is over and above the Warmfront funding available. The grant also ensures that the property will meet the decent homes standard at the end of the work. The programme also offers assistance to households in fuel poverty that receive a qualifying benefit but do not have children under 16 years of age, are under 60 years of age or are not disabled.

- 79** Adaptations to help older and disabled people remain in their own homes are completed quickly. In the current year, it has taken an average of 134 days between the referral from the occupational therapist to the completion of works. This does not represent the total time for the work, since it does not include the time taken by the occupational therapists themselves. However there is no waiting list and some procedures for the work have been streamlined to speed up the process. For example, occupational therapists accept assessments from the independent living centre for minor adaptations without the need for home visits. Housing associations also play their part by funding minor work in accordance with government guidance and as a result the budget is sufficient to meet the demand.
- 80** The handyman service provides a well regarded small repairs service for vulnerable residents. There is also a small 'safe and secure' grants service which provides a prompt service, helping vulnerable residents to the security and fire precautions in their homes.

Housing association homes

- 81** Housing association homes are in a very good condition. Over 95 per cent of these homes are in the ownership of East Dorset Housing Association and all but four at the time of the inspection met the decent homes standard. The SAP (energy efficiency) rating of its stock is 75, which is well above average. There is also an innovative arrangement in place to encourage tenants to report disrepair to the Council's environmental health service if the housing association fails to meet its repairing responsibilities. The association itself finds this helpful as a check and balance for the service and it contributes in a small way to helping homes meet the decent homes standard.
- 82** The Council can take a great deal of credit for creating the first choice-based lettings scheme in Dorset. Since 2006 the Council has operated a scheme called Homefinder Dorset and this allows applicants to bid for each vacant property. This helps to ensure that people are housed where they want to be housed and also that they make realistic choices.
- 83** The choice based lettings service is the most easily accessible service offered by the Council and its agent. There is a common housing register to which all of the major housing associations are signed up. Vacancies are publicised widely in parish councils, libraries and supermarkets. Results of bids are publicised so applicants can see why they were unsuccessful. The Homefinder Dorset publication clearly explains the scheme in a professionally presented leaflet. Applicants are placed into three bands and a clear description of criteria for each band is given. The leaflet also tells customers about how they may appeal against their banding and of 31 appeals to date, 12 have been successful. A description of all homes available is on line, at Council offices, libraries and Parish Councils. Bids can be made electronically, by post or voice mail. As with all services there are very few service standards in place and those that exist are not challenging or developed in partnership with users. However in all other respects the way in which this service is delivered provides an example to the rest of the Council.

How good is the service?

- 84** The Council has responded positively to a decision by a national housing association for older people to close one of its sheltered housing schemes. The association gave notice on its elderly tenants within a week of advising them of its decision and gave the Council six months notice to secure alternative accommodation. The association paid disturbance allowances to the tenants affected, but has not made any undertaking to the Council on the future use of the property or the use of any capital receipt. Even so, the Council has acted responsibly and compassionately to secure new homes for those affected.
- 85** There is an active scheme in place to encourage the best use of housing association homes. The association and Council fund a successful and generous tenants' incentive scheme which includes a bonus if the home is offered to a homeless person.
- 86** The one aspect of the service that is in need of improvement is the approach to low demand homes. There are currently 115 sheltered bedsits that no longer meet the needs of older residents, but there are plans in place to make better use of each scheme. Given the shortage of accommodation for other vulnerable groups in East Dorset it is important that the Council makes the best possible use of the resources that it has access to.

Enabling the provision of more housing

- 87** Weaknesses significantly outweigh strengths in this area of activity. Despite reasonable numbers of market homes being constructed, very few have been affordable and they do not meet the identified needs of the district. The Council is not engaging effectively with town and parish councils to promote the development of affordable housing and with housing associations to deliver it. It is doing little to win over local opinion and, critically, establish strong partnerships with developers and town and parish councils.
- 88** The number of affordable homes being developed in East Dorset is very low. The Council has already exceeded the requirement of the Dorset Structure Plan to develop 4,400 new dwellings between 1994 and 2011, but only 240 so far have been affordable, with only 36 in the past four years. The rate of development has not been steady - much of it occurred in the early years - and so by the time the current affordable housing requirements were adopted there were few larger sites remaining. Although the threshold was reduced to 15 almost all sites fell below this and so it was not low enough to generate affordable housing. This means that there are greater housing options for those wish to move into the area, often to retire, while many local young people who cannot compete in the housing market have to move elsewhere. This is creating a community that is unbalanced and generating homelessness among people who have been priced out of the market.

- 89** The size and mix of the few affordable homes delivered is not meeting the identified need. The Council has had to reduce its affordable housing target to 40 homes a year which it considers will meet the needs of those with the very greatest housing needs. A third of these are young people while the remainder are families. The majority of the 36 homes completed in the past four years comprised small, predominantly sheltered flats, with only seven for young people. Some of the total has replaced obsolete sheltered housing stock, but older people are already the group that is best served by the current housing stock. The Council is therefore not maximising the opportunity presented by the few opportunities that come its way to help those in greatest need.
- 90** The Council is not making good use of its powers under planning legislation. No homes have been achieved as a result of section 106 agreements in the past four years and for the last three years for which comparisons are available there have been fewer affordable homes developed in East Dorset than in any other district in the South West, including the Isles of Scilly. While the Council points to the large number of schemes that fall below the threshold of 15, when the opportunity has arisen it has not been taken. As an example, no affordable housing was generated at a new 40 apartment sheltered housing scheme in West Moors. In part this is because the affordable housing policy states loosely that any form of special needs housing counts as a contribution, even if it is not affordable. At West Moors 'extra care' was defined by the developer as being the provision of grab rails and laundry facilities and the Council did not challenge this. This means that luxury retirement schemes have attracted more older people into the district making no contribution to meeting the needs of local, low income families. In another instance, the outcome was outside of the Council's control. Where the Council challenged a scheme on its density (resulting in the scheme falling below the threshold) its refusal was overturned by the Planning Inspector.
- 91** The quality of liaison between planners and housing associations is inconsistent. The Council accepts that the quality of planning advice provided is uneven, sometimes due to staffing shortages. Housing associations complained of face-to-face advice being contradicted in follow up correspondence and of new and costly requirements being imposed late in the day. At the same time the quality of submissions and time taken by some associations is a source of frustration to the Council, with applications being submitted in an incomplete form and having insufficient regard to the advice provided. New developments will take longer to come to fruition if there are avoidable delays in the process.

How good is the service?

- 92 The Council is not engaging effectively with town and parish councils to promote the development of affordable housing. They are not involved significantly in the development of housing strategies. Few parish plans, needs surveys and land identification exercises have been undertaken. Parishes express a desire for more information about affordable housing issues and do not have regular briefings on housing issues with some reporting that this has never happened. Planners do not, as a matter of course, meet with parishes to talk through potential rural exceptions sites. Parishes perceive that it is up to them to come to the Council to find out about services rather than the other way around. The recent Taylor report¹⁰ recommends that planning authorities should work in partnership with the parishes to draw up a long term vision for each community. This is not happening and as a result there is a large degree of ignorance among town and parish councillors about solutions to rural housing needs and so they are less able to make the case for affordable housing locally.
- 93 The Council is not demonstrating good community leadership by balancing the needs and aspirations of all local people. There is a significant tension in reconciling the need to maximise the delivery of housing while also protecting the environment and character of the area. Importantly, the Council has opposed the option to deliver more homes on urban extensions - the one option that appears capable of delivering significant numbers of affordable housing - without putting forward an alternative. The Council's inability to make difficult decisions in order to balance local priorities will continue to impact on the delivery of affordable housing.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 94 Weaknesses outweigh strengths. The service does not have a clear understanding of its costs and how they compare. It has not embedded a value for money 'culture' - its focus has been on controlling costs rather than a strategic approach to improving and managing value for money. The Council corporately is taking steps to embed a value for money culture and it is positive that some important cost savings and efficiency improvements have been achieved by the service in recent years.

¹⁰ Living Working Countryside - The Taylor Review of the Rural Economy and Affordable Housing (2009) Chapter 3

How do costs compare?

95 The service does not have a clear understanding of its costs and how they compare. It cannot demonstrate value for money in its outsourced services because these have rarely been the subject of market testing.

- The Council has not appraised the value for money of developments by housing associations operating in the area. It has never undertaken a selection process for preferred partners and has relied upon housing associations to come forward with development proposals. With limited development opportunities and the difficulties associated with them, the Council is not in a strong negotiating position in this respect. However should more attractive opportunities emerge through the local development framework, the Council will be in a position to select those associations that can give added value. Possible approaches include working with those associations that are most successful at developing rural exceptions sites, have the best design expertise or who provide the best services to their tenants.
- The Council is unable to demonstrate that the £305,000 contract for the provision of housing advice and the housing register provides value for money. An agency arrangement was established 20 years ago when the transfer of the housing stock took place. Benchmarking has taken place in recent months and shows that the administrative cost of the service is above average compared with other Councils in Dorset. The Shelter reviews showed that the service was failing in a number of important respects. In spite of this and the value of the contract, it has not been subject to any form of re-procurement. The reason for this was that in other respects, notably choice based lettings¹¹ and the development of preventive activity, the contractor had performed well. Improved value for money could also be achieved through the use of rental bonds rather than deposits, particularly as one of the largest private landlords is used to this approach by other Councils. Had the Council taken a more robust approach sooner it could have achieved savings to re-invest in other services or alternatively improved the homelessness service at no additional cost.
- The Council has an understanding of the cost of the home improvement agency, but does not know how it compares in performance or against other services beyond the limits of Dorset. The County Council, four districts and Primary Care Trust who share the cost of the home improvement agency (which amounted to £250,000 plus fees in 2007/08) have yet to subject it to competition. This is in spite of a change in the nature of the service being provided and a request which has been granted for top-up funding.

¹¹ This is a government initiative to enable people to have a greater say in where they are housed and by doing so promote sustainable communities. All Councils are expected to have adopted a choice-based approach by 2010.

How good is the service?

- Some rudimentary cost analysis carried out for 2007/08 with four neighbouring Councils showed that the private sector housing service is low cost. However, when compared with service teams of approximately the same size the service is the highest cost overall, so the figures need further investigation, which has yet to happen.

There are a number of activities that the Council has not been able to pursue because of a perceived lack of resources and so it is all the more important that it makes the best possible use of what expenditure it is already incurring.

- 96 The choice based lettings service provides the best example of value for money among the services inspected. It has been procured at relatively low cost and at no detriment to the time taken to let properties, with very few empty at any one time. In 2008 the largest housing association in the district took an average of 25 days per letting, which puts it among the best performing 25 per cent (although the performance of other associations is less impressive). Initial surveys indicate high levels of satisfaction and, as is shown above, the service is of a high quality. The understanding of the quality and cost of this service is an example that other services would do well to learn from.

How is value for money managed?

- 97 The Council has not embedded a value for money 'culture'. The Council has had a strong focus on controlling costs rather than a strategic approach to improving value for money. It is positive that value for money is one of the key ambitions of the Council. The corporate plan includes objectives of delivering the 'efficient, effective and economic use of resources' and 'high quality services that meet the needs of the community.' However the key success measures do not reflect this. They are focused on ensuring that the budget is controlled and that Councillors and staff are well trained. While these are important ingredients, this does not reflect a strategic approach to improving value for money by improving effectiveness and value based on a clear understanding of costs and performance and how they compare.
- 98 Value for money is not yet integral to its performance management arrangements. The Council has been slow to make the important step of incorporating value for money into reporting and service planning but aims to do so over the coming year. In addition, the Council plans to implement a systematic approach to reviewing services and their value for money but there is no timetable for this.
- 99 The Council corporately is taking steps to embed a value for money culture. The value for money strategy now provides guidelines and a declaration of the Council's intentions. The principles within the strategy are sound and the responsibility for each of the ambitions is clear. However many of the stated intentions are not SMART. For example the Council signals its intention to 'evaluate different options (internal, external and jointly with partners) for procuring supplies and services' but does not say whether this means all services and by when such reviews will be completed. The strategy lists the measures it will use to evaluate value for money including residents' feedback and benchmarking without saying what it is aiming for. This reflects the current situation that the approach is still in its infancy and the Council cannot yet say with confidence how each service performs in this respect.

- 100** The Council is not directing resources strategically towards its housing priorities. Strategic housing services account for a small proportion of the total expenditure of the Council, which was estimated to be £12.4 million in 2008/09. There are some areas where resourcing has increased; for example expenditure on disabled facilities grants to reflect increasing demand and the additional funding requested by the home improvement agency. But this is not done in a strategic way or on the basis of a value for money assessment. So important areas of activity are getting overlooked. For example, the enabling capacity of the service was criticised in our 2004 balancing housing markets diagnostic report. The council recognised this as a weakness but has not taken action to address it, even though housing is a corporate priority.
- 101** The service has not used procurement to deliver value for money improvements with most services delivered in a traditional way. The Council has a traditional approach to procurement. Its procurement policy provides managers with the choice of in-house, external and joint provision. It encourages five year or longer contracts but does not set out why and when a contract should be reviewed. As a result the homelessness contract has never been the subject of review. Value for money is not being maximised through innovative approaches to service and partnership working.
- 102** Monitoring arrangements for value for money are weak. The service level agreement for the homelessness contract has an over-emphasis on procedures and a limited focus on outcomes for customers. There is no agreement in place for the £70,000 grant to the Citizens Advice Bureau. There is no schedule of rates system in place to help officers determine the reasonableness of estimates received for the grant work that they administer. The monitoring of the largest contract - housing advice - has increased in recent months but the Council is struggling to drive change within the contractor.
- 103** However, some important and lasting cost savings and efficiency improvements have been achieved by the service in recent years.
- The Council responded positively to the national drive to reduce the use of bed and breakfast accommodation. Through its leasing scheme alone it estimates that it has saved a net amount of £163,890 per year.
 - There is strong partnership working with other councils that is helping to reduce costs. Joint commissioning is playing a major role in terms of research and strategic development. High quality research is helping to raise the profile of housing at a county level and provide the basis for good quality strategies for older people, young people, domestic violence and homelessness. The Council could not have achieved this degree of quality on its own at the same cost. There are many other ways in which it is working in partnership, although some still have scope for improvement. These include:
 - the Dorsetforyou.com website - an ambitious attempt by the County and three districts to give their residents access to public services through a single portal;
 - a joint approach to the local development framework, with Christchurch;
 - jointly funded services such as the domestic violence outreach worker and the handyperson service;

How good is the service?

- joint training across a range of housing issues; and
- joint responses to government consultation papers.

Joint working with other councils is therefore helping to reduce costs and increase the Council's capacity to deliver.

104 The Council has successfully drawn in income to increase its capacity. It successfully bid for government funding for a Housing Advice Officer in November 2006 and a Housing Support Officer in 2008. This now amounts to £50,000 although this short term grant is coming to an end. It has also drawn in £35,000 for a Nightstop lodgings service. It also receives generous support from East Dorset Housing Association of £60,000 in the current year (rising to £100,000 in 2010/11) towards the cost of adaptations for disabled tenants.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 105** Weaknesses outweigh strengths. The track record of improvement in the service is poor. Progress against the findings of external assessment is poor and on the implementation of key plans and strategies is mixed. Performance indicators show an equally variable picture while progress in the cross cutting areas of customer care, diversity and value for money is weak.
- 106** The Council's track record in implementing the housing findings of the 2004 comprehensive performance assessment is poor. The assessment identified that plans need to be SMART, that the understanding of local issues needed to improve and that the financial and staffing capacity of the service was a risk. These weaknesses have not been addressed.
- 107** The track record on delivering key plans and strategies is mixed. The Council was able to meet the structure plan target for overall housing development well ahead of schedule. The temporary accommodation action plan and the homelessness target within the Local Area Agreement were also met. However it has been slow to address the weaknesses of the homelessness service identified in 2006 by Shelter. The Council has also fallen well short of its targets for affordable housing and there are still some significant gaps in its strategic aim to establish a more proactive private sector housing service. The 2005 corporate plan contains targets to increase the level of consultation, feedback and information to the local community, but we have found little evidence of this for housing.
- 108** Progress in the cross cutting areas of customer care, diversity and value for money is weak. Services are still difficult to access for many local people and the range of services for some of the most vulnerable members of the community is very limited. Although the Council is now taking active steps to improve its approach to equality and diversity at present it does not understand the diversity of its community and equality and diversity is not embedded in the service through for example, the use of equality impact assessments. The range of services for the most vulnerable members of the East Dorset community is variable. But there has been an increase in the supply of accommodation and support for vulnerable people. Joint working is improving value for money but the service does not have a clear understanding of its costs and how they compare and has not embedded a value for money 'culture'.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

109 Performance indicators show a mixed picture of improvement in individual services:

- the speed with which planning applications are handled is high and improving, but this is sometimes undermined by the inconsistent times with which pre-application discussions can take, for the reasons given in paragraph 91;
- some of the data on homelessness is unreliable for reasons stated earlier, but outcomes are improving with fewer people in bed and breakfast and other forms of temporary accommodation;
- the condition of housing association homes has improved and there are fewer harder to let properties;
- the volume of activity on adaptations has improved thanks to the injection of additional funding by both the Council and the largest housing association;
- the volume of advice to owner occupiers has increased, but the level of action to address disrepair and empty homes is low and unchanged. Energy efficiency ratings are reported to have fallen, but we question the validity of this data; and
- performance on processing housing benefit applications has deteriorated (though it remains within the best 25 per cent).

How well does the service manage performance?

110 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. There is now clear and visible political commitment to the service, which gives more confidence that improvement will be delivered. There is a good self-awareness and high-level plans are in place to address most of its weaknesses. But the supporting action plans are weak and there are significant weaknesses in the approach to performance management. The service is generally learning well from customer feedback and from local partners but its approach to service delivery in a number of areas does not reflect learning from good practice.

111 The Council's plans are informed by a good level of self-awareness. The scrutiny report on the enabling service is a particularly good example of an open and self-critical report. The report on the services being undertaken by East Dorset Housing Association is equally impressive in its analysis. Some issues have only recently come to the fore, notably in terms of homelessness and the regulation of the private sector. Any organisation is more likely to improve if it is open about its weaknesses and what needs to happen.

112 The Council has high-level plans in place to address most of the weaknesses identified in this report. Key among these are:

- 33 recommendations that have been accepted on changes to the enabling function;
- new countywide strategies being developed for young people and empty homes;
- the Council has now resolved to take the homelessness and housing advice service back in-house and a countywide review of home improvement agencies is now in progress;

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- the introduction of loans to tackle disrepair and a bid for funding to cover the cost of a Park Homes inspection regime;
- taking a leading role on work to address the needs of Gypsies and Travellers;
- there are robust plans in place to help the Council to reach level 3 of the Equalities Standard and address other operational weaknesses in the way services are delivered to vulnerable people;
- improvements are planned to the way that performance is managed; and
- changes in the approach to value for money, with the Council party to the Dorset pathfinder work taking place in Dorset on shared services.

The plans if implemented should lead to significant improvements in the service.

113 Some plans are undermined by the quality of action plans to support them.

- The mixed quality of housing strategies (and the absence of an up to date housing strategy in particular) and the value for money strategy has previously been mentioned. The corporate social inclusion, diversity and equalities strategy is, like the 2005 housing strategy, well written and outcome focussed, but deadlines have passed for almost all of the actions and some, such as embedding equality impact assessments in business plans (by 2006), have yet to be achieved.
- Very few actions within the improvement action plan are SMART or outcome focused. Most have 'ongoing' targets; most are to 'review' services without stating what the desired outcome will be; and those about which the Council appears least confident are 'seek to' actions. Some obvious SMART targets, such as meeting the national targets for decent homes and homelessness, are not referred to. The actions are not costed and do not show, overall, what an improved service is intended to look like.
- The policy planning business plan is of a much higher quality than that of housing or public health. It is completed with up to date information and the corporate commitment to affordable housing evident in the text as well as in the national and local targets for the service. Some targets, such as the proximity of housing to schools, employment and public transport are particularly imaginative. By contrast the 2007/09 housing business plan is incomplete, contains an out of date improvement plan and only six targets (none of which is locally set) covering only 2007/08. The impression is that it is the 2007/08 plan with only the title changed.
- The pace of change and the deadline for key activities is uncertain. Any significant progress on new housing development will depend upon the speed with which the local development framework is adopted and the Council's challenge to the Regional Spatial Strategy will delay its adoption by a considerable period. The creation of an enabling post is also on hold pending a new staffing structure (even though the Council has accepted that the work needs to be done) and so it is expected to be at least 18 months years since the Scrutiny report and five years since the 2004 Audit Commission recommended it before this post is filled.

The Council's self-awareness will be a source of frustration rather than strength if it is unable to implement the changes it needs to make.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 114** The Council is not monitoring its progress against strategic aims in a systematic way. There is no timetable to ensure that each strategy is updated regularly and in a coordinated way (for example prompted by a change to the corporate plan). It is over a year since an annual statement on progress against the housing strategy has been produced. The Council is struggling to keep pace with the changing environment in which it is operating and address poor performance because it does not review its strategies regularly enough.
- 115** There are weaknesses in the approach to performance reporting. The Council has continued to adopt best value performance plans to drive improvement. The format that it uses is easy to follow, containing a look back at the key achievements of previous year and the key initiatives for the coming year. It sets out trend information covering a wide range of local and national planning performance indicators and a smaller but equally relevant set of housing indicators. These cover the health and housing safety rating system, fuel poverty, decent homes, empty homes, homelessness and new build. However, the plans do not contain the trend and comparative information that Councillors need to help them to know what a good service should look like.
- 116** A performance management framework has been introduced, but its application is weak. There is an annual review meeting in which staff are asked what they think they have done well and what they think will be important in the next 12 months. However, the meetings are very generalised and do not refer back to what was talked about 12 months ago. There are no clear targets set and so the evaluation of performance is limited. There is also no clear connection between performance reviews and training provision. This is an important reason why the Council's aspirations are not being translated into real change.
- 117** The Council has been slow to respond to independent quality checks. It commissioned expert checks by Shelter in 2006 and 2008 on the service. The 2006 check highlighted some key weaknesses, but these had not been addressed by 2008. This is because staff working for the agency disagreed with Shelter's findings and did not act upon them effectively, in spite of the Council requiring it to do so. Our own file checks confirmed that the weaknesses persist, notably in respect of the quality of advice being provided. This reflects poorly on the relationship between the Council and its contractor and in the management of the contract.
- 118** The approach to risk management is still developing. Risks are reported regularly but the Council has not identified new strategic risks in a consistent way. There is a personal risk register but staff are not required to check it before carrying out home visits and so it is not as effective as intended. There is a business continuity risk register but it is not updated on a regular basis.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 119** The quality of data being used to monitor performance is a cause for concern. Some of the most important data from a customer perspective is not monitored regularly. For example, the key stages in the grants process are not adopted as service standards or monitored to help managers assess service quality and deliver effective performance appraisal. SAP (energy efficiency) ratings should never be getting worse because the energy efficiency of a house does not actually deteriorate unless you take out energy saving measures, yet the Council reports a reduction from 53 to 52 over the past four years. It emerged that this was due to conflicting figures in the 2008 and previous stock condition surveys. Our concerns with the number of homelessness applications being completed undermine some of the good work being done to prevent homelessness. The data on housing completions differs between the housing and planning services and different estimates exist for the number of empty homes. Councillors will be less able to manage the service if they cannot rely upon key data.
- 120** The service is generally learning well from customer feedback and from local partners but its approach to service delivery in a number of areas does not reflect learning from good practice. It learns well from complaints, though less so through consultation and dialogue with service users. Membership of the various countywide housing groups has helped it to improve, for example in the policies of the private sector housing service. It has also commissioned independent checks on the homelessness service. However, its approach to service delivery in a number of areas does not reflect learning from good practice. The best organisations are those that seek out and replicate policies and practices from other top performers, regardless of their proximity.
- 121** There is now clear and visible political commitment to the service. There is a clear recognition that although the Council has cited affordable housing, equalities, value for money and customer care as priorities for many years these ambitions have not been translated into significant improvement. The Leader of the Council has shown a real desire to bring in the resources and people to improve strategic housing services. This gives more confidence that improvements will be delivered.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 122** Capacity is a significant weakness. Staff and management capacity is weak. Financial capacity is also currently weak and increasingly under significant pressure. Some important partnerships are underdeveloped. However, managers and staff have access to good quality IT systems.
- 123** Management capacity within the service is weak. While there is good self awareness, managers have to spend too much time on operational matters to be able to drive change rather than strategically managing services. A vicious circle is in place that managers do not believe that they have the time to carry out a detailed analysis of the value for money of their services and so are unable to unlock resources that would increase their capacity. As has already been shown, performance management is not working well and planned improvements have not always been implemented. If managers do not invest the time to think ahead then little is likely to change.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 124** Staff capacity in each service is weak. The Council employs some talented people with the necessary skills and experience and, as an Investor in People, is able to offer good opportunities for training and development. However the service is fragmented between different departments and outside agencies, with in-house capacity very limited. Staff consistently reported that they were overwhelmed by the challenges that they face. The Council struggles to provide cover for the absence of key staff and this has resulted in delays in, for example, an action plan in response to the review of the homelessness service. The Council plans to take outsourced services back in house to set up a housing advice and homelessness service. This has the potential to increase capacity in the service in the future.
- 125** Financial capacity is currently weak and increasingly under significant pressure. The Council's revenue budget has been particularly strained by the funding of concessionary travel and at the same time it recovers relatively little in car parking charges. The additional funding for housing advisors and the budget for transfer incentives both cease in March 2011. The Council is not yet making the best use of its existing housing resources by its approach to procurement and value for money, other than through joint working. In terms of capital funding the Council has been able to fund increased disabled facilities grants but has no budget for social housing grant and no significant land reserves to call upon. Weak financial capacity is the single most important reason for the uncertainty that is present in the Council's plans and its inability to achieve what it set out to do.
- 126** Important partnerships with town and parish councils, developers and East Dorset Housing Association are underdeveloped. The Council is not engaging effectively with town and parish councils on enabling. The relationship with developers who are key to delivery is strained. There is a positive relationship between managers of the Council and the housing association but there has been little challenge until recently to the services provided by the association, so this relationship has not been tested. The Council will struggle to achieve its aspirations if key partnerships are weak.
- 127** The Council is improving its capacity through some strong partnerships. It is working well with other Councils in Dorset to jointly procure services and there is strong political and management support for the Dorset pathfinder on joint provision. There have already been some important achievements as a result of joint working, as listed in the section on value for money. Councillors are supportive of the idea of joint working and already have experience of the joint funding of posts. The Council also has a good working relationship with the Department for Communities and Local Government and this has been reflected in some of the revenue grants that it has attracted. The relationship with the largest private sector landlords is positive and as a result the Council has easy access to private sector lettings. These partnerships are contributing enormously to the potential of the Council.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

128 Staff within the Council and the housing needs service have the benefit of good IT facilities. The IT system supporting the private sector housing service is user-friendly and provides a good range of management information as well as a sound property database. Letters and notices etc are automatically generated and a bring-forward system helps officers track the cases they are managing. As the first Council in the county to develop a choice based lettings system, this it has a tried and tested IT system that is reflected in the promptness with which homes are relet. There are some good corporate systems, such as the performance management IT system, that managers can make use of.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Planning		2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	Comments Note: 2008/09 data is unaudited
1	Total number of new homes developed.	173	128	164		The overall supply of new homes has been healthy, averaging 155 a year for the period 2005/08.
2	Target number of homes within structure plan.	+21	-20	-44		The Council has exceeded its structure plan requirements.
3	Average density of new housing developments.	30dph – 32.9%	54.9%	36.6%		Higher density development peaked in 2005/06 and has fallen off since then. Lower density development has increased from 33 per cent to 37 per cent of all development, while high density homes (over 50 DPHA) falling from 56 per cent to 51 per cent of all development over the past three years.
	Based on sites with capacity of ten or more units.	30/50dph – 11%	25.4%	12.2%		
		50+dph – 55.9%	19.7%	51.2%		
4	Percentage on previously developed land.	99.54	93.62	56.71		The use of brownfield land peaked at almost 100 per cent in 2005/06 but has fallen off since then. One major Greenfield development resulted in the proportion (of 164 new homes) falling to 57 per cent.
5	Percentage 'secure by design'.	NA	NA	NA		The Council does not require secure by design standards to be met on new development and so is not using this opportunity to contribute to its own priority of 'promoting a safe environment and reducing crime'.
6	Percentage of major planning applications processed in 13 weeks.	73.9	90.6	76.7		The speed with which major planning applications are processed is above average. This has improved over the past three years.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Planning		2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	Comments
Note: 2008/09 data is unaudited						
7	Up to date development plan.	YES	YES	YES		Progress on the LDF stalled due to concerns with number of homes required by RSS.
9	Percentage of successful appeals against refusal of planning permission.	27.1	25.49	29		One in three appeals against planning permission are successful.
10	Score against a quality of planning service checklist.	83.3				The Council scored poorly against a quality of service checklist for planning as a result of in planning application information not being displayed on the Council's website. Most Councils met 100 per cent of the requirements.
11	Target percentage of affordable being required on sites in excess of the threshold size.	40	40	40		The Council has an appropriately high affordable housing requirement, given house prices and need, but on the few occasions that it has had the opportunity to negotiate an affordable element, only 25 per cent was achieved.
12	Percentage of affordable housing being achieved on sites in excess of the threshold size.	0	0	25		
Enabling						
13	Total number of affordable rented homes completed.	12	0	2	26	This figure also reflects poor performance on developing rural exceptions sites and any form of innovative housing.
17	Number of homes achieved through s106 agreements.	0	0	0	0	Twenty-seven homes have been negotiated but not yet built.
21	Number of rural housing needs surveys/village appraisals undertaken.	0	0	2	1	
23	Number of new supported housing units.	0	0	0	26	

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Planning		2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	Comments Note: 2008/09 data is unaudited
Housing needs						
25	Number of homelessness applications.	137	134	59	11	These figures are unreliable for reasons given in the report.
26	Number of those threatened with homeless for whom advice and support prevented the occurrence of homelessness.	94	30	131	118	We would expect the number of applications and decisions to at least match this figure.
27	Number of homelessness acceptances.	75	55	0	6	These figures are unreliable for reasons given in the report.
28	Number of families in B&B at 31 March.	0	0	1	0	Very little use is now made of bed and breakfast hotels.
29	Number of families in other temporary accommodation at 31 March.	45	53	17		Fewer people are now in temporary accommodation than three years ago, although the trend has not been continuously downward.
30	Number of single people in bed and breakfast hotels.	0	2	3		Few single people are in bed and breakfast hotels but the number is increasing.
31	Average no of weeks spent in B&B by families.	4.	2	6		The number of weeks spent in bed and breakfast hotels is increasing and the average now is over six weeks.
32	Average no of weeks spent in hostels by families.	11	8	15		The average amount of time spent in hostels is increasing.
Housing Association homes						
34	Number of low demand affordable homes.	na	na	138	115	

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Planning		2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	Comments Note: 2008/09 data is unaudited
35	Number of four, three or two bedroom properties vacated through transfer incentive schemes.	3	4	6	6	A modest number of homes are being used more efficiently as a result of the transfer incentives scheme.
37	Percentage of HA homes not meeting the decent homes standard.			0.11	0.11	Only four properties of EDHA's stock is non compliant with the decent homes standard'.
38	SAP rating for the social rented stock.			75		EDHA homes have a relatively high standard of insulation and energy efficiency.
39	Refuge places per 10,000.	0	0	0	0	While there is no Refuge in the district, a successful outreach service is in place.
Private sector housing						
40	Percentage of private sector homes that are in need of major repair.	4.7	4.5	4.5	4.4	The number of homes in need of major repair has remained relatively unchanged for the past three years.
42	Number of vacant homes returned to use.	0	3	3	3	Very few of the Council's estimated 711 empty homes are returned to use each year as a result of Council intervention.
43	Number of homes vacant for six months or longer.				99	
44	Percentage of private sector homes occupied by vulnerable people that do not meet the decent homes standard.			31.3		The Council estimates from the 2007/08 house condition survey that 31 per cent of non-decent homes in the private sector are occupied by vulnerable people.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Planning		2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	Comments
						Note: 2008/09 data is unaudited
45	Number of homes improved through the use of disabled facilities grants.	91	82	93	110	The number of homes made accessible through disabled facilities grants has remained fairly static at around 91 for the past three years.
46	Number of households to whom advice on repairs and improvements were provided.	117	280	302	484	The Council provides a reasonable and increasing volume of advice on repairs and improvements. The number has risen from 117 to 484 over the past four years.
47	Number of informal actions taken that have resolved unfitness in the private rented sector.	4	2	7	21	The Council takes very little informal and formal action to address unfitness in the private rented sector.
48	Number of formal actions taken which have resolved unfitness in the private rented sector.	0	0	2	0	See above.
49	Number of high risk HMOs registered.	0	0	0	1	The Council has only registered one house in multiple occupation to date and has not taken any action in the past year to ensure that these homes are safe.
50	Number of HMOs that meet the HH&SRS standard following your intervention.	0	0	0	0	As above.
51	SAP rating for the private sector housing stock.	53	54	51	52	Most homes in the private sector are well heated and insulated. However we question the quality of this data: energy efficiency ratings should never be getting worse because the energy efficiency of a house does not actually deteriorate unless you take out energy saving measures.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Planning		2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09	Comments
						Note: 2008/09 data is unaudited
52	Days taken for new HB claims,	27.9	38.69	29.8		Data for 2006/07 is unreliable.
53	Days taken for changes to HB claims,	7.32	5.27	8.04		Benefit claims are processed reasonably quickly, with new claims taking an average 30 days and revised claims taking an above average speed of eight days.
54	Accuracy of HB calculations,	95	97.2	96.8		Levels of accuracy with housing benefit calculations, at 96.8 per cent, are poor.

Appendix 2 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
 - focus groups with staff and customers;
 - interviews with staff, Councillors, partners and key stakeholders;
 - shadowing staff carrying out their activities;
 - observation at customer contact centre;
 - tour of the district;
 - visits to affordable housing developments;
 - viewing temporary and supported accommodation;
 - various file checks;
 - review of Council's website and leaflets; and
 - mystery shopping.

Appendix 3 – Positive practice

‘The Commission will identify and promote good practice. Every inspection will look for examples of good practice and innovation, and for creative ways to overcome barriers and resistance to change or make better use of resources’. (Seeing is Believing)

Joint working to deliver an effective adaptations service

- 1** Adaptations to help older and disabled people remain in their own homes are completed quickly. The Council deals with all requests for adaptations when as soon as they are received and there is no waiting list. The Council works well with its partners to deliver adaptations quickly for example, by carrying out minor adaptations following assessments from the independent living centre for without the need for home visits. Housing associations also play their part by funding minor work.

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