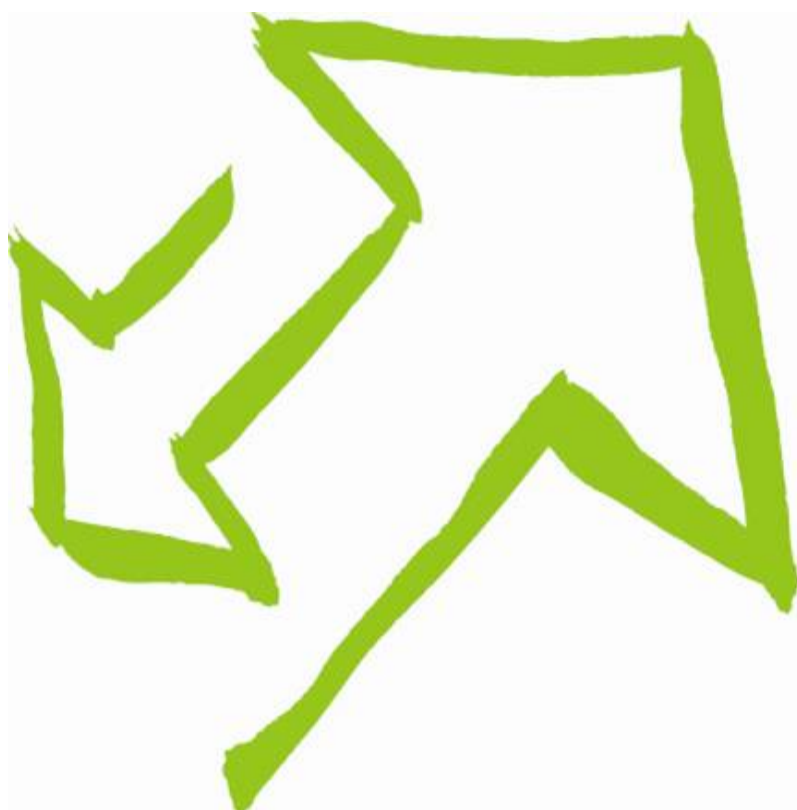


Strategic Housing Services

Wealden District Council

June 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.

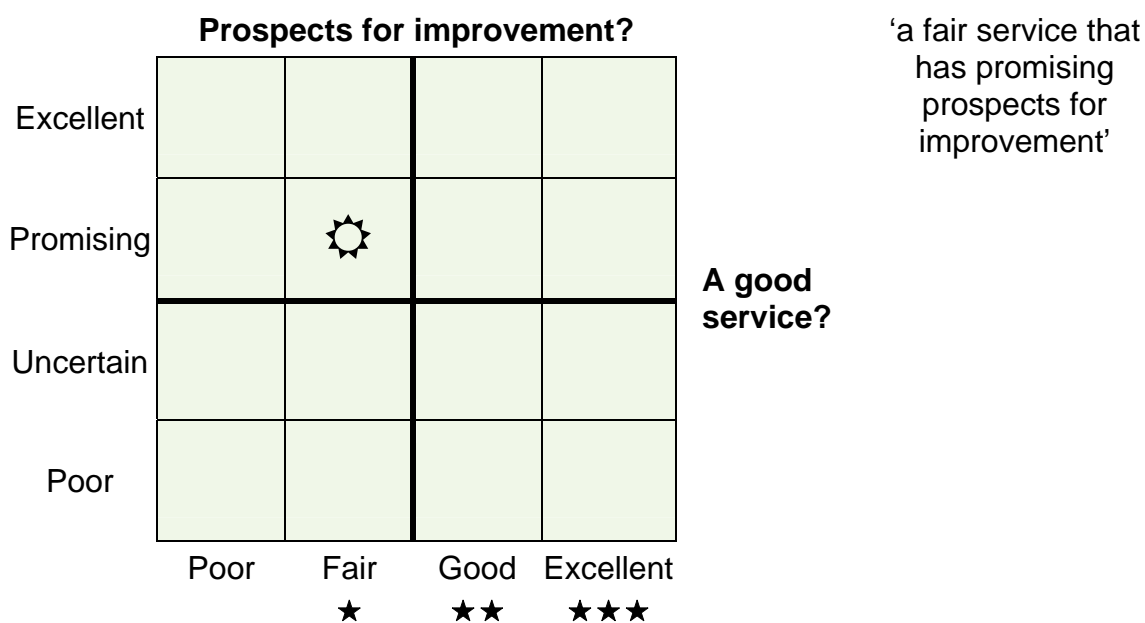
Summary

- 1 Wealden District Council is providing fair strategic housing services that have promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 There are a number of strengths. The service has a strong focus on customer care and there is a range of ways that service users can access services. There is a good understanding of local housing needs and market conditions and a robust approach to involving stakeholders and service users in strategy development. The refocusing of homelessness on providing housing options advice has had a positive impact and the Council has successfully reduced both its use of temporary accommodation and instances of youth homelessness. A choice based letting scheme has successfully been introduced and generally the Council is using its own stock well. There is a good level of assistance for homeowners to improve their homes, including its energy efficiency. The service works well with private sector landlords. The Council has a good understanding of costs and has used benchmarking to help identify areas for improvement and efficiency savings across strategic housing services.
- 3 But a number of areas require improvement. The delivery of new market and affordable housing has been very low in comparison with Council and regional targets. Strategies to reverse poor housing delivery are only just beginning to have an impact and a new strategy to support private sector housing is still being finalised. Assistance for home owners could be better targeted at those properties with category one hazard ratings and, despite recent improvements, it still takes too long to provide disabled adaptations. The approach to long-term empty homes is still developing. Although the number of households in temporary accommodation has reduced, homeless people are staying a long time in hostel accommodation. The Council has not been proactive in setting the strategic direction for all social housing providers in the area or monitoring and challenging their performance.
- 4 There are a number of drivers for improvement. The Council has invested in a more focussed and managed approach to support delivery of new and affordable homes. Weaker service areas are showing improvement and strong and improving leadership is helping to address barriers to housing delivery. There is good understanding of service weaknesses and improvement plans focus on the right things. Performance management arrangements are generally effective and a more strategic approach to value for money is being implemented across the service. The Council works well in partnership, helping to increase capacity and has a positive approach to seeking and responding to external challenge.
- 5 Some issues still need to be addressed. Despite some planned improvements, there remain concerns about the capacity of the housing management computer system to provide a useful tool for strategic housing managers. Work is underway to progress ICT improvements but funding has not yet been agreed. There is scope to strengthen some aspects of the performance monitoring framework to better reflect value for money though this has very recently been addressed.

Scoring the Service

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

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

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.

- 7 We found the service to be fair because it has a range of strengths including:
- service users have easy access to strategic housing services. The service is responding quickly and effectively to telephone and face-to-face enquiries and internet access is a particular strength;
 - there is a consistent approach to customer care, demonstrated by a range of service standards for key areas, an effective complaints process and arrangements for monitoring customer satisfaction in most areas;
 - some housing support for vulnerable people is being delivered through joint working and equality assessments have now been completed for all areas of strategic housing;
 - there is a good understanding of housing needs, markets and land availability to inform housing policies;
 - housing is a priority for the Council and partnership structures support a coordinated and informed approach to strategy development, including effective service user consultation;
 - a focus on prevention activity has helped to significantly reduce homelessness and levels of temporary accommodation;
 - there is a good level of assistance for home owners to improve their homes including its energy efficiency and the service works well with private sector landlords;
 - there is an effective approach to improving the majority of social housing in the area which is of a good quality, with well-managed access arrangements; and
 - there is a strong understanding of service costs and a systematic approach to addressing the value for money of strategic housing services.
- 8 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:
- the delivery of new market and affordable housing has been very low in comparison with Council and regional targets;
 - the length of stay in temporary accommodation remains among the worst nationally and there are some gaps in housing support for vulnerable groups;
 - the strategies to support private sector housing are currently out-of-date;
 - assistance for home owners has not been clearly targeted at those in greatest need and it takes too long to provide disabled adaptations;
 - the service has not proactively ensured that private rented homes meet minimum standards and its approach to bringing long-term empty homes back into use is still developing;
 - the Council has not been proactive setting the strategic direction for all social housing providers in the area or addressing under occupation across the social housing sector; and
 - some housing policies and partnerships have not yet been robustly assessed to ensure value for money.

Scoring the Service

- 9 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:
- the Council has demonstrated that it can improve the performance of weak services;
 - housing is a clear priority for the Council and this is being demonstrated through leadership, resource allocation and a willingness to be proactive in tackling barriers to housing delivery;
 - the service has high levels of self awareness and has effective mechanisms in place to capture learning from service users;
 - new high level strategic housing plans are providing better direction for the service;
 - performance management arrangements are generally effective and there is a proactive and successful approach to managing corporate finances;
 - joint working through a range of partnerships is increasing capacity and expertise and improving opportunities for successful funding bids; and
 - the Council is open to and positively seeks external challenge which has strengthened improvement plans and led to stronger outcomes.
- 10 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include:
- there remain concerns about the capacity of the housing management computer system to provide a useful tool for strategic housing managers by recording homelessness prevention outcomes;
 - there is scope to strengthen some aspects of the performance monitoring framework and provide clearer, measurable outcomes in improvement plans; and
 - the Council's Transformational programme is still developing and at this stage there is not yet a clear picture of its potential impact on key service areas.

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 Strengthen the approach to diversity by:

- improving systems to ensure that disabled adaptations are consistently delivered in line with government good practice guidelines.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- integration of diversity data into the strategic improvement plans;
- improvement drivers that are shaped by service users' experiences; and
- better outcomes for vulnerable groups;

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by September 2009.

Recommendation

R2 Improve the approach to private sector housing services by:

- developing a more proactive approach to dealing with poor housing conditions; and
- adopting a stronger strategic approach to reduce the number of empty homes.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved housing conditions for most vulnerable households and improved opportunities to meet housing needs.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This 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

- 12** Strengthen the approach to housing strategy development and performance monitoring by:
- improving the quality of staff appraisals to consistently contain better outcome targets;
 - ensuring that all strategic plans have clear measurable targets that describe successful outcomes;
 - strengthening strategic working with RSLs to make better use of existing affordable housing; and
 - strengthening the ICT capacity to support strategic housing services.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- clearer drivers for improvement for staff;
- an accurate assessment of homeless prevention initiatives will be available;
- identify which RSLs are performing well to help the Council deliver its affordable housing priority;
- ICT systems will provide a better tool for strategic housing managers to capture data about outcomes; and
- underperformance will be more easily identified and training requirements will be clear.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by December 2009

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

Dates of Inspection: 30 March - 3 April 2009

Report

Context

The locality

- 14 Wealden District Council is the largest of the five districts within the county of East Sussex, covering an area of 323 square miles. The area is predominantly rural, with two-thirds of the district covered by the High Weald and Sussex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, 34 conservation areas, and over 2,500 listed buildings. A small part of the district was declared within the boundaries of the new South Downs National Park in April 2009. The proposed designated area covers approximately 7 per cent of the total area of the district and broadly reflects the existing boundaries of the existing South Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The National Park is expected to be legislatively effective from 2011.
- 15 Half of the population of 143,800³ live in the district's five main towns (Crowborough, Hailsham, Heathfield, Polegate and Uckfield), with the remainder resident in a diverse range of villages and hamlets spread across the 37 parishes. Transport links in the district are poor: congested roads, lack of fast rail services and limited buses increase the difficulty of delivering frontline services and identifying suitable sites for new homes. Around 40,000 people work in the district, mainly in the service sector.
- 16 Compared to other areas, Wealden has a significantly higher proportion of older people, partly reflecting inward migration from (often wealthy) retired households (25.9 per cent of the population were older people in 2007, compared to an average of 19.6 per cent in the South East and 18.9 per cent in England). By contrast the black and minority ethnic (BME) population is smaller than average (4.7 per cent of the population are non-White British compared to the South East average of 8.7 per cent and 13 per cent nationally). The district generally has low levels of deprivation, ranking 306th out of 354 districts on the Government's Index of Deprivation 2004 (where 1 is the most deprived). However, there are pockets of deprivation - for example, the Hailsham East ward is among the 25 per cent most deprived nationally.
- 17 Levels of home ownership in Wealden are high – around 83.3 per cent of households are owner-occupiers. Of the remainder, 5.6 per cent are in private rented accommodation and 8.7 per cent are in social housing (with the Council still owning and managing around 3,000 homes). Average house prices in the district are above both the county and South East average (£275,911 compared to £223,777 and £248,032⁴), and affordability is a key issue. At 2007, 1,613 households were on the waiting list for social housing – a 65 per cent increase since 2002), with current numbers closer to 2,000.

³ ONS, MYE 2007

⁴ Land Registry, October to December 2008

The Council

- 18 Wealden District Council is Conservative-led, with 33 Conservative councillors. The remaining seats are held by: the Liberal Democratic Party (13); Independent Democrat councillors (3); the Green Party (2) and Independents (1). A Leader and cabinet model of governance is in place, with dedicated portfolio holders for Planning and Housing Development; Affordable Housing and Community.
- 19 The senior management team comprises the chief executive officer and three corporate directors. The majority of strategic housing services sit under the corporate director of community services with the corporate director of environment responsible for planning. The Council has two offices, with the housing service based at the Hailsham offices and planning service at Crowborough.
- 20 The Council's audit and inspection letter published in March 2009 reported that the Council continues to improve performance across most of its priority areas. 66 per cent of the Audit Commission's basket of best value performance indicators (PIs) for which comparisons can be made have improved in the last year, which is above the national average for district councils. However only 24 per cent of PIs are in the best 25 per cent which is less than the national average for district councils and over the last three years only 55 per cent of PIs have improved which is below the national average for all district councils. The Council achieved a score of three (performing well) in the annual use of resources assessment in 2009.
- 21 The Council has an annual budget of £18.7 million. Wealden's Council Tax for services provided by the Council is slightly above the median for District Councils (64.9 per cent of services are funded through council tax against the average for English District Councils of around 40 per cent). Wealden had £3.2 million in its capital fund reserve as of September 2008, and a forecast £4.2 million in its earmarked reserves as of April 2009.

The service

- 22 This inspection covered a range of services which contribute to meeting housing needs. It looked at how the Council works in partnership with others to deliver affordable housing, how well it understands the housing market and meets the housing needs of the local community, including more vulnerable households with acute or special housing needs. Affordable housing can be defined as low cost market housing and subsidised housing, irrespective of tenure or ownership, whether exclusive or shared, that is available to people who cannot afford to buy or rent properties generally available on the open market.

- 23 Just over 83 per cent of homes in the district are owner occupied⁵. There is a very small private rental sector (5.6 per cent) and a relatively small social housing sector (7.8 per cent). The remaining 3.2 per cent of accommodation is tied accommodation, or people living rent free or with family. The housing market also has an imbalance in the unit sizes, with the average property being a three bedroom house. The small affordable housing and private rented sectors and the lack of entry level properties pose challenges for local people trying to find affordable accommodation. Additionally, the Annual Survey and Earnings 2008 reported a person earning an average income in Wealden would need to borrow just over 10.5 times their annual income to buy a terrace property at £207,707⁶.
- 24 The Council has retained its housing stock. It currently owns and manages 3,133 homes, mainly on estates in the urban centres, but with some smaller estates in the rural areas. The Council also has three established sites for gypsies and travellers across the district.
- 25 Wealden's size, rural character, low population density⁷ and the absence of a major centre of population (the largest town has a population of around 20,000) poses a number of accessibility challenges for strategic housing services both in terms of capacity and cost. The Council has recently taken the decision to consolidate its headquarters to one main office site in Hailsham and downsize the office facility at Crowborough by 2012.

⁵ Census 2001

⁶ Average terrace property price as at September 2008; Land Registry

⁷ DEFRA R-80 classification

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 26** Housing is a key priority both within the community and corporate plans. The Local Strategic Partnership's (LSP) sustainable community strategy identifies lobbying for an increase in the percentage of affordable housing in developments as a key task, with commitments to seek an extension of the requirement to include smaller schemes and encourage affordable provision in all settlements. It also encourages greater provision of specialist adaptation of accommodation and initiatives to promote the green agenda, with commitments to work towards a reduction in carbon emissions and the 'eco-homes' standards in the provision of both social and private sector housing.
- 27** The Council's corporate plan 2009-11 states that the Council is committed to providing more affordable housing options for local people in the places where it is most needed and identifies three priorities;
- putting people first by providing quality services & promoting health, prosperity and community safety;
 - pride of place through the preservation & enhancement of the environment; and
 - purpose through partnership & community leadership.
- 28** The Leader's purpose and priorities report to Cabinet in 2008 clearly identified affordable housing as a priority and identified several key areas including work on the the Local Development Framework (LDF), promoting sustainability and improving services to rural parts of the district.
- 29** The Council's housing strategy sets out the Council's overarching strategic housing aims - these focus on improving the standard of homes in Wealden and assisting in the creation of a safer and more secure environment for all. Key strategic housing priorities are highlighted as:
- improving housing supply;
 - improving housing quality; and
 - improving housing support.
- 30** Affordable housing is also a priority target for Wealden's partners. Affordable housing and its delivery is a designated target within the East Sussex Local Area agreement 2008-11. The agreement contains targets for the total of new homes built, numbers of affordable homes, families living in temporary accommodation and development sites that are ready to be built on.

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

Access and customer care

- 31** Strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses in access and customer care. The Council has a clear strategic approach to customer access. Staff are friendly, well-trained and customer-focused. Most customers who visit the Council's offices will find the service easy to use and there are flexible access arrangements for local people who live more remotely - telephones are answered quickly, with high quality written information and a good website accessible through public access terminals across the district. Complaints are managed well and overall satisfaction with the service is above average. However, some of the service standards for housing options and homelessness need updating to reflect service user feedback and some aspects of service delivery are not yet monitored effectively.
- 32** The Council has a clear strategic approach to improving access to council services. Its Access Channel Strategy produced in 2004 has driven improvements in customer access. For example, the Council has invested in a customer relationship management system (CRM) to allow better customer service and information recording, it has improved call answering, invested in its website and in public access terminals across the area. Customer contact for some services such as housing benefits is now more efficient, quick and easy with the majority of service requests for benefits (75 per cent) dealt with at the first point of contact. The Council is currently exploring whether it will expand this approach across services.
- 33** The service communicates effectively with local people. The Communication Strategy 2008-11 sets out clear and positive principles about how the organisation will communicate with local people. It emphasises the need for all communication with local people to be clear and timely and that all written information should use plain language. The Council also uses corporate branding to ensure information is instantly recognised as originating from Wealden District Council. Each service has a key communicator/information officer to support front-line staff and ensure that information produced in services meets corporate standards.
- 34** There is a range of high quality printed leaflets that are easy to understand and provide helpful advice. Leaflets cover a range of areas including homelessness, supported housing, advice for private sector tenants and the range of grants available. Leaflets are available at public points of access across the district and can be downloaded from the Council's website. The quality and content of information is helping people to understand the range of housing options and support that is available.

How good is the service?

- 35** The service benefits from friendly, well-trained and customer-focused staff. Staff demonstrate a desire to be accessible and a strong commitment to making a positive difference for local people. The Council has invested in measures to improve the customer experience for example, through NVQ training for customer service staff and customer service training for all staff. The Council is also working with a neighbouring council and a private sector organisation to challenge standards of delivery. Positively, all services across the Council have been awarded Chartermark accreditation. Customer standards generally set out what customers can expect to receive from the service as well as information about how to contact the Council and details about how staff can assist customers, although the standards for housing options does require updating to reflect service user feedback. Published service standards mean that service users know the level of services they can expect and give informed feedback on the quality of service they receive.
- 36** Most customers who visit the Council's offices will find the service easy to use. Reception areas at the Hailsham and Crowborough offices are welcoming, of a high standard and located close to the town centres. Customers are seen very quickly. There are some weaknesses around face-to-face access arrangements. For example, the use of cubicles (at the Hailsham reception) means that personal conversations can be clearly heard across the reception area, although customers are offered the use of a private interview room. Generally customers who want face-to-face contact benefit from good quality offices.
- 37** The service has flexible access arrangements for local people who live remote from the Council's offices. Telephone calls are answered promptly with 94 per cent answered within 15 seconds and around 98 per cent in 30 seconds with very few calls abandoned. Opening hours are traditional and have been slightly reduced but this was following a consultation exercise where no appetite for extended or weekend opening was identified. Appropriate out-of-hours arrangements are in place for service users to access emergency accommodation. There are also opportunities for local people to meet face-to-face with staff through a weekly housing advice service from the Crowborough office or home visits. Importantly for local people who live remote from the Council's offices the Council in partnership has provided 16 public access terminals where local people can access the Council's website. Flexible and publicised arrangements help to ensure that customers receive timely access to support and services.
- 38** The website provides local people with good and accessible information about strategic housing services. There is a comprehensive A-Z of services and up-to-date service information for example, information about landlords' meetings. Common searches relating to the service successfully find useful information. All written information used on the website is checked for the use of plain language. The Council's investment in its website allows customers to resolve queries with little or no direct contact with staff. The Council is using its website to consult local people and obtain feedback about its services. Service improvements as a result of feedback include changes to grant information packs, redesigning housing information leaflets and decommissioning temporary accommodation where the standard was considered low. However, the quality of consultation on new strategies through the website is low. The service is generally using the internet as a quick and cost effective way of supporting access to its services.

- 39 Complaints are managed well. The corporate system is clear with accessible information about how to comment, complain or compliment. The system also helps evaluate the learning from each complaint and provides tools for more effective monitoring and improved service delivery, including feedback to service users through the Council's website. A small sample of complaints relating to strategic housing services showed that the quality of complaints handling was customer-focused and usually contained information on how to move to the next stage of the process. The Council is working to capture learning and information from its customers to help it shape and improve services as well as effectively handling complaints about strategic housing services.
- 40 Satisfaction with strategic housing services is above average and is effectively measured, although arrangements in some parts of the service are new and only recently evaluated. A 2008 survey of Council tenants showed that 85 per cent were satisfied with the overall service provided. In November 2008 Private Housing updated their satisfaction survey for grants provided to private sector customers. Current figures suggest that satisfaction with the grants service is over 90 per cent. The housing options survey commenced capturing service user satisfaction levels routinely from January 2009, returns have been low and the data currently is not sufficient to give an accurate assessment. Surveys for the Homemove scheme were carried out in 2008/09 for all customers housed through the scheme and all customers on the housing register. This data provides a useful tool to give an indication of the quality of service provided to service users.
- 41 The Council is not recording the time that service users have to wait for access to the housing options service or monitoring how long people are waiting for appointments with the local CAB service. Failure to record and monitor response times means that the Council does not know how timely the service is or how easy it is for customers wanting advice to initially access services.

Diversity

- 42 Strengths and weaknesses are in balance in the Council's approach to diversity. Corporate working and investment is supporting diversity. The Council is working well in partnership to remove barriers for people accessing services and to support young people and the local BME community. Some specialist accommodation has been delivered to support vulnerable people but there remain gaps and low levels of floating support available. The approach to diversity monitoring is developing but is not consistent across all service streams. The Council has yet to identify new sites for Gypsies and Travellers to meet identified need.
- 43 There is a sound corporate framework in place to support diversity. In June 2007 the Council adopted an inclusive Equalities Scheme. Equality and diversity has a high profile in the Council with a Director and staff in each service designated as officer champions and a senior councillor actively engaged. High-level equality impact assessments (EIAs) have been carried out on all services. All new policies and procedures have had a detailed assessment and a risk-based approach is being used to work through the remainder. The corporate approach to diversity is helping to raise awareness and understanding of the full range of needs of the local community.

How good is the service?

- 44 The Council has invested in training for staff and councillors and has increased internal capacity. The Council employs an equalities officer on a partnership basis with another local council who is supported by a Communications and Internal Equality Group with representatives drawn from across the Council. A good range of training is in place for staff on Gypsies and Travellers issues, HIV, drug awareness and disability. The training programme for all staff is due to be completed by the end of 2009 as well as diversity legislation training for councillors. This approach is important as it is ensuring that councillors and staff fairly represent all groups within their community.
- 45 The Council is helping diverse groups overcome access barriers through assistance such as translation facilities, hearing loops and Braille. The website also contains a range of applications to ensure that it is easily viewed. All buildings used by strategic housing services customers are fully compliant with the DDA⁸. Published information contains clear strap lines and correspondence is mostly written in a clear way. This ensures that where possible any barriers to accessing services for vulnerable people are being removed.
- 46 The Council has delivered some positive outcomes to help address the needs of young people. The Council has developed a website for young people giving a range of information on health, personal safety, leisure, and education and homelessness issues in addition to problem pages where young people's concerns are responded to by volunteer professionals across the public, private and voluntary sectors. The site is partly managed by a group of 12 young advisors who work with the Council to ensure it remains youth focussed. Since its launch in April 2006 it has received over 10,000 first time visitors, many of whom return regularly. Homeless young people are one of the main pressures on the housing options service and it is important that the Council is proactively working to try to reduce instances of homelessness in this key group.
- 47 The Council is working well with a variety of partners to provide good quality housing solutions for some vulnerable people. The Council jointly appointed a medical and special needs housing officer (funded by the Council and ESCC⁹) to provide assistance to tenants/residents with disabilities or medical needs. Within the housing options teams the Council funds a temporary accommodation co-ordinator who also provides floating support services for tenants in the Council's hostel and bed and breakfast accommodation. These arrangements help vulnerable people access and sustain accommodation.
- 48 The Council is working to encourage greater local participation and improve quality and access among BME groups. The Council's landlord service complies with the Code of Practice on Racial Equality in Housing (2006). A Connecting Community Plus project also provides support for any BME clients in Wealden who would like help to access Council services. The project provides language services and casework support. Recently the project carried out some targeted work to assist BME tenants to complete the 'Help us to Help You' survey and seeks their views on consultation on key corporate strategies. The project is now identifying the ten issues most frequently raised by clients to feed into future service improvements. These arrangements are helping the Council to ensure that service delivery is provided in a fair way.

⁸ Disability Discrimination Act

⁹ East Sussex County Council

- 49 The Council has plans in place that show that it is close to achieving level three of the Local Government Equalities Standard (2006) but some important gaps remain. Some key areas include the following.
- The Council has identified a number of areas where there are gaps in provision for some vulnerable people. These include a lack of accommodation for people with complex needs, a physical or mental disability, young people, ex-offenders, gypsies, travellers and clients suffering domestic violence and extra care provision (contractors are about to go on site to deliver a new extra care facility). Current levels of general floating support are also low. The Council is working with the ESCC supporting people team to try and secure future investment in these areas as well as identifying schemes can provide some provision for clients with complex needs.
 - Diversity monitoring is being carried out in the service (across all six equality strands) but at present is not comprehensive across all service areas. The Council has some understanding of its tenant profile that it is using to help tailor services to needs. The 'Help us to Help You' survey in 2007 provided the Council with information on around 50 per cent of its tenants' ethnicity, age and disabilities. The Council's lack of comprehensive monitoring information limits its ability to develop services that best reflect the diverse needs of the community.
 - The Council has worked to improve existing accommodation for gypsies and travellers but has been slow to identify new sites. Anecdotally the Council believes that gypsy and travellers are the largest ethnic group locally and an assessment of their needs in 2005 identified a shortage of pitches. Currently three of the four traveller sites provided by the County Council are located in the district and there are also a further 12 private sites. The Council is working effectively with partners to help ensure community cohesion and to ensure minimum standards are met and improve the sites. The Council has recently appointed a consultant to identify land for a new site within the district to meet local identified need. Homelessness legislation states that gypsy and traveller households who have a caravan but no place to pitch it are considered homeless. The lack of sufficient pitches presents a risk to the Council.

Plans show that the Council is aware of where weaknesses remain and has an agreed course of action to deliver improvements in this area.

Strategic approach

- 50 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in the Council's strategic approach to housing. Council's plans and strategies are based on a wide range of good quality research and strong consultation with stakeholders and service users. Affordable housing is a priority for the Council and this is reflected in high level plans. The Council works well in partnership to deliver its strategic approach on a county basis and strategies are up-to-date, of a good quality and set out how improvements will be delivered including in rural areas. The Local Development Framework (LDF) is progressing and recently the Council has published a design guide for developers. However, the strategies to support private sector housing are currently out-of-date.

How good is the service?

- 51 The Council's commitment to affordable housing is reflected in the overall plans of the Council and local strategic partnership. Housing is a key priority within both the community and corporate plans. The Cabinet membership and related portfolios have been adjusted to reflect this increased focus, with a designated portfolio holder for Strategic Planning and Housing Delivery, and a separate portfolio for Affordable Housing. These two Executive Members work closely together to achieve the overall objectives. Clear affordable housing targets in high-level plans demonstrate a recently strengthened political and community focus on improving affordable housing locally.
- 52 The Council has a good understanding of local housing needs and market conditions both in rural and urban parts of the district. Studies include the following.
- An urban housing needs survey carried out in partnership with all of the housing authorities across East Sussex and Brighton and Hove in 2004/05, along with a district-wide rural housing needs survey in 2004/05.
 - Two Strategic Housing Market Assessments were completed in 2007/08, one in partnership with Eastbourne Borough Council and one for the more northern parts of the district.
 - A joint county wide gypsy and traveller needs assessment in 2005.
 - A private sector stock condition survey was completed in 2007.
 - The Council is currently undertaking a strategic housing land assessment which is informing the spatial options (part of the LDF).

As a result of the evidence gained from the Housing Needs Survey in 2004, a new policy was agreed in the non statutory Local Plan which, in addition to the 30 per cent affordable housing provision on site, requires 20 per cent of the market accommodation to be provided in the form of smaller unit accommodation, helping to increase the number of entry-level properties and small properties for people wishing to trade down. Robust intelligence about the local housing market helps to ensure that strategies are focussed on areas that will deliver improvements.

- 53 The Council is strategically well engaged at a sub-regional level. Senior officers are having an effective input in to a range of partnership groups (particularly for vulnerable people) that play a contributory role in overseeing strategic development. Housing is well linked with the local strategic partnership and the local area agreement through ESHOG (East Sussex Chief Housing Officers Group) and the Wealden Housing Partnership. At a local level the Wealden Partnership brings together a wide range of partners and this is used as one of the vehicles to consult partners on strategy.

- 54** Wealden is actively involved in the development of a county-wide youth homelessness strategy (which has been commissioned by the Children's Trust Executive Group¹⁰). The strategy is expected to bring together the housing authorities and Children's Services to improve and strengthen services for young people at risk of homelessness. The strategic aim is to establish a county-wide youth homelessness team, made up of officers from the five authorities and children's services. A bid for funding has been made to the CLG¹¹, with match funding committed by the housing authorities and ESCC. The strategy also aims to shift resources in order to end the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for 16/17 year olds and replace this with supported lodgings sourced by social services. The draft strategy is expected to be released in April 2009.
- 55** The Council's older persons' housing and support strategy was produced as a result of a partnership between ESCC's Adult Social Care Services, the local Primary Care Trust and the Council with input from other stakeholders including the voluntary sector. The consultation led to a new provider forum to take forward some of the actions which include improving the range of housing options for older people with care and support needs, including provision of an extra care scheme.
- 56** The Council has worked closely with the large number of Parish Councils to increase their understanding of local housing need and strategic housing development. This has involved attendance at face-to-face public meetings, consultation events and parish planning conferences. A rural local connections policy was developed as a result of consultation with local parishes. The increased focus in this area over the past 18 months is beginning to deliver affordable housing outcomes in rural areas.
- 57** The Council is working strategically with its partners to improve outcomes for the delivery of new homes, including affordable homes. At the request of the Wealden Housing Partnership¹² a seminar was hosted in May 2008 to review housing delivery and examine the barriers to house-building. The session involved developers, land agents, Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), Cabinet and other elected Members involved in planning, along with the majority of the corporate management team and key heads of service. Since this event levels of affordable housing delivery have begun to increase. An annual follow-up to this event took place on 10 March 2009 and it again focussed on housing delivery. A further event is planned for 13 May 2009 which will focus on the Local Development Framework (LDF).
- 58** The Council has a robust approach to consulting stakeholders and service users about its strategic approach. The new housing strategy and homelessness strategies were produced through comprehensive consultation processes. Strategic partners see their relationship with the Council as mature, with the ability to influence strategic development and implementation. There are a range of groups providing opportunities to share good practice and learning such a countrywide Learning Disability Strategic Housing Group and an Older Persons' Locality Group. Strategies set out how consultation has helped to shape the strategic approach and comprehensive consultation is increasing opportunities for local people to inform how they want services to be delivered.

¹⁰ A partnership with the East Sussex five councils and ESCC Children's Services.

¹¹ Department for Communities and Local Government.

¹² Sub group of the Local Strategic Partnership.

How good is the service?

- 59 The framework of housing strategies are generally of a good quality and set out how the Council will meet identified needs and gaps in the current provision.
- A new housing strategy (2009-13) focuses on three key areas: improving supply, housing conditions and housing support. The strategy identifies how it has been shaped by stakeholders and service users, focuses on the right issues and is easy to read. There is a separate but linked action plan which reflects key messages contained in the housing market assessments, such as the need for smaller homes in the north of the district and more family accommodation in the south. Delivery against the key outcomes is reviewed annually, with achievements reported at the Council's housing summit, which is attended by over 100 stakeholders and partners. Feedback is also provided through the Wealden housing partnership. However, the related action plan lacks sufficient measurable outcomes or key milestones. The strategy is also weakened by the lack of an up-to-date private sector sub strategy currently in place.
 - The homelessness strategy 2008-13 has been updated in line with the Government's July 2008 deadline and provides a robust review of the service. It is a comprehensive document written in an accessible style and reflects input from a range of key stakeholders. Feedback from service users has informed the strategy and in particular has led to a focus on raising the standard of temporary accommodation, resulting in one scheme being decommissioned. In terms of the strategic approach the consultation resulted in additional sections being included covering sustainability, infrastructure and under-occupation. The strategy's action plan aims to address the key issues identified, fill gaps in service provision and improve on current performance. A clear planning framework enables the council to tackle homelessness effectively.
- 60 The private sector housing strategy and the empty homes strategy are now well out of date. These strategies do not reflect the intelligence the service now has about stock condition or importantly the significant and fundamental legislative changes identified in the Housing Act 2004. The Council recognises this and is currently consulting on new strategies to drive improvement in this area. Failure to utilise empty accommodation is a wasted resource which puts pressure on the housing market.
- 61 The Council's emerging LDF¹³ has a clear strategic priority to increase the delivery of affordable housing. The Council has both a statutory and a non-statutory plan, with the policy on affordable housing is set out in the non-statutory plan. This states that the level of affordable housing will be negotiated on a site-by-site basis with an expectation that within the development boundaries of the five towns 30 per cent will be affordable for developments of 10 or more units and outside of this area for development of five or more. Where there is a development of between three and four units, one affordable unit will be provided. The Council has not adopted Supplementary Planning Guidance (due to the status of the non statutory plan). Recently the Council has published a design guide which developers and Councillors described as useful, setting out standards and quality for new development.

¹³ Local Development Framework

- 62 There are effective strategic links between the ESCC Supporting People Strategy 2005-10 and the Council's strategic approach. Supporting People services are being reviewed and the Council has worked closely with the team to identify gaps in services and make best use of resources. As a result the strategy has been refocused to provide more generic floating support services with limited specialist services available on the basis of need and regardless of location and tenure. Currently services provided in Wealden are predominantly for older people, primarily in the form of sheltered housing. Provision beyond this is very limited but is being addressed. The new floating support contract has been revised and is due to be effective from July 2009.

Making the best use of existing housing

- 63 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The focus on prevention is having some positive outcomes on homelessness and many of the initiatives are benefiting from well-developed partnership arrangements. The service has worked well to reduce use of temporary accommodation and has met and exceeded its government target ahead of schedule. There is a good level of assistance for home owners to improve their homes and the service works well in partnership with other local councils and its home improvement agency to improve private sector housing. Less positively, the service has not clearly targeted private sector grants at those in greatest need and it takes too long to provide disabled adaptations. The strategic approach to bringing long-term empty homes back into use is still developing and the service has not proactively ensured that private rented homes meet minimum standards. Although the number of households in temporary accommodation has reduced, homeless people are staying a long time in hostel accommodation. There remain some areas for improvement working with managing RSLs.

Housing advice and homelessness

- 64 The refocusing of homelessness on providing housing options advice has had a positive impact on homelessness levels. This is linked to a range of initiatives detailed below. Homelessness applications have reduced from a peak of 261 in 2005/06 to 121 in 2007/08. Prevention activity has increased from 56 in 2007/08 to 109 cases, exceeding the projected 70 cases for 2008/09. However, in the current year (2008/09), homelessness acceptances are growing despite an increasing level of prevention activity, anecdotally the Council believes that this may be due to the pressures from the current economic climate. Prevention work is helping to reduce overall levels but that currently the service is under some renewed pressure.
- 65 The Council has reduced its reliance on the use of temporary accommodation and has already met its Government target to half its use by 2010. This has largely been achieved by preventative work to avoid people becoming homeless and effective work to secure alternative accommodation. Temporary accommodation has reduced from 225 units at December 2004 to 65 at 31 March 2009, exceeding the target of 112. Homeless people are increasingly moving to settled accommodation more quickly.

How good is the service?

- 66 Floating support arrangements are in place for homeless people living in temporary accommodation through supporting people funded scheme and also an in-house post. Current re-commissioning within the supporting people contract is also likely to produce additional capacity within the floating support service for Wealden residents from June 2009. This helps to ensure that vulnerable people are receiving help to maintain independent living and reduce the risk of tenure breakdown.
- 67 There is a strong working relationship between the Council's housing options team and revenue and benefits team to ensure that the discretionary housing payment (DHP) budget is spent on appropriate cases. The DHP policy prioritises eviction risk, families in need and those cases where it would be difficult to find cheaper alternative accommodation. The budget has been consistently spent and during 2007/08 the Council topped up the fund by approximately £8,000. As part of the prevention approach the team is examining the use of DHP to increase further the number of homelessness prevention cases. Payments are helping to reduce instances of homelessness and make best use of housing across all tenures.
- 68 The service is targeting its resources to help prevent homelessness occurring. The housing options team has a range of tools available to help prevent homelessness. These include the following.
- Mediation Plus - the Council has referral arrangements with an independent mediation service. Although there are significant numbers of referrals both to the neighbour mediation service and time 2 talk service (for young people) the Council has not been collecting information about outcomes. This gap is being currently being addressed.
 - Mortgage Rescue - The Council is one of the 60 fast-track authorities for the Government's mortgage rescue scheme and has played an active role developing a county-wide mortgage advice delivery team. The group comprises the five East Sussex authorities, Citizens' Advice Bureau and the preferred RSL provider. The scheme is current awaiting clearance from the financial regularity body so there are no outcomes to date.
 - Spend to save - the homelessness budget has an identified budget for preventing homelessness which has been used to provide two Sanctuary schemes for households at risk of domestic violence. There are also a range of cases where housing options staff have been able to make a financial contribution to help prevent homelessness, including rent arrears where the tenant is not to blame for their accrual and eviction is pending.

Partnership working in the delivery of these schemes is helping to provide a range of solutions for homeless and potentially homeless households which are reducing pressures on the homelessness service.

- 69 The Council has worked well to help reduce youth homelessness. In addition to the youth website mentioned earlier, key projects include.
- A schools project in partnership with Eastbourne Borough Council and Eastbourne and Wealden YMCA has successfully secured £36,000 funding from the CLG to tackle youth homelessness. The grant has been used to develop a schools education programme to be used in citizenship classes, including a DVD covering youth homelessness, teenage pregnancy, substance misuse and the realities of becoming homeless. A project worker has also been appointed by the YMCA to co-ordinate the project and run educational workshops within local schools. The project is still in its infancy but feedback has been positive.
 - Joint Homelessness Assessments - a Housing Options Officer has taken the lead responsibility for working with all young people who approach as potentially homeless. This has built up strong working relationships with the 16 plus team in ESCC. Joint assessments of young people at risk of homelessness are carried out and meetings are held weekly at a local youth information centre attached to the YMCA. Support for young people who are homeless is provided by Action for Children, who also provide life skills training to ensure accommodation can be sustained in the future.

This approach is helping the Council reduce the number of young people facing homelessness (with only five acceptances as at 31 December 2008) and meet the Government target of ending the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for 16/17 year olds by 2010.

- 70 Homelessness decisions are made quickly and the quality of decision making is improving. Unaudited data for 2008/09 shows that the average time to make a decision on homelessness was 26 days. During 2007/08 there were 19 appeals against a homelessness decision, of these, 8 were upheld. During 2008/09 (year to date figure) the service received eight requests for a review of which only three were upheld. During 2008/09 all except three appeal cases were resolved on average in 25.4 days, within the statutory deadline of 56 days (and the three extensions were agreed mutual consent). Timely and accurate decision making is important as it helps to reduce the time people spend in temporary accommodation.
- 71 Performance processing housing benefit claims is average. During 2007/08 the average number of days for new claims to be processed was 22.44 days. The outturn performance for 'changes of circumstances' claims processed was 11.32 days. An efficient benefits system encourages private sector landlords to accept tenants in receipt of benefits.
- 72 Although the Council has a range of joint protocols in place with a range of statutory agencies some are outdated and require a refresh. Strong working relationships mean that the protocols are rarely implemented but the Council acknowledges that further work is required to update some existing protocols. The joint assessment protocol with Children and Young People Services is being refreshed through the current work on the County Youth Homelessness strategy (which is out to consultation). Strong joint protocols are important particularly where there are a range of agencies working together to support vulnerable people in accessing and sustaining housing support and accommodation.

How good is the service?

- 73** The performance management of partnerships is not supporting the service to accurately record all outcomes. The current IT system does not provide the ability to record the detail of housing options and prevention cases. Improvements are being put in place to rectify this but currently the service believes that it is under recording outcomes. Currently the Council has not been provided with information on outcomes of referrals made to partners in areas such as mediation, court desks, and debt advice-although new service level agreements will rectify this. This means that outcomes appear low when reported through best value performance indicator and the Council cannot be sure how effective some prevention measures are.
- 74** Some homeless households are still placed outside the district. Currently the service is using five bed and breakfast placements in Eastbourne (all are aged over 18 and are couples). Arrangements are in place with the local Council to inspect these premises and support is provided through the in-house service. Despite efforts to increase the range of temporary accommodation the lack of temporary accommodation in areas where people have local networks can increase stress levels during a housing crisis.
- 75** The arrangements for specialist housing and welfare advice are mixed. The Housing Service funds a money advice and debt management service for Council tenants in rent arrears to prevent homelessness. Housing associations with stock in the district also provide funding to Wealden Citizens' Advice for the same service for RSL tenants which has delivered strong outcomes. Housing options officers provide basic money advice and carry out financial assessments on any case where affordability is an issue before referring any client into the private rented sector. Court desks are also operated by the CAB in all local courts where Wealden residents' possession cases are heard. However, unless it is an emergency, people seeking housing and debt advice have to wait too long for an appointment at the citizens' advice bureau (CAB). This can be up to six weeks. Delays in accessing services can allow financial difficulties to escalate.
- 76** There continue to be some weaknesses in the service.
- Homeless households are still spending too long in hostel and bed and breakfast accommodation. Compared with other councils, people experience lengthier stays in bed and breakfast. Even though the Council is meeting government minimum requirements to ensure that families do not stay in this type of accommodation for more than six weeks, the average stay in both bed and breakfast and hostel accommodation placed the Council in the worst 25 per cent of councils.
 - Cases of repeat homelessness are still below average (although the number of cases is low).
 - Housing advice services preventing homelessness placed the service in the worst 25 per cent of councils (this may be due to lack of effectiveness recording mechanisms and unaudited outcomes for 2008/09 show improvement, with the number of cases prevented rising from 56 in 2007/08 to 109 in 2008/09).

Social housing

77 Allocation policies maximise choice for applicants. The Council is part of the Sussex Homemove Partnership¹⁴ which went live in Wealden in September 2007. The Council operates a single housing register with all nominations coming through Homemove (except some small charitable trusts). The CBL system provides opportunities for housing providers to work cross boundary with difficult to let properties, which has helped to let some sheltered accommodation. The CBL scheme is also treating homelessness applications in line with Section 167 of the 1996 Homelessness Act¹⁵. CBL is making the allocations process more transparent for applicants and increasing the Council's ability to match allocations to need and applicants' aspirations.

78 There is a strong focus on making the best use of Council homes. For example:

- The Council has challenged the use of Council assets such as garage sites and sundry land, and via adaptation and disposal of stock. Following its review of sheltered housing it disposed of a sheltered scheme to a housing association (at a discounted value) to provide an extra care scheme with 19 one-bed and 20 two-bed apartments. This work involved strong partnership working with the County Council, the housing association and good liaison with residents. The Council also has clear plans to redevelop five sheltered schemes that include bedsit accommodation over the next 10 years. Strong asset management is helping to ensure the housing stock meet the changing needs of the community.
- The Council has access to a supply of Council homes that are in good condition. There has been a significant reduction in non-decent local authority dwellings, from 25 per cent to 4 per cent over the past four years. Council homes have good levels of thermal comfort and have an average energy efficiency SAP¹⁶ rating of 73. Levels of non decency are currently 8 per cent and relate to work required to improve loft insulation in some homes. This work is programmed to be completed in the early part of 2009/10.
- The Council is letting empty homes quickly. The time taken has significantly improved over the past 12 months. Current performance shows that it is taking on average 24 days to relet a property compared to 35 days in 2007/08. A reduction in the average void time is helping to improve access to social housing.
- Adaptations in council homes are dealt with reasonably well. The Council has taken a tenure-blind approach to adaptations with council tenants dealt with in the same way as owner-occupiers. There are currently no council tenants waiting for adaptations work and the time taken to complete the work has reduced from an average of 423 days in 2006/07 to a current average of 254 days.
- The Council is helping to support and sustain new tenancies by providing all new tenants with two hours of assistance from the Home Improvement Agency's (HIA) handyperson scheme.

¹⁴ Choice based lettings scheme (CBL)

¹⁵ S167 of the 1996 Homelessness Act requires any allocations policy to give appropriate preferential treatment to homeless people.

¹⁶ Measure of energy efficiency - higher number is better

How good is the service?

- 79** Work to deal with under-occupation of council homes is underdeveloped. Historically, the Council has supported a number of households to move to more suitable accommodation, but only nine tenants have been assisted to move at a cost of £11,000 in 2008/09. Recent work has identified properties that the Council believe to be under-occupied, with residents surveyed about their interest in moving. This found that up to one in six properties could be under-occupied and generated interest from 60 households. The service is now reviewing its tenant incentive scheme and is working with other local councils to employ a dedicated post to work on this area. The service is also working hard to identify sites where housing can be provided that meets the needs of older tenants who may want to downsize. It is important that the council has a strategic approach to under-occupation so that it can make best use of its homes.
- 80** The Council has not been proactive setting the strategic direction for all social housing providers in the area and in monitoring and challenging performance in terms of re-let times, approach to under-occupation and promoting sustainable improvement (lifetime homes, proactively looking at future needs and addressing them). In particular:
- There has not been a proactive approach with RSLs to understand and address under-occupation in their stock. An under-occupation survey to RSL tenants has recently been issued to help inform future work in this area.
 - The housing options team does not have an agreed protocol in place with RSLs that ensures that early warning is provided where tenancies are at risk (a draft is currently out to consultation). Operationally there appears to be good working relationships with RSLs and the number of RSL evictions is low across the district. But a protocol will help to ensure that all RSLs work with the Council to sustain tenancies.
 - The Council has not made best use of the Wealden housing partnership to capture information about how well local RSLs are contributing to the Council's strategic housing priorities in the district.

Private sector housing services

- 81** The Council has worked closely with other local councils to ensure a consistent approach to licensing houses in multiple occupation (HMOs). In partnership it has introduced a uniform license scheme with standard fees and standards. It also has clear arrangements with the East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service on how they will work together when dealing with fire safety in HMOs. Most importantly the Council has inspected and improved its three licensable properties. Although HMO numbers are low, this approach ensures a consistent approach and will help to improve the quality of accommodation in the private rented sector.

- 82** The Council has had a strong focus on energy efficiency with good progress towards Home Energy Conservation Act 1995 (HECA) targets and above average SAP rating. The Council has made good progress towards the target to improve energy efficiency of homes in their area by 30 per cent by 2011. In March 2008 Wealden identified an energy efficiency saving of 26.75 per cent within the district. The Council has a dedicated post working on improving energy efficiency across all tenures. This work includes education and promotion work and work with partners such as the Home Improvement Agency. Grant funding and additional resources from the East Sussex Insulation and Renewables Scheme have been used to work towards the HECA targets. The Council is successfully reducing fuel costs and environmental impact through its energy efficiency work.
- 83** The Council works well in partnership to improve private sector housing.
- Through the Brighton and East Sussex Together (BEST) partnership the Council has successfully attracted additional funding of £18.5 million into the region. The Council will receive around £630,000 for three years to tackle private sector renewal, including work to improve energy efficiency, assist with landlord accreditation and support for the home improvement agency handyperson scheme.
 - The Council has also recently joined the consortium of Sussex and Hampshire authorities to deliver loans through the South Coast Moneyline (SCML). This allows home owners who are on low incomes or vulnerable to access low interest loans to improve their homes to minimum standards. The loans are then repaid over time or on the sale of the property. Partnership working is helping to increase capacity within the service.
 - The energy efficiency post works with the affordable warmth steering group which includes representatives from parish councils, Warmfront, the Primary Care Trust, Age Concern and the HIA to target improvement to the area's housing stock. This is important as 18.5 per cent of housing in the district still fails the Decent Homes Standard because of inadequate 'cold hazards'.
- 84** The Council has had a long-term relationship with a Home Improvement Agency (HIA) to help deliver a responsive, customer-focused service for local people including advice and assistance with DFGs, maintenance work through a handyperson scheme and assistance with decoration and gardening for vulnerable clients. This relationship ensures that older and disabled people receive the support of a caseworker to provide assistance and advice when improvements to their home are required.
- 85** There is an effective approach to the regulation of conditions of the district's caravan and park homes sites. There are 28 multiple occupied sites and 41 single residential mobile homes accommodating around 800 mobile homes. The Council has a robust risk-based inspection programme for controlling and maintaining conditions on these sites. Effective regulation of residential sites helps to reduce health and safety risks.

How good is the service?

- 86** The Council provides a good level of assistance for home owners to improve their homes but it has not been targeted at those in greatest need. In 2007/08 the Council provided three renovation grants of a value of £52,000 and provided Home Repair Assistance to 116 homes (value of £246,000). These improvements have had a positive impact on the health and well-being of the people living in these properties. However, because improvements were not linked to an assessment of health and safety risks in the property the Council cannot be sure that it is targeting local people in the greatest need or that its improvements are meeting its objectives of reducing the number of people living in non-decent housing. Equally, there is no GP referral scheme that links health outcomes to housing- related problems. This means that resources are not always focused on tackling the worst housing conditions.
- 87** Disabled residents are waiting too long for help to adapt their homes. Despite the Council increasing the level of resources allocated for adaptation work, budgets are still knowingly set that will be outstripped by demand (with virements taking place from other budgets). The service tries to address this using a rational approach to prioritising individual cases. The length of time clients wait for necessary work to be undertaken is reducing - the Council currently takes an average of 343 days compared with 429 days in 2006/07 and the County Council has reduced the time taken to assess needs and make recommendations to the Council from an historic average of 190 days to 116 days. But on average it takes around a year for adaptations to be completed. There is good working with the County Council to ensure the Council is aware of any major cases that may be coming forward. There are currently 36 cases on the waiting list. Current performance means that delivery is not always within target guidelines set by the government and increases the risk that disabled people may suffer a poorer quality of life for an excessive period of time.
- 88** There is an improving relationship with private sector landlords but this remains an area for improvement. The service is becoming more proactively engaged with the Eastbourne and Wealden Landlords' Forum. The service also provides good information on issues that are importance to local landlords, such as the local housing allowance, energy efficiency and HMO licensing through a newsletter. However, this is only targeted at landlords whose tenants receive housing benefit. In addition, there has been no proactive engagement with the known landlords whose properties were previously improved to help ensure housing conditions are maintained. This is a missed opportunity to maximise contact with local landlords (although this should be addressed shortly through the introduction of the Sussex Landlord Accreditation Scheme funded through the BEST bid).
- 89** The service has not proactively ensured that private rented homes meet minimum standards. The level of complaints from private sector tenants does not reflect the scale of the problems identified by the Council but little work has been done to identify 'hidden' tenants or support 'accidental' landlords. In addition, there have been insufficient resources to build on the improvements carried out in privately rented homes in 2002 by developing ways to encourage landlords to maintain standards in their properties for example, through accreditation or self-certification (this is now being addressed). An active enabling approach would help to improve the service and raise accommodation standards for homeowners, landlords and tenants.

- 90** The Council's strategic approach to bringing long-term empty homes back into use is still developing. The Council has been successful at bringing a reasonable level of empty homes back into use for example, through the rent deposit scheme. However, this has not been part of a clear strategic approach targeted at long-term empty homes. Positively, the Council has worked in partnership to establish a cross boundary approach and has also started to engage with owners of empty homes to encourage them back into use and through its updated empty homes strategy which has the ability to provide financial assistance to owners in return for use of the property for PSL¹⁷. However, it does not yet have a clear strategic approach to the problem. It has not identified target properties where it can focus its efforts to maximise impact for local people and to create momentum for its work. Nor has it developed a clear plan that sets out the range of solutions that the Council's Empty Homes Officer can use (advice and assistance and enforcement) to deliver positive outcomes.
- 91** Some aspects of service delivery are not customer-focused. For example, where enforcement action is taken the Council tries to keep tenants informed on a one to one basis - but this should also be embedded in procedures. There are no standard letters to the tenants to advise them that the Council is taking action to improve their homes or that standards have been met following this action. In addition, the Council's approach to prioritising adaptations means that it does not tell disabled people of their right to make an application at any time rather than waiting for the Council to invite them to make an application. The Council also does not provide a list of accredited builders or agents (beyond the HIA) or effectively promote a related scheme provided by the County Council. This provides people with more choice and assurance about the quality of the builder/agent and can in some cases help the Council streamline its grant processes.

Enabling the provision of new housing to meet need

- 92** Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. The delivery of new market and affordable housing has been very low in comparison with Council and regional targets. The Council has failed to spend its allocation of social housing grant and low numbers of homes have been delivered through planning gain. However, there has been a significant change in approach over the past year which is beginning to deliver better outcomes, albeit from a very low base. Despite improved outcomes for 2008/09, levels of house-building above current rates will be required for several years to get back on track.
- 93** The Council has failed to meet its targets for the delivery of new homes. Delivery against targets for new homes and affordable homes has fallen far short of requirements. The Council's combined Regional Spatial Strategy and Structure Plan target from 2001/02 to 2007/08 was 3,300 new homes - an annual requirement of 471. In total, over this period the Council built 1,624 homes, a shortfall of 1,676 homes. This performance placed the Council as the third worst performing district in the South East. The South East Plan requires the district to build 11,000 homes between 2006 and 2026, an annual requirement of 550. The average annual number of new homes built over the last five years is 217. Of these 211 were affordable, 19.5 per cent of all new homes delivered (up to 2007/08). This is far below Council and structure plan targets.

¹⁷ Private sector leasing

How good is the service?

	Number of new homes built	Number of affordable homes built and as a percentage of all new houses	Number of affordable homes provided through S106 agreements
2008/09 (unaudited figures)	Projected at 340 ¹⁸	64 ¹⁹ (19%)	30
2007/08	415	13 (3.1%)	0
2006/07	223	64 (28.7%)	0
2005/06	173	24 (13.8%)	0
2004/05	128	41 (32.0%)	0
2003/04	145	69 (47.5%)	13

The shortfall in delivery has had a detrimental impact on the Council's ability to meet local housing need. Despite a rise in affordable homes in 2008/09 early indications suggest that they will only account for just over 12 per cent of total delivery.

- 94** A range of factors have led to low housing outturns. The Council has indicated that the approval of their Non-Statutory Local Plan coinciding with an overheated property market was a major contributory factor. But tensions between Council priorities have also adversely impacted on the delivery of affordable housing. Local people have identified affordable housing as an important issue; it is identified as a key priority in the Community Plan; and is a key part of meeting the Council's objective of 'Pride of Place' under the priority of 'place shaping'. However, until recently there have been significant tensions in reconciling the need to maximise the delivery of housing while protecting the rural character and environment of the district. This led to reluctance to support new housing development, often because of strong local opposition. This was an extremely difficult issue for some ward councillors to manage and key stakeholders, including developers and developing housing associations, did not always feel confident that proposals for development would be successful.
- 95** The Council has taken steps to improve awareness among local people about local housing need and the urgent need for more affordable homes to be built. A main strand of this work has focussed on awareness raising at a large number of Parish Councils. This has involved attendance at face-to-face public meetings, consultation events and parish planning conferences. This approach is ensuring that the Council is now better placed to manage the tensions between the need for more homes and the desire to conserve the environmental quality of the area, helping to foster a delivery culture. Over the past year all planning applications with an element of affordable housing have been agreed.

¹⁸ 2008/09 year end figures were still being finalised at the time of this report

¹⁹ Unaudited figure

- 96 The Council has invested in a more focussed and managed approach to delivering new homes. Planning and housing teams have moved to a project-based approach to support the delivery of affordable homes. Cross-departmental working is being applied at pre-application stages through a development team approach and through mechanisms such as regular forums where the strategic approach to major developments is determined early on. Planning services also have specific named officers to deal with affordable housing who meet bi weekly with the affordable housing development team, helping to resolve issues with prospective sites, monitor progress, and agree representation at development control committees. Team leaders with responsibility for major schemes have also been created. More joined up working is now helping to support the delivery of housing.
- 97 The Council is working to identify future land supply and assess viability. Capacity in this area has been strengthened through external consultancy. This is important for the development of the LDF as the latest Secretary of State's proposed amendments to the South East Plan will result in an additional 11,000 dwellings (550 per annum) between 2006 and 2026. The Council is required to prepare plans and strategies to ensure the delivery. The South East Plan envisages 7,000 of the total dwellings being provided in the southern part of Wealden district and the remaining 4,000 in the remainder. It is important that the Council has identified a sufficient supply of land to complement its good housing needs information. This will be critical in informing the LDF and the pending spatial options.
- 98 The Council has produced a SPD on housing design as part of the LDF which is helping to raise the sustainability of new homes. The Wealden Design Guide states that new buildings should minimise energy consumption, avoid unnecessary waste, minimise the use of new materials produced unsustainably, maximise the use of recycled materials, minimise water consumption, protect habitats and ground water from contamination and be flexible and capable of being adapted for changing needs and users. The Council also operates a voluntary sustainability checklist for all new developments to make sure that properties are fully insulated and meet water use and drainage standards. Wealden's own climate change policy and action plan aims to promote the reduction of carbon emissions in all new developments and encourages developments to prepare for the future impacts of climate change.
- 99 The Council's planning performance is improving. A three-year implementation plan is in place, with some outcomes already achieved including a housing and planning protocol, the appointment of a new development team manager, and regular attendance at planning committee by housing development officers. New housing schemes which contain affordable housing are formally presented to members at planning committee and there is ongoing training of members on affordable housing. The time taken to make decisions on major planning applications is also reducing. During 2007/08 84 per cent of major applications were resolved within 13 weeks compared to 73 per cent in 2005/06 and only 43 per cent in 2004/05. The score against a quality of planning service checklist has also improved to 94.4 per cent in 2007/08 compared to 75 per cent in 2005/06. The current level of planning performance (above the higher quartile) particularly for major applications should further assist and support delivery of new homes.

How good is the service?

- 100** Affordable housing developments are of a reasonable quality and located within private housing developments. Schemes are pleasantly landscaped and have access to local facilities. This approach is delivering quality homes that are well integrated into new developments.
- 101** Development plans have allocated funding to support delivery. In 2008-11, £4,035,500 has been secured through the Housing Corporation bidding round to provide 27 Homebuy units and 74 rented units across four sites. Since the on site period of the inspection a further six schemes have been agreed to be funded. These will deliver 123 units and include the Extra Care housing scheme for older people. In addition to this, RSL funding will be used to deliver 101 new homes. A further £50,000 has been set aside by the Council for the next three years to provide funding to enhance the delivery of rural housing, this includes a new post to lead on rural affordable housing, an education and training programme for members and parish councils and a new rural housing needs survey. The Council also has set aside in its MTFS²⁰ £250,000 per annum for the building or purchase of new affordable housing units through RSL partnerships. This should help to pump-prime some affordable housing projects each year.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 102** Strengths and weaknesses are in balance in this area. The Council has a good understanding of service costs and has used benchmarking to identify areas for improvement across strategic housing services, including efficiency savings. Partnership working is producing savings and supporting successful bids to draw in external funding although the Council has not maximised all opportunities, though the Council and its partners did not maximise the use of social housing grant provided to the district during 2006/08. There is a strong corporate procurement framework in place that is delivering savings and effective financial monitoring systems. But current performance management of partners does not focus on value for money and there is scope for further cost scrutiny.

²⁰ Medium term financial strategy

How do costs compare?

- 103** The Council has a good understanding of the costs of the service and how they compare. During 2007/08 the Council employed external consultants to undertake a service by service value for money assessment. The review considered a range of benchmarking information including cost and service performance. At the time of the review it showed that:
- Wealden's strategic housing functions are generally, in terms of cost per head of population, below median compared to district councils in England. Housing Services expenditure per head is the 50th lowest among districts and 3rd lowest in the group. Spend is below average across housing services. Performance is above average for the proportion of non-decent dwellings, the time taken to make a planning decision and long term empty homes, but below average for the length of stay in bed and breakfast, repeat homelessness, the impact of homelessness advice, and energy efficiency.
 - The Council commissioned a value for money review of its direct labour organisation (DSO) in 2008. The external review reported that generally there was good value for money with below average costs. This showed that expenditure on repairs to empty homes (including sheltered) is low, at 68 per cent of the average group spend. Spend per void property is £1,050 against a group average of £2,316.
- 104** The service also uses the CIPFA benchmarking group to examine cost and performance. Local benchmarking has also taken place in the housing management service, Private Sector Housing, temporary accommodation and the delivery of affordable housing. This has been used to inform the business planning processes and identify savings within the service.

How is value for money managed?

- 105** Value for money is challenged in a number of ways. Costs are challenged annually through the budget process and as part of the preparation of the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) 2008-11. This involves a review of every budget heading, full consultation with the public, parish councils and businesses resulting in planned reductions in costs, and in some cases service levels, over the three year period. The MTFS 2004-07 saved £1.3m and downsized from 22 senior managers to 15. A programme of Business Process Improvement has also delivered savings and improved service quality in the benefits service and identified savings of around £200,000 per year in the planning service. Improvements have also been identified in the affordable housing service. Savings are being reinvested in priority areas, such as planning which is increasing capacity to improve. The overall approach is helping to lower costs and in some areas secure better outcomes.

How good is the service?

- 106** The Council has worked hard to embed value for money as part of its organisational culture. 'Improving performance and efficiency' is a key corporate aim that has been reinforced through a series of value for money workshops with senior managers and by encouraging staff at all levels to actively identify and address value for money issues. There is a comprehensive approach to medium term financial planning that increasingly focuses on both cost and outcomes. This is increasing the Council's ability to understand and demonstrate value for money.
- 107** The scrutiny of value for money is improving. The Council has historically had a strong focus on cost. There are now regular meetings with portfolio holders where cost and performance issues are discussed. In addition, performance reports to both senior managers and councillors now include information on budgets and progress on efficiency targets. However, performance reports at present provide few clear service level value for money indicators to enhance scrutiny of value for money. The Council plans to address this imminently but current arrangements mean that councillors' ability to assess value for money is limited and lacks a qualitative element.
- 108** The Council has a strong approach to procurement. The Council has its own dedicated procurement unit that has supported the joint procurement of the choice based lettings scheme and in the gypsy and traveller assessment work. The new procurement strategy (2009-2011) suggests that the housing service should save £100,000 over the next two financial years. This is in addition to the savings of £956,000 achieved in the period 2004-08, of which £250,000 was made in the housing service. Activities aimed at improving procurement include the following.
- In 2004 the Council became members of the Northern Housing Consortium and this generated savings of £85,000 on the community alarms upgrade programme.
 - The housing service has recently signed up to the South East Consortium (procurement club) in order to take advantage of best practice and to buy into some of the consortium's procurement contracts.
 - The Council's investment in its website has delivered efficiencies and easy access to services through the use of 'self-service' options.
- 109** Partnership working is helping to attract a range of external funding and improve capacity. Partners described the 'Wealden hinterland' which is often viewed as an area of affluence with little deprivation. However working with neighbouring councils such as Hasting and Eastbourne the Council has been able to secure additional capacity which is producing outcomes such as energy efficiency work, and work with young people to reduce homelessness. This approach makes good use of the capacity, skills and resources available.

- 110** The Council is using benchmarking information to help drive improvement. In addition to the work described in the previous section of the report the Council has also benchmarked some key service areas through the LAA, the East Sussex Chief Housing Officers Group and Wealden housing management group. Data has been gathered from authorities/RSLs who manage voids well and survey them to find out how they deliver the service, with a view to replicating similar improvements. Benchmarking data on responsive repairs also led to visits to high performing authorities and contributed to the reorganisation of the service. Data from the benchmarking of the planning service has fed in to the overall improvement plan for the service which delivered around £200,000 potential savings.
- 111** Efficiency savings in the strategic housing service are being reinvested to meet priorities. Although the MTFS has applied tough targets for reducing costs, there remains scope to invest more resources if a business case is made. Examples of this approach include the appointment of new posts in planning, and housing development. Redirecting resources the Council's corporate priority is helping to support the delivery of affordable homes.
- 112** Policies and partnerships have not been robustly assessed to ensure value for money. For example, the service lacks any measure of success in the existing service level agreement with the CAB to help to understand the relationship between outcomes and cost. Similarly, initiatives in place for homelessness prevention and home improvement assistance have not been fully assessed in terms of cost and outcome. The service is not using its powers to charge for reasonable expenses incurred (and thereby generate income for the service) when enforcement action is taken and does not charge for planning advice. The Council currently operates two development control committees (for the north and south of the district) which has an impact on capacity and cost of the service. Failure to apply a value for money approach to all elements of strategic housing service increases the risk that opportunities for cost reductions, service improvements or service expansion may be lost.
- 113** The Council is not ensuring good value for money from its grant processes. Schedules of work produced by the Council are not clear. This is important in ensuring that owners know exactly what work is eligible for assistance and builders can price for the work transparently. The Council does not insist on two estimates for Home Repairs Assistance. When one estimate is received the Council is not recording on its files how it has been assessed for reasonableness. There also does not appear to be any record of checks of VAT registration or the competency of the builder. Current arrangements do not demonstrate a strong customer focus that is transparent.
- 114** The Service has not maximised all opportunities to lever in and use external funding to support service delivery. There are examples of external funding being secured for private sector housing (BEST funding), homelessness and planning services and achieving match funding through the community grants programme. However the return of £9.5 million social housing grant has meant that the district has lost significant opportunities to support delivery of affordable homes.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 115** Strengths and weaknesses are in balance in this area. Performance indicators show a general trend of improvement and there have been some improvements for customers of the planning service and in customer access. Homelessness is falling and the approach to value for money has improved. But the number of new and affordable homes delivered remains well below target and the private sector and housing options services has delivered mixed outcomes for service users. The Council has achieved some good value for money outcomes and has in place a structured approach. Despite progress on the diversity agenda the Council remains at level two of the Local Government Equality Standard.
- 116** Satisfaction levels are generally strong. The Council's quarter three performance report 2008/09 shows that 86 per cent of Council tenants are satisfied with the overall landlord service and 96 per cent of private sector service users are satisfied. 98.2 per cent of a sample of customers using front desk services during May to October 2008 expressed overall satisfaction with the service they received as good or very good. Customer feedback surveys suggest that service users are recognising some of the benefits of service improvements, although despite improvements this has not yet been the case in planning services.
- 117** There has been mixed improvement in the planning service. Performance improvements across the major planning application categories place the Council in the best 25 per cent nationally. However, planning appeals and satisfaction with planning²¹ have not improved at the same rate and remain below average. A new design guide is helping to raise the quality of design of new build and the integration of tenure. The Council continues to work with independent consultants to progress the LDF, although there has been some slippage.
- 118** Improvements from plans and strategies have been implemented well over the past 18 months. A range of external challenges and reviews have resulted in comprehensive improvement plans for strategic housing services, leading to some positive outcomes. For example, the Council has successfully introduced a pan-Sussex choice based letting system which promotes greater consistency and efficiency of approach and helps to maximise learning; a development team approach is now employed for all new affordable housing planning applications and is leading to more new affordable homes coming through; poor quality temporary accommodation has been de-commissioned; and the time taken to let empty homes has fallen from over 40 days to 24 days. Although the latest figure is unaudited it suggests an improvement from the bottom 25 per cent to the top 25 per cent performance.

²¹ Last triennial survey showed only 63 per cent of service users were satisfied

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 119** The Council is improving value for money. The Council is an active partner on regional procurement initiatives and hosts a number of shared posts. Between 2004 and 2008 the Council secured a saving of £5 million savings through its corporate procurement programme. The introduction of the MTFs has also delivered a reduction in overall costs. Officers are clear about cost and quality of services and use benchmarking to support this. However despite attracting external funding in to strategic housing service through the BEST bid the Council's partner RSLs failed to use a significant sum of social housing grant which resulted in the loss of £9.5 million investment in affordable homes. The strategic approach to value for money is strong but not yet fully embedded across strategic housing services.
- 120** There have been a range of improvements that local people would recognise in customer access. Local people who visit the Council's office receive a better experience. They are seen quickly by friendly, well trained and customer-focused staff. All services across the Council have been awarded Chartermark accreditation. Communication with local people has also improved. Telephones are answered quickly and there is high quality written information available as leaflets and through the website. These improvements are providing a strong focus on customer care and access to most services.
- 121** The Council has made progress in improving its approach to equality and diversity but there remain areas where further progress is required. The Council is now at level two of the Local Government Equality standard and close to achieving level three. All strategic housing services have undergone an equality impact assessment and the Council also works closely with a number of groups representing a range of vulnerable people. The Council is also using partnerships with the local voluntary organisations to increase its understanding of harder to reach groups. Monitoring of outcomes has been strengthened through a two year agreement with a BME charity to monitor equity of services. However the availability of supported housing services is patchy across the district and there are gaps in provision for some vulnerable people. Diversity monitoring is being carried out in the service (across all six equality strands) but at present the data is incomplete.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

122 There are mixed outcomes for both the housing options and private sector housing services.

- Homelessness acceptances fell from 261 in 2005/06 to 121 in 2007/08 while homelessness enquiries dropped from 458 in 2004/05 to 176 in 2007/08. The service has also successfully reduced the number of young people becoming homeless and reduced the use of temporary accommodation to exceed the Government's 2010 target ahead of schedule. However, people are still staying a long time in temporary accommodation with the Council within the worst 25 per cent of performers nationally in 2007/08. The Council acknowledges that it is under-recording the impact of housing advice within the district and this is likely to be having a negative impact on this performance indicator, placing the Council in the worst 25 per cent of Councils.
- The private sector housing service has worked well with partners to provide assistance for home owners but this assistance has not been clearly targeted at the greatest need and the support does not include providing a list of accredited builders or agents. Performance on completing disabled adaptations has improved at all the key stages of the process but it still takes too long to meet clients' needs. The service has inspected and improved the small number of Houses in Multiple Occupation as part of its approach to licensing. However, the service has not proactively ensured that private rented homes meet minimum standards. Performance in bringing empty homes back into use has been reasonable but has been more as a result of 'quick wins' rather than a clear strategic approach targeting long-term empty homes.

123 The Council's enabling new homes to meet local need remains an area of weakness. Performance is beginning to show improvement but this is from a low base. Only 13 affordable homes were delivered in 2007/08 (compared to 62 in the previous year), placing the Council among worst 25 per cent of district council performers. Delivery of new housing generally is also weak, with poor performance against regional and local targets. However the investment in the service over the past 18 months has begun to deliver improved outcomes with 64 affordable homes delivered in 2008/09, which includes 30 through section 106 agreements and 14 homebuy loans. 19 were in rural areas and 9 were on a rural exception site.

How well does the service manage performance?

124 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in relation to managing performance. Leadership is effective, with new service initiatives and a stronger focus on affordable housing leading to better outcomes for service users in most areas. The service is in dialogue with developers to place the Council in a position where it can take action where possible to help mitigate the impact of the current economic downturn. Performance management is effective but could be strengthened by better recording of outcomes.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 125** Councillors are increasingly demonstrating good community leadership and recognise the need for them to balance the needs of those who currently live in their wards and those in housing need that would like to. Historically there has been some unwillingness to recognise the need for affordable housing delivery as a priority. However, over the past year the Council has shown a new willingness to take difficult decisions to support the delivery of affordable housing. For example, in the last 12 months, all applications with affordable housing have been approved at development control committees and there have been concerted efforts to improve understanding of the need for more housing across the community. The service is now a priority for the Council.
- 126** There is also active and visible managerial leadership of strategic housing services. Managers have clearly communicated the ambitions for the service to staff and are actively driving performance improvement. Staff clearly understand how their work fits into the council's overall ambitions and were clear what their personal and team priorities were and how well they were performing against targets. This clarity ensures that staff are focussing on key priorities and work closely across service streams to deliver improvement.
- 127** The framework of housing strategies are generally of good quality and set out how the Council will meet identified needs. Strategies focus on three key areas - improving supply, conditions and housing support - and are based on robust data. Feedback from service users has informed strategic approach and councillors have used the cabinet and scrutiny process to review improvement plans and strategic action plans. There is a separate but linked action plan that addresses service weaknesses. These plans are used to refresh the strategic approach on an annual basis. The Local Development Framework (LDF) is progressing and recently the Council has published a design guide for developers.
- 128** The Council has a well-developed and comprehensive system to monitor and manage performance. Performance is monitored and reported to cabinet every quarter. Performance reports include clear and simple headlines on performance against seven key performance indicators identified by the Leader. Performance against both national and local performance indicators is identified and a backward look at previous performance is included. Current performance is reviewed via a traffic light system to identify predictive performance. Information used is generally timely and internal audit has an active programme of verifying the accuracy and reliability of performance information used. This helps to ensure that service areas are effectively monitored and that service users receive quality and timely services.
- 129** The Council's approach to managing risk is comprehensive and embedded in service and financial planning processes. The risk framework is supported with regular training and written guidance for staff involved in reporting and managing risk. Risk registers have management action plans detailing actions to control and reduce risk and these are regularly monitored by officers and councillors through the performance management process. It is important that the Council has a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the level of risk to which it is exposed at any one time in order to take measures to help mitigate them.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 130** The Council learns well from both external organisations and its customers. This is reflected in the high level of self awareness; with a shared understanding of this evident at all levels from front-line staff to senior managers and councillors. The service planning framework has a strong focus on consultation with service users and stakeholders. However the service has not effectively used the Wealden housing partnership to monitor strategic delivery but this is planned from 2009/10. This increases the potential for improvement in this service area.
- 131** The Council is currently consulting on new private sector housing and empty homes strategies covering the period 2009-2014. Both strategies link well to corporate priorities and plans and reflect the improved intelligence on conditions and need. There are also clear links made to national drivers and regional and local housing priorities. The private sector housing action plan 2009-2011 is generally SMART with planned actions demonstrating a good level of self-awareness of the strengths and weaknesses in the service. There are some aspects of the draft financial assistance policy that could be strengthened or made more transparent for example, in the proposals for the use of home repairs assistance and empty homes grants. The empty homes strategy action plan is logical and will support the Council in developing a strategic approach to bringing long-term empty homes back into use. However, it is not outcome-focused and targets are based on resources available rather than the scale of the problem.
- 132** Improvement plans generally focus on the right things to secure future improvement. The Council has employed external experts in areas that have been underperforming and their recommendations have been incorporated in to improvement plans to address key weaknesses identified earlier in the report. For example:
- Plans with partners include additional floating support, move on accommodation for the Foyer scheme, creation of a local credit union, a joint worklessness project and a mortgage rescue scheme.
 - The revised rent deposit schemes will be re-branded under one scheme in June 2009. The scheme enables landlords to advertise properties through a letting agents-style website managed by the Council. Applicants on the housing register will be able to log in using their CBL reference number and express an interest in available privately rented accommodation in the same way that they 'bid' for accommodation under the CBL system. Applicants put forward for the scheme will be accredited. Applicants needing financial assistance will be able to access one of three levels of rent deposit assistance depending on their circumstances.
 - Future plans include improved access arrangements, such as the proposed gateway model for CAB services which includes an agreed prioritisation process and appointment system.
 - Plans include measures to raise the sustainability of both new homes and the existing stock. The Council's landlord service is currently piloting a range of renewable energy technology for use in its own stock and the Wealden Design Guide sets out requirements for new homes to meet life time homes and secure by design standards for affordable homes.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- A second stage piece of planning consultancy work (looking at the development management process) was completed in January 2009. The issues raised cover some issues already being addressed. However, some areas require further work to secure investment to improve the computer systems that support planners.
- 133** The service has a strong approach to learning from customer feedback, its partners and its own experience. It learns from others through its partnerships. Partners interviewed during a focus group reported that the Council was a listening Council who was willing to adopt a flexible approach to deliver required outcomes. The Council also learns from feedback for example, through both complaints and consultation with local people. Outcomes from these activities are available on the Council's website. Partnership work to improve private sector homes has delivered additional funding to move towards a loan system for owner occupiers whose homes require improving and is also helping the Council to maximise learning. This approach ensures that service improvements include actions that are important to local people.
- 134** As part of its approach to improving value for money the Council is embarking on a Transformation Programme that seeks to save the Council over £1.3 million. Positively, there is a clear sense of momentum and a strong focus on project management from staff who have experience of leading change of this nature. However, the programme is at an early stage and at present there is no clear plan that sets out exactly what the Council plans to do. Consequently, the wider councillor body do not yet have a clear view of the benefits and risks associated with the programme.
- 135** In addition the Housing Services is currently developing two value for money strategies, one for the housing revenue account activities and for strategic housing general fund works streams. These are due to be consulted on in May 2009. These strategies bring together the service's approach to value for money referencing benchmarking data, against context of cost and customer satisfaction rates. This is strengthening the strategic approach to value for money.
- 136** The Council's appraisal system is effective. The quality of the appraisal system has been improved through training on target-setting and a requirement for targets to link to organisational goals. The quality of the appraisal is checked by a peer manager as second signatory. A small selection of appraisals for strategic housing staff showed compliance with the corporate process and training requirements had been identified. However appraisals lacked strong outcome targets and often described a process or action rather than what a successful outcome should produce. Effective appraisal processes support performance management and staff development.
- 137** There are some weaknesses in the reporting of directorate performance. Performance management reports are too detailed. This can result in a loss of focus on the 'things that matter' and can hamper meaningful debate on the relevant key issues. There are around 50 indicators reported for the Community Services Directorate in addition to information on performance against around thirteen further corporate plan targets. There is also insufficient clear service level value for money indicators reported on. This is planned to be addressed in the next performance management report and further enhanced through the new financial management system next year. Current reporting arrangements limit opportunities to manage value for money and the complexity increases the risk that key messages may be unclear.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

138 Improvement plans do not always contain clear measurable outcomes. Generally action/processes described are the right ones to address weaknesses but targets are not described in such a way as to describe what a successful outcome should deliver/look like. The lack of measurable outcomes can make it more difficult to identify under performance at an early stage.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

139 Strengths outweigh weaknesses. The Council has the staff with skills and experience to deliver the improvements set out in its strategies and plans. Political capacity is now stronger and extensive partnership working further enhances capacity. The Council is investing in priority areas and external investment is also helping to support improved services and staff capacity. External challenge and review has led to strong improvement plans which contain actions that should improve many of the weaknesses identified in the report. But financial pressures on the Council and the limited capacity of the current housing management system may present some barriers to improvement.

140 The capacity of Councillors to lead the service is increasing. The Cabinet now includes a portfolio holder for strategic planning and housing delivery, and a separate portfolio for affordable housing. These two Executive Members work closely together to achieve the overall objectives and there has been a focus on wider member-level training on housing delivery and planning. Community Scrutiny Committee was also asked to look at issues with the delivery of affordable housing within rural areas which fed in to improvement plans. The commitment by councillors to move to a single planning development control committee also offers the potential to release further capacity. Councillors are now better-placed to champion the need for affordable housing and take difficult decisions through the strategic and planning process.

141 Staff capacity is strong and morale is high. The Council's human resources (HR) department is supporting change in the Council. Positively, staff turnover in the service is low. There is also a wide ranging training and development programme in place that is enhancing capacity and improving services for local people, such as customer care training for all staff. The Council also has policies in place to support the changes planned. These include an employment stability policy and policies to support both 'flexible' and home-based working. This provides a sound basis for future improvement.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 142** Key corporate projects should also help to improve capacity across the Council and within strategic housing services.
- The Council aims to replace its financial management system by April 2010 and this will deliver 'procure to pay' systems as well as vastly improved financial information. The system will provide better information for decision-makers on finance and value for money and information about how customers are interacting with services. The improved system will help the Council to streamline services and support all the Council's financial and procurement processes.
 - The Council's Transformation Programme aims to change the way the Council delivers services, moving to a commissioning role and focusing further on outcomes and value for money with a target to reduce net costs by at least £1.3 million over the next three years.
 - Plans to consolidate its service on one site in Hailsham offer the potential to increase capacity through enhanced internal communication, closer team working and removal of duplication.
- 143** Strong partnership working is helping to increase capacity within strategic housing services. The Council works well with neighbouring councils and other stakeholders in delivering strategic housing services. The Council already employs some shared posts - the special needs medical officer with ESCC's Adult Social Care department and an equalities officer is shared with Rother District Council. The Council is also exploring with two neighbouring councils a bid for funding to employ a joint under occupation officer post. The Brighton & Hove, East Sussex Together Partnership (BEST) has been allocated £18.6 million over three years by the South East England Regional Housing Board to tackle some of the region's worst housing conditions. Wealden District Council has received £627,000 of this sum. This increases capacity in a cost effective way.
- 144** The Council is investing in capacity within the planning service. The service has been working with a leading planning consultant to provide a series of workshops for Councillors and to assist the development of the LDF Core Strategy. In April 2008 the planning service also adopted the national validation criteria for planning applications linked to the planning portal allowing for online submissions of planning applications. A Housing Development Officer has been seconded to the LDF project team to assist with this work. New posts within the affordable housing development team and planning's development management service will also help to ensure delivery of affordable housing remains a priority and ensure that the Council's response to major schemes will be well co-ordinated and focussed. Additional capacity within the planning service is helping to maximise opportunities for new development.
- 145** The Council has increased the focus on delivering affordable homes. A reorganisation of this team has been undertaken to increase the emphasis on delivery. A new team leader post has been created and they are working closely with the LDF team within Planning Policy to ensure that delivery of affordable housing remains a priority. A member of the affordable housing development team also attends Development Planning Committees to present the case for affordable housing and deal with housing related questions. This approach has strengthened joint working between planning and housing services.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 146** The Council has been proactive in developing its approaches and plans to respond to current economic challenges facing developers. Action has included negotiating with developers to bring affordable housing forward in site developments, increasing the percentage of affordable housing above the thresholds and in some cases purchasing completed developments off the shelf. The Council has also revisited all schemes which have planning permission and where there is a section 106 agreement in place, to see if any easements can be agreed to support developers to build out the sites. This approach is helping to preserve the overall viability of development schemes and allow the Council to respond quickly as an opportunity arises or a concern is raised.
- 147** Some of the barriers to delivering affordable homes are beginning to be overcome. Developers acknowledged that Wealden had a reputation as an area where it was difficult to work but they welcomed recent changes and acknowledged the improvements that have been made. The number of planning approvals and numbers of units in excess of the affordable housing threshold policy are increasing. For example, in 2009/10 the development programme shows two units on site that will be delivered in excess of the threshold policy but this is forecast to increase to a further 48 units in 2010/11. Homes are also beginning to be delivered via section 106 agreements and through the rural exceptions policy. Since the rural housing protocol has been implemented three rural sites have received planning approvals for 32 homes and a further 45 homes are currently in the design and consultation phase on exception sites. A further 46 homes are at the initial stages of design on exception sites within the district. The Council exceeded its annual LAA affordable housing target for the first time in 2008/09 delivering 64 new affordable homes against a target of 45.
- 148** Financial and ICT capacity could have a negative impact on the Council's ability to improve. Significant financial pressures affecting the Council that may impact on the service. However, the impact is likely to be mitigated by the Council's significant level of reserves - £6 million - and its track record of continued financial support to the service. There are some weaknesses in the existing housing management system, in particular its compatibility with the housing options service. In addition current ICT systems do not effectively support service-level managers and the strategic management of cross-cutting themes such as equality and diversity and value for money. ICT is not maximising efficiency or supporting managers across all service areas to monitor how effective outcomes are.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Planning		BVPI	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
1	Total number of new homes developed		145	128	173	223	415
2	Target number of homes within structure plan		415	415	440	880	880
3	Average density of new housing developments		No Data	No Data	No Data	No Data	No Data
4	Percentage on previously developed land	106	81%	87.61%	69%	84%	91%
5	Percentage 'secure by design'		No Data	No Data	No Data	No Data	No Data
6	109a Major planning apps processed in 13 weeks	109a	26%	44.83%	73%	80%	84%
7	200a * Up to date development plan	200a	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
8	200b * Up to date proposals on deposit	200b	No	No	No	No	No
9	204 Successful appeals against refusal of planning permission	204	No Data	23.9%	32.87%	24.14%	33.33%
10	205 Score against a quality of planning service checklist	205	No Data	83.3%	75%	88.89%	94.4%
11	Target percentage of affordable being required on sites in excess of the threshold size		30%	30%	30%	30%	30%
12	Percentage of affordable housing being achieved on sites in excess of the threshold size		No Data	No Data	No Data	No Data	No Data

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Enabling		BVPI	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
13	Total number of affordable rented homes completed		62	30	4	28	12
14	Total number of shared ownership or other forms of low cost home ownership completed		7	11	20	36	5
15	Total number of below market rented homes developed		0	0	0	0	0
16	Total number of affordable homes developed (ie 13+14+15)		69	41	24	64	17
17	Number of homes achieved through s106 agreements		13	0	0	0	0
18	Number of grant-free affordable housing completions		N/A	N/A	0	0	0
19	Number of grant-free affordable rented housing completions		N/A	N/A	0	0	0
20	Number of homes completed on rural exceptions sites		0	0	0	5	10
21	Number of rural housing needs surveys/village appraisals undertaken		0	38	0	0	0
22	Number of homes with Eco-excellent ratings or including low energy features above current HC requirements		No Data	No Data	No Data	No Data	No Data
23	Number of new supported housing units		10 Rooms	14 Units	0	0	0
24	Number of key worker homes		1	4	0	0	0

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Housing needs		BVPI	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
25	Number of homelessness applications		568	458	443	226	176
26	Number of those threatened with homeless for whom advice and support prevented the occurrence of homelessness		No Data	No Data	22	80	56
27	Number of homelessness acceptances		331	251	261	149	121
28	Number of families in B&B at 31st March		7	8	8	7	7
29	Number of families in other TA at 31st March		185	202	206	161	119
30	Number of single people in B&B		No Data	6?	6	7	4
31	Average no of weeks spent in B&B by families	183a	7	5	3	3	2
32	Average no of weeks spent in hostels by families	183b	0	0	0	0	28.05
33	Reduction in numbers of families placed in TA	203	+19.3%	+18.5%	+3.4%	-9.87%	-44.94%
Use of existing Affordable Housing		BVPI	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
34	Number of low demand affordable homes		0	0	0	0	0
35	Number of 4, 3 or 2 bedroom properties vacated through transfer incentive schemes		9	2	9	5	5
36	Percentage of LA homes not meeting the decent homes standard	184a	26%	18%	9%	4%	8%
37	Percentage of HA homes not meeting the decent homes standard		N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
38	SAP rating for the social rented stock	163	60	60	63	72	73
39	Refuge places per 10,000	176	1	1	1	1	1
Access to affordable housing		BVPI	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
40	Percentage of private sector homes that are unfit or in need of major repair		N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	2.5%* Identified by 2007 Stock Condition Survey
41	Percentage unfit homes made fit or demolished	62	7.00%	3.43%	3.05%	N/A	N/A

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

42	Percentage of vacant homes returned to use (BVPI - 64 actual number not percentage)	64	15.0	0	7	89	43
43	Number of homes vacant for six months or longer		569	563	614	514	480
44	Percentage of private sector homes occupied by vulnerable people that do not meet the decent homes standard		N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	28.1% Identified by 2007 Stock Condition Survey
45	Number of homes improved through the use of disabled facilities grants		62	66	80	91	93
46	Number of households to whom advice on repairs and improvements were provided		N/A	511	482	650	538
47	Number of informal actions taken that have resolved unfitness in the private rented sector		N/A	2 (+works completed on further 8)	4 (+4)	3 +2 In relation to Cat 1 Hazards	4 +18
48	Number of formal actions taken which have resolved unfitness in the private rented sector		0	1	1	0	2
49	Number of high risk HMOs registered		N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0
50	Number of HMOs that meet the HH&SRS standard following your intervention		N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0
51	SAP rating for the private sector housing stock		N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	55 Identified by 2007 Stock Condition Survey
52	Days taken for new HB claims	78a	49.0	36.0	29.4	25.26	22.44
53	Days taken for changes to HB claims	78b	28.0	24.0	11.19	11.53	11.32
54	Accuracy of HB calculations	79a	97.6%	97.4%	96%	98%	94.4%
20.5	Number of Affordable Homes Completed in Rural Areas (not on exception sites)		6	13	0	0	0

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;
 - tour of the district;
 - visits to affordable housing developments;
 - 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)

ESCC youth homelessness strategy

- 1** Wealden district Council is actively involved in the development of a county-wide Youth Homelessness Strategy (which has been commissioned by the Children's Trust Executive Group which is a partnership with the five districts and boroughs and Children's Services). The strategy is expected to bring together the housing authorities and Children's Services to improve and strengthen services for young people at risk of homelessness and proposes a county-wide Youth Homelessness Team, made up of officers from the five authorities and Children's Services. The strategy would be implemented by a newly appointed post and a bid for funding has been made to the department for Communities and Local Government , with match funding committed by the housing authorities and East Sussex County Council. The final strategy is expected to be released in April 2009.

Joint Youth Homelessness project

- 2** Wealden District Council, in partnership with Eastbourne Borough Council and Eastbourne and Wealden YMCA, were successful in securing £36,000 funding from the CLG to tackle youth homelessness. The grant has been used to develop a schools education programme to be used in citizenship classes, including a DVD covering youth homelessness, teenage pregnancy, substance misuse and the 'realities' of becoming homeless, told by young people who have or are experiencing homelessness within Wealden and Eastbourne. A project worker has also been appointed by YMCA to co-ordinate the project, which runs educational workshops within local schools, using the DVD as a starting point. The project is still in its infancy but feedback from the workshops and the DVD has been extremely positive. In the coming year, the project team plan to produce further educational materials and a 'lesson pack' to accompany the DVD.

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