

Strategic Housing Service

West Lindsey 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 The strategic housing service provided by West Lindsey District Council has been assessed as a poor, zero-star service, which has uncertain prospects for improvement.
- 2 Improving accessibility of services is a corporate priority, but has had limited impact on the service. Housing advice enquiries, including those made out of hours, are dealt with promptly and appropriately, but service provision is largely centred on Gainsborough, and the Council has not worked with customers to determine how easy it is for them to make use of the services available.
- 3 Good quality information about the service is available from a wide range of locations, and in a range of formats on request. The Council is starting to work with others to increase the take up of services, but some of this work is at an early stage, and the Council could do more to target information about the service effectively.
- 4 Lack of customer profile information means that services are not being tailored to meet individual needs. This is also impacting on the Council's ability to identify and tackle inequality in service delivery, and it cannot demonstrate that services are provided fairly and consistently to all members of the community.
- 5 The Council has been slow to address some key issues identified through the research base. It is not effectively tackling gaps in housing provision and support for vulnerable people, is not reducing the high number of empty homes in the district, and is not meeting the housing needs of the gypsy and traveller community.
- 6 In addition, although it has delivered creditable numbers of affordable homes, including on rural exception sites, delivery has been skewed in favour of shared ownership, and the Council has not consistently met its delivery targets.
- 7 The Council has improved its approach to monitoring and enforcing conditions in the private sector, but areas for improvement remain. The Council is not maximising its investment in or use of the private rented sector, or social rented homes, and so cannot demonstrate that it is having a significant impact on meeting housing need or tackling imbalances in the housing market.
- 8 Different service areas work well together, but external relationships to support delivery of objectives are not fully developed. The Council has made progress in this area, but has more to do, as some partners are unclear about what the Council is trying to achieve and how they can contribute.
- 9 Work to assess and improve value for money is still developing. Robust comparisons of cost, performance and satisfaction have not been completed and so the service cannot demonstrate that it provides value for money.

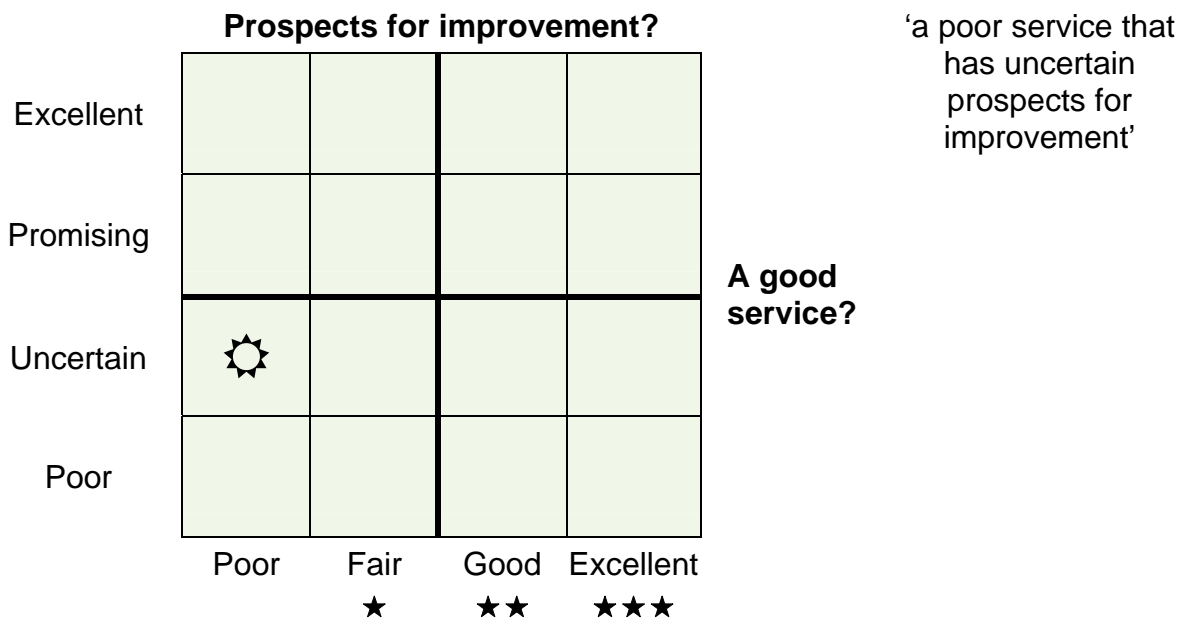
Summary

- 10 Housing as a corporate priority has been focused primarily on delivery of new affordable housing, and so there is not a robust track record of delivering improvements across the whole service. There are gaps in the performance management framework, and the Council lacks a robust housing strategy to guide its actions. The quality and availability of supporting strategies is weak. However, there is a good level of self awareness about what needs to improve, supported by increased leadership, external support, additional investment.

Scoring the service

11 We have assessed West Lindsey District Council as providing a 'poor', no-star service that has uncertain 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

12 We found the service to be poor because:

- the Council has not explored whether access and service delivery arrangements are meeting the needs of all customers;
- service delivery is not being tailored to meet the needs of individual customers;
- information about services is not being effectively targeted at those in most need;
- not all customer service standards are monitored and the service lacks comprehensive standards of its own;
- the Council cannot demonstrate that services are provided fairly and consistently to all parts of the community;
- there are gaps in service provision for vulnerable people in housing need;
- actions to tackle housing need and imbalances in the housing market are not being guided by a robust housing strategy;

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.

Scoring the service

- the quality and availability of supporting strategies is weak and the Council has not responded effectively to some significant issues highlighted by its research base;
- lack of clear targets for tenure type and mix of new affordable homes has skewed delivery towards shared ownership and the number of new affordable rented homes is low;
- there is limited choice for housing applicants and the Council is not making effective use of existing social rented stock to meet housing need;
- some homeless people are being placed into unsettled accommodation for long periods of time and in some cases, unacceptably far away from support networks;
- safeguarding arrangements are weak and the Council is not effectively managing risks to health and safety of service users placed into bed and breakfast accommodation;
- there is a high number of empty homes in the district which are not being effectively tackled and brought back into use;
- the Council cannot demonstrate the impact of investment in some key areas, such as increasing the supply of decent homes occupied by vulnerable people; and
- gaps in information means that costs and performance cannot be robustly compared with others, and the service cannot demonstrate that it provides value for money.

13 However, there are some strengths. These include:

- housing advice enquiries are dealt with quickly and appropriately, supported by effective signposting with advice and support available out of hours;
- good quality information about the service is widely available, in a range of formats on request;
- wide ranging provision of energy advice which is helping people to access additional funding;
- the Council has developed a wide ranging research base to inform development of the housing strategy and Local Development Framework;
- planning policies support delivery of affordable homes and the Council has delivered a creditable number over the last three years;
- complaints and referrals about poor housing conditions are being dealt with appropriately;
- standards in Houses in Multiple Occupation are being managed effectively; and
- aids and adaptations to help people remain living independently in their homes are being delivered quickly.

14 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- the focus on improving the service has been relatively recent, with a limited number of recent improvements that customers would notice;
- the service cannot demonstrate a robust track record of improving value for money or identifying and tackling inequality in service provision;
- performance is mixed compared to others and there has been limited or slow progress in some key areas;
- there has been slippage in delivering agreed actions and plans and the quality of delivery and improvement plans is mixed;
- there are gaps in performance monitoring arrangements within the service and examples of where supporting data is not robust; and
- engagement with external partners and stakeholders to help deliver service objectives and plans is not fully effective in all areas.

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

- corporate performance monitoring and reporting arrangements are working well;
- the service is benefiting from increased leadership supported by improved understanding of the wider role of the service;
- there is a good level of self awareness of what needs to be improved within the service and the service's improvement plan addresses key weaknesses;
- additional investment is supporting increased capacity within the service to deliver its improvement plan; and
- Human Resource management, Information Technology, procurement practice and financial and service planning are releasing cashable efficiencies which are being redirected to support priorities.

Recommendations

- 16 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 Increase the accessibility of services and focus on customers by:

- reviewing the accessibility, availability and quality of access arrangements with customers, to include an assessment of demand and access requirements in relation to geographical provision, to identify their needs and preferences, ensuring that this work is guided by a clear strategic approach;
- tailoring the availability and accessibility of services and information by collecting and using comprehensive profile information which includes but is not limited to information about diversity;
- working with customers to develop comprehensive service standards, for all aspects of the strategic housing service, ensuring that they are monitored and reported frequently, and embedding their use into the performance management framework; and
- implementing regular measures of satisfaction with service users, addressing the weaknesses identified in current arrangements, and reporting satisfaction levels and actions taken as a result through the performance management framework.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- access arrangements which meet the needs of customers;
- service delivery which reflects customer priorities;
- improved customer satisfaction with services; and
- increased impact of corporate initiatives and resources.

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

Recommendation

R2 Improve the focus on equality and diversity by:

- ensuring that all Councillors understand their leadership role in relation to equality and diversity;
- formalising and publishing an agreed approach to community cohesion and ensuring that this theme is reflected within service planning;
- completing and incorporating the results of a self assessment against the Commission for Racial Equality Code of Practice in Housing into the service delivery and improvement plan;
- implementing measures to ensure that inequality in service provision can be readily identified and tackled; and
- prioritising resources to tackle known gaps in support and provision for people in housing need, including vulnerable groups, and taking a proactive role in driving this through new and existing partnerships.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- services which are provided fairly and consistently to all groups within the community;
- increased challenge from Councillors to ensure that the Council is meeting the needs of all residents; and
- the needs of vulnerable people are being championed, and met.

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

Recommendation

R3 Address poor practice in homelessness by:

- ceasing to place homeless people in bed and breakfast accommodation outside of the county, and in other districts only where no other provision is available;
- implementing a rolling programme of inspections to check and maintain temporary and emergency accommodation standards and minimise risks to the health and safety of customers; and
- reviewing and improving safeguarding arrangements with appropriate partners and implementing robust and regular monitoring arrangements.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- risks to the health and safety of customers is minimised; and
- people are not placed in unsettled accommodation at unacceptable distances from their existing support networks.

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

Recommendations

Recommendation

R4 Improve the strategic approach to housing by:

- ensuring that the revised housing strategy fully integrates corporate, local and regional priorities and targets, is informed by stakeholders and service users, and is supported by effective working relationships and robust arrangements to monitor and report delivery;
- addressing gaps in the current strategic approach which include those relating to long term plans for temporary accommodation, maximising the use of the private sector and social rented stock; and
- implementing targets and a robust monitoring framework for the delivery of affordable homes.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a service which is driven by robust and integrated long term aims which meet national, regional and local priorities, and the needs of service users;
- increased emphasis on making best use of existing stock to help meet housing need; and
- new affordable homes which meet the known tenure needs of the district and contribute to mixed communities.

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

Recommendation

R5 Improve value for money and the use of resources by:

- benchmarking the costs, performance and satisfaction with all elements of the strategic housing with other providers to inform investment and policy decisions and service improvement;
- reviewing allocated budgets for private sector renewal in relation known need and demand and ensuring that the service has sufficient capacity to fully spend those budgets;
- evaluating the costs and benefits of investment in the service and external agencies to deliver the service, including investment in prevention of homelessness, to determine if they provide value for money; and
- evaluating the value for money of current working practices and arrangements within the strategic housing service, in particular for grant funding and homelessness; and
- implementing a policy to prioritise the spend of commuted sums and include levels of spend, expiry dates and pipeline projects within regular performance monitoring arrangements.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- resources are used effectively and are aligned to meet the needs of customers.

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

Recommendation

R6 Improve the way performance is managed by:

- addressing the identified gaps in available performance information and integrate it into performance management and service planning;
- ensuring that action and improvement plans are specific and measurable, and include a clear assessment of the resources required to deliver them;
- reviewing the robustness of data quality and collection arrangements within the service.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- outcomes and the impact of the Council's work to meet housing need and balance the housing market can be robustly evaluated, monitored and reported.

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

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

Dates of Inspection: 12 - 16 January 2009

Report

Context

The locality

- 18 West Lindsey District Council is on the western boundary of Lincolnshire. The district covers 450 square miles, and is predominantly rural. It has three market towns, Gainsborough, Market Rasen and Caistor. Gainsborough is the main administrative centre. The district is the most sparsely populated district in Lincolnshire and the East Midlands region, and two thirds of the population live in rural settlements and villages.
- 19 The population, estimated at 86,500 in 2006, is expected to increase by 16 per cent over the next 20 years, and is the fastest growing in Lincolnshire. The proportion of older people is increasing, and this trend is predicted to continue. There is a low Black and Minority Ethnic population, estimated at 3.9 per cent in 2006, and European Migrants make up the largest increase in migrant workers, particularly in Gainsborough.
- 20 Overall West Lindsey enjoys relatively low levels of deprivation, although there are pockets of deprivation, particularly in Gainsborough.
- 21 The unemployment rate is 2.1 per cent, which is higher than the county average of 1.9 per cent, but there are concentrations of unemployment in some of the wards in Gainsborough, where it reaches up to 6.6 per cent. Average earnings for those working in West Lindsey have fluctuated slightly over recent years in contrast to the steady increase in county, regional and national averages over this time. Since 2003 the gap in earnings between West Lindsey and the national average has increased by 17 per cent.
- 22 The West Lindsey Housing Market Assessment 2007 estimates that there is a net annual requirement for 518 affordable homes per year to meet identified need. The average entry level property costs £103,000, which would require a single income of £29,429 or a joint income of £35,517 to access the housing market. 80 per cent of single people and seventy per cent of couples earn less than this.
- 23 West Lindsey is part of the central housing market area of Lincolnshire which also includes North Kesteven and Lincoln. Within the central housing market area the Lincoln Policy Area, which incorporates villages at the south of the district surrounding Lincoln, forms part of the Lincoln Growth Point.

The Council

- 24 The Council achieved a 'fair' rating in its 2004 Comprehensive Performance Assessment.
- 25 The Conservatives took control of the Council at the local elections in June 2008 from the Liberal Democrats. The Council is a fourth option district, and operates a committee structure. Elected members are currently in the process of determining whether they will move to executive governance arrangements and whole Council elections with a decision expected in February 2009.
- 26 The Council transferred its housing stock in 1999 to Acis, a Registered Social Landlord set up for this purpose.

The service

- 27 The Council's strategic housing team is responsible for developing strategies for housing and homelessness. Their role focuses on monitoring and improving the provision, supply, adaptation and standard of housing within the district.
- 28 Housing advice and options services, including management of placements into temporary accommodation and management of the housing waiting list are currently provided by Acis via a contract.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 29** The Housing Strategy 2006/08 is being retained until a longer term strategy is developed. It states that the key issues facing the district are a shortfall in affordable housing, rising homelessness, poor housing conditions particularly in the private sector and affordable warmth.
- 30** The Council's vision is that 'West Lindsey is seen as a place where people want to live, work, invest and visit'. The Corporate Plan (2008/11) is centred on five key themes to support delivery. They are regeneration, health, inclusion, neighbourhoods and organisational development.
- 31** Within the theme of regeneration, a key outcome for the authority is developing its approach as a strategic housing authority. The Council has agreed a number of strategic objectives for housing, which are to:
- improve the supply of affordable housing to meet housing need to create balanced communities now and in the future;
 - improve housing conditions now and in the future;
 - maximise housing options and resources;
 - prevent and minimise homelessness;
 - promote independence, social inclusion and develop housing related support; and
 - strive for excellence through continuous improvement in service delivery and meeting our objectives and service aims.
- 32** The corporate plan sets out key actions for 2008/09, which are to:
- produce a Housing Strategy covering the period 2008/2026 which includes the Council's objectives on affordable housing;
 - deliver Housing Growth and Infrastructure Provision in the Lincoln Policy area and the rest of West Lindsey; and
 - produce a new Homelessness Strategy for the District.
- 33** IDeA facilitated workshops in June 2008 with members, officers and partners have resulted in a vision for strategic housing. It states 'we want people in West Lindsey to be able to choose a home and community that meets their needs and aspirations'.

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

Access and customer care

- 34** Weaknesses outweigh strengths. Accessibility as a corporate priority is not supported by a clear strategic approach, and is not embedded in the service. Service standards are not comprehensive and many corporate standards are not being monitored. Satisfaction surveys are a new development for the service, and so their use is not fully developed or embedded. Service provision is largely focused on Gainsborough, and the service has not reviewed access arrangements with customers. Joint working to promote services and target information is still developing. There are some strengths, in that good quality service information is widely available, customers receive timely and appropriate housing advice, and are able to access advice and services out of hours.
- 35** Improving access to services is a priority for the Council, which is starting to deliver improvements corporately. The Council aims to ensure that services are inclusive, which is also a priority of the Local Strategic Partnership. To date, this includes consolidating Council services into one publicly accessible office with improved customer facilities, piloting an extension of the opening hours of the Customer Service Centre following feedback from customers, and increasing rural access to services through a parish based wireless internet project, which is being used to extend the availability of benefits advice.
- 36** However, lack of a clear strategy or plan means that this priority is not having a significant influence on activities and plans for the service. For example, access arrangements for the strategic housing service have not been reviewed with service users, and there are currently no plans to do so. Satisfaction surveys completed in 2008 did not include any questions to determine how easily customers can access services, or collect any profile information, to determine if there were any adjustments the Council could make. As a result, the service does not know if current arrangements are meeting the needs of all service users, opportunities to explore and remove any barriers to accessing the service are being missed and services are not being tailored to meet individual needs.
- 37** Customers are receiving the right information for their housing enquiries in a timely way. The Council and Acis have worked together to tackle variances in the quality of advice and signposting highlighted by external mystery shopping in 2008. The findings, which covered the full range of advice and assistance available, has informed joint training sessions for front line staff and improved information for staff to signpost more effectively. During the inspection staff were able to demonstrate appropriate knowledge for dealing with a range of scenarios effectively. As a result, customers are better supported to access the service and information they need.

How good is the service?

- 38 However, opportunities for residents to access housing services outside of Gainsborough are limited. The Council's area offices provide published service information, but no advice services. Housing advice surgeries in Market Rasen and Saxilby have not been well promoted, and are not being held consistently at agreed times. Take up and effectiveness of these arrangements is not monitored. This is important given the rural nature of the district and the difficulty some people may have in accessing services in Gainsborough.
- 39 Out of hours enquiries are dealt with appropriately. A freephone service is offered, which is widely publicised, and supported by a rota system of duty officers. Assistance is offered to help people to access temporary accommodation, such as taxi fares, and also to provide them with any basic essentials such as toiletries if they have not been able to leave their home in a planned way. This provides valuable support for people in difficult circumstances.
- 40 Good quality information about the service is widely available. Information leaflets and guides are easy to understand and ensure that residents know who they need to contact, and what will happen when they do. Information is available from a range of places, such as GP surgeries, libraries, the Council's area offices, partner agency offices, and is also available on the websites of both the Council and Acis. Both websites also offer signposting to related support services, such as for domestic violence. This helps to ensure that residents know what services are available to them.
- 41 Joint working to increase the take up of services is at an early stage, but there are some positive initiatives. The Council has held joint benefits and affordable warmth surgeries in order to increase take up of available funding, but has not evaluated their impact, and so cannot demonstrate any outcomes from this activity. It has also promoted housing advice relating to private tenancies at community cohesion events in the South West ward. Six referrals have been made through the 'First Contact' scheme, a county-wide initiative which the Council joined in 2008. The scheme aims to ensure that visiting officers from any of the participating agencies can identify additional needs for information or services, including any housing disrepair or affordable warmth issues. The scheme is helping to increase contact with older people who may be in need of additional support, and although relatively new in the district, has resulted in a significant number of referrals in the pilot scheme.
- 42 Work to target information about services is still developing. The First Contact scheme is a positive example of this, and some work has been completed to target information about energy efficiency and affordable warmth. Other areas, such as targeting information to owners of empty properties, and decent homes assistance, for example by using stock condition information combined with benefits records, is not yet in place. This limits the ability of the Council to ensure that its resources are directed effectively to those who would benefit most.

- 43 The approach to collecting and using satisfaction information within the service is not effective. Satisfaction surveys were completed for the first time in October 2008 for key aspects of the service. The Council has not yet considered how frequently it will refresh the surveys, or how to increase the low return rate. The surveys collect both overall satisfaction and diversity information, but low return rates have meant that more work is needed to understand the profile of respondents. The low return rate and the fact that surveys are not ongoing means that it is difficult for the Council to robustly establish and tackle the causes of dissatisfaction.
- 44 Service standards are not being used effectively to monitor the quality of service provision. Corporate standards are in place, but many, including the level of telephone enquiries answered within target time, are not monitored. Published standards for housing advice and service provision through the Home Improvement Agency are monitored, but are largely based on contract targets which reflect national guidance, and have not been developed with customers to reflect their priorities. Performance against published standards is not being reported to customers. Staff and service users do not have clear information about the expected level of service and performance against it, and so are unable to judge or challenge performance.
- 45 The Council's policy on complaints is comprehensive and widely publicised, but it is not yet maximising the value of complaints to inform improvement. For example, informal complaints are not being routinely captured across all service areas, including housing. The Council has recognised this, and is building this work into the current review of its Customer Care policy. It has also recently started to report complaints in terms of common issues, rather than simply numbers and performance against response times. However, there are few outcomes yet from this work.

Diversity

- 46 Weaknesses outweigh strengths. Lack of customer profile information and monitoring means that the Council cannot demonstrate fair and consistent service delivery to all parts of the community, and is unable to effectively identify and tackle any inequality. Some gaps in provision for specific needs, identified by the research base, remain. The Council is taking action to promote community cohesion, but lacks a published strategy or plan. However, the Council demonstrates a clear commitment to this area, supported by a range of tools.
- 47 The Council has been slow to achieve level two of the Equality Standard for Local Government. However, this has been validated externally, and the Council has used external expertise to develop a sound action plan to achieve level three by April 2009. The validation exercise for the next level was taking place during the inspection. The pace of progress in achieving the next level has been consistent and rapid, reflecting a clear corporate commitment to progressing through the standard.
- 48 The Corporate Equality Scheme is comprehensive. The scheme has been refreshed, with consultees, to include all six diversity strands and sets out planned actions for both service provision and employment practice. Delivery is overseen by a working group of officers from across the authority, and members. The scheme provides the Council with a comprehensive framework for identifying and meeting the different needs of the community.

How good is the service?

- 49 However, the Council does not have a clear understanding of the profile of its customers. It has developed a questionnaire to collect detailed profile information, including the six equality strands of age, gender, ethnicity, disability, religion and sexuality. Use of the questionnaire is combined with existing consultation exercises, and is accompanied by clear guidance for customers as to why the information is being collected and how it will be used. This work is also planned to support profile collection and satisfaction analysis within the service. However, this work has only recently started, and lack of profile information limits the ability of the Council to identify and tackle inequality in service provision, and shape and adjust services to meet needs.
- 50 Despite good progress corporately with completing the programme of Equality Impact Assessments, lack of capacity has meant that this work has only recently started within the strategic housing service. It has completed two impact assessments to date, which are resulting in further work to tackle gaps in information which would enable levels of take up across diverse groups to be assessed. As a result, the service cannot demonstrate how impact assessments are identifying and removing inequality in service provision.
- 51 The service is not compliant with the Commission for Racial Equality Code of Practice in Housing. The Code requires the ability to be able to demonstrate equality of service provision. The service has not assessed itself against the Code, or made use of the good practice highlighted within it. This is important in terms of demonstrating a proactive commitment to race equality, and minimising the risk of legal challenge, for example, in relation to local connection policies for affordable housing.
- 52 The Council lacks a published commitment or strategy to promote and support community cohesion. In practice, the Council is delivering a number of measures, supported by its own research. For example, it has identified emerging communities within the district and has held community events, and tailored information and service accessibility as a result. Staff are encouraged to provide a 'buddy' service to help non English speakers to practise and improve their language skills. However, lack of a published strategy or plan means that this focus risks losing momentum or integration into service priorities and plans.
- 53 The Council has a broad understanding of the different needs of its residents, but this has not been consistently translated into action within the strategic housing service. Corporate initiatives to meet diverse needs range from working with stakeholders to improve the accessibility of the Guildhall, projects to improve rural access to services, and targeting engagement and life skills activities at older people, disabled people, and young people at risk of or excluded from education.
- 54 Information about services is available in a wide range of formats and services are physically accessible. The Council has one building, an area office, which is not compliant with the Disability Discrimination Act, but negotiations are underway to dispose of the building. Hearing loops are available, and staff are aware of how to access interpreting and translation services. Information can be requested in a range of formats to suit different needs, and the website allows users to adjust the size of the text, translate pages on-line, or listen to text. This means that residents with different needs are able to access information and services in a way which suits them best.

- 55** However, the service has had only mixed effectiveness in tackling lack of provision for particular groups identified through the research base. The Council provides funding to the Market Rasen foyer scheme, and recently signed a contract with NACRO³ to provide an ex-offender floating support service. However, key gaps remain, for example, provision of extra care accommodation, additional pitches for gypsies and travellers, and support services for young parents. Continued gaps in provision are leading to poor outcomes for many residents.
- 56** The Council lacks a fully effective approach to supporting survivors of domestic violence, but it is starting to make progress in this area. This had been identified as an area for improvement, and is supported by an action plan, but lack of capacity has meant that many planned actions have not been completed. However, some progress has been made, for example, developing a comprehensive directory of support services and contributing £10,000 to the Home Improvement Agency to start providing target hardening measures in 2009/10. The Council has also invested in a full-time co-ordinator to take this work forward to add capacity. However, outcomes and provision to date are limited.
- 57** Tools are in place to support a diversity culture. This has been the subject of renewed focus over the last two years, supported by the 'One Council' programme of culture change. Training to build staff awareness, which was interactive and covered all six diversity strands, has been well received. The Council has included diversity into its competency based appraisal system for staff, who are required to sign a personal commitment to meet diversity objectives. It has taken formal action in relation to staff performance in this area. This shows clear leadership and reinforces the importance the Council places on valuing diversity.
- 58** However, although training is provided for Members, take up is low. Nine members attended external equality training in 2007 and eleven attended theatre style training organised in March 2008. This does not demonstrate a robust level of commitment from members to explore, understand and drive improvements in this area.
- 59** The Council's workforce is not representative of the community, but it is working to address this. Monitoring has highlighted where this needs to improve, and the Council is taking action as a result. It works with the Shaw Trust and Job Centre Plus to offer placements, offers two modern apprenticeships, and is offering ten work placements for young people having established relationships with local schools and colleges. It is now working with other members of the county HR network to target promotion of employment and placement opportunities at BME communities. However, it cannot demonstrate yet that these activities are leading to increased diversity within the workforce.

³ NACRO is the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders

How good is the service?

Strategic approach to housing

- 60** Weaknesses outweigh strengths. The Council does not have a robust housing strategy. The quality and availability of many existing supporting strategies is weak, and have delivered few outcomes. The Council has developed a sound research base, which it uses effectively at an operational level, and which has supported the delivery of rural affordable housing. However, it has been slow to respond to some key strategic issues, and cannot demonstrate that it has effectively tackled gaps in provision or imbalances in the housing market.
- 61** The Council does not have a robust housing strategy in place to guide its actions. The previous strategy ran to 2005/06, with an interim strategy adopted for 2006/08, which were signed off as fit for purpose. Although work started to develop a new strategy in 2008, the Council took a conscious decision to delay further work for a number of reasons. These include commissioning up to date private sector stock condition information, rebuilding strategic relationships with key partners and stakeholders to engage them in strategy development, and the need to take account of the ongoing development of a regional housing strategy. The recent appointment of a new service manager and decision to bring the homelessness and housing advice back 'in house' are also key factors. In the meantime, the service plan and housing improvement plans are providing some direction for the service.
- 62** The quality and availability of many supporting strategies is weak. The interim housing strategy, which has been retained, is largely based on improving service processes, rather than providing clear long term outcome-based objectives for meeting housing need and tackling imbalances in the housing market. The strategy for empty homes, developed in 2008, also lacks an outcome focus. There are no strategies for either reducing the use of temporary accommodation, or for maximising the role of the private sector in meeting housing need. In addition, many priorities contained within county level strategies, such as addressing shortfalls in appropriate new build and adapted properties for older people, have not been integrated into the Council's strategies. As a result, the Council's strategic housing role has had a limited impact on tackling housing need and imbalances in the local and sub-regional housing market.
- 63** The Council has a wide range of research and information to inform the development of its strategic objectives and priorities for housing. This includes key pieces of research such as a Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (2008), Housing Market Assessment (2008), and Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment (2007). Rural housing needs are assessed through a programme of housing needs surveys supported by an annual audit of rural amenities and services. A private sector stock condition survey has been commissioned and is planned to begin in summer 2009, to update a 2006 desktop review of its 2003 survey. These provide key building blocks for the Council to refresh its strategic approach to housing.

- 64 At an operational level, the research base is helping the Council to focus its resources. Detailed ward profiles provide a picture of demographics, access to services, health, employment, access to housing, and housing condition. It has identified the South West ward, characterised by comparatively high levels of deprivation, empty properties, and non decent homes, as a priority area for housing and regeneration services in 2009. Other examples include using Council Tax and benefits records to identify and target inspections of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs), and more recently, mapping the location of empty homes across the district. This is enabling the Council to target its activities more effectively, which is important given the limited size and staffing capacity of the service.
- 65 It is also helping the Council to meet housing needs in rural areas. A programme of rural housing needs surveys, supported by investment in the Rural Housing Enabling Service, provides officers and Councillors with the information they need to support delivery of affordable homes on rural exception sites.
- 66 However, the Council has been slow to respond to some key issues. For example, work to address housing need identified in the 2007 Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Needs Assessment has really only just started, with no formal work yet to identify possible sites for additional pitches. In addition, despite the 2006 adopted local plan making clear reference to the need to tackle empty homes as a means of meeting housing need alongside delivery of new homes, work to map the location of empty homes has only recently been completed and tools to support this work are currently underdeveloped.
- 67 The Council is working to establish effective relationships to help develop and deliver its strategic priorities, but many are not yet fully developed or embedded. Joint working between housing, planning and regeneration colleagues is effective and is well established. However, limited capacity within the service has meant that the service is now working to re-establish or introduce external relationships. It has restarted the private landlords' forum, which met recently, and is planning to reintroduce its social landlords' (RSL) forum. It has also recently established a district forum to take forward work to deliver the county homelessness strategy. Lack of sustained focus in this area means that many partners are unclear about what the service is trying to achieve, and how they can contribute.
- 68 Significant work has recently taken place to build relationships at a more strategic level. The Council has engaged with the review of the Regional Spatial Strategy, and has had initial meetings with neighbouring authorities to develop a joint core strategy. It has also led on the recent establishment of a Housing Partnership Board as a recognised element of the governance structure of the Local Strategic Partnership. This is helping to raise the profile of housing, and reflects a wider understanding of its role. However, because much of this work is relatively recent, outcomes are limited.

How good is the service?

Enabling the provision of more housing to meet needs

- 69** Strengths and weaknesses are balanced. The Council is making clear progress in implementing its Local Development Framework. Planning policies support delivery of affordable housing, including homes on rural exception sites. Housing, regeneration and planning colleagues work effectively together. It has delivered a creditable number of affordable homes and targets, informed by the research base, have become more challenging. However, there are weaknesses which need to be addressed. The Council lacks a policy for prioritising how commuted sums will be reallocated, and it does not have a robust monitoring framework for delivery of new affordable homes, including targets for tenure type to inform negotiations. The effectiveness and value for money of different planning tools have not been evaluated, and strategic relationships are not fully developed.
- 70** Despite delays in finalisation of regional allocations within the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS), the Council is making clear progress in moving towards implementing the Local Development Framework. It has completed a review of its 2005 Local Development Scheme, which was approved by Government Office in December 2006, and completed the required Issues and Options Consultation in 2007. Key pieces of research to develop the core strategy have been completed, and work has started to jointly develop the strategy with growth point partners. This is enabling the Council to ensure that growth and regeneration plans are aligned across boundaries and meet strategic needs.
- 71** Planning policies are supporting delivery of new affordable homes. The local plan, adopted in June 2006, introduced a settlement and land use hierarchy which provides a clear framework for guiding the location and density of housing, including rural exception sites, supported by clear thresholds for affordable homes, including infill and windfall sites. Policies also support negotiations on sites where renewal of an existing permission is sought, which is important given that many five-year permissions were granted for sites prior to adoption of the policies outlined above. Negotiations on these, and new permissions, backed by clear policies and use of the research base, such as the Housing Market Assessment, are resulting in an increased number of completions into 2008/09.
- 72** Policies and plans effectively support the integration of housing into wider regeneration objectives. Some of this is already well established, for example, the Council's asset management strategy prioritises the use of assets and resources for this purpose. Examples include the regeneration of Whitton's Mill, with a funding contribution of £1.7 million, which delivered 45 sheltered units, and discounted sale of land to support regeneration which included remodelling low demand social rented homes. Further work is now underway to develop detailed plans for regeneration linked to growth point status, and to support the targeted regeneration of the South West ward.

- 73** Operational relationships are working well to support delivery. A development team approach, between housing and planning colleagues, has been in place for some time, and has helped to reinforce the Council's focus on delivering affordable homes. This has been further strengthened recently by implementation of a pre-application approach to planning applications, and a positive operational relationship with RSLs. Feedback from stakeholders is that this approach is working well, and is taking time out of the application process by removing any potential barriers at an early stage.
- 74** The Council has revised its high level targets for delivery of affordable homes, and they are challenging given the context of the district. Local Plan targets originally required delivery of 55 affordable homes per year and were set using the 2003 Housing Needs Survey. More up to date information has been used to increase the annual target to 100 units per year from 2008/09, which exceeds the Local Area Agreement target of 90 units per annum, to increase the supply of new affordable homes.
- 75** The Council has, over the last three years, delivered a creditable number of new affordable homes. Although it has not consistently met its annual target for 55 completions, the application of policies referred to above, combined with the introduction of a development team approach between housing and planning colleagues, has seen an increase in delivery in 2008/09. Between 2005/06 and 2007/08, 181 new affordable homes were completed within the district. By the end of December 2008, a further 100 affordable homes have been completed, with a further 25 estimated for completion by April 2009. As a result, the Council has already met its revised annual target of 100 units for 2008/09.
- 76** However, delivery is not supported by a robust monitoring framework. Although high level performance is monitored through the Annual Monitoring Report and performance reported by exception to management team, there are clear gaps in terms of what is recorded and reported in order to keep track of completions. For example, there is no regular reporting of site progress, performance against thresholds by site, tenure mix or density, and property size in relation to known housing needs. This limits the ability of the Council to ensure that its policies are effectively tackling imbalances in the housing market, or that it is maximising supply through negotiations.
- 77** The Council lacks any broad targets for the tenure type required in relation to balancing the housing market and meeting needs. Individual site negotiations over the last three years have resulted in a split of 80 per cent shared ownership units and 20 per cent of completed units for social rent, with the number of rented units decreasing every year over the same period. Some sites have contained only shared ownership units, and there is one recent example of a site where the number of shared ownership units had been negotiated upwards by a developer on the basis of affordability, only to revert to rented units when they could not be sold. This raises doubts about the robustness of negotiations in relation to tackling affordability issues and meeting housing need.

How good is the service?

- 78** The Council uses different planning tools to secure affordable homes, but has not evaluated their comparative effectiveness. It has successfully used both section 106 agreements and negative conditions on permissions to secure affordable housing. However, the respective impacts of these tools on delivery in terms of time taken through negotiation and appeals, and benefits such as a model agreement, have not yet been assessed. Without completing this work, the Council cannot demonstrate that it is minimising delays in delivery.
- 79** The Council lacks clear, published guidance for developers. There is no single document which sets out the Council's requirements in relation to planning policy, design guidance and scheme standards, and tenure mixes and targets. There are also gaps in policy relating to lifetime homes and sustainability standards. This could help the Council to strengthen its negotiations and pre-application approach.
- 80** The Council has been slow to make use of commuted sums, given that it will be returned to developers if unused after five years. On site provision is prioritised over commuted sums, but the Council has only recently started to use contributions to support its enabling role. It has developed and published comprehensive Supplementary Planning Guidance which emphasises that off site provision will only be accepted in exceptional circumstances. This helps to ensure that both staff and developers understand the Council's approach. A total of £308,000 was allocated with committee approval in January 2008, from accrued sums of £550,000 dating back to 2005. However, £240,000 currently remains unallocated and means that opportunities to support delivery of new affordable homes with commuted sums are being missed.
- 81** The Council's policy on reallocating commuted sums does not focus on addressing gaps in provision. Sums are allocated using a broad principle of supporting funding shortfalls in social landlord schemes. However, the policy does not help the Council to prioritise funding based on housing need. This is a weakness given that known gaps in specialist provision have not been tackled.
- 82** The effectiveness of external strategic relationships is mixed. Positively, the Council has engaged in debate about regional allocations, and has started discussions with neighbouring authorities on the development of a joint core strategy. Engagement with the Housing Corporation has resulted in funding to deliver affordable homes, and more recently, the Council has implemented a 'Try Before You Buy'⁴ scheme with support from the site's developer. However, it has not met with developing social landlords for some time. There are no formal partnering arrangements with them, and many were unaware of the existence of the Council's Housing Partnership Agreement, leading to confusion about the Council's strategic aims and how partners contribute.

⁴ This scheme enables people to rent for up to three years before making a decision to purchase the property through shared ownership

Making best use of existing housing - housing advice, housing options and homelessness

- 83** Weaknesses significantly outweigh strengths. There is limited choice for housing applicants and joint working with RSLs to make effective use of existing homes is underdeveloped. Preventions of homelessness are increasing, but tools have not been fully evaluated in terms of their effectiveness. Gaps in provision for accommodation and support, identified through the research base some time ago, have not been fully addressed. The Council is not effectively managing risks to the health and safety of people it places into temporary accommodation, and lacks an effective strategic approach to reducing the use of temporary accommodation, with some service users experiencing poor outcomes as a result.
- 84** There is limited choice for housing applicants. The Council is exploring the implementation of a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme, but detailed implementation plans have not yet been finalised. It is actively participating in the development of a cluster scheme and has worked to reinvigorate the county scheme working group, both of which are making some progress. However, overall this is slow progress compared to other authorities. Lack of a common housing register and application process, initiatives to minimise under-occupation and lack of monitoring for nominations agreements, also means that the Council is not making the most effective use of existing social rented homes to help meet housing need.
- 85** A focus on prevention is reducing the number of people accepted as being homeless. A number of tools are available, which include rent deposit bonds, money and debt advice services provided under contract by the Citizen's Advice Bureau, home visits to provide mediation, and use of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) to help people remain in their homes. Preventions have increased from 21 in 2006/07, to 38 in 2007/08, and to 46 at the end of December 2008.
- 86** However, it is a weakness that the Council is not fully evaluating the effectiveness of the prevention tools available. It formally monitors preventions through use of the rent deposit scheme, but has no information about the number of preventions resulting from other advice or intervention. It has only recently, for example, arranged with the Citizen's Advice Bureau to share information about caseload and outcomes. This limits its ability to determine whether prevention tools are being maximised, whether they meet needs, or, where they are funded by the Council, provide value for money.
- 87** Some people are waiting for a long time for decisions to be made about their homelessness status. This has improved as a result of a renewed focus on contract monitoring, but many decisions are still taking longer than the target of 33 days. In 2008/09, 86.5 per cent of decisions are being made within the target time, compared to 53 per cent in 2007/08, 56 per cent in 2006/07 and 50 per cent in 2005/06. Lack of timely decisions increases the level of uncertainty felt by people who are already in difficult circumstances.

How good is the service?

- 88 The Council's strategic approach to temporary accommodation is underdeveloped, and does not focus on outcomes. There are broad targets in place to reduce the number of people in temporary accommodation. The number of people placed in temporary accommodation reduced in 2007/08 compared to 2006/07, but remained higher than 2005/06. The Council is also using bed and breakfast as a last resort for families, and is keeping stays well under six weeks. However, there is a lack of focus beyond reducing numbers, for example, the quantity, quality and type of temporary accommodation used, and how the Council's partnerships and enabling role can assist with addressing gaps in provision.
- 89 Gaps in provision are not being tackled effectively. The research base has shown for some time that there is a lack of provision of supported and specialist accommodation, and temporary accommodation. There are instances of homeless people, including those classed as vulnerable, moving several times between different bed and breakfast establishments, sometimes in a different district or county. Single males are also frequently placed into bed and breakfast accommodation, sometimes for long periods of time, and sometimes out of district. Lack of planned provision is resulting in people spending long periods of time in unsettled accommodation, disrupting access to education and support networks.
- 90 Safeguarding arrangements are weak. There is no formal programme of inspections to ensure that temporary accommodation such as bed and breakfast establishments continue to meet required standards, and lack of a formal process to complete CRB⁵ checks. Joint assessments of young people are not being completed consistently within target times, and the protocol with social services that exists to ensure that this happens is not being routinely monitored and reviewed. In one recent case, two young people placed in bed and breakfast accommodation in a different county waited for approximately four weeks for an assessment. As a result, risks to the health and safety of service users are not being managed effectively.
- 91 Arrangements to identify and provide support for rough sleepers is still developing. The Council has not completed a formal count of rough sleepers in the district. It has recently sent a survey to partner agencies to get a better understanding of contact levels with rough sleepers, but this work is at an early stage and has not been collated. Lack of informal and formal intelligence for this area means that the Council is unable to identify levels of need for support, and cannot plan services as a result.
- 92 Effective relationships are not in place with all key partners and stakeholders. The Council contributes to strategy development at county level, but has not, until very recently, engaged with local partners and stakeholders effectively to deliver priorities. The Council is aware of this, and has recently changed the focus of the existing Housing Forum to become a Housing Issues Group, comprising local partners and stakeholders, to focus on joint working and strategic development. However, this group has only had one meeting to date, and is now working up its terms of reference.

⁵ Criminal Records Bureau

Making best use of existing housing - private sector

- 93** Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. The Council is not effectively tackling the high number of empty homes in the district. It does not know the impact of its investment to increase the number of decent homes occupied by vulnerable people. It has strengthened its approach to enforcement, but there has been no visible improvement in poor conditions experienced by residents of the authorised Gypsy and Traveller site in Gainsborough. The use of available grant funding is not being maximised, the landlord accreditation scheme is not effective and relationships with private landlords have only recently been renewed. There are some strengths. The Council is helping residents to access wider funding to improve the energy efficiency of their homes, and is managing conditions in houses in multiple occupation effectively. Vulnerable people are benefiting from aids and adaptations to their homes which are completed quickly.
- 94** The Council's approach to bringing empty homes back into use is underdeveloped, and has had little impact so far on the high numbers that exist within the district. There are currently 939 homes which have been empty for longer than six months. Tools to tackle empty homes are currently limited to grant assistance, which allows the Council to nominate tenants for five years. Six grants have been taken up by owners since they were introduced in 2007/08, with two properties returned to use to date. The housing improvement plan recognises that wider options could be explored, such as use of loans and Empty Dwelling Management Orders. This work is planned for 2009.
- 95** Complaints and referrals about poor housing conditions are dealt with appropriately. Until recently, the Council's approach depended largely on informal discussions with landlords to improve the condition of their properties. A review of the Council's corporate enforcement policy in September 2008 has resulted in a stronger focus on monitoring and intervention, and since then it has served 17 notices to owners of 12 properties to tackle disrepair. As a result, complainants can be more confident that their concerns will be investigated and escalated effectively.
- 96** However, no visible progress has been made in improving conditions at the County Council owned gypsy and traveller site in the district. . Concerns about site conditions were first raised in the Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment in 2007, and again in a survey of residents which was shared with the Council in April 2008. Actions to explore the site's future with residents and its landlord have recently started, but to date there has not been any short term improvement or enforcement measures to tackle conditions which are affecting the health and safety of the site's residents.
- 97** The role of landlords in raising the standard and availability of accommodation to meet housing need is not being maximised. The landlords' accreditation scheme, implemented in 2002, is under review having recently been found to be ineffective, with some accredited landlords not meeting agreed standards. The landlords' forum has only recently re-started after a gap of 12 months, which means that opportunities to promote financial the assistance available and increase the supply of, for example, temporary accommodation, have been missed.

How good is the service?

- 98** The Council actively promotes energy efficiency advice and is helping people to access wider resources and funding to improve their homes. Promotion events are frequent, and supported by mailshots to bring in referrals for either improvement grants or signposting to other schemes. Over 2,000 households have benefited from Warm Front grants over the last three years, and last year, the Council's dedicated energy efficiency advisor levered in an additional £500,000 funding to support affordable warmth and energy efficiency improvements
- 99** The Council has invested its own and external resources to increase the number of decent homes in the private sector, but is unable to fully assess the impact of its work in this area. It has improved the level of spend against improvement grants, but has not updated stock condition information with either completed works or any additional surveys. This means that it is not able to review budgets and target activity in relation to changing conditions within the sector. The Council has recognised this and is planning to complete a further stock condition survey in 2009/10. However, lack of targeted intervention and monitoring means that the Council is unable to evaluate its progress in increasing the number of decent homes occupied by vulnerable people.
- 100** Standards in houses of multiple occupation (HMOs) are being managed effectively. The Council collects and uses data from a range of sources, such as council tax and benefits data, referrals from other services, some targeted surveys of streets, and complaints from members of the public, to generate inspections. Inspections have been completed for all properties identified so far, none of which are high risk, and therefore do not require a license. Further survey work is planned for 2009. This is important given that HMOs often house vulnerable people.
- 101** Partnership arrangements to deliver aids and adaptations are working well. The Home Improvement Agency (HIA), part funded by WLDC, acts as a single referral point for all customers. There is no waiting list within the district for referrals, and the overall amount of time taken to complete the necessary work is exceeding good practice guidelines. Data for the first five months of 2008/09 shows completion time from enquiry for minor adaptations as 14 weeks, with major adaptations taking approximately 41 weeks. This compares to 34 weeks and 90 weeks respectively in 2005/06 before the service was transferred to the HIA. As a result, vulnerable people are not waiting for a long time for adaptations which enable them to remain living safely and independently in their homes.
- 102** However, the Council is not maximising the impact of its investment in this area. For example, lack of a register of adapted social rented properties, and a common allocations policy for adapted properties, means that opportunities to allocate those properties to applicants who would benefit most may be missed. In addition, although the Council sets aside significant sums as its contribution to DFGs, and offers discretionary grants for those people who do not qualify, budgets are not being fully spent. This in part is due to limited capacity within the HIA to deliver works above a contracted amount, which means that vulnerable people are not always able to benefit from budgeted resources. The Council has already recognised these areas within its housing improvement plan for 2009.

Is the service delivering value for money?

103 This is an area where there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There is a strong corporate focus on value for money, supported by a range of tools and practices which are delivering improved ways of working and releasing cashable efficiency gains. However, the strategic housing service lacks key information to enable it to make a rounded assessment of how costs and performance compare. The service has made some cost savings through the corporate shared services approach, but overall, the service cannot demonstrate that it provides value for money.

How do costs compare?

104 Corporately, work to determine how costs compare with other districts is still developing. The Council has made use of benchmarking information, such as the Audit Commission profiles, but found that the value of comparisons was limited due to the different ways that costs are apportioned between comparison authorities. Since then it has spent considerable time since in apportioning costs to support comparison, and is working with other districts in the county to develop a benchmarking framework. However, until this work is completed, its understanding of how costs compare is limited.

105 However, the Council is making use of the cost information it has collected in other ways. This information is included in service plans in order to support growth bids in the budget setting process, or to highlight where efficiency savings could be made. This has helped to identify the majority of savings required to deliver the budget, and has supported increased investment in the strategic housing service.

106 Use of cost information and comparisons is better developed within the strategic housing service, but gaps remain. High level costs, such as staffing costs, have been benchmarked, and showed average costs but varying performance. This information has been used to inform decision making about investment in the service, based on tackling some key areas of underperformance. However, there is recognition that there are gaps in what is measured in terms of performance and customer satisfaction, which limits the ability of the service to fully understand and improve the relative value for money of its services.

How is value for money managed?

107 The Council has a good understanding of value for money, supported by a clear strategic framework. It recognises the need to maximise resources in order to deliver corporate and local strategic priorities, and to drive improved performance and customer satisfaction with service delivery. Delivery of the strategy is supported by a number of tools to embed VFM within its working practices. It has made consistent progress in delivering its strategy, and is delivering efficiency savings, service improvements and more effective ways of working as a result. This is important given the Council's context as a small, rural authority.

How good is the service?

- 108** The Council has consistently outperformed its corporate efficiency targets. It delivered total cumulative efficiency gains of over £1.9 million to the end of 2007/08, of which £1.6 million were cashable. Significant gains have been achieved through procurement, ICT and reorganisation of the Council's management structure. This has released considerable resources which the Council has reinvested in priority areas.
- 109** Financial and service planning are helping to deliver efficiencies and target reinvestment effectively. Service managers are required to annually identify cashable efficiency gains and growth bids, based on cost and performance information. Gains are reinvested in line with priorities and the need to improve performance, for example, the strategic housing service has benefited from increased investment from efficiencies released elsewhere within the authority. This is helping to ensure that resources are directed to support priority areas and service improvements.
- 110** Targeted service reviews are delivering more efficient and effective ways of working, leading to increases in productivity. Reviews, which use lean thinking principles, are targeted in line with the VFM strategy through analysis of cost and performance, focusing initially on high volume services. Services which have benefited so far include benefits administration and the planning service. Both reviews have led to increased performance in terms of time taken to process cases, which indirectly have had a positive impact on users of some strategic housing services.
- 111** The Council works with partners to deliver shared services, some of which are benefiting the strategic housing service. The council participates in a shared procurement service for Lincolnshire authorities. This has benefited the Council in terms of increased capacity through shared expertise, support for strategic development, and cost savings through collaborative purchasing and e-procurement. The strategic housing service has made use of these arrangements, for example, jointly purchasing its private sector stock condition survey and housing market assessment. In addition, a joint legal service has reduced costs for the Council, and made available additional expertise, for example, in relation to housing enforcement issues.
- 112** External funding and inward investment is targeted to help deliver priorities. Examples include the 2008/11 National Affordable Housing Programme funding of £4.3 million to deliver 130 new affordable homes, and funding of £250,000 in 2007/08 from the Regional Housing Board, to help the service make better use of existing housing stock, for example, by supporting the introduction of grants to bring empty homes back into use. The Council also targets investment externally to support service delivery. It is contributing funding to the CAB to provide money and debt advice, to the Rural Housing Enabler service, and to the HIA to deliver added value services, such as a handyperson scheme and target hardening measures for survivors of domestic violence.

113 Management of value for money within the strategic housing service is underdeveloped. The Council has not explored whether its grants funding arrangements provide value for money, for example in relation to loans, and some grants budgets remain underspent. It is not evaluating the effectiveness of tools to prevent homelessness, and has not explored how it can improve the value for money in relation to temporary accommodation and the use of bed and breakfast accommodation. Procurement arrangements for aids and adaptations are also in need of review, being based on an individual tendering process. The service plan for 2009 reflects the need to address these and other value for money issues. However, until then, the service cannot demonstrate that it is maximising the use of available resources.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 114** Weaknesses outweigh strengths. Performance is mixed compared to others and does not show consistent improvement across the service over time. The Council has been slow to address national initiatives and priorities, and has not effectively tackled issues highlighted by its research base, particularly the lack of provision for vulnerable people. Limited capacity has led to slippage in delivering agreed targets and actions, and gaps in monitoring information means that the Council cannot demonstrate a robust track record of improving value for money in this service. However, there has been a recent focus on improvement, which has improved some aspects of service delivery.
- 115** Key performance indicators show a mixed picture compared to others, and do not show consistent improvement over the last three years across the service. The percentage of housing performance indicators showing improvement over the last three years is below the district average of between 62 and 66 per cent, at 50 per cent. The percentage of performance indicators which show performance as being comparable to the best performing authorities is also below average, at 17 per cent compared to a district average of 33 per cent.
- 116** Progress against national targets and initiatives is mixed. Positively, the Council has decreased its use of bed and breakfast accommodation for families, and has continued to meet the target to limit use in these circumstances to less than six weeks. However, the number of households in temporary accommodation in 2007/08 decreased to 20 from 26 in the previous year, but this is higher than 2005/06 levels. Plans to implement a Choice Based Lettings scheme are not finalised, and the Council does not have sufficient monitoring information to determine how effective it has been at increasing the number of decent homes occupied by vulnerable people.
- 117** Lack of a joined up approach to integrating targets from sub-regional strategies, such as the 2005/10 Physical Disability Strategy and the 2005/10 Youth Homelessness Strategy, means that some areas of housing need, including those for vulnerable people, have not been addressed, despite being identified some time ago.
- 118** The Council has been slow to address key issues identified by its own research base. It has not yet started to identify the additional pitches highlighted as needed in the identified in the 2007 Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessment. Work to tackle the high number of empty homes has not had a sufficient focus, despite being identified as a target in the adopted local plan. Little action has been taken to address gaps in provision of specialist support and accommodation, despite being identified some time ago. As a result, the Council cannot demonstrate that it has had a significant and consistent impact on meeting different housing needs.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 119** Limited capacity within the service has led to slippage in delivering agreed targets and actions. Many actions contained within the 2006/08 interim housing strategy have been carried forward into 2009/10 because they have not been completed, such as development of a common allocations policy. It has also impacted the ability of the service to maintain key relationships and activities, for example, being unable to maintain the landlord accreditation scheme inspection programme, which has now been found to be ineffective in maintaining standards of private rented accommodation. As a result, key areas of the service remain underdeveloped.
- 120** Despite a strong corporate focus, the service cannot demonstrate a robust track record of improving value for money. The Council has developed cost information at a corporate and service level, for example, influencing the decision to terminate the contract for housing advice and homelessness, but much work remains to do in order to fully explore costs, performance and satisfaction. The Council has consistently exceeded the targets set out in its Annual Efficiency Statement, but the service has not contributed towards this, and key areas have not been explored in relation to efficiency and effectiveness, such as tools to prevent homelessness and provision of grants.
- 121** There has been a recent focus on improvement, which has resulted in some service improvements that customers would notice. These include:
- updating and providing improved service information for residents, such as the domestic violence directory, and improving the quality of housing advice and signposting, such as the First Contact scheme;
 - reducing the time that people threatened with homelessness wait to see a housing advisor and improving decision times;
 - reducing the backlog of applications for Disabled Facilities Grants and working closely with Home Improvement Agency to deliver adaptations quickly;
 - dealing with complaints about poor housing conditions more consistently and taking enforcement action where appropriate;
 - increasing the speed with which housing benefit claims are dealt with; and
 - increasing the supply of new affordable homes during 2008/09, supported by improved joint working.

However, the focus on service improvement is relatively recent. A number of issues and improvements, identified within previous strategies, plans, and through Audit Commission Voluntary Improvement Work in 2006, have not been fully addressed or implemented.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

How well does the service manage performance?

- 122** This is an area where strengths and weaknesses are in balance. Strengths include corporate performance monitoring arrangements which work well, and use of external scrutiny and service reviews to improve services. The service is also benefiting now from clear leadership and a positive level of self awareness. This is reflected in the service plan for 2009, which addresses key weaknesses in service delivery. However, the Council does not currently have a robust housing strategy to guide its actions, and the quality and availability of supporting strategies is weak. The effectiveness of managing performance at service level is limited by gaps in what is monitored and unreliability of some reported data, and the Council is not maximising learning from its own experiences.
- 123** The Council has recognised that it was viewing the service too narrowly, and has worked hard to build an improved understanding of its strategic role. The priority corporately, and within the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP), has been focused primarily on delivery of new affordable homes. In 2008, the Council brought in external expertise to complete a peer review of the service, supported by training for Councillors on the wider role of the service. The Council has also led on the recent adoption of a Housing Partnership Board as part of the LSP governance arrangements. A higher profile and improved understanding provides a firm basis for increasing the impact of the service.
- 124** The Council is having some success in driving culture change to support continuous improvement. The 'One Council' programme, which started in 2006, has resulted in the implementation of a competency based appraisal system, a project team approach across all directorates, and moving the focus of risk management from being risk averse to risk aware. It has also supported the corporate focus on equality and diversity through integration into performance management. Staff are positive about the impact the programme has had in relation to improving morale, breaking down silos, and the Council's willingness to listen to ideas and suggestions.
- 125** The service is benefiting from increased leadership. Examples include support for affordable housing on rural exception sites despite local challenge, and support for growth bids for the service. There has been clear leadership in tackling historic underperformance of the service, which has meant having to take some difficult decisions in relation to the service structure and staffing. This demonstrates a firm commitment to improving the service.
- 126** There is a good level of self awareness and commitment to improvement. The service plan and housing improvement plan, for example, already contain actions to tackle the majority of weaknesses identified during the inspection. Recent investment in the service, its restructure and the decision to bring the housing and advice and homelessness service back in house all reflect a desire to improve the way the service is delivered. Decisions have been made with full knowledge of the impact this might have on the service in the short term, but have been made to secure long term service improvement.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 127** However, the Council currently lacks a robust housing strategy, which means that the service does not have a set of clear, long term aims and priorities. It has retained the 2006/07 interim housing strategy, which largely focuses on process improvements. It developed a vision for the service in 2008, consulted with stakeholders and partners, but not with customers. A high level summary of expected outcomes has been developed to guide planned work in 2009 to refresh the housing strategy, but because this work is at an early stage, it does not include any measurable or specific targets for intended outcomes.
- 128** The quality of delivery and improvement plans for the service is mixed. Some action plans for related strategies, such as homelessness and empty homes, have indicative milestones but many lack specific targets, such as completion dates and the resources required to deliver actions. Others, such as the service plan for 2009, which incorporates retained actions from the interim strategy, and provides the direction for the service until a new housing strategy is developed, has clear targets, but is not outcome focused. This limits the ability of the Council to maintain consistent focus on delivery, or assess the impact of delivery on tackling imbalances in the housing market.
- 129** Corporate performance monitoring and reporting arrangements work well. High level targets, aligned to corporate priorities, are reported by exception on a monthly basis. Service managers are required to include detailed commentary to explain variances in performance, and planned actions to mitigate the effect of this on delivery of agreed aims and priorities. A recent example is working with the HIA to increase its contractual capacity to ensure that future funds are fully spent. The current indicator set for strategic housing reflects key areas of the service, and provides managers and Councillors with a broad overview of performance.
- 130** However, there are gaps in what is monitored and reported at service level. Key areas of homelessness and delivery of affordable housing, a corporate priority, are not supported by comprehensive or robust performance monitoring. There are gaps within monitoring data at service level, such as routine reporting of use of DHPs, or appeals against homelessness decisions. The use of satisfaction information is relatively new, and not all of the results have been fully responded to. Service standards are not in place for all elements of the service, and those that are have not been designed with customers to reflect their priorities or expectations. This means that the Council does not have a full understanding of how the service is performing beyond high level, broad targets and limits the ability of the service to actively manage performance.
- 131** In addition, there are examples of where data quality is not robust. This has had a strong focus corporately, supported by use of internal audits to review how data is captured and calculated. However, examples remain within the service where data is being reported incorrectly or differently in different reports. Examples include the reported use of bed and breakfast accommodation for families, and different data provided for the numbers of affordable housing completions over the last three years. Unreliable data undermines the Council's ability to manage performance effectively.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

132 The Council is not maximising opportunities for learning and improvement. Lean thinking service reviews have resulted in noticeable improvements in both the benefits and planning services, and the Council has made positive use of peer review, mystery shopping and customer feedback to improve the service. However, it is not making use of tools such as internal audit to test delivery of its policies, or benchmarking to focus improvement and learning from high performers. Lack of customer profile information limits its ability to target inequality in service provision, and there are examples of where new services or improvements have been implemented, but they have not been fully evaluated in terms of whether they are delivering intended outcomes.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

133 Strengths outweigh weaknesses. The Council has an effective human resources function which is helping to maximise staff resources. Shared services are increasing the availability of specialist skills and reducing costs, and investment in information technology is improving productivity. Financial planning and risk management are focusing resources on priorities. The Council has invested in the service to tackle key weaknesses. However, although it has started to improve strategic relationships, some gaps remain. Despite successfully attracting additional investment, the impact of these resources is not being evaluated and in some cases, maximised.

134 Human resources are managed effectively. Since the Human Resources (HR) service was brought back in house in 2007, it has provided the Council with the policies and procedures it needs to strengthen recruitment, staff performance management and training, sickness absence, and payroll functions, supported by investment in information technology (IT). The service achieved Investors in People accreditation in 2008. It has provided valuable support to manage restructures, implement the staff appraisal scheme, and tackle poor performance. It has also successfully managed a reduction in sickness absence. This was showing an increasing trend from 2005/06 to 11 days in 2006/07, reducing to 10 days in 2007/08 to 3.7 days at the midpoint of 2008/09. This is helping to maximise internal capacity.

135 Capacity is being increased through sharing services with other local authorities. The Council has adopted a shared service approach in recognition of its limited capacity as a small rural district. One positive example is an agreement with Lincolnshire County Council to provide cover for customer service telephone enquiries at peak periods. Other examples currently include the procurement function, legal advice, IT services, and web hosting. This ensures that specialist skills are readily available, and reduces costs to the Council.

136 Investment in information technology is boosting the Council's capacity. It has invested in key areas, such as HR, Customer Relationship Management, and Electronic Document Management. IT has also been used to support implementation of modern procurement practice, such as e-tendering and the use of procurement cards. A peer review of the service has led to further investment in training for staff to make improved use of the systems they have, and staff feel well supported by existing systems. The Council's focus on effective use of IT is helping to improve productivity and reduce costs by automating processes and activities.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 137** Financial planning and risk management supports delivery of agreed corporate priorities. Service planning and budget setting requires managers to identify areas of savings to contribute to the Council's efficiency targets, and areas of growth. This is supported by identification of risks to delivery of priorities. Resources are therefore allocated to priorities, with risks and savings targets built into the management and delivery of services. This strengthens the Council's ability to deliver priorities and planned improvements.
- 138** The Council is investing in the capacity of the strategic housing service to secure improvements in service delivery. The service was restructured in 2008, separating housing from the planning function, and placed within a new Regeneration and Housing Directorate. This reflects recognition of the lack of focus on the service over time, and the need to ensure that housing is firmly linked in to the plans for regeneration and the growth point. Additional posts have been created, and a new service manager appointed. Structures are now being finalised to take account of the decision to bring the housing advice and homelessness service back in house. Although not yet finalised, this demonstrates clear commitment to improve the service and outcomes for service users.
- 139** Investment and external funding is sought and directed towards priorities. The service has benefited from growth bids to increase its effectiveness, and assets such as land are prioritised to support delivery of new housing and regeneration. It contributes funding towards organisations which support its work, such as the CAB and HIA. The Council has successfully attracted funding from the Regional Housing Board, CLG, and the Housing Corporation to support delivery of its priorities, and this funding is also supporting service development, for example, empty homes grants and homelessness prevention tools.
- 140** However, weaknesses in performance management mean that the Council cannot demonstrate that it is maximising the impact of this investment. It has not for example, fully evaluated the relative costs and benefits of loan based funding for improving conditions in the private sector, it lacks information on the impact of different homelessness prevention tools, and despite increases in grant budgets, some remain underspent.
- 141** Not all partnerships are fully effective or embedded. This has been a focus for the service recently, and some significant progress has been made, for example, establishing the Housing Partnership Board, and engaging with the National Affordable Housing Programme to secure funding for 2008/11. However, some key operational partnerships, such as those with RSLs, private landlords and homelessness partners, are either not in place or too recent to be having any impact. The additional capacity that these partnerships can bring is not yet being maximised.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

	2007/08 district top quartile	2005/06 West Lindsey DC	2006/07 West Lindsey DC	2007/08 West Lindsey DC	West Lindsey unaudited data December 2008
Average length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation (weeks)	-	1.5	4	0	2
Number of households living in temporary accommodation (quarter end snapshot)	19	18	26	20	10
Number of homeless acceptances	51	78	77	102	31
Affordable housing completions	-	86	52	43	100
Empty homes brought back into use*	112	7	0	39	-
Empty homes (>6 months) brought back into use**	-	-	-	-	0

* includes properties which have been empty for less than six months and brought back into use through a rent deposit or bond

** is properties which have been empty for six months or longer and does not include those brought back into use through a rent deposit or bond

Note that for both affordable housing completions (2005/06) and length of stay in bed and breakfast (2006/07), different sets of data have been provided by the Council. This table shows the lower of the two reported data sets.

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:
 - interviews with Councillors, senior managers, managers and staff, including those from Acis;
 - focus groups with front line staff, developing social landlords, and partners who help to prevent homelessness;
 - reviews of key strategies and documents; and
 - interviews with key partners including the Home Improvement Agency and Lincolnshire Gypsy Liaison Group.

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