

Strategic Housing Service Re-inspection

Maldon District Council

August 2010



Contents

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Local authority housing inspections | 3 |
| Summary | 4 |
| Scoring the service | 6 |
| Recommendations | 9 |
| Report | 11 |
| How good is the service? | 13 |
| What are the prospects for improvement to the service? | 35 |
| Appendix 1 – Progress against previous inspection recommendations | 42 |
| Appendix 2 – Performance indicators | 44 |
| Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken | 45 |
| Appendix 4 – Positive practice | 46 |

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 When we inspected Maldon District Council's Strategic Housing Service in 2008 we assessed it to be a 'poor no-star service with uncertain prospects for improvement'.
- 2 In this inspection we assessed the Council's Strategic Housing Service as a 'fair one-star service with excellent prospects for improvement'.
- 3 There is a framework for customer care in place, with access to services at different locations in the district, more services available over the website and a range of good quality information and service standards. There is a strong focus on and clear leadership of, equality and diversity, with information on the profile of the community, and a greater understanding of the issues across the organisation. Equality Impact Assessments are being effectively used to identify where services can be improved and services are being tailored to meet particular needs.
- 4 The service has a clear strategic focus, with good quality housing and planning strategies, informed by a sound understanding of the housing market. The Council is clear about the type of housing development it wants and is delivering affordable homes that meet its strategic needs and exceed the targets set. Supported housing needs are being addressed, including the needs of the gypsy and traveller communities, and the approach to rural housing has been strengthened.
- 5 The Council provides an effective housing advice and options service, which is successfully helping to meet housing needs and prevent homelessness. The number of homelessness cases and the use of temporary accommodation are both reducing and there has been no use of bed and breakfast accommodation in the last year. There is a proactive approach to empty properties which is beginning to result in some being returned to use, some as affordable homes for rent.
- 6 Effective partnership working is supporting the delivery of the Council's priorities and there is good joint working within the Council. There is a sound strategic approach to value for money and the Council has a good understanding of its costs. The Council is making significant efficiency gains and the strategic housing service has reduced its costs while improving performance in some key areas.
- 7 However, a number of weaknesses remain. Some customers wait too long for telephone calls to be answered, and not all service standards are being monitored and reported on. Customer feedback is not being systematically used to assess performance and inform service improvement. Customer profile information gathered corporately is not yet being effectively used to develop and tailor services and there are some gaps in information.
- 8 There is not yet a comprehensive range of strategies to support the strategic focus, with the older persons' strategy not yet in place and the private sector strategy not yet developed. The Council is not maximising affordable housing through planning obligations and no rural homes have been built to date. The effectiveness of housing advice given by other agencies to assess how well it contributes to the service priorities has only just begun to be monitored.

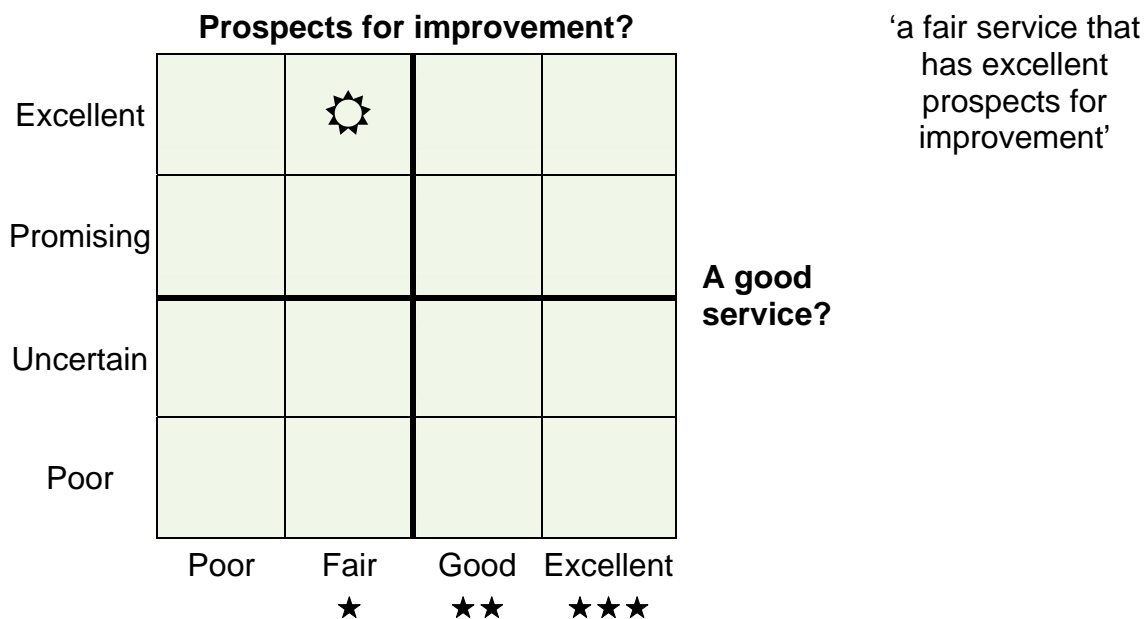
Summary

- 9 The approach to the private sector service is under developed with many aspects of it reactive and limited impact on improving conditions and energy efficiency in private sector homes. Customers are waiting too long for adaptations to their homes and although being addressed, there is a significant backlog of cases.
- 10 There are some aspects of the strategic housing service which cannot demonstrate value for money and comparison of costs and services with others has only recently started. Customer satisfaction is not yet informing value for money assessments so that the quality of service can be taken into account.
- 11 The Council can demonstrate a track record in delivering improvement with good progress made against improvement and action plans. Customers are benefiting from a range of service improvements, and performance has improved in a number of key areas. The Council can show it has improved value for money over time.
- 12 There is a clear vision for the service and strong leadership, with priorities well understood throughout the organisation. The Council is aware of which areas it needs to improve and although progress in delivering improved outcomes and performance for the private sector service is taking longer, the Council has arrangements in place which are tackling this. Progress against plans is effectively monitored and performance is well managed. Learning from others is helping to inform service improvements.
- 13 The Council has the financial resources to deliver and improve the strategic housing service, and has put in place a sound basis for delivering improvements and tackling areas of concern. There are the skills and capacity to deliver an effective service, supported by good corporate working and positive working between staff and members. Partnership working and external funding is adding significant capacity in delivering services.

Scoring the service

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

Figure 1 Scoring chartⁱ



Source: Audit Commission

- 15 We found the service to be fair because it has a range of strengths including:
- a strategic approach to customer care with access to services at different locations in the district and more services available on the website;
 - there is a range of good quality information and service standards are in place which have been agreed with customers;
 - there is a strong focus on equality and diversity supported by a strategic framework and clear leadership;
 - information on the profile of the community is available and the housing service gathers information on diverse needs of its customers which it has used to develop services to meet particular needs;
 - equality impact assessments are being effectively used to identify how services can be improved to meet diverse needs;

ⁱ 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

- there is a clear strategic focus for the service informed by a sound understanding of the housing market and supported by some good quality housing and planning strategies;
- the Council is clear about the type of housing development it wants and is delivering affordable homes that meet its strategic needs and exceed the targets set;
- supported housing needs are being addressed, including the needs of the gypsy and traveller communities, and the approach to rural housing has been strengthened;
- there is effective partnership working to deliver priorities and good joint working within the Council;
- there is an effective housing options service with good quality advice and assistance and a range of tools to meet housing needs and prevent homelessness;
- successful homelessness prevention activities are leading to fewer homelessness cases, and a reduction in the use of temporary accommodation, with no use of bed and breakfast for over a year;
- there is a proactive approach to empty properties which is beginning to result in returning them to use;
- there is a sound strategic approach to value for money, the Council has a good understanding of its costs and its efficiency programme and procurement activities are resulting in significant efficiency gains being made; and
- the strategic housing service can demonstrate it is delivering value for money in a number of areas, and overall its costs have reduced while performance has improved in some areas.

16 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:

- some customers are waiting too long for telephone calls to be answered;
- not all service standards are monitored and reported on, and customer feedback is not systematically used to assess performance and inform service improvement;
- customer profile information gathered corporately is not yet being effectively used to develop and tailor services, and there are some gaps in information;
- there is not yet a comprehensive range of strategies across the service with the older persons' strategy not yet in place and the private sector strategy not yet developed;
- the Council is not yet maximising affordable housing through planning obligations and no rural homes have been built to date;
- the effectiveness of housing advice given by other agencies has yet to be fully evaluated;
- many aspects of the private sector service are reactive with limited impact in improving conditions and energy efficiency in private sector homes;
- customers are waiting too long for adaptations to their homes and, although being addressed, there is a significant backlog of cases;

- comparison of costs and services with others has only recently started and customer satisfaction is not yet informing value for money assessments so that the quality of service can be taken into account; and
- there are some aspects of the strategic housing service which cannot demonstrate value for money.

17 The service has excellent prospects for improvement because:

- the Council can show a track record in delivering improvements with good progress made against improvement and action plans;
- customers are benefiting from a range of service improvements;
- performance has improved in a number of key areas;
- the Council can show it has improved value for money over time;
- there is a clear vision for the service and strong leadership, with priorities well understood throughout the organisation;
- the Council is aware of which areas it needs to improve and has arrangements in place for tackling these;
- learning from others is helping to inform service improvements;
- progress against plans is effectively monitored and performance is well managed;
- the Council has the financial resources to deliver and improve the strategic housing service;
- there are building blocks in place that provide a sound basis for delivering improvements and which tackle areas of concern;
- the skills and capacity are in place to deliver an effective service, supported by good corporate working and positive working between staff and members;
- staff are well motivated and supported in their roles by good management and training; and
- partnership working and external funding is adding significant capacity in delivering services.

18 However, there are some barriers to improvement. These include:

- progress has been slower in addressing weaknesses in the private sector service;
- there are some gaps in performance information for private sector housing, although the weaknesses in performance in this area are well understood and being tackled; and
- the Council cannot show whether customer satisfaction is improving.

Recommendations

- 19 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 costsⁱ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

- R1** Strengthen the approach to customer care and meeting the diverse needs of the community by:
- providing an effective service for customers requiring adaptations to their homes by dealing with the backlog of cases and dealing with new cases in a customer focused and timely way;
 - continuing to increase the level of customer profile information held at a corporate level and using this to develop and tailor services;
 - improving telephone access to services so that all calls are answered in a timely manner and in line with standards agreed with customers;
 - monitoring all of the published service standards and reporting on these so that performance is demonstrated in a comprehensive way; and
 - using customer feedback in a systematic way to assess the performance of services and inform service improvement.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- households requiring adaptations will have their needs met more effectively;
- services will be developed that reflect the diverse needs of the community and improved through the customer experience of them; and
- customers will benefit from having better access to services and can see how well their expectations are being met.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by March 2011.

ⁱ 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 Strengthen the strategic outcomes for the service by:

- providing a comprehensive strategic framework for the service by completing the older persons' strategy and the private sector strategy;
- developing the approach to the private sector housing service to address poor housing conditions and improve energy efficiency in a proactive and targeted way, in line with the strategic objectives for the service;
- developing outcome measures and performance indicators which demonstrate the progress being made in the private sector service;
- maximising the delivery of affordable housing through planning obligations;
- ensuring the development of rural homes to meet local needs;
- monitoring the housing advice and assistance provided through partnership arrangements to assess how effective it is in contributing to the Council's priorities; and
- comprehensively comparing the strategic housing service cost, quality and performance and using this to assess and improve value for money.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- residents will have access to a wide range of services which are strategically targeted to meet their needs and which make best use of the resources available.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by March 2011.

20 We would like to thank the staff of Maldon District Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of Inspection: 24 to 28 May 2010

Report

Context

The locality

- 21 Maldon covers an area of over 36,000 hectares in East Essex. The landscape and character are dominated by the district's 60 miles of coastline that includes the estuaries of the rivers Blackwater and Crouch. The district has a rural character ranging from tidal salt marshes to farmland and wooded ridges. The main town is Maldon with the towns of Burnham-on-Crouch, Southminster and Mayland in the Dengie Peninsular and a more rural group of villages to the north. The Council is ranked 255 out of 365 councils in the Index of Deprivation 2007.
- 22 Maldon District council is a small, rural local authority and the current population is below 70,000 although it has grown by about 20 per cent since the 1980s. At 1.4 per cent of the population, black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups are far lower than the national average of around 13 per cent.
- 23 Maldon is part of the Greater Haven Gateway housing sub-region. This sub-region includes the four district councils of Colchester, Braintree, Tendring and Maldon in Essex and four other districts in Suffolk. Chelmsford is the nearest large urban centre to Maldon but is included within the London Commuter belt group of authorities.

The Council

- 24 The Council operates a modified committee governance system in accordance with the alternative arrangements of the Local Government Act 2000. It has a single Overview and Scrutiny Committee, a Standards Committee, three Area Planning Committees and four other committees. Strategic housing issues are dealt with by the Community Services Committee.
- 25 The Council is in Conservative control with 27 Conservative councillors and four Independent councillors. The executive team is led by the Chief Executive supported by a strategic corporate director and seven heads of service.

The service

- 26 Maldon contains around 26,000 households with over 80 per cent of these owner occupied and only 11 per cent of housing provided by Registered Social Landlords (RSLs). The Council transferred its housing stock in 1995 to Moat Housing, its partner Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) RSL.
- 27 House prices have grown significantly in recent years. Housing demand has remained strong throughout the recession and it is now one of the most expensive areas to live in Essex according to recent housing market data.

- 28 The service was originally inspected in 2008 when it was judged to be a poor, no-star service with uncertain prospects for improvement. Our re-inspection was based on the 2006 Strategic Approach to Housing KLOEⁱ, used in the previous inspection. It covered the areas inspected in 2008 which were access and customer care, diversity, value for money, housing strategy and enabling, homelessness and housing needs and private sector housing.

ⁱ Audit Commission's Key Lines of Enquiry

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 29** The vision of the Council is 'to encourage and maintain a District which takes pride in itself'.
- 30** The Corporate Plan 2007-2011 sets out four priority areas to complement its vision. These are:
- promoting civic pride;
 - protecting rural heritage;
 - supporting an active local economy; and
 - increasing the affordable housing supply.
- 31** The key priority of increasing the affordable housing supply has three objectives which support an overall target to increase the number of affordable housing homes. These are to:
- show clear leadership for the district council's strategic housing role in order to ensure the delivery of affordable housing;
 - ensure that affordable housing providers, private developers and the district council are clear about each others' priorities so that plans for new developments can be agreed quickly; and
 - ensure that the benefits of sub-regional working are maximised.
- 32** The strategic approach to housing is based on four themes:
- housing supply;
 - prevention of homelessness;
 - improving conditions; and
 - supporting older people.
- 33** The housing strategy focuses on:
- understanding housing need;
 - improving the balance of the housing supply; and
 - improving access to the housing market.

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

Access and customer care

- 34** In our last inspection this was an area of weakness. The Council did not have a clear strategic approach to understanding and improving access to its services. Consultation and customer feedback arrangements in the strategic housing service were under developed. There was limited written information in some key areas and no monitoring of service standards in many areas. Opportunities to access services in person were limited, and the offer of home visits and partnership working to access related services was under developed. The website provided limited information and meant customers had to contact the Council. Office opening times were limited to 'traditional' office hours rather than more customer-focused times.
- 35** In this inspection there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The strategic approach to customer care has been strengthened and is providing a framework for improvement. Customers have access to services at different locations in the district, a range of information is available and services are more easily accessed through the website. Service standards have been reviewed and agreed with customers, and complaints are well handled. However, some customers wait too long for telephone calls to be answered and not all service standards are being monitored and reported on. Customer feedback is not being systematically used to assess performance and inform service improvement.
- 36** The Council has strengthened its strategic approach to access and customer care. A customer insight project is underway which is providing the strategic framework for the service, with an action plan to deliver improvements. A culture workplan is being developed alongside this to support and embed customer care and meet the diverse needs of customers. The Council has established a customers' champions group, made up of staff from across the organisation, who are leading on the development and embedding of a much more customer focussed approach in the way the council operates. The champions are reference points for staff and lead on improvements in the customer insight project, such as the establishment of service standards across the council and the use of customer profile data to help staff understand the make up of the community they serve. The approach is resulting in improved access and customer care.
- 37** The Council has improved access to its services making them more easily available to customers. It has reviewed how customers make contact for housing issues and this has led to outreach surgeries once a month at Burnham and Southminster and more recently at Tollesbury. These have proved popular, with customers receiving advice on housing and benefit issues and access to the housing register. In addition the Council jointly funds 'One Place' with other agencies which offers access to information and sign posting to services at two permanent locations in the district and through a mobile bus service. Home visits are offered for customers unable to attend the office, although resources limit this to a case by case basis, and there are satisfactory arrangements for emergency contact out of hours. This is providing better access for people living in more remote parts of the district.

How good is the service?

- 38 Callers to the Council's main office receive a quick and efficient service. The office is welcoming and accessible, complying with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), and now has more officers able give housing advice and assistance to customers. A dedicated officer offers housing and benefit advice, and benefit officers are also able to advise customers about the choice based lettings (CBL) scheme. Appointments are offered where more detailed advice and assistance is needed, and there are emergency appointments available for urgent cases. This is allowing quick access to housing advice and assistance in person and by telephone, and means that housing is providing a more responsive service to its customers.
- 39 Access to the Council's services by telephone is not effective for all customers, with some callers waiting too long for their calls to be answered. Recent performance information shows that just over half of all calls are answered in less than five seconds, and two thirds in under one minute. This means that a third of customers wait longer than a minute for their call to be answered. The Council has set a target to answer 93 per cent of calls in under three minutes, which is not challenging, and it achieved 95.5 per cent against this, with 4.5 per cent of calls abandoned. The Council's service is based on the telephone being answered in person and customer feedback has indicated that they do not want an automated response. The Council recognises that it needs to improve and is working to get a better understanding of the telephone statistics and to look at the reasons for calls so that it can develop a more strategic response. However, in the meantime this level of service does not offer good customer care.
- 40 There is a good range of information on housing services for customers. Good quality leaflets cover a number of housing and support services. There is well presented information on the website, making it easy for customers to access accurate information at a time that suits them. There are arrangements for information to be translated or made available in different formats along with an interpretation service, and there are translation and other accessibility features on the website. However the leaflets and service information themselves do not indicate that they are available in different formats or languages. This may deter or prevent some customers from using them.
- 41 Service standards are in place which have been agreed with customers. There are corporate customer care standards which were refreshed in 2009 in consultation with the Citizens Panel, and performance against these is monitored. The strategic housing service has also reviewed and developed its service standards in conjunction with customers. The previous standards were not sufficiently customer focused, had not been well promoted to customers and were not easily monitored. The new standards are captured in a new form of corporate leaflet to include the corporate customer care standards alongside the service specific. This is allowing customers to be clear about the level of service they can expect.
- 42 However, the revised housing service standards have only recently been introduced and are not yet being monitored. This makes it difficult for the Council and its customers to know how well it is performing and whether customer needs and expectations are being met.

- 43 Customer feedback and satisfaction surveys are not yet being systematically used to assess services from a customer perspective and inform service improvement. A range of satisfaction surveys across the services are in place and there are examples of where customer feedback has led to improvements. For example comments on surveys returned by tenants moving into newly developed homes is leading to changes in car parking and recycling arrangements in new schemes. Individual issues on surveys are also followed up. Survey results generally show customers are satisfied with the services provided. However, some are based on a low number of responses and the information is not yet collated and coordinated in a systematic way so that it can be monitored and reported. This means it is difficult to use as a way of assessing performance and to feed back to customers.
- 44 Complaints are handled well. A review of a sample of complaints for the past two years shows that these are generally answered within timescales with appropriate responses addressing the issues raised. The Council has recently introduced a new complaints process which ensures that any follow up action is completed and that learning is shared. This provides a more robust approach and strengthens the approach to customer care.

Diversity

- 45 In our last inspection weaknesses outweighed strengths. The Council's strategic approach to equality and diversity was underdeveloped and there was a lack of leadership around these issues. There was a lack of detailed knowledge about all sections of the community although work was underway to address this. The lack of knowledge meant that the Council had not tailored its services to meet the needs of all its customers and there were no targets for these activities. The service was not able to demonstrate compliance with national statutory requirements around diversity. Staff were working on these issues but the lack of leadership was a significant barrier in progressing this. Although the Council had undertaken equality impact assessments (EIAs), more work was needed to implement the outcomes from these. There were some positive outcomes for some vulnerable groups but because work in this area was not embedded, these were not consistently being delivered across all aspects of the service.
- 46 In this inspection strengths outweigh weaknesses. There is a strong focus on equality and diversity supported by a strategic framework and clear leadership. There is a range of information on the profile of the community and a greater understanding of equality and diversity issues across the organisation. Information on the diverse needs of customers using housing services is proactively gathered and has been used to develop services to meet particular needs. Equality impact assessments are being used to identify where services can be improved to meet diverse needs, and the Council can show it meets statutory requirements for housing. However, customer profile information gathered corporately is not yet being effectively used to develop and tailor services, there are some gaps in information and more work is needed to embed diversity in the organisation and for outcomes from the various equality action plans to be realised.

How good is the service?

- 47 There is a strong focus on equality and diversity. The Single Equalities Scheme provides a strategic framework for the service covering the seven strands of diversity as well as other areas such as socio economic factors. The senior management team of the Council has taken a clear role in leading on equality and diversity issues and it has been a key corporate activity, with progress monitored by the Corporate Management Team and members. Staff recognise the importance of equality and diversity and their responsibility for reflecting this in their work. The focus and the clear leadership shown are resulting in equality and diversity becoming increasingly embedded as a way of working in the organisation.
- 48 Understanding of equality and diversity has been increased through training. All managers have received training which is being rolled out to all staff. Staff in strategic housing services have completed specific training, covering a range of issues such as identifying appropriate support for people, and how to gather sensitive information from people, for example about sexuality. Housing staff have their own diversity guide based on best practice, and have developed a good knowledge of equality and diversity issues. Two housing staff members are corporate equality and diversity champions and are using their knowledge and expertise to continue to improve the approach across the organisation. This is allowing staff to fully understand the impact of equality and diversity and how the Council needs to address issues to ensure that services are provided in a fair and equitable way.
- 49 There is greater understanding of equality and diversity by members. Members have received formal training on equalities and diversity, and this has been supplemented by presentations on equality and diversity issues to every committee. This is allowing members to take a greater lead on equalities and diversity, particularly in regard to housing and support for some marginalised groups, and this has been recognised by partners working with the Council.
- 50 The Council has a range of information about its customer base although this is not yet being comprehensively used. It has built up information about the make up of its population using a customer profiling system. Information has been gathered through a variety of surveys and information sources, such as the Census and council tax records. Profiles on a ward basis have been developed and are available on the Council's website. However, there are some gaps in the information gathered around some of the diversity strands, and the Council has not yet used the information it has for detailed work in shaping services to respond to population needs. The Council has plans to develop its approach but currently it cannot be sure that services are appropriately targeted and meeting the diverse needs of customers.
- 51 The strategic housing service is proactively gathering diversity information on its customers and beginning to make use of this to improve services. Application forms and satisfaction surveys are used to collect monitoring information. This information has been used in the housing options service to monitor trends and develop services, for example to introduce the mediation service for young people and monitoring of the CBL scheme which led to a project to encourage older people to use the internet. Although not yet systematic across all housing services, customers are benefiting from services that are being tailored to their needs.

- 52** Services to meet diverse needs are being improved through EIAs. There is a programme for EIAs across the Council with a number completed. Outcomes include having the Council's free magazine being recorded by Talking Pages to make it more accessible to people with a visual impairment. EIAs have been carried out for all of strategic housing services with all staff actively involved and have been informed by discussions with partners. These identified a range of issues to be addressed, for example the lack of provision for gay men suffering domestic violence and how the gypsy and traveller community could be helped by adaptations to caravans or mobile homes. These issues have been captured in action plans although it is too early for many outcomes at this stage.
- 53** The Council has self assessed against the Equality and Human Rights Commission Code of Practice on Race Equality in Housing, which shows it largely meets the key criteria for most of its housing functions. It has developed an action plan to meet the gaps identified so it can improve further. Positively, the Council also requires its Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners to show that they comply with the code. This demonstrates the Council's commitment to ensure that equality and diversity is reflected in all areas of its work.
- 54** The Council has assessed that it meets the 'developing' criteria of the Equality Standard in Local Government. It has an action plan to reach the 'achieving' stage and although there has been some slippage with progress, the Council is preparing for an external assessment this year.
- 55** The Council has strengthened its strategic approach to domestic violence through the Single Equality Scheme. Services are coordinated through the Community Safety Partnership and housing staff play a role in signposting and being members of a number of key groups. At an operational level a range of services and support are offered to people experiencing domestic violence including a Sanctuary scheme and through organisations providing support which the Council funds. This is ensuring support and assistance is available to this vulnerable client group.
- 56** There is an effective approach to hate crime. Hate crime is managed through the Community Safety Partnership and a protocol has been established with the police to share information on incidents. This is resulting in positive joint working and the Council has recently supported the Police in a successful prosecution of a race hate crime case.
- 57** The Council is keen to explore ways of improving services to people with particular needs. The Council is involved in the 'Right to Control' scheme with the County Council. This involves exploring the possibility of pooling different funding streams, including the Council's budget for disabled facilities grants (DFGs), and sharing customer information to improve choice and make best use of resources.
- 58** The Council monitors how well its workforce reflects the community. Representation by ethnicity is low but consistent with the local profile. There is a low number of staff declaring a disability so the Council advertises as a Positive Labour Disabled People employer to encourage applications from people with disabilities. Recruitment is monitored and reported on covering age, disability, ethnicity, and gender. This allows the Council to try and ensure that staff delivering services also represent views from different sectors of the community.

How good is the service?

Strategic approach to housing

- 59** In our last inspection weaknesses outweighed strengths. The Council had undertaken a strategic housing market assessment (SHMA) which had given it a good basis to start to work from and there were clear links between strategic housing and wider Council priorities. However, there were still some gaps in its knowledge including the housing needs of gypsies and travellers, a group which has long featured in the county, although a county-wide survey had recently been completed. There were weaknesses and gaps in the quality of the Council's framework of strategic housing plans. Although a new homelessness strategy had been developed there were still areas where there was no clear direction about what the Council wanted to achieve and policies underpinning the adopted local plan were not maximising the delivery of affordable housing.
- 60** In this inspection there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There is a clear strategic focus for the service informed by a sound understanding of the housing market. A comprehensive information base and effective consultation has resulted in some good quality housing strategies, which are well supported by the policy planning framework. Supported housing needs are being addressed and the approach to rural housing has been strengthened. However, there is not yet a comprehensive range of strategies to support the strategic focus with the older persons' strategy not yet in place and the private sector strategy not yet developed.
- 61** There is a clear and comprehensive strategic focus for the service. The strategic approach to housing is based around four themes of housing supply, the prevention of homelessness, improving conditions in the housing stock and supporting older people. The approach is clearly aligned to the wider priorities for the area as set out in the Sustainable Communities Strategy and the Corporate Plan with 'increasing the affordable housing supply' being one of the four corporate priorities. This is resulting in a sound and well understood housing strategic framework for delivering the Council's priorities.
- 62** The strategic approach is based on a good understanding of the housing market. There is comprehensive and up-to-date information and housing market intelligence which is being effectively used to develop strategies and policy, and to inform the priorities for how best to meet the housing needs of the area. The strategic housing market assessment (SHMA) was completed in 2008 and updated in 2009. Information is gathered from sources such as the land registry on house price movement and CBL data is giving detailed information about housing needs and aspirations. This has allowed the Council to be clear about what it needs to achieve in the housing market and for strategies to be developed to support this.
- 63** There is a range of information to identify supported housing needs. Information on the housing needs of different client groups is available through the Essex joint needs assessment and the Supporting People programme. The county-wide Gypsy and Traveller Needs Assessment is informing provision for this client group. Information on meeting the needs of the older population has resulted in the development of an Older Persons Strategy in recognition of the growing and changing housing needs for this group. This is ensuring that all needs in the community are identified and reflected in strategies and policies.

- 64 The Council works in partnership with the local University to extend its research base. Recent research projects include whether discounted homes are a viable option for meeting housing needs in the area and a flats over shops survey to inform the approach to empty homes. These studies are an effective way to inform and support policy development in particular areas of activity.
- 65 The strategic approach to housing is not yet fully supported by a comprehensive range of strategies to reflect the four strategic themes. The housing strategy, the homelessness strategy and an empty homes strategy are in place and established and the older persons' strategy is currently being consulted on. However, work to develop the private sector strategy has been waiting for the completion of the stock condition survey to provide a sound information base to inform the strategic priorities. The stock condition survey is now complete and there are plans to draft and consult on the strategy over the next few months with introduction planned by the end of the year. Although the strategic focus and priorities are clear for strategic housing, without all of the strategies in place to support this, the Council cannot set out how it will deliver its objectives across the service as a whole.
- 66 The strategies and plans that are in place are clear, are of good quality and have been well consulted on. Partners and stakeholders views have been sought at a range of forums and events to help develop the housing, homelessness and older person's strategies, in addition to the formal consultation exercises. This has resulted in partners having a good understanding of what the Council is trying to achieve, with the strategies supporting the clear direction for the service.
- 67 The policy planning framework is effectively supporting the strategic housing role. The key theme in the housing strategy around 'balancing housing' is one of the five areas of focus in the draft core strategy, supported by a range of housing policies. The policies are informed by a strong evidence base including the updated SHMA and a strategic housing land availability assessment (SHLAA). The core strategy sets out the composition, density and mix of market and affordable housing required in the district and the areas where development will be supported. The threshold for triggering the provision of affordable housing is being lowered to five units or more and 40 per cent affordable homes are expected on these sites. Under this number of units a financial contribution is expected to support infrastructure. A rural exception sites policy has been introduced and the requirements for supported housing development are also set out. There is a requirement for housing to be built to lifetime homes standards and level 3 of the Sustainability Code. This is resulting in a joined up strategic approach to delivering the housing priorities around balancing the housing market.
- 68 The Council has strengthened its strategic approach to support the delivery of rural housing. Working in partnership with the Rural Communities Council for Essex (RCCE) rural housing need surveys have been carried out in a number of parishes. The Rural Housing Task Group has been set up made up of members, parish councillors and a range of other partners. The group has been active in promoting rural affordable housing and identifying and overcoming any barriers. Funding has been obtained to produce a DVD on rural affordable housing to improve promotion further. This has resulted in a greater understanding of the issues and more willingness in rural areas to accept the need for affordable housing to be built.

How good is the service?

- 69** Partnership working to deliver the strategic housing priorities has been strengthened. There is joint working with RSL partners which is encouraging development in the area and regular performance reviews focus on the accountability of RSLs for the effective management of their stock. Partnership work with private landlords is also being strengthened with proposals to develop a county wide accreditation scheme and to extend the landlords forum. The Council has increased its understanding of how partners work and their business needs and priorities and, as a result, has partners who can work proactively with them to deliver shared objectives.
- 70** Joint working to deliver the strategic housing service within the Council is effective. Planning and housing services work closely together in developing the strategic framework for the service and there are also regular meetings between services such as housing and environmental health. This is allowing a much better understanding of the service and how different parts can contribute at a strategic and operational level towards achieving priorities.
- 71** As part of its strategic approach the Council seeks to assess the impact it is making on meeting housing needs. Targets for delivering affordable homes have been set through the county-wide local area agreement (LAA) which for Maldon is to achieve 94 homes for 2008/11. However, the Council recognises that it needs to achieve more than this to make an impact on meeting housing needs. Rather than set numerical targets above this level the Council aims to achieve a steady supply and to assess the impact of this, along with its other housing interventions, to show whether the net need for affordable housing is reducing. The review of the SHMA in 2009 showed that the overall need for affordable homes had reduced by about 15 per cent from 301 to 256 homes.

Enabling the provision of more housing to meet needs

- 72** In our last inspection this was an area of weaknesses. Although the provision of more units of affordable housing was a key Council priority, it had not been effective in its enabling role to deliver these. Most of the new properties that had been delivered over the past few years had been large executive houses. It was only within the last few months that the Council has been clear about what housing was needed and it had not enabled the provision of rural exception housing. However, the re-establishment of partnership working and additional capacity in the strategic housing service was starting to influence work in this area.
- 73** In this inspection strengths outweigh weaknesses. The Council is clear about the type of housing development it wants and is delivering improved numbers of affordable homes, meeting the LAA target and in line with meeting strategic needs. There is provision for supported housing needs and progress is being made to meet the needs of the gypsy and traveller communities. There is effective partnership working to deliver affordable homes and there is a supply chain for future homes. Joint working within the Council is ensuring an effective approach to managing development. However, the Council is not yet maximising affordable housing through planning obligations and no rural homes have been built to date.

- 74** The Council is clear about the type of housing it wants in the area based on its understanding of the market. It recognises that there is a high demand for shared ownership homes as well as intermediate and affordable rented accommodation. As well as family homes, the Council also requires desirable smaller homes for older people in locations which encourages them to move from their existing larger properties. This provides a clear framework for the Council to work in, with partners clear about what is expected from development proposals.
- 75** The number of affordable homes delivered is meeting the targets set and reflects the mix of housing to help meet identified needs. In 2008/09, 45 homes were delivered and in 2009/10, 32 were delivered. This is a total of 77 against the target of 94 homes between 2008 and 2011. These were a mix of sizes and tenures determined on needs in the particular location. The majority were for rent but 16 were shared ownership and seven were intermediate rent. This means that affordable housing provision is geared to meeting priorities to maximise the impact it has in addressing housing needs.
- 76** The Council is working effectively to meet supported housing needs in the district. Working with the county it has identified the supported housing needs of different client groups and is aiming to develop a range of options to meet these. It has developed a scheme for a shared ownership home with support to enable independent living for a client with learning disabilities and is exploring using two homes in the private rented sector with support for this client group. It has worked with a neighbouring authority to develop a frail elderly scheme which is due for completion shortly and will initially offer six homes for Maldon residents. The type of supported housing to meet the needs of people with mental health problems has been identified and work has started to find provision that complements an existing scheme in the area. Proposals for a Night Stop scheme for young people are also being developed. This is helping to address the housing needs of vulnerable groups.
- 77** The Council is ensuring that new housing can cater for existing and future needs. New homes are built to life time home standards and are also required to meet level three of the Sustainable Homes Code. There is also a focus on 'flexi' homes offering the option to alter the internal rooms to meet any changing needs. The enabling role is also used to meet the disability needs of individual households, with one client helped in this way recently. This approach offers the Council more flexibility when seeking to meet the housing needs of the area.
- 78** Provision is being made to meet the housing needs of the gypsy and traveller community in accordance with the requirements identified in the needs assessment. To reach the additional 15 pitches required by 2012, the Council is working with an RSL partner to expand existing sites. It is exploring other alternatives to meet its requirement to reach a total of 74 pitches by 2026. The Council is using existing links through the site manager and the health worker to help it engage more effectively with the gypsy and traveller community so that it is involved in the arrangements for the extra provision.

How good is the service?

- 79** The Council has not yet enabled any rural homes to be provided, although the approach to rural housing has been strengthened. The Council jointly funds the Rural Community Council for Essex to support a rural enabling post and six rural housing need surveys have been completed so far. In three parish council areas sites are being identified and on one site a scheme has been proposed and is being consulted on. This has led to potentially 30 rural homes in the pipeline for development.
- 80** The Council has had limited success in delivering affordable homes through the planning system as part of S106 agreements. Development sites in the area are generally small and the majority have fallen below the previous threshold of 15 properties. Even where sites did fall under the planning obligations the Council has not reached the percentage of affordable housing required. There has been some improvement with two S106 sites in the last two years where the Council achieved just over 20 per cent affordable housing delivering 29 homes. The proposed changes to the threshold in the core strategy will also address the issues of smaller sites. However, in recent years only about 4 per cent affordable housing has been achieved as a total of overall development in the area.
- 81** There is an effective approach in the Council to manage development across the district. A Development Group has been set up comprising officers from relevant departments, chaired by the strategic corporate director and attended by the Chief Executive. This is allowing a more strategic approach to development to ensure strategic needs are met, with the Council prepared to refuse development where this cannot be demonstrated. Operationally it means discussions start before the application is made and enables affordable housing requirements to be taken account of at an early stage.
- 82** There is clear information about the affordable housing required in the area. An affordable housing guide provides information for RSLs and developers interested in developing in the area. The guide is currently being revised to reflect the changes in the core strategy and will form part of the documents that make up the local development framework. This is allowing developers and RSLs to be clear about what is expected from them in any development proposals.
- 83** Partnership working to deliver affordable housing has been strengthened. Six developing RSLs work with the Council through the Social Housing Partnership which offers a range of expertise in different types of development. Partners are positive about working with the Council and good working relationships are clear. More recently, a housing market partnership board has been set up made up of RSLs but widened to include developers, land agents and owners. This enables a wider range of partners to be actively involved in development activities and how these meet the Council's priorities.

- 84** The Council has taken steps to ensure a supply chain for affordable housing over the next few years. It has its own capital funds of about £1.8 million, made up from the capital receipts from the sale of homes by its LSVT RSL partner and from any financial contributions from developers taken as 'commuted' sums. It has identified how it will use this money strategically to make schemes that meet its strategic priorities viable for partners to develop, for example to support rural housing. The Council has very little land of its own that it could make available for development but works with its RSL partners to identify sites and potential redevelopment opportunities of existing affordable housing sites. It is also working strategically with other public bodies to look at any potential sites that could be brought forward for development in the future. The Council has benefited from grant funding from the Homes and Community Agency (HCA) for some schemes and continues to support its RSL partners in bidding for further schemes. As a result the Council has identified a supply chain for affordable housing which potentially will deliver about 200 homes over the medium term. About 50 homes are already on site or due to start.
- 85** The Council is strengthening its position for future housing delivery through the planning system. More affordable homes will be delivered by the new policy which reduces the threshold for eligible sites for planning obligations to five homes or more and increases the proportion of affordable housing to 40 per cent on these sites. Site viability exercises show that there are a number of sites with planning permission where the new policy will be applied. The Council has also identified the land available for development through its strategic housing land availability assessment and assessed it for viability. In addition the Council has reviewed all its brownfield sites and those sites with planning permission. This shows it has a five-year land supply capable of meeting and exceeding its overall housing provision targets. The Council has introduced a financial appraisal toolkit to assess its planning policies and this will underpin negotiations with developers for S106 agreements, providing an open and transparent approach. The Council is now much better placed to deliver affordable homes through this route, in addition to the supply chain identified above.
- 86** The Council is using its enabling role to make use of existing housing to better meet needs. As a result of the reducing need for temporary accommodation it has worked with its RSL partner to transfer five homes back into permanent affordable homes for allocation through the CBL scheme. It has also worked with an RSL partner through its enabling role to demolish a sheltered scheme which was no longer fit for purpose and replacing it with an affordable housing scheme for general needs. The Council is currently working with its LSVT RSL partner to look at sheltered schemes across the stock and to rationalise or reconfigure in line with the developing priorities in the older persons' strategy.

Making the best use of existing housing

- 87** In our last inspection weaknesses outweighed strengths for homelessness prevention, housing advice and options. Capacity issues had impacted on the level of service that had been provided and in some areas the service had not been satisfactory. There had been an over reliance on the use of bed and breakfast accommodation. However, there were a number of tools in place to help staff prevent homelessness and a number of households had been helped to access accommodation in the private rented sector. Private sector intervention, improvements and adaptations was an area of considerable weakness. A number of grants and loans were available but these had not been adequately promoted. Adaptations to properties through disabled facilities grants were taking too long to complete and waiting time was double the national guidelines. The Council's knowledge of the condition of the private sector was becoming increasingly out of date and its approach to improving energy efficiency was only just developing. There had been no work on bringing empty homes back into use and little had been done to ensure the quality of accommodation in houses in multiple occupation. Work had started to address a number of these areas such as the draft empty homes strategy and the re-establishment of the private sector landlords' forum but it was too early to see outcomes from work in these areas.
- 88** In this inspection there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The housing advice and options service has many positive features, with an effective advice and assistance service and a range of tools which are helping prevent homelessness. Successful prevention activities are leading to year on year reductions in the number of homelessness cases and a reduction in the use of temporary accommodation. Bed and breakfast has not been used for over a year. Improvements are still needed to assess the effectiveness of advice given by other agencies and to use customer feedback to drive improvements to the service, but on the whole this is a strong and effective service.
- 89** However, a number of weaknesses remain in the private sector service. The lack of stock condition information and strategic approach has meant that many aspects of the service are reactive. Limited impact has been made to improve conditions in the private sector through grants and financial assistance and although standards are being improved through appropriate enforcement action, this is on a reactive basis. Customers are waiting too long for adaptations to their home, with many still part of a significant backlog of cases. There are some strengths with a proactive approach to empty properties beginning to result in returning them to use, some as affordable homes for rent, and the introduction of an inspection regime for houses in multiple occupation to ensure standards are maintained. Importantly the arrangements for the DFG service have been strengthened with the backlog of cases now being effectively tackled.

Homelessness prevention, housing advice and options

- 90** The Council is offering more choice and mobility to households seeking affordable housing. It participates in the sub regional choice based lettings (CBL) scheme and staff ensure that anyone approaching the Council for advice is aware of this and is supported to register and bid for accommodation. This has opened up a wider range of options for people, particularly those who were not in a high priority band who have been able to bid for accommodation and, in one or two cases, have been successful in securing this. Households accepted as homeless also have choice by bidding on properties with time restrictions to ensure that they move on from temporary accommodation in a reasonable timeframe. The CBL scheme includes a shared allocation policy and households are offered more mobility to move between districts. This is providing a fair and transparent route into affordable housing for households in need.
- 91** The allocation policy is used to make best use of existing housing. Under occupation moves are given a high priority under the CBL scheme to encourage people who are under occupying to consider moving to a smaller property. In the last year five households have transferred to smaller properties within the district, and a similar number have moved to neighbouring areas, releasing larger family accommodation.
- 92** The Council is making a positive impact through its housing advice and options service. In 2008/09, 342 households, and in 2009/10, 330 households received help to resolve their housing problems. Homelessness has been prevented in a number of cases which has led to a reduction over the last three years in homelessness applications from 65 in 2007/08, to 53 in 2008/09, and to 45 in 2009/10.
- 93** There is effective housing advice and assistance to help meet housing needs and prevent homelessness. There is improved access to the service through surgeries, appointments and home visits and advice is readily available from the Council's main office. Housing staff are very focussed on the prevention of homelessness and work to support households to find housing solutions. There are many examples of people who have been supported to find settled accommodation that meets their needs without becoming homeless. This is ensuring better outcomes for people seeking accommodation and for those at risk of homelessness.
- 94** Joint working between the Council and the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) is supporting housing advice and assistance for households in need. Both parties are working more positively to look at housing options for people and prevent homelessness. A revised service level agreement has recently been agreed and the Council and the CAB have signed up to the National Housing Advice Service (NHAS) agreement for advice on the prevention of homelessness. Outcomes are not yet being captured and monitored to assess the impact of this service but these arrangements are providing a more responsive service to meet customer needs.

How good is the service?

- 95 The Council is working sub regionally to improve the housing options service. It is part of the government funded 'trailblazer' project which seeks to extend housing options into benefit, training and employment advice so that issues of worklessness can be tackled alongside housing. The scheme is being set up and is due to go live later this year. This will provide a much wider range of options and support for people seeking help from the Council.
- 96 The Council is making effective use of a range of tools to help prevent homelessness. A mediation scheme for young people has recently been introduced in response to parental eviction being identified as a main cause of homelessness, with nine people helped so far. In the last financial year the rent in advance scheme assisted 52 households to obtain privately rented accommodation. A mortgage debt advisor, jointly funded with a neighbouring council and employed by the CAB, has just started and taken on two cases. The generic floating support service offers an immediate response service to deal with a crisis such as an imminent eviction, as well as ongoing support to help people address issues that are contributing to their potential homelessness. This range of tools provides effective support to supplement the advice and assistance offered by the Council and is resulting in positive outcomes for households in housing need.
- 97 There is effective partnership working to address housing issues and prevent homelessness. A number of partners are involved in prevention initiatives and are able to work positively with the Council to meet their clients' needs. Partners who work closely with the housing options service regard it as thorough and customer focused to meet the needs of vulnerable people.
- 98 Homelessness cases are dealt with effectively and within target times. Investigation and decision making is helped by the use of a specific IT tool which provides up-to-date information on any legal changes and recent case law. This also ensures consistency in the advice and information given. The Council has kept the previous national indicator to reach a decision on applications within 33 days as a local indicator and monitors performance against this. This shows that in 2008/09, 100 per cent of applications were dealt with on time and in 2009/10, 98 per cent was achieved. This offers households experiencing homelessness a consistent and timely service.
- 99 The Council is successfully reducing its use of temporary accommodation for homelessness households. Successful prevention activities and fewer homeless households have led to a reduction in the need for temporary accommodation. Bed and breakfast accommodation was not used in the last financial year. In 2009/10, 17 households were placed in temporary accommodation, and at the time of inspection there were 12 households. This is exceeding the LAA target to have no more than 35 households placed into and living in temporary accommodation. It also means better outcomes for homeless households avoiding or limiting any stay in temporary accommodation.
- 100 The Council is making better use of the stock by reducing the use of temporary accommodation. Thirteen homes provided by RSL partners as temporary accommodation have been re-designated, five as permanent homes available for letting through the CBL scheme, and eight for disposal on the open market with proceeds being re-invested into affordable housing. This is increasing the number of affordable homes to meet housing needs in the area.

101 The Council is not yet using customer feedback effectively to inform service improvement. It does seek to learn from households using the service, for example, it is looking to add the letting agent's fee to the rent in advance scheme as this is acting as a barrier to households seeking housing in the private rented sector, but this is not as part of a systematic approach. However, the Council has recently implemented an IT system to capture feedback from people who have been supported through housing advice and prevention work. Although this is not yet resulting in outcomes it will enable the effectiveness of the service to be assessed in future.

Private sector intervention, improvements and adaptations

102 The strategic approach to private sector housing is not yet fully developed. As discussed earlier in report, the Council has been waiting for the stock condition survey to be completed so that it can develop its strategic approach in an informed way. The stock condition information is now available and shows that there are some significant issues to be addressed in the sector, with about one third of properties not meeting the decency standard and also having a category 1 hazard under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS). However, pending the development of a strategic framework for the Council to work more proactively in the sector and target resources to best effect, many aspects of the service rely on a more reactive approach.

103 The Council is making limited impact improving conditions in the private sector through grants and other financial assistance. Although there is a policy allowing a wide range of grants and financial assistance to be offered, the Council has not been in a position to actively promote these and has lacked the capacity while this is focused on improving the service for disabled facilities grants (DFGs) to offer anything more than a reactive service. As a result last year only one decent homes loan was approved, one minor repair grant, one renovation loan and one top up for a DFG.

104 Customers are waiting too long for adaptations to their homes through DFGs. Although reducing, there is a backlog of cases waiting for their application to be processed, with 135 outstanding at the time of inspection. Of these 44 cases have been waiting since before 2009/10 with the oldest going back to 2005/06. This is an unacceptable level of service to provide.

105 Monitoring of the DFG service is not in place. The time taken to process DFGs from initial enquiry to completion of the work is not monitored although the information to allow this is now being captured for different stages of the process. The time customers wait for the occupational therapist (OT) visit is also not monitored and performance information is not provided by the county council to show this. Based on the knowledge of individual applications the Council knows this is in the region of eight to 12 months which is a long time for people to wait. Without robust monitoring the Council cannot assess how well the service is performing and whether it is meeting customers' needs in a timely way.

How good is the service?

- 106** Joint working between the Council and the OT service is under developed. Although there are a range of forums around related issues, there are no formal ways for the Council and the OT service to meet to discuss either strategic or operational issues, despite the evident performance issues that need to be addressed. This means there is little joint working around improving the service for customers by seeking ways to reduce the time people wait for adaptations to their homes.
- 107** Joint working between the Council and its LSVT RSL partner, Moat, is not well developed for the DFG service. Moat tenants are the main client group for DFGs in social housing and account for approximately half the DFG caseload overall. Moat fund minor adaptations under £1,000 but all other adaptations are referred to the Council for DFGs. There is little coordination around decent homes work where adaptations may be needed so that these can be done in a coordinated way to make best use of resources. Other opportunities to work more closely, perhaps to share funding or technical expertise, are not being taken. The lack of joint working shows a lack of customer focus in finding better ways of working and minimising waiting times for customers.
- 108** The approach to the DFG service has been strengthened and improvements are being made. Following a review in 2009 additional staffing resources have been brought in, processes have been streamlined and progress is being made in tackling the backlog. All cases have been reviewed and all customers have been contacted to explain where their case is and what will happen next. Cases have been prioritised in line with the OT recommendation and are being worked through in priority and date order, with a target to achieve two approvals a week. Action is taken for new applications assessed as 'critical' upon receipt. It will still be some time before the backlog is cleared but the overall number of cases is reducing from a high of 162 in March 2009 to 135 at the time of inspection.
- 109** There are some customer focused and effective support arrangements for customers receiving the DFG service. Home visits are offered to help with the paperwork, and alternative options such as moving to a more suitable property are discussed and arranged if appropriate. The Council has an adapted property register to help facilitate moves in this way. An agency service is offered to prepare the application and arrange the works. The Council works in partnership with the Homes Improvement Agency, which, along with private agencies, offers the agency service, but also offers a handy person scheme for minor repairs and support through the home from hospital scheme. This is supporting customers to obtain the adaptation they need as well as allowing them to benefit from a range of other valuable services. Apart from dissatisfaction over the length of time waited, customer satisfaction results suggest general satisfaction with other aspects of the service.

- 110** The Council is ensuring that the resources are in place to deliver an improved DFG service. Money from previous underspend against the budget and government grant for private sector improvement work is being used to support clearance of the backlog with likely expenditure of £340,000 this year. A profiling exercise has been carried out to assess the budget needed once the backlog is cleared, based on the average cost of grants and the number of cases per month. This indicates that the annual cost will be £316,800 and there is provision to fund this over the next two years through the government grant, the RSL contribution and £76,000 from the Council's own capital resources. This means that the Council is in a position to support an improved service and prevent any delays due to limited budgetary provision.
- 111** Housing standards are being improved through enforcement activities, although largely on a reactive basis. Enquires or complaints are dealt with promptly and appropriate action is taken. In general, an informal approach and discussions with the landlord or owner results in the issues being addressed. Where work is not completed as required, formal enforcement action is taken and on occasions this has resulted in works being carried out in default. In 2009/10, 130 enquires were received and 30 enforcement notices were served.
- 112** There is some work to promote and raise awareness of the standards expected in homes. Presentations to the Landlords Forum have been made by the fire service and the Council to make landlords aware of the regulations they need to conform to and there are leaflets about the HHSRSⁱ and Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) as well as information on the website. Officers have also attended the outreach surgeries to promote the importance of house condition standards and deal with any enquiries. This has resulted in some owners actively seeking help from the Council to improve their properties to meet the necessary standards.
- 113** There is a sound approach to deal with HMOs in the district. Potential HMOs were identified through a survey exercise and information from other sources. From this, 16 properties, many comprising several individual units, have been classified as HMOs, although none of these require licensing. Inspections are being made to all these properties to risk assess them and nearly all of these have been completed. An inspection system has been started based on high, medium and low risk at two, three and five year intervals respectively. This is now starting to ensure that HMOs are effectively managed to meet the required standards.
- 114** The approach to empty homes has been strengthened. The empty homes strategy has been reviewed and shows good progress against the action plan. About 250 homes have been identified as empty for longer than six months across the district and visits are being made to assess these. The properties are assessed against a priority matrix to determine the ones to be tackled first and to identify those where, because of their condition, location or circumstances are not viable options for returning to use. Contact is being made with the owners and, where the property is one which the Council has prioritised for return to use, contact is pursued. So far about 50 empty homes have been identified as a high priority to focus on.

ⁱ The Housing Health and Safety Rating System is the national criteria setting out the standards required in the home.

How good is the service?

- 115** The Council is being proactive in seeking to return empty properties to use. There is effective promotion about empty homes with leaflets to show the options that are available to help owners and there is promotion and adverts in the Council's newsletter, on the website and on local radio. In addition to advice and assistance there are a range of options to help owners return their properties to use. Funding of £400,000 has been obtained with a neighbouring council from the East of England Regional Assembly to offer grants to owners to bring properties back into use. In return owners agree to rent the property to a council nominee for a three or five-year period at an affordable rent, with the property managed through an RSL partner. A target to achieve 20 homes through this route has been set and currently one is underway and three are in the pipeline. Where investment is not needed to make the property suitable for letting, the Council offers its private sector leasing scheme for empty homes through an RSL for a council nominated tenant at a rent below the local housing allowance. This is helping to meet housing needs by making more affordable homes available and to increase the supply of homes more generally.
- 116** The Council has not yet completed its overall approach to dealing with empty homes. There are not yet enforcement procedures for owners who will not cooperate and return their empty homes to use. An enforcement policy is in development and once in place will complete the package of options necessary to effectively tackle empty homes.
- 117** The Council is not yet reaching its targets for returning empty properties to use. In 2009/10, two properties were returned against a target of six as a result of the Council's direct intervention. A further 42 ceased to be empty and became occupied following contact by the Council but, because it is difficult to show that these were directly influenced by the Council's actions, they are not included in the performance figures for meeting the target. The target this year is eight properties and 12 in 2011/12. With the building blocks and options in place and a number of properties in the pipeline, the Council is confident that it will reach these targets.
- 118** The Council is not making a significant impact on addressing the energy efficiency of its private stock. The recent stock condition survey showed that average SAP ratings are 43, which is among the worst performing local authorities. Although there has been some promotion activities these have been limited by staff changes and without the stock condition information it has been difficult for the Council to target its resources to most effect to help the most vulnerable households in the worst properties.
- 119** However, the importance of energy efficiency and affordable warmth is captured in the Council's Environment and Climate Change Strategy and the Council has adopted the national performance indicator for reducing fuel poverty. This shows some progress has been made over the last two years, with SAP ratings increasing for homes occupied by households claiming income based benefits. There is work with the Energy Savings Trust and the Eastern Carbon Reduction Initiative to tackle issues around energy efficiency and schemes to seek out the best energy deals for customers and arrange Warmfront and other grants. The Council also provides advice to customers and refers them for Warmfront grants where appropriate. As a result of this 217 households benefited last year from installations to improve the energy efficiencies of their homes with grant aid of £527,000.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 120** In our last inspection the approach to delivering value for money was weak. The service did not have a good understanding of how its costs compared to other authorities. The service had an under developed approach to value for money and it was not embedded in its strategies or plans. However, there were some examples of the service developing good value such as the recycling of adaptations and the Council's use of modern procurement practices.
- 121** In this inspection there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The Council has a good understanding of its costs and has started to compare these with others. It has a sound strategic approach to value for money and its efficiency programme and procurement activities are resulting in significant efficiency gains being made. The strategic housing service can demonstrate it is delivering value for money in a number of areas and overall its costs have reduced while performance has improved in some areas. However, comparison of costs and services with others is not yet sufficiently developed to show clear outcomes and customer satisfaction is not yet informing value for money assessments. There are some aspects of the service where value for money cannot be demonstrated.

How do costs compare?

- 122** The Council has a good understanding of its costs. There is a comprehensive breakdown of costs for all of the Council's service areas, which considers the resources and costs of services against the performance outputs achieved. This is supported by detailed budget information which allows the costs of particular activities to be assessed. This is allowing the strategic housing service to have detailed information for its costs in delivering the different parts of the service.
- 123** Comparison of costs with others is not fully developed. The Council has benchmarked the overall cost of delivering the strategic housing service with other providers which showed that its costs are high. This led to further investigations which showed that when compared to other organisations with similar structures for delivering the service, the costs are similar. To gain a better understanding of why costs might differ, the Council has identified two organisations with different structures and lower costs for delivering the strategic housing service. It intends to benchmark its costs and outputs in more detail with these organisations but pending this it cannot be sure whether it could deliver the service in a more cost effective way.
- 124** Comparison with other providers for particular activities of the service is only just starting. Although performance has been compared in the past, there has been less comparison of costs. Various benchmarking arrangements have been set up to look at individual aspects of the services including DFGs, homelessness and affordable housing. However it is too early for any outcomes from these exercises to inform value for money assessments.

How good is the service?

125 Satisfaction with services is not yet included as an element to inform value for money assessments, along with costs and performance. Satisfaction information has only recently started to be gathered for some key areas and has not been available in a systematic way to include in any assessment. However, without knowing what customers think of the service, and their level of satisfaction with it, it is difficult to make a robust value for money judgement.

How is value for money managed?

- 126** Budget setting is effectively used to support value for money. The Council has developed a strategic financial planning process to link priorities through the high level strategies to the service business plans and the budget setting process. Service heads develop options for savings and efficiencies and identify and prioritise any areas where additional investment is needed. The Citizens Panel is used for consultation on budget priorities and their views are taken into account by members when making decisions. This information, along with the detailed cost information for services, informs the budget setting process and where resources may need to be redirected. This is increasingly ensuring that budgets are aligned to priorities for both capital and revenue expenditure and reflects priority service areas that are important to residents.
- 127** The Council has a clear strategic focus on delivering value for money through its efficiency programme. It has an efficiency strategy and programme in place for 2009/12 which is providing a framework for delivering value for money and is supporting some of the larger efficiencies needed to meet the reduction in resources that the Council is facing. The programme includes developing shared services with the county council for back office functions, development of the website to increase the level of customer access and transactions through this route and a review of administrative functions and other activities to improve the efficiency with which these are delivered across the Council. Targets for savings and efficiencies are set in the medium term financial strategy and progress against these and the efficiency programme is closely monitored. As a result of this approach, efficiencies of £300,000 were made in 2009/10 which exceeded the target of £150,000.
- 128** There is effective use of procurement to improve value for money. The Commissioning and Procurement Strategy has recently been revised to strengthen the focus on commissioning and to take account of environmental sustainability issues. Some of the efficiency gains last year were as a result of procurement exercises, for example the costs of insurance reduced. The Council contributes to the funding of a procurement hub with other local authorities which gives access to specialist procurement staff and facilitates shared procurement activities and learning from previous exercises. The private sector stock condition survey was commissioned through this route as a way of securing value for money. The Council is also a member of the Procurement Agency for Essex which allows it to use any framework agreements set up and benefit from any strategic procurement across the county. This is ensuring that value for money is secured through procurement.

- 129** The Council works effectively with other local authorities and partners to share costs and resources in delivering the strategic housing service. There is joint working on the Strategic Housing Market Assessment, delivering the CBL scheme, joint partner events and sharing the costs of training. Work with the local University has meant that research projects have been carried out at little cost to the Council. This is supporting value for money by making best use of resources.
- 130** The Council can show that it has improved value for money across a number of its strategic housing activities. The overall cost of delivering the strategic housing service has reduced over the last three years while performance in a number of areas has improved. The consistent reduction in bed and breakfast costs has made a significant contribution to these efficiency savings reducing from £113,000 in 2007/08 to £4,000 in 2009/10. This has enabled investment in priority areas such as the introduction of the CBL scheme and additional staffing resources for private sector housing to improve the DFG service.
- 131** The Council actively seeks to ensure value for money for affordable housing schemes. Developers are expected to be transparent about their costs and the Council is encouraging an open book accounting approach so the costs of delivering schemes can be identified. A financial viability toolkit supports negotiation on a scheme by scheme basis so that the right balance of affordable housing is achieved based on robust financial appraisals. This approach offers assurance that the amount of grant needed is minimised and, in one case, has allowed the Council to negotiate affordable housing on a scheme at a much lower grant rate per property than was achieved on a previous scheme.
- 132** However, not all aspects of the service can demonstrate value for money. There has been little work to assess whether the costs of dealing with planning applications and decisions represent value for money. The budget for DFGs has been underspent in the past because the service lacked the, capacity to deliver an effective service. This means that the available resources may not be being used in the best way.
- 133** The Council has been successful in attracting external resources. For example, it secured funding from the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) to introduce the mediation scheme to help prevent homelessness and for the IT project to encourage older people to use the internet. Regional funding has been obtained for the scheme to bring empty properties back into use and external funding is also supporting the recent mortgage debt advice service. This is allowing the Council to provide additional services which it would have difficulty in funding through its own resources.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 134** In our last inspection the service track record of delivering improvements was weak. Staffing issues had severely impacted on the service's ability to implement and sustain progress. Performance indicators did not show improvement across most areas and performance in DFGs showed a deteriorating picture. The Council had not achieved improved performance in many areas including delivering rural housing, bringing empty properties back into use and improving conditions in the private sector. Progress in the cross cutting areas of access and diversity was weak. Although work had started in addressing value for money there were no outcomes from this. The Council had delivered some improvements for some vulnerable people in the district but these were not yet improving outcomes for all service users.
- 135** In this inspection strengths outweigh weaknesses. The Council can now demonstrate a track record in delivering improvement with good progress made against improvement and action plans, and the recommendations made in the previous inspection report. Customers are now benefiting from a range of service improvements and performance has improved in a number of key areas. The Council can show it has improved value for money over time. However, progress has been slower in some areas to deliver service improvements and improved performance and the Council cannot show whether customer satisfaction is improving.
- 136** The Council has made good progress in delivering the improvement actions in its strategies and plans. Many of the recommendations made in the previous inspection, and captured in a comprehensive improvement plan for the service, have either been implemented or are in the process of being implemented. Appendix 1 sets out progress against each of the recommendations. Reviews of the action plans for the housing strategy, homelessness strategy and empty homes strategy also show that steady progress is being made. Although some services have improved more than others, as limited capacity meant that not all areas of concern could be tackled at the same time, the Council can now demonstrate a track record in delivering improvements.
- 137** There are a number of improvements that customers would notice and are benefiting from. These include:
- more choice and mobility in accessing housing through the CBL scheme;
 - easier access to services with more staff able to give advice, and outreach surgeries for customers in the outlying areas;
 - improved leaflets and information about the services offered;
 - a wider range of housing options to help households with housing needs; and
 - more affordable homes to help meet the high demand for these.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 138** Progress has been made in some key areas which are now providing the framework for future service improvements. Since the last inspection, a strategic framework for the service has been developed which has allowed members, partners and staff to be clear about what needs to be achieved, and resulted in better services for customers. Improving the approach to equality and diversity has been a key corporate activity over the last two years, resulting in the Council meeting the diverse needs of its customers in a more proactive way.
- 139** Performance has improved in some key areas. The number of affordable homes has increased with 77 delivered in the last two years. The number of homelessness cases has reduced over the last three years and performance in dealing with homelessness applications within 33 days has improved from 77 per cent in 2007/08 to 98 per cent in 2009/10. The number of households in temporary accommodation has reduced and the use of bed and breakfast has effectively ceased.
- 140** Progress to improve the private sector housing service and deliver outcomes for customers has been slower. Performance in returning empty homes to use and dealing with DFGs has not improved significantly. Action has been taken to strengthen the service such as completing the stock condition survey, introducing an inspection system for HMOs and tackling the backlog of DFG cases. This shows that the Council has put the building blocks in place to deliver improved outcomes in future.
- 141** The Council has improved value for money over time. The cost of delivering the strategic housing service has reduced over the last three years while performance in some key areas has improved. There has been a significant reduction in bed and breakfast expenditure which has allowed investment in other parts of the service. Although comparison with other organisations is not yet fully informing the approach to value for money, it is clear overall that the Council can now show a track record of improved outcomes.
- 142** The Council cannot demonstrate whether customer satisfaction with services is improving. Although surveys show high levels of satisfaction this has only recently been gathered in some areas and has not been used systematically as a way of assessing how well services are performing.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 143** In our last inspection this was an area where weaknesses outweighed strengths. A vision for the service was being developed and officers had a good understanding of what needed to be done to improve services although it was too early to see outcomes from this. A performance management framework was in place across the Council but the service was not using all the information that could be available to it to address and improve performance. Some good use had been made of consultation and partnership working to develop strategic housing strategies and the Council had responded positively to external scrutiny and challenge. Learning from others was ad hoc but the Council had recognised this as an area for further work and the service was anxious to take advantage of this now that it had greater capacity in the team.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 144** In this inspection strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses. There is a clear vision for the service and strong leadership. Priorities are well understood throughout the organisation with the business planning framework and the improvement and action plans focused on delivering these. The Council is aware of which areas it needs to improve and has arrangements in place for tackling these. Progress against plans is effectively monitored and performance is well managed. Learning from others is helping to inform service improvements. There are some gaps in performance information for private sector housing although the weaknesses in performance in this area are well understood and being tackled.
- 145** There is a clear vision for the service supported by strong leadership. Priorities for the service are well understood throughout the organisation and by partners. Difficult decisions are taken when needed, such as bringing the management of the Housing Register back to the Council and implementing the CBL scheme to improve the effectiveness of the strategic housing role. This is providing a clear focus on what the service needs to achieve.
- 146** Delivery of the Council's priorities is effectively supported through the business planning framework. The service's annual business plan reflects the Council's overall aims and priorities and sets out the key tasks and targets for the service. These are cascaded down to the different teams and to individuals through the appraisal system. This is helping staff understand the contribution they make to the achievement of the overall aims of the organisation, and ensures that priorities are effectively delivered.
- 147** The Council has good self awareness of what needs to improve. The improvement plan and the action plans in the various strategies provide a comprehensive range of actions which tackle the areas of concern, and show how improvement will be delivered. This has resulted in actions already in hand to tackle areas of weakness, including those identified in this inspection.
- 148** There are effective arrangements to monitor the delivery of the Council's improvement and action plans. Managers are responsible for ensuring the delivery of the action plans developed to implement the various strategies and these are reviewed annually and reported to members. The improvement plan is monitored by the Head of Service with exception reporting through the management structure to members. The Affordable Housing Board, made up of members and Officers, also plays a key role in monitoring the progress of strategies and plans. This is allowing members and senior managers to assess the progress being made and ensure that any issues or barriers to progress are addressed.
- 149** The Council has an effective approach to performance management. Key performance indicators and progress against key corporate activities are monitored quarterly on an exception basis by the Corporate Management Team and by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Six monthly reports are taken to the service committees. Key service performance indicators and service activities are also monitored by the Chief Executive and the Strategic Director on a quarterly basis. Heads of Service monitor their performance indicators and service activities monthly with the service managers. Where performance is not meeting the required standards explanations are provided and remedial action taken. If there is no improvement these are escalated up through the performance management framework so they can be tackled at a more strategic level if needed. This is resulting in performance being well managed.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 150** Poor performance is effectively tackled. Poor performance in the planning service led to an improvement plan being developed and monitored as a key corporate activity. This has resulted in the backlog of applications being cleared and improvement in the time taken to deal with applications.
- 151** There is a good understanding of how the Council is performing. Key corporate activities and performance indicators are reviewed annually and replaced if necessary. Members and managers have access to the performance management system allowing them to see performance at any time and to drill down further if necessary. Members are well informed about performance and are able to keep track of how the council is performing against its targets and priorities. This supports effective performance management and ensures action is taken when performance is not reaching the required standards.
- 152** There are some gaps in the performance information gathered. Information to assess how well private sector housing is performing is under developed and performance indicators for reporting on the DFG service in particular have only just been developed. Although members and senior managers have received reports and are well aware of the weaknesses in performance in this service, the lack of performance information makes routine monitoring of progress difficult.
- 153** There is a sound approach to risk management. There is a corporate register with risks assessed against a matrix. These are reviewed annually and re-scored if needed, with quarterly exception reporting to the Corporate Management Team. Service areas identify their risks as part of the business planning process with heads of service responsible for monitoring these. This is ensuring that risks are identified and well managed.
- 154** Budgets are well managed. All budget holders have access to their budgets through the IT system to show them the current position. In addition they are sent monthly budget reports against which they are required to provide explanations for any variations of 10 per cent or more either over or under budget and to sign off the budgets. Each budget holder has a financial advisor to provide help if needed. This means that budgets are controlled and there is early identification of any over or under spends.
- 155** The Council actively learns from others and its own feedback systems. Good practice has been sought from other organisations and used to inform, for example, the new processes for DFGs and to help develop the service diversity guide. The Council also seeks feedback from partners and acts on what it is told. This allows services to benefit from learning and best practice from elsewhere.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 156** In our last inspection there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The service had addressed its capacity issues and staff had been recruited bringing a good range of skills and experience. Capacity was being further enhanced through the development of cross departmental working and the re-establishment of partnership working. The imminent restructuring was for the first time identifying housing as a key part of the Council's services. Sound management processes were in place and the service was supported by effective IT systems and modern procurement practices.
- 157** In this inspection strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses. The Council has the financial resources to deliver and improve the strategic housing service and has building blocks that provide a sound basis for delivering improvements. The right skills and capacity are in place to deliver an effective service and this is supported by good corporate working and positive working between staff and members. Staff are well motivated and supported in their roles by good management and training. Partnership working and external funding is adding significant capacity in delivering services. Further development of some human resource policies is needed and IT is not yet fully supporting capacity in the service but arrangements are in place to address these issues.
- 158** The Council is ensuring that it has the resources in place to deliver its priorities for the strategic housing service. It has £1.6 million of capital resources to support the delivery of affordable housing, and is using this money strategically to complement other external resources to support schemes that may otherwise not be viable. The Council also regularly reviews its assets as a source of additional resources, including any small pieces of land suitable for affordable housing projects. There is budgetary provision for other strategic housing priorities, much of which is made up of external grants, in particular the housing capital grant for decent homes. This is mainly being used to improve the DFG service but once the backlog is cleared some will be redirected to support the wider priorities for the private sector. This means that currently the Council has the financial capacity to deliver the strategic housing service and achieve improvements.
- 159** The Council has put a number of building blocks in place which provide the capacity to improve services. There is a supply chain for affordable housing to ensure future delivery, arrangements have been developed to deliver rural housing in future and the Council is now in a position to develop its strategic approach to private sector housing. This shows that the Council is well placed to deliver its improvement plans and improved outcomes in future.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 160** The Council has the right skills and capacity in place to deliver its housing priorities. Restructuring, shared working across teams and additional investment in staff has increased the capacity to deliver the service. Team working is effective within the housing section and the service has benefitted from the additional resources available through the merger of housing with the revenues and benefits service. This has allowed work to be shared and a wider pool of staff to deal with customer contact. There is also more corporate working to deliver housing priorities with close working between housing and the planning service and improved working with the environmental health service. This has resulted in additional capacity through support from other services in the Council and a stable housing team with the skills needed to deliver an effective strategic housing service.
- 161** Staff are well supported by knowledgeable and active members. Working relationships between members and officers are strong and focussed on tackling issues such as rural housing and equality and diversity. The affordable housing programme board made up of members and officers supports this working relationship as well as giving members a good understanding of strategic housing issues. Members take an active role in sub-regional and regional housing issues and are providing clear leadership around areas such as the provision of rural housing and the importance of meeting supported housing needs.
- 162** Training is adding to the capacity of the organisation. Training needs are identified through the appraisal system and training is prioritised to meet these and corporate requirements. The Council offers regular training on a range of issues and supports staff to obtain professional qualifications. The Council has also provided training to its partners on a range of housing issues such as the CBL system, the local housing allowance and the prevention of rent arrears so that partners can more effectively support the service. Specific training on equality and diversity in housing has been delivered with a neighbouring council to share both costs and expertise. Members are offered a variety of training and this is often supplemented by briefings before committee meetings. Staff and members feel well supported by training and that this helps them carry out their roles.
- 163** However, members are not required to undertake mandatory training on planning matters. All members are involved in planning decisions through the area committee structure. Although briefing sessions on planning issues are often held at the beginning of meetings, without formal mandatory training, which is in line with good practice, there is limited assurance that members are appropriately equipped to carry out this role.
- 164** Housing staff are motivated to do a good job and are well informed about what is happening in the organisation. Staff are effectively managed and supported and the appraisal system works well allowing staff to be clear about what they need to achieve. There are well established feedback mechanisms up and down the organisation allowing staff to put forward ideas and influence how services are delivered and improved. Regular team meetings, a variety of briefings and a well developed and well used intranet keep staff up-to-date with any developments or news in the organisation. The annual staff survey showed that housing staff had the highest satisfaction for all areas and the lowest sickness rate across the Council.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 165** Sickness is well managed. Appropriate procedures are in place and action is taken in response to any trends. For example stress has been identified as a main cause of long term sickness and as a result the Council is now putting on corporate training for all managers and team leaders in dealing with stress and general stress awareness courses for all staff. Overall, absence was 8.5 days for 2009/10, which although a slight increase from the previous year, is an improvement from previous years when it was considerably higher.
- 166** The approach to human resources management is not fully supporting the capacity of the organisation. There are a range of policies and procedures in place but areas such as workforce management and succession planning need further development. Policies are due to be reviewed as a county-wide exercise to develop a standard set of policies, which will provide a stronger framework for the Council to operate in.
- 167** IT services are not yet being maximised to increase the capacity to deliver services. Investment has been made to improve the IT solutions for housing with the housing options service benefiting from improved systems. Improved systems to support private sector activities are in development but not yet in place. This means that in some areas of the housing service the effective use of staff time is hindered by work that could be better automated.
- 168** Capacity to deliver the strategic housing service is significantly increased by effective partnership working and attracting external funding. The Council works well with partners across the range of strategic housing functions and delivers a number of services through its partners, including for example some of the housing options offered and the additional services offered by the HIA. External funding has been obtained for a range of activities, often in partnership with neighbouring councils, so that the services developed as a result also benefit from shared expertise and costs in delivering them. Partnership working is allowing the Council to deliver its strategic housing service in a better way, and provide services, which otherwise it would be unable to do, for the benefit of its residents and customers.

Appendix 1 – Progress against previous inspection recommendations

| Recommendation | Status |
|---|------------------------------------|
| R1 Ensure that legislative requirements are met by assessing compliance with the Equalities and Human Rights Commission Code of Practice in Housing. | Complete and ongoing |
| R2.1 Developing, monitoring and publishing performance against service standards which have been developed with customers. | Complete and ongoing |
| R2.2 Improving the quality and consistency of written information. | Complete |
| R2.3 Improving the range of information and advice on the Council's website. | Partially complete |
| R2.4 Developing a strategic approach to improving access based on a clear understanding of current levels of access and the needs and aspirations of local people to access services. | Substantially complete and ongoing |
| R2.5 Reviewing the current opening hours with customers and consider the benefits of a more customer-focussed approach. | Partially complete and ongoing |
| R2.6 Developing a strategic approach to collecting and evaluating customer views in shaping strategic housing plans and services. | Substantially complete and ongoing |
| R3.1 Developing a corporate strategy to embed a diversity culture across the organisation and ensuring that this benefits from appropriate and sustained leadership. | Complete |
| R3.2 Develop and implement training for Councillors and staff updating their knowledge and understanding of diversity. | Complete and ongoing |
| R3.3 Developing a comprehensive understanding of all sections of the community and using this to tailor services. | Partially complete |
| R3.4 Capturing and using customer profile information to monitor equality of service delivery and taking action to remove barriers to access. | Substantially complete and ongoing |
| R3.5 Ensuring that service improvement plans address diverse needs. | Complete |

Appendix 1 – Progress against previous inspection recommendations

| Recommendation | Status |
|---|------------------------------------|
| R4.1 Routinely reviewing service costs alongside service performance. | Partially complete and ongoing |
| R4.2 Routinely collecting benchmarking information to compare costs with other services and organisations. | Substantially complete and ongoing |
| R4.3 Setting vfm targets as part of future plans and cascading these through the performance management system. | Substantially complete and ongoing |
| R5.1 Improving the performance and monitoring arrangements for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs). | Partially complete and ongoing |
| R5.2 Publicise and promote the availability of grants and loans to improve private sector housing. | Complete |
| R5.3 Develop a more strategic approach to private sector housing renewal based on up-to-date information on the conditions and hazards present in existing stock. | Partially complete and ongoing |
| R5.4 Reducing the number of empty properties by the use of targeted actions. | Partially complete and ongoing |
| R6.1 Reviewing the thresholds and percentages for affordable housing on new developments. | Substantially complete and ongoing |
| R6.2 Evaluating the use and promotion of rural housing schemes across the District. | Substantially complete and ongoing |
| R7.1 Developing robust action plans and long term targets that underpin the vision for the service. | Complete |
| R7.2 Making greater use of the opportunities to share expertise and resources at the sub-regional level. | Complete and ongoing |
| R7.3 Providing clear performance monitoring information for the service that supports action plans to deliver continuous improvement. | Substantially complete and ongoing |

Appendix 2 – Performance indicators

| Performance indicator | National 2008/09 | Maldon DC 2007/08 | Maldon DC 2008/09 | Maldon DC 2009/10 |
|---|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| NI 154 net additional homes delivered | 472 | 160 | 161 | 105 (provisional) |
| NI 155 affordable homes delivered | 157 | 40 | 50 | 30 |
| Empty private homes returned to use or demolished | N/A | 0? | 12 | 44 but 2 through direct intervention |
| Average length of stay in B&B in weeks (previously BVPI 183a) | N/A | 7.69 | 1.39 | 0 |
| Number of families in temporary accommodation | N/A | 34 | 17 | 15 |
| Number of households prevented from becoming homeless | N/A | N/A | 126 | 289 |

Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
 - focus groups with staff and external stakeholders;
 - interviews with staff, Councillors, partners and key stakeholders;
 - review of the Council's website; and
 - mystery shopping.

Appendix 4 – Positive practice

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

Use of students for research projects

- 1** The Council works in partnership with the local University to commission research projects to support particular areas of work. Recent studies include whether discounted homes are a viable option for meeting housing needs in the area, a flats over shops survey, and research into the enforcement tools available to return empty homes to use. These studies have provided good information and been delivered at very little cost to the Council.

Matrix to prioritise which empty homes should be tackled first

- 2** Empty properties are assessed against a priority matrix to determine the ones to be tackled first and to identify those where because of their condition, location or circumstances are not viable options for returning to use. This allows limited resources to be effectively prioritised and targeted.

Supporting rural affordable housing development

- 3** A Rural Housing Task Group has been set up made up of members, parish councillors and a range of other partners. The group has been active in promoting rural affordable housing and identifying and overcoming any barriers. Funding has been obtained to produce a DVD on rural affordable housing to improve promotion further. This has resulted in a greater understanding of the issues and more willingness in rural areas to accept the need for affordable housing to be built.

The Audit Commission

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

Our work across local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services means that we have a unique perspective. We promote value for money for taxpayers, auditing the £200 billion spent by 11,000 local public bodies.

As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.

Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, audio, or in a language other than English, please call 0844 798 7070.

© Audit Commission 2010

For further information on the work of the Commission please contact:

Audit Commission, 1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank, London SW1P 4HQ

Tel: 0844 798 1212 Fax: 0844 798 2945 Textphone (minicom): 0844 798 2946

www.audit-commission.gov.uk
