

# Re-inspection of strategic housing services

Uttlesford District Council

September 2010



---

# Contents

<b>Local authority housing inspections</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Scoring the service</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Report</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>How good is the service?</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>What are the prospects for improvement to the service?</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Appendix 1 – Performance indicators and statistics</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken</b>	<b>52</b>

# 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](http://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.

---

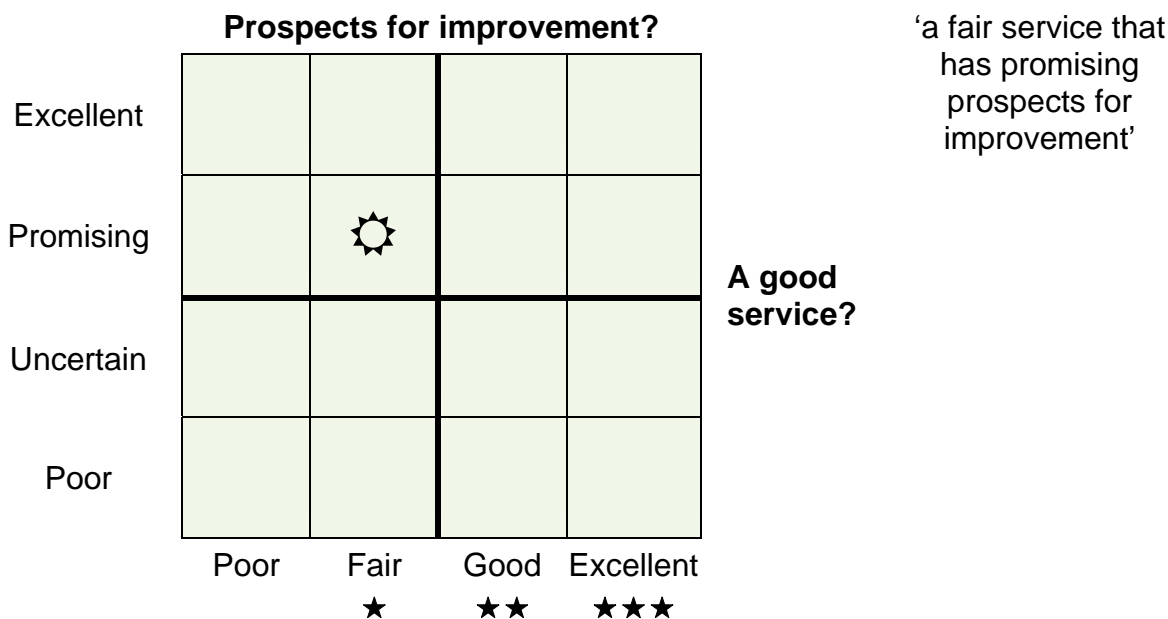
# Summary

- 1 Uttlesford District Council is delivering a one-star, 'fair' strategic housing service with promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 There are a number of strengths. There is member, officer and partner support to drive forward the delivery of strategic housing services. Services are generally accessible, including for those residents that live in rural areas and particular improvements have been made in the access to the housing options team. An improved focus on homeless prevention has reduced the number of people becoming homeless and being placed in temporary accommodation. Some work has started to develop with the private sector, but there is more to do. There are strong partnerships in place, and the Council is enabling a sustained level of new affordable homes to be delivered on rural and urban sites even during the recession.
- 3 However, there are some weaknesses. Services are not sufficiently customer focused, service standards and monitoring is not comprehensive and there is an inconsistent approach to measuring satisfaction levels, and the Council has been slow to embed its approach to diversity and value for money. Private sector housing does not feature as a strategic priority, and the approach taken to improving conditions in the private sector have been reactive.
- 4 Prospects for improvement are promising. Uttlesford has significantly improved its financial position, and delivered improvements that customers have noticed and benefitted from. There is clear leadership in place, and the Council is open to learning from others and external challenge. Improvements have been made in the corporate improvement planning and performance management frameworks and effective partnerships support the capacity of the Council to deliver improvements.
- 5 However, some aspects of improvement planning and performance management are not yet sufficiently developed, including action planning and benchmarking.

# Scoring the service

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

**Figure 1** Scoring chart<sup>i</sup>



Source: Audit Commission

- 7 We found the service to be fair because it has a range of strengths including the following.
- There is a range of ways in which customers can access housing services. Staff providing the services are knowledgeable and professional, and there is clear and useful information available and on the accessible website, including service standards.
  - There are examples where officers have worked well with minority groups to engage and enhance their ability to access services, and the revised approach to equality impact assessments puts service users at the heart of the assessment.
  - The Council is enabling a sustained level of affordable housing to be delivered, to a high quality that includes elements of sustainability across rural and urban areas. The Council is taking a flexible but sensible approach to housing delivery during the current economic climate.

<sup>i</sup> 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.

- Homelessness has been actively tackled, reducing the number of homeless cases and the level of people placed into temporary accommodation.
- A range of housing options are in place, including the HomeOptions Choice Based Lettings scheme, Homeswapper mutual exchange scheme and rent deposit scheme.
- More Disabled Facility Grants (DFGs) are being delivered due to an increase in funding, and the Home Improvement Agency (HIA) provides a range of services for vulnerable people.
- There are some initiatives in place to improve energy efficiency.

8 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include the following.

- Services are not sufficiently customer focused. Performance against service standards are not known, performance on answering the telephones and correspondence is not monitored and complaints performance is not measured.
- Customer feedback is not systematically used to measure and shape service delivery.
- Equality and diversity is not yet sufficiently embedded within the organisation. Customer profiling is inconsistent, targets are not set and equality schemes have not been sufficiently kept up to date which means that the Council is unable to demonstrate that services are being delivered equally.
- Not all the recommendations from the previous inspection have been fully implemented and some of the actions from the housing strategy have not been sufficiently progressed.
- Temporary accommodation used for those who are homeless has not been sufficiently tailored to meet their needs.
- Existing housing is not always fully utilised - re-let times for Council empty homes are long and the Council does not know the lettings, under-occupancy and decency levels of housing association properties.
- The arrangements of the Choice Based Lettings scheme mean the Council cannot fully exploit its potential.
- The private sector service is reactive. It does not feature as a strategic priority. There is a lack of public information available on assistance that is available, the service is not proactively improving the condition of private sector stock and does not adequately monitor provision of DFGs and the HIA.
- The Council has not compared its service costs, and can not demonstrate that it is delivering value for money.

9 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- there is a sustained level of improvements that customers would notice and benefit from, including the delivery of new homes and reducing homelessness;
- financial capacity of the Council has improved, and a strategy is in place to deliver the savings required over the next five years;

## Scoring the service

- leadership to and vision of the Council is clear, communicated to staff and partners and has delivered corporate improvements, such as improvement planning, financial, risk and performance management;
- staff capacity is positive, with a new management structure planned, stable levels of staff turnover and sickness and a workforce plan being developed; and
- partnership working is embedded, and continues to deliver outcomes and access to external funding.

10 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include the following.

- Some recommendations from the previous inspection have not been fully delivered.
- Weaknesses in improvement planning, in particular the lack of SMART<sup>i</sup> action plans and monitoring progress.
- Weaknesses in performance management, such as utilising benchmarking and incorporating value for money.

---

<sup>i</sup> SMART - specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-bound

# Recommendations

- 11** To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>i</sup> 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 service to customers and take steps to embed a customer-focused culture by:
- improving the range of and accessibility to information on private sector housing assistance and complaints handling (corporately);
  - involving customers and developing service standards for the private sector housing function;
  - routinely monitoring and publishing performance across the range of service standards;
  - introducing a systematic and consistent approach to measuring customer satisfaction across the strategic housing functions; and
  - routinely monitoring and publishing performance on complaints handling.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better access to services;
- more accountable services; and
- services that respond to the needs of customers.

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

<sup>i</sup> Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

## Recommendations

### Recommendation

- R2** Improving the Council's approach to diversity and take steps to embed an equalities-focused culture by:
- developing a SMART action plan for diversity, that incorporates statutory requirements and the needs of the community of Uttlesford;
  - developing performance indicators that measure the delivery of the approach to diversity;
  - developing comprehensive customer profiling information across the six nationally recognised diversity strands to monitor access to services and take action to remove barriers to accessing services; and
  - enhancing the delivery of equality impact assessments, through training and monitoring of their quality.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- fewer barriers to services;
- more accountable services; and
- services that respond to the needs of customers.

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

### Recommendation

- R3** Strengthen the strategic approach to housing by:
- developing robust monitoring arrangements to assess progress and delivery of the approach to strategic housing against the initial defined timescales and outcomes;
  - ensuring private sector housing features as a strategic area of delivery; and
  - improving the co-ordination and promotion of sustainability in housing delivery.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased accountability across the strategic housing functions;
- improved co-ordination across the strategic housing functions; and
- sustained delivery of new sustainable homes.

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

**Recommendation**

**R4** Make better use of the existing and future housing stock and service arrangements by:

- improving liaison arrangements with private sector landlords and identifying and exploring best practice with them;
- developing information regarding housing association provision in the areas of lettings, decency, under-occupation and aids and adaptations, and utilising the provision to develop and support the better use of existing housing;
- improving access to the HomeOptions Choice Based Lettings scheme for new applicants;
- improving performance on re-letting Council homes and continuing the improvements in processing planning applications;
- developing a strategic approach to proactively improve the condition of private sector housing, and return empty homes back into use, using all available options; and
- improving the monitoring arrangements for the delivery of disabled facility grants.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improving the condition of existing housing;
- maximising the use of existing housing; and
- housing services which better meet local need and more effectively address health and safety.

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

**Recommendation**

**R5** Improve the approach to value for money by:

- developing and regularly reviewing a comprehensive understanding of costs and how these, and service outcomes, compare with others;
- at a corporate level, developing a strategic framework for value for money to ensure it is embedded consistently across the Council;
- at a corporate level, developing a programme of service reviews to be led by the Business Improvement and Performance Team, that comprehensively prioritises areas for review;
- establishing clear and measurable value for money targets in improvement plans; and
- carrying out impact assessments of partnerships, services and funding streams related to strategic housing services.

## Recommendations

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a better understanding of the balance of cost and quality in service assessments; and
- increased capacity through more value for money services.

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

### Recommendation

**R6** Strengthen improvement planning and performance management by:

- reviewing action plans and ensuring that all action plans are SMART;
- ensuring a consistent and robust approach is in place to monitor the delivery of action plans, with reports that reflect progress against the initial defined timescales and outcomes;
- developing SMART objectives on improving the Council's improvement planning and performance management frameworks; and
- developing the use of benchmarking, and setting targets that reflect challenging benchmarked performance.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved monitoring arrangements and the ability to identify areas of weakness or delay;
- the increased likelihood that targets and improvements will be met; and
- improved services.

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

We would like to thank the staff of Uttlesford 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

- 12 Uttlesford is a rural district in North-West Essex, comprising of the main towns and villages of Saffron Walden, Great Dunmow, Stansted Mountfitchet and Thaxted. It borders the counties of Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire, and in terms of geographical area it is the largest district in Essex.
- 13 The district is close to London and Cambridge, and is well served by major road, rail and air links. The M11 and Cambridge to London rail links run through the district, and Stansted Airport is also located within the district. Due to its rural nature there are accessibility issues for some without private transport, especially in outlying villages. 6.5 per cent of the district is green belt.
- 14 The district has a population of approximately 71,000, which is dispersed and characterised as low density. In relation to the rest of England, Uttlesford has proportionally more older people and fewer 15 to 34 year olds which may reflect the movement of this portion of the population to other areas. The 34 to 44 age group and above are larger in Uttlesford than the national average. Office for National Statistics (ONS) data shows that the population of Uttlesford is projected to grow to over 78,000 people by 2029, an 11.6 per cent increase from 2004.
- 15 The 2001 Census showed that 4.8 per cent of Uttlesford's residents are from minority ethnic groups, 3 per cent of which are from white (BME<sup>i</sup>) groups and 1.8 per cent ethnic groups other than white (BME). Comparative figures across England are 13 per cent, 3 per cent and 9.1 per cent respectively.
- 16 Uttlesford is the most affluent of the Essex districts. Unemployment is low, wages are high, and qualifications and skills levels are high when compared against regional and national averages.

### The Council

- 17 Uttlesford District Council (UDC) has 44 elected Members with a majority Conservative administration (27), 14 liberal democrats and 3 independents. Elections are held every four years, and the next one is due to take place in May 2011.

---

<sup>i</sup> BME - Black and Minority Ethnic

## Report

- 18 UDC is a 'fourth option' Council and operates a committee based system of decision making. Full Council sets overall corporate policy, with three policy committees, including the Community and Housing Committee; two regulatory committees dealing with licensing and planning; and two committees, one of which is the Performance Select Committee (PSC), responsible for the traditional audit function, scrutinising performance and monitoring progress on action plans from external inspections. Consultation is currently taking place on the introduction of an executive style of decision making, which, if adopted, would be introduced immediately following the next district Council election in May 2011.
- 19 The Strategic Management Board (SMB) is led by the Chief Executive, and supported currently by an Assistant Chief Executive, the Chief Finance Officer (who is the Council's Section 151 officer), three directors, and eight Heads of Division. A new management structure has been approved and is to be implemented in the autumn of 2010. This will see a reduction to two directors and four Heads of Division. There are approximately 270 full-time staff working for the Council.
- 20 The Council's strategic housing service was inspected in January 2008 and judged to be a 'fair', one-star service with poor prospects for improvement.
- 21 Due to the severe financial position that the Council were in at this time and the consequent impact of redundancies on the impact of the Council external assistance was obtained through Improvement East in early 2008. Through Improvement East's assistance it was able to obtain short term interim support in both corporate and financial services. A voluntary improvement board was also set up with representatives from Government Office (East), Improvement East, the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) and the Audit Commission to support the Council's financial recovery and oversee its progress. The Board's success enabled its chairmanship to be passed from the Audit Commission to the Council.

---

# How good is the service?

---

## What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 22** The Council's 2010-2015 Corporate Plan's vision is 'for Uttlesford to sustain a high quality of life in which the benefits of the unique character of the district are equally available to all residents, workers or visitors', to be delivered through the four corporate strategic priorities.
- Finance – Effectively managing our finances in economically challenging times and to achieve an Organisational Assessment score of '3' by 2012.
  - Partnerships – Working to deliver effective and coordinated services with partners and others at reduced cost while helping those in hardship.
  - People – Supporting our communities, consulting and engaging fairly with staff and customers, and helping those in hardship.
  - Environment – Protecting and enhancing the environment and keeping communities together.
- 23** The 2009-2012 Housing Strategy aims are to:
- maximise the delivery of a range of new affordable homes to meet diverse needs;
  - improve the condition of the housing stock both public and private; and
  - build sustainable and thriving neighbourhoods and communities.

---

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

### Access and customer care

- 24** In the previous inspection we found this to be an area where weaknesses outweighed strengths. Information on the range of strategic housing activities was variable. There were no service standards relating to any of the strategic housing functions. Customer feedback had only recently been captured. Corporate access arrangements had not fully had an impact on strategic housing functions. The strengths found were that staff were providing a friendly service and sought to signpost customers to relevant services provided by other organisations. The website was also user-friendly with a range of information covering strategic housing functions.

## How good is the service?

- 25** In this re-inspection we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The Council has developed a range of service standards, but performance against the standards is not effectively monitored, and standards are not in place for private sector housing. There is a range of ways in which service users can access services, and there have been particular improvements for rural residents and those requiring access to the homeless and housing options team. Information is clear and comprehensive, the website is accessible and frontline staff are professional and knowledgeable. However, there is a lack of information on private sector housing. Customer satisfaction monitoring is not comprehensive and is not systematically informing service delivery. There is a lack of publicity and performance management for complaints.
- 26** The Council has taken steps to improve accessibility to services, particularly in the rural areas and the easy availability of housing options advice. Face to face access to housing options advice is available at the Saffron Walden office (Monday to Thursday 8.30am to 5.00pm, and Friday 8.30am to 4.30pm) through a duty housing options officer system, which does not require an appointment. Access to officers in rural areas is provided at surgeries and regularly reviewed. For example, the surgery at Thaxted has ceased, and the surgery at Great Dunmow library has been increased, in response to the level of demand. The provision of home visits is widely publicised and used. Offices are accessible, welcoming and provide a range of information. Service users are able to access information and services relating to housing need easily, although there is no provision of evening or Saturday services, other than for emergencies.
- 27** Frontline staff provide a friendly and professional service. There has been joint training provided to reception and housing options staff. Reception staff are able to deal with basic enquiries and utilise the housing options duty officer where appropriate. Customer care training has not been provided to all staff, but our reality checks found staff courteous, knowledgeable and empathetic where required. Housing options staff provided service users with sufficient information to inform them on their housing options, and our call to the out of hours emergency number was dealt with promptly and effectively. This means that service users are likely to experience customer focused services when contacting the Council.
- 28** The website is accessible, easy to navigate and provides some alternative format options. It is attractive and provides a range of information on the services inspected, including the ability to download housing application forms. It provides a range of options for alternative formats, including the ability to change text size and contrast, activate a speech enabler and translate the site pages into a wide range of languages. This means that service users are able to access information remotely and be informed about the services offered by the Council.
- 29** Information available to the public is generally clear and well laid out. There is an increased range of information leaflets that cover key areas of the service, for example homelessness, housing options, review for homelessness decisions, HomeOptions Choice Based Lettings (CBL) and points scheme, private renting and the rent deposit scheme. Information is not readily available in alternative formats, other than some in large print, but there is a clear policy on providing information in different languages and formats. This means service users can make informed decisions about their housing options.

- 30** The Council's development of service standards is not yet fully comprehensive and effective. Published service standards are in place for homelessness and housing options, although there are some which are not challenging and there are none in place for private sector housing. Performance against some of the service standards are monitored through local performance indicators, but this is not consistent across all standards and performance against the service standards are not reported to service users. This means service users are not always clear on the level of service they can expect, or how the Council is performing against those that are set.
- 31** Corporate service standards are in place for telephone and letter responses, but performance against them is not systematically monitored. Performance on answering the telephone and the level of abandoned calls are not monitored or known, despite the majority of residents using this method of communication due to the rural nature of the district. On request we were provided with data on the housing sections performance on responding to letters which showed that in the last quarter 96.4 per cent were responded to within ten days, although this information is also not being reported. The absence of routine monitoring and reporting on these key standards prevents the Council from demonstrating that service users are receiving a prompt response to their enquiries.
- 32** There is a lack of public information on private sector housing. There are no service standards in place for the private sector housing service. There is a lack of leaflets on Disabled Facility Grants (DFGs) and other private sector assistance, and the leaflet on private renting does not make clear the Council's role in private sector enforcement activities. This is a barrier to ensuring that private sector occupants are aware of the assistance that is available to them through various funding streams and opportunities.
- 33** The approach to ongoing customer satisfaction measuring is inconsistent and not well developed. Corporately customer satisfaction with the performance of the customer service team for both telephone and face to face contact is not measured. There is an aim to obtain customer feedback from service users that have been interviewed by the housing options team, but there was a lack of clarity on who or how this was collected on a systematic basis, and to date there has been a very low level of returns. Feedback from those that have received telephone advice from the homelessness and housing options team is not gathered. An annual satisfaction survey of homeless applicants takes place but this does not enable ongoing monitoring of the service. A satisfaction survey of users of the CBL scheme was carried out in November 2008, and some additional survey work has been done on accessibility of the service which is not integrated in an annual review process. However, this does not provide comprehensive ongoing satisfaction information on the service. The satisfaction levels of new residents on rural developments are tested, but not on urban developments. There is no satisfaction testing of private sector housing service users. The failure to systematically monitor the service users experience prevents the Council from identifying and addressing shortfalls and routinely responding to and shaping services that meet the needs of service users.

## How good is the service?

**34** There is a weak approach to dealing with complaints. The complaints process is not well publicised, there is limited information on the website and in the complaints leaflet regarding the process, and there are no complaints leaflets in the Saffron Walden office. Staff lack clear guidance on how to identify and deal with complaints and there has been no training for frontline staff on complaints. Positively quarterly reports to the SMB identify the outcome of complaints and any changes required as a result of the complaint, but there is no monitoring of response timescales or how satisfied complainants are with how their complaint was handled. As a result service users may not be aware of their right to make or escalate a complaint, and the Council does not know how well it is handling complaints or identifying how it can improve in this area.

## Diversity

**35** In the previous inspection we found weaknesses outweighed strengths in this area. Leadership on driving forward the diversity agenda was weak, arrangements to support the corporate approach were in their infancy and there was insufficient monitoring of the equalities action plan, which was not a SMART document. The Council had only reached level one of the local government equalities standard, did not have a gender equality scheme in place and did not know whether it complied with the CRE<sup>i</sup> code of practice in rented housing. The approach to customer profiling was weak and monitoring of services by diversity was absent. However, most information was accessible in alternative formats. The Council had also consulted on a range of diversity issues and was assessing the equalities impact of what it done.

**36** In this re-inspection we found that weaknesses continue to outweigh strengths in this area. While a framework is in place to drive forward the diversity agenda, and the Council is at a comparative level of the Equality Framework for Local Government as its peers, it lacks a strategic action plan for further driving forward the diversity agenda. Equality scheme action plans have not been consistently reviewed. A suite of equalities performance indicators or targets are not in place. Customer profiling is underdeveloped. Strategic housing officers feed into established service user groups well, but there is an inconsistent approach to collecting information on housing needs. There has been limited equalities training. The equality impact assessment framework has been improved, but its delivery is not being sufficiently monitored. There are examples of positive work with minority groups taking place.

---

<sup>i</sup> Formerly the Commission for Racial Equality, now the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, with the revised guidance being issued in October 2006.

- 37 Despite the Council internally re-launching its approach to diversity in February 2009, progress on developing and embedding its corporate approach has been weak. The Council indicated that it has had to prioritise corporate initiatives, particularly to improve its financial position and that this has had an impact on its ability to drive forward some of its service, including diversity.
- In February 2009 the IDeA considered that the Council was at level two of the former Local Government Equality Standard. The 2009-2012 corporate plan set an objective for the Council to reach the 'achieving' level of the new Equality Framework for Local Government<sup>i</sup> by December 2009, and the 2010-2015 corporate plan reiterated this objective with a further target date of March 2011. Whilst a survey carried out by the LGA<sup>ii</sup> in January 2010 found that 43 per cent of England authorities were at the same 'developing' stage as Uttlesford, the Council has had a clear ambition to move beyond this stage but has not yet developed a comprehensive action plan to achieve this.
  - Equality schemes and their action plans have not been adequately monitored or reviewed. Despite each of the schemes indicating that they would be reviewed annually, and a statutory requirement to review them every three years, the race equality scheme (March 2007) and its original action plan have not been reviewed; the gender equality scheme (June 2007) and its action plan are only now in the process of being reviewed due to gaps identified in the June 2007 scheme by the EHRC<sup>iii</sup>; and while the disability equality scheme (July 2007) was revised in 2008 and 2009, the Council's website has not been updated to reflect the outcomes of the reviews or the last revised action plan of July 2009.
  - Recent equalities training has not been provided to all of the Council. Training has taken place in the past for all staff, but current updated training has only been provided to officers on the equality working group, the SMB, heads of divisions, leading councillors and new staff in October 2009.
  - A suite of meaningful equality performance indicators are not in place.

---

<sup>i</sup> The Equality Framework for Local Government, became effective from April 2009, and replaced the Equality Standard for Local Government (levels one to five). The framework is a tool for local authorities to ensure that their equality and diversity work is mainstreamed across their organisation, and consists of three levels: developing, achieving and excellent. The equality strands covered are age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, faith and disability

<sup>ii</sup> The Local Government Association (LGA) reported the on-line survey results at its March 2010 Improvement Board. Based on a 65 per cent response level it found: 43 per cent (98) authorities at the developing level; 42 per cent (96) at the achieving level; 13 per cent (29) moving towards excellence; and 1 per cent (2) at excellent.

<sup>iii</sup> Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) replaces the Commission for Racial Equality, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Disability Rights Commission, effective from October 2007. It aims to 'eliminate discrimination, reduce inequality, protect human rights and to build good relations, ensuring that everyone has a fair chance to participate in society'

## How good is the service?

- 38** The Council's approach to customer profiling is underdeveloped. The Council is not systematically requesting or capturing profiling information, and has not yet incorporated requests for all six nationally recognised diversity strands. The Council monitors that homes are being allocated to a representative proportion of BME applicants, based on the 2001 census data, and some profiling information has been collated by a research and intelligence officer and used to identify some trends, including an increasing level of JSA<sup>i</sup> claimants and the creation of an interview space for DWP<sup>ii</sup> at Saffron Walden. However profiling information is not systematically used to target or monitor service delivery. This means that the Council does not have a comprehensive profile of its customers. This prevents it from assessing that services are being accessed adequately and equally by all service users, identifying barriers that may prevent this and effectively targeting its resources to meet the needs of the community.
- 39** The Council does not systematically monitor if its workforce is reflective of the community. It is generally aware of the makeup of its workforce, for example ethnicity, gender and disability, but other than the area of ethnicity (which is representative of the community) it has not compared this to the customer profile information that it does have. This means that the Council does not know if its workforce is fully reflective of the community.
- 40** There is an inconsistent approach to collecting and analysing housing needs information. The service has assessed some aspects of need since the 2004/05 housing needs survey through the housing register, liaison with specialist service providers and the interim findings of the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA). However, it has not yet established a consistent and thorough approach, although it plans to review the SHMA every 18 months. As a result there are gaps and housing needs information has not been established comprehensively for: those that experience domestic abuse, those with drug and alcohol problems, offenders and the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) population. While there are future plans in place to carry out work and establish the needs of these groups, their needs are currently unknown and potentially unmet.
- 41** The framework for completing equality impact assessments has been revised and is now more comprehensive however the Council does not fully monitor their completion and delivery. A revised framework was introduced in January 2010 that encourages more of a reflective assessment through the use of outcomes, monitoring and service user consultation. As before a critical friend (a manager from another section) provides an element of challenge and scrutiny, however there has been no specific training for managers or quality checking of completed assessments. Therefore the Council can not be certain that completed equality impact assessments are as robust and comprehensive as they should be.

---

<sup>i</sup> Job Seekers Allowance

<sup>ii</sup> Department for work and pensions

- 42 The framework for driving the diversity agenda is in place, and has been strengthened. There are three elected members (representing the three political parties on the Council) that sit on the Equalities strategic group, along with the Chief Executive and other officers, including the Council's Monitoring Officer. This group is supported by an officer working group, and a specific budget for equalities was introduced in 2009 of £10,000. This means the Council has the officer/member and resources in place to lead its approach to improving how it deals with equality issues.
- 43 The strategic housing service works with established service user groups to inform its approach to housing need and services. Officers are members of groups that represent different service users, and have used these to inform housing delivery and services. For example, the Housing Strategy and Planning Policy Manager is the Accountable officer for Supporting People and attends the Essex County Council Commissioning Body, and as a result subsequent partnerships have been developed to deliver housing to specific vulnerable client groups; the Disability Equality Forum informed the development of the disabled adaptations policy; the Learning Disability housing sub group has considered scheme re-development; and work is ongoing with Mental Health providers to look at service requirements and potential scheme re-developments. This enables the service to deliver services that meet the needs of some of the more vulnerable service users in the community, and schemes and individual homes have been developed to meet these needs.
- 44 There are examples where work with minority groups is taking place across the Council. These include partner work with specialist workers which has developed initial engagement with a group of young gay men and women; an advocacy worker is available to support gypsies and travellers in dealing with literacy issues, and pictures have been placed on bins to enhance refuse collection; ESOL<sup>i</sup> classes have been provided to Eastern European migrants and more recently the increasing Nepalese community through the Carver barracks; and a BME forum is planned for July 2010 with community groups. The outcomes of these initiatives have not been measured, but anecdotally officers considered that the support provided had made members of these communities more confident to access services and develop better community integration.

### Strategic approach to housing

- 45 In the last inspection we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The housing strategy was not driving forward delivery of the strategic housing priorities. Information on housing needs and the local housing market was only collated on an ad hoc basis. There was a lack of co-ordination in the Council's approach to delivering its strategic housing priorities that left key issues like private sector housing under developed. As for strengths, the Council actively participated in sub-regional housing partnerships and was integrating its future housing strategy into a sub-regional housing strategy. Member involvement with the approach to strategic housing had increased and the Council's strategic approach to housing had helped to increase the housing options available.

---

<sup>i</sup> ESOL - English for speakers of other languages

## How good is the service?

- 46 In this re-inspection we found a continued balance of strengths and weaknesses. There is member, officer and partner support to drive forward the delivery of strategic housing, although there are weaknesses in the monitoring of the housing strategy action plan, and the approach to private sector housing remains underdeveloped. The Council is progressing with the development of its Local Development Framework (LDF), and planning policies support the delivery of new affordable and sustainable homes. The understanding of housing needs and the housing market is mixed, and outcomes from the sub-regional partnership is mixed.
- 47 Housing is a clear priority within the Council. The corporate plan 2010-2015 includes a number of specific aims for housing, including the delivery of affordable homes, tackling homelessness and bringing empty homes back into use. There is a comprehensive housing strategy 2009-2012 in place with supporting strategies including for homelessness and affordable housing. There is clear member, officer and partner support for the delivery of new homes, tackling homelessness and providing a range of housing options. Internal and external partnerships work well, enabling early discussions and resolutions on potential planning requests and housing initiatives. This means the Council has a generally sound structure and range of support in place to drive forward its delivery of strategic housing.
- 48 Partnership working is well developed in strategic housing. Partners were actively involved in the development of the housing and homelessness strategy, and feel included and informed on the Council's strategic direction. In working with partners the Council has secured external funding to develop new homes and improve housing provision, such as the Stansted Area Housing Partnership (SAHP) a partnership of four local authorities, two HAs, the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA) and BAA Stansted, that has delivered a significant number of affordable homes across the areas in the last couple of years through HCA growth funding and cross authority nominations; additional funding for homelessness prevention from the government; and a joint approach to establishing HEEP<sup>i</sup> with government funding.
- 49 Positive partnerships are also in place internally within the Council. Communication works well between members and officers, in particular when progressing new developments and ensuring that members are informed on behalf of their constituents. The Housing Initiative Task Group (HITG) is chaired by a councillor and the group focuses on key housing improvement projects. The positioning of the strategy and planning policy manager within the development directorate has enabled early discussions on potential planning requests with planners and developers, and resolutions discussed at an early stage regarding potential developments. These communication flows assist in co-ordinating the delivery of the strategic housing functions.

---

<sup>i</sup> Herts and Essex Energy Partnership

- 50** The Council has been committed to the development of its LDF<sup>i</sup>. While the completion of the Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) has been delayed by approximately one year, members and officers have continued to develop the LDF. A viability assessment of the projections in the SHMA is currently underway, and public consultation is being analysed, with a view to reporting back to members in September 2010. The public consultation has been based upon the level of housing need identified for Uttlesford in the sub-regional housing strategy (2009), in particular the requirement for 3,000 additional affordable homes, as well as the findings in the gypsy and traveller accommodation assessment. Funding has been secured to carry out rural master plans for two of the areas potentially identified for some of the 3,000 additional homes. This demonstrates the Council's commitment to deliver new homes and meet needs, and upon completion the LDF will influence the affordable housing requirements to 2026, through a revised housing strategy and supplementary planning documents.
- 51** Planning policy is effectively used to deliver new affordable homes. The Affordable Housing Strategy (November 2009) reiterates the 40 per cent target in the 2005 Local Plan of affordable homes to be delivered on residential development sites over a 15-unit threshold or half a hectare in size, with a significant proportion to be of two and three bed size. This is an effective way to ensure that affordable homes are part of the development of new communities.
- 52** The Council has in place and is achieving its sustainability requirements but reference to the requirements are not well co-ordinated. The Council's Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) (October 2007) for energy efficiency sets out how the Council will negotiate to achieve level three of the code for sustainable homes on new developments up to 2012, and after this encourage all developments to achieve level four up to 2016 and then all developments will be expected to be zero carbon, level six. However, the 2009 Housing Strategy only refers to the minimum level three of the code, and the 2009 Affordable Housing Strategy does not refer to any. Similarly SPD (November 2005) on Accessible Homes and Play Space sets out that all new homes must be built to lifetime homes standard and ratios for wheelchair accessible units; this is included within the Housing Strategy, but not the Affordable Housing Strategy, although it does make reference to the SPD. Some of the partners that we spoke to considered that the Council could do more to promote its approach to sustainability. However, all housing developments delivered in the last two years have met level three of the code, and recently funding was agreed by the Homes and Communities Agency for the first rural site (nationally) to be assessed for Passivhaus<sup>ii</sup> certification in the district. The Council is supporting the delivery of new homes to improve energy efficiency levels and meet future housing need.

---

<sup>i</sup> LDF - Local Development Framework is a portfolio of local development documents which outlines how planning will be managed in a local area.

<sup>ii</sup> Passivhaus is a design methodology for ultra low-energy buildings, promoted by the Passivhaus Institut in Darmstadt, Germany.

## How good is the service?

- 53** The planning and monitoring of the housing strategy action plan is weak. A specific action plan was absent between 2007-2009 while the Council awaited Government guidance on housing strategies. It updated the former 2004-2007 action plan, and it is clear that some actions were delivered. For the current action plan that supports the delivery of a three year strategy and involves some fundamental and complex areas of work, there is a lack of prioritisation across the objectives, outcomes are not always clearly measurable, and sufficient target dates and milestones are absent. While quarterly updates have been provided to the HITG, these have not been sufficiently detailed and members have not challenged areas of delay. Together with the lack of an action plan for the period 2007-2009, it is difficult to measure how successful the level of delivery has been, and this has prevented the strategic direction of the service from being progressed as well it potentially could have been.
- 54** The Council's knowledge and understanding of the housing need and housing market is mixed. As indicated in 'diversity' housing needs information has not been systematically updated. The SHMA has subsequently provided the Council with a better overview on housing need and the housing market however its completion has been delayed by one year due to complications, and is in principle based on data before the recession. The Essex-wide gypsy and traveller accommodation assessment (2009) has now informed UDC of the level of need for this minority group, and is to be used to develop a site specific policy. However, the delay in updating and assessing knowledge potentially means that the Council is not sufficiently meeting need and demand. For example the SHMA suggests that in order to meet housing need and the housing market a ratio of 30:70 rented: intermediate new affordable homes should be aimed for. This is opposite to what the Council is currently delivering of 70:30 rented: intermediate new affordable homes and the viability of this new level of delivery will be further considered in the viability assessment.
- 55** Outcomes from the London Commuter Belt (LCB) sub-regional partnerships have been mixed. While there have been some outcomes from the partnership, these have been limited to specific pieces of work, for example the SHMA, and a template for housing strategy action plans. There has been no progress on developing shared approaches or guidance on the delivery of strategic housing. Members of the partnership have had some discussions regarding the large profile of the LCB sub-regional partnership (15 authorities) and the effect this has on systematically co-ordinating progress, and will be revisiting this in the near future. In the meantime UDC has established a smaller partnership group with Epping Forest, Harlow and East Herts, due to geographical locations and shared similarities. It has already worked with these areas on some initiatives, and further projects are arising as a result, such as the development of the young parents' scheme and progression with a Single Conversation Local Investment Plan with Epping Forest and Harlow.
- 56** Weaknesses in the strategic approach to private sector housing remain evident. The housing strategy identifies some of the key issues in the private sector, but it does not provide a clear picture of what the Council and its partners are seeking to achieve in the area of private sector housing. Available stock condition data on the private sector is based on 2005/06 conditions, has not been systematically updated and there are no plans to review it. There is no strategic approach in place to how to utilise and improve private sector housing. This is a missed opportunity to ensure existing housing is used to its maximum potential.

### Making the best use of existing housing

- 57 The last inspection found a balance of strengths and weaknesses in the Council's approach to making best use of existing housing stock. The Council did not know the effectiveness of its approach to homelessness prevention and the choice-based lettings arrangements limited the ability of the Council to fully use the scheme to meet local needs. A strategic and proactive approach to private sector housing was absent, and prevented the Council from enhancing the use and condition of private sector stock to meet local housing need. However, the Council's strategic approach to homelessness was increasing housing options, putting more focus on homelessness prevention, reducing the use of bed and breakfast accommodation and addressing the risk of a sudden and large number of homelessness cases from Stansted airport. The new choice-based letting scheme had started to provide applicants with greater choice and the Council has effective nomination arrangements and was strengthening its approach to under-occupied homes.
- 58 This re-inspection found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There has been a clear focus on preventing homelessness, supported by established partnership working. As a result there are low levels of homeless presentations, and acceptances and people being placed in temporary accommodation. There are some prevention opportunities that have not been fully explored. The Council's CBL scheme is well established and Council stock is well maintained but takes a long time to re-let, and sheltered schemes are being redeveloped to better meet need. There are some strategic weaknesses. The Council does not know the condition of HA stock or the level of under-occupation across the district. Private sector housing does not feature as a strategic priority, with a lack of resources and prioritisation applied to it, although there are positive services delivered through the Home Improvement Agency (HIA) and energy efficiency initiatives.

### Homelessness and housing need

- 59 There is a clear focus on preventing homelessness through a range of initiatives and housing options advice. The Housing Options and Homelessness Team have access to and use a range of preventative measures including a sanctuary scheme, mediation services for young people, a well used and effective rent deposit scheme, a joint protocol and effective communication with the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and use of the mortgage rescue scheme. The number of cases where homelessness was prevented due to the Council's intervention increased from 60 in 2008/09 to 121 in 2009/10, highlighting success in the initiatives and housing options used.

## How good is the service?

- 60 Partnership working to tackle homelessness and support service users is well established. The homelessness strategy group provides an opportunity for partners to share information, coordinate and construct homelessness services in the district. For example, the rent deposit scheme has been more popular following amendments for housing benefit to be paid directly to the landlord, and a further amendment that enables a deposit to be paid on two homes where a client is moving-on from their existing accommodation. Representatives from the housing options team attend anti-social behaviour (ASB) case management meetings to assist in avoiding homelessness. Joint protocols are in place on homelessness prevention between Uttlesford and Essex County Council (ECC), and Uttlesford and the CAB, and for dealing with homeless 16/17 year olds across all Essex authorities and Essex Social Care. This means that the Council is acting as a facilitator and a supporter in preventing homelessness and supporting those that are homeless.
- 61 There are strong relationships between the housing options and housing benefits teams. Housing benefit applications are fast tracked where this is requested by the housing options team. Liaison between the teams and private landlords has not only developed the rent deposit scheme to pay housing benefit direct to landlords, but also encouraged landlords to use the scheme. Performance on processing new housing benefit claims and change of events stood at 6.5 days (2009/10) against a target of 14.5 days. The prompt assessment and payment of housing benefit supports the Council in preventing homelessness.
- 62 The level of homelessness presentations and acceptances has reduced. In 2009/10 the number of presentations was 26, a reduction from 48 in 2008/09, and the number of acceptances was 10, a reduction from 25 in 2008/09. The ability to request a review against a homelessness decision is well publicised, but since 2007/08, when there were three requests, there have been no further requests for a review. An annual survey in April 2010 of all households making a homelessness application showed a 91 per cent satisfaction rating regarding the service. This means that the Council is successfully tackling and reducing homelessness, and being responsive to the circumstances of the individuals/households concerned.
- 63 There is a low level of people in temporary accommodation. During 2009/10 only two families and seven single people had to be placed in bed and breakfast accommodation, and at the end of 2009/10 only four households were in temporary accommodation. The Council has exceeded the Government target to reduce the number of households in temporary accommodation, and reduced the level of cost associated with placing people in temporary accommodation.

- 64 The length of stay in temporary accommodation is mixed. Benchmark data for 2009/10 shows better than average performance for the time spent by children and pregnant women in bed and breakfast accommodation. The average stay for UDC ranged from 0.43 to 1.78 weeks (an average of 1.14 weeks), against an internal target of two weeks and a comparative average ranging from 0.57 to 1.87 weeks (2009/10). However, stays in temporary accommodation were longer for 'accepted priority needs - others (single)' 6.1<sup>i</sup> weeks against a target of three weeks, and 'rejected, all groups' 4.12 weeks against a target of six weeks (2009/10). This figure has not been benchmarked. Although the length of time spent in non-bed and breakfast temporary accommodation, namely Council hard to let stock, is not reported as a performance indicator, this information was provided to us. It showed that of the 12 households placed in this form of temporary accommodation during 2009/10, eight were permanently re-housed within three months and all but one complex case was re-housed within 12 months. This is better than average compared with performance in the East region for 2008/09 (East region average was 64 per cent of households spending less than six months in temporary accommodation) although up to date benchmarking has not taken place.
- 65 Support mechanisms are in place for service users placed in temporary accommodation. The Council has worked with partners to improve the provision of supported accommodation for younger people threatened with homelessness, resulting in 100 per cent nomination rights to a 17 bed-space scheme for people under 25. Formal referral arrangements are in place for floating support provision for all households placed in temporary accommodation, which can also extend to a resettlement period when re-housed. This means that people have access to support at a difficult time in their life, while in temporary accommodation as well as when settling in to longer term housing.
- 66 Joint working with the private sector is developing but is not yet comprehensive. There is insufficient emphasis on joint working with private landlords in the homelessness review/strategy, and while the Council has taken some steps to build a partnership approach with the private sector, these are recent and their impact fairly limited. There is an annual private landlords' forum and the Council has started to develop initiatives with private sector landlords. These include a short-list of landlords that will notify the Council of vacancies and consider referrals, and accept households in receipt of housing benefit. The take-up of the rent deposit scheme from 17 (2008/09) to 42 (2009/10) is a strength but there is still more to do, for example there has been no discussion with private landlords about utilising CBL to advertise vacancies. This prevents the Council from maximising the use of private sector housing to meet housing need.

---

<sup>i</sup> The 2009/10 end of year performance report states that performance reflects one case only, of a 17 year old who needed to be placed in supported accommodation and the delays associated with finding suitable accommodation.

## How good is the service?

- 67 There are some gaps in homeless prevention initiatives and provision. The level of evictions in Housing Associations (HAs) is not monitored, and a protocol has not been agreed with partner HAs on liaison arrangements with the housing options team on potential evictions. While HAs generally notify the team, this is an informal arrangement and does not ensure that intervention is maximised. The Council has not explored the introduction of a 'Court desk' service where service users are attending court for repossessions. While this would involve a number of courts, the Council has not considered the potential of a joint service with other housing organisations. This means that the Council is not yet using the full range of initiatives to prevent homelessness.
- 68 The Council's use of temporary accommodation has not been sufficiently developed. It does not yet have any specifically designed temporary accommodation for service users (although some is being developed), and currently bed and breakfast and hard to let Council accommodation is used for temporary accommodation. We visited the current used accommodation and it was of a reasonable physical condition, clean and presentable and bed and breakfast accommodation has recently improved to provide some additional facilities for families. However, the hard to let Council accommodation is not fully furnished, with only a cooker and fridge supplied, and in emergencies the only form of temporary accommodation currently available is bed and breakfast. This is for all client groups, including a 16/17 year old<sup>i</sup> that was placed in bed and breakfast in the last year.

## Housing options (allocations and lettings)

- 69 The Council has a well established CBL scheme in place, HomeOption. The scheme was introduced in November 2007 and is administered across six partner authorities, including UDC. The scheme is well publicised, and the HomeOption freesheet that advertises properties available is located in a wide range of places, including Council offices, shops and post offices. Council staff provide support and guidance to those using the scheme, including bidding for properties. A survey of CBL users in November 2008 found that 85 per cent found the user guide easy to follow and 79 per cent found bidding easy. This survey has not yet been repeated, or the outcomes benchmarked with other CBL schemes to compare performance, but the scheme is providing applicants with some options of choice and re-housing.
- 70 The Council has taken some steps to support applicants who need help in the bidding process, but the approach is not yet comprehensive. It is seeking to identify people who need assistance through questions on the application form, and the annual review form to registered applicants and did carry out a specific survey of all applicants on the issue of access to the service. It currently knows of 40 applicants that require assistance and when a suitable property is advertised an officer contacts them to check if they want to bid. However, the Council is not monitoring the bidding patterns of new applicants in order to try and identify potential access difficulties at an early stage.

---

<sup>i</sup> The applicant had to be placed in bed and breakfast while awaiting a supported unit, and during this time was supported by the Council's floating support team and other relevant agencies.

- 71** The Council has taken some steps to tackle under-occupation in social housing. Under-occupation is given a high priority in the points system for UDCs CBL scheme. There is also a cash incentive scheme for UDC tenants to encourage them to move to smaller homes although this was only accessed by five tenants in 2009/10. These means provide some incentive for households to release larger sized properties that they may be struggling to maintain, as well as releasing them for larger families in housing need.
- 72** The majority of Council homes meet the decent homes standard. At March 2010 only 1.5 per cent of Council homes did not meet the standard. This means that the Council is ensuring that it is providing suitable housing that meet current standards through its own stock.
- 73** The Council is taking action to make best use of sheltered housing. Sheltered housing stock has been improved as part of the property improvement programme and support services have also been redesigned in consultation with ECC Supporting People and service users. Two schemes have been identified as having a low level of demand and these are being addressed through redevelopment, one of which has funding secured to be developed into extra care provision, which is much needed in the district. Close working with Occupational Therapy and the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) ensures that new standards are applied in the letting of sheltered homes that meet the long term needs of older people, and adaptations are carried out as necessary. This means that sheltered housing is being developed to meet the needs of an aging population more effectively.
- 74** The Council established a 'Homeswapper' on-line scheme in November 2009 replacing a previous paper based mutual exchange scheme. While the scheme is relatively new, it has already had 211 Uttlesford applicants register and in 2009/10, 22 mutual exchanges took place. Although it is not clear if all of these were as a result of 'Homeswapper', the scheme is well publicised and effective in matching tenants and properties and therefore enables current tenants to identify potential exchange properties to better meet their housing need.
- 75** The Council takes a long time to re-let its homes. The average time taken to re-let an empty property during 2009/10 was 42.28 days, against a target of 28 days. This included all empty properties, including those that required major work<sup>i</sup>. While during this period the Council undertakes work to bring empty properties up to the decent homes standard which can extend work time, the majority of the Council's stock has been brought up to the standard already, therefore the impact on empty properties should be minimal. The Council has not fully evaluated the potential of advertising properties on a weekly basis through CBL, which could reduce re-let times. The delay in letting homes means people in housing need are waiting longer to be re-housed.

---

<sup>i</sup> Since the inspection the Council has separated out reported performance for re-letting routine empty properties (those that do not require major work) in line with the definition in the Business Plan Statistical Appendix, and indicated that performance stood at 32.8 days (2009/10) and 29.6 days (April to June 2010).

## How good is the service?

- 76** The Council has not sufficiently developed its strategic approach in a number of areas to ensure existing housing is best used to meet housing needs. These include:
- the Council does not monitor the level of decency or lettings performance in HA homes. This information is not collated, known or reported within the Council, despite the Council's Housing Strategy having a clear strategic objective to 'improve the condition of the housing stock in both public and private';
  - the Council has not assessed the level of under-occupation across social housing in the district, neither has it investigated how or whether HAs are tackling the issue. This means that the Council does not know the full extent of under-occupation in the district, and is not necessarily targeting its resources or policies sufficiently with partners to ensure that larger homes are best used to meet housing need; and
  - there is not an agreed protocol in place with HAs for how aids and adaptations should be delivered to their stock. This prevents the Council and its partners from ensuring that a co-ordinated approach is taken to addressing needs within accommodation and making maximum use of available resources.
- 77** There are some limitations to the current CBL scheme. Despite being administered across six partner authorities it does not provide an automatic sub-regional level of choice to applicants. This means that applicants have to apply directly to each authority individually across the partnership to be considered, with each applying a different allocation scheme and prioritisation. While UDC has been actively pursuing the full integration of a CBL scheme across the partners since June 2009, at the moment the level of choice available to UDC applicants immediately through CBL is limited.
- 78** The registration of new applicants is generally well managed although performance dispatching HomeOption packs is not clear. Housing register applications are currently being fully assessed in an average of ten days (based on current performance this is against an unchallenging target of 20 days). There is then a commitment by the sub-regional HomeOption team to send out the introduction packs within ten days, as they are reliant on updated data following registration which only uploads on the IT system once a week. This target is not challenging, and the Council does not monitor or know performance against the commitment. This prevents the Council from identifying areas that require improvement, and potentially means that applicants are not being provided with the opportunity to bid for properties as promptly as they could.

## Private sector housing

- 79** Private sector housing has continued to have an insufficient profile within the Council. There has been a lack of co-ordination and development of the Council's approach to private sector housing. The service is not sufficiently customer focused, service standards are absent, publicity on what is available is insufficient and customer satisfaction testing on what is delivered is not carried out. The Council is not maximising the use of current existing housing stock.

80 There is not a proactive approach to addressing poor housing conditions in the private sector. The Council has not sufficiently identified conditions within the sector, resourced, targeted or prioritised its approach.

- Information from the 2005/06 stock condition survey of private sector housing conditions has not been systematically updated, and there are no plans in place to update the information.
- While the 2005/06 survey found relatively low levels of unfitness at 1.6 per cent, it did identify significant levels of substantial disrepair at 6.7 per cent (1,816), and 1,500 properties needing attention under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) with 605 requiring immediate attention. In 2008/09 the Council was in the worst 25 per cent of performers in the region in making homes free from category one (CAT1) hazards.
- Private sector housing renewal assistance is not being actively marketed, resources allocated are low and take up is low.
- The Council takes a complaints-led approach to enforcement, which means it is a reactive service.
- The number of licensable Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) is low but there has not been a proactive approach to identifying and inspecting HMOs. There has been no proper consideration of developing an accreditation scheme to try to improve conditions and management in the private rented sector.
- A thorough evaluation of the benefits of different approaches has not been carried out. Therefore while the Council has a number of initiatives in place, it has not measured their effectiveness in improving conditions and delivering best value for money. For example grants are available, but these are based on historical activity rather than a current assessment, and there was some consideration by partners that due to the districts affluence a loans only scheme may be more successful.

The Council considers that it faces a different set of challenges to those of other district councils when it comes to private sector housing, including the proximity to Stansted airport. However its lack of strategic direction and prioritisation in this area is a missed opportunity to improve the stock's condition, and potentially means that a significant number of residents, a high proportion of which will be vulnerable, are living in homes that are not suitable and possibly affect their health and safety.

## How good is the service?

- 81** There has been limited activity on bringing empty properties back into use. The Council has an empty property strategy, and the PLACE<sup>i</sup> project completed its first home in October 2009. However officers primarily respond to empty properties where Councillors or neighbours have raised issues. A questionnaire was sent to all empty properties in 2009 but this information has not been effectively followed up. Of the 322 homes empty for over six months there is active work on only six properties. While the Council has some understanding of reasons for some of these homes being empty it has not quantified this, and there is no effective system in place to prioritise this work. While the percentage of empty private sector stock in the district, 1.2 per cent is below the central regional average of 1.5 per cent (2008/09), the Council has not maximised its efforts to use existing housing stock to meet housing need within the district.
- 82** There are weaknesses in the monitoring and delivery of Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs). The Council does not monitor the overall delivery of DFGs. Performance information is not available on completion times from the initial enquiry to completion of the works. Benchmarking information shows that UDC is the second slowest Council among a comparison group to approve DFGs following receipt of an application, at an average of 52 days in 2009/10. The Council has not carried out further analysis of this data. There are long waits for Occupational Therapy visits (a service delivered by ECC), currently three to four months. The county has been collecting information on the key stages of delivering DFGs, however these have not been provided to the Council for over a year. While these two latter services relate to the County Council, there is limited assurance that Uttlesford has been actively raising them with the county. Nor does UDC monitor the HIAs handling and delivery of DFGs. The Council is unable to demonstrate that vulnerable people are receiving prompt delivery of adaptations that can improve their quality of life and independence.
- 83** Council monitoring of the HIA is inadequate. The HIA does not provide performance information to the Council. This means the Council is not able to effectively judge performance in terms of the level of work carried out, timescales and satisfaction. Regular contact on the progress of individual cases takes place and there are joint meetings every two to three months but these are not recorded so there is not a clear record of issues arising or decisions made. This is despite the Council contributing £15,000 to the running costs of the HIA in addition to approximately 10 per cent of the fees on DFG/Home repairs applications where technical support is provided. The Council is unable to demonstrate performance of the HIA and whether it is delivering value for money.
- 84** Funding for DFGs has been increased in response to the level of applications. This has been increased quite significantly from £108,900 in 2007/08, £190,500 in 2008/09 to £250,000 in 2009/10 (of which £193,200 was committed at February 2010). This has enabled the Council to deliver more DFGs, and at the time of the inspection there was no waiting list. However, this has been against the level of past demand, which has been based on applications received rather than the level of actual projected need.

---

<sup>i</sup> PLACE - Private Lease Agreements Converting Empties. A project delivered through a sub-regional partnership that encourages owners of long term vacant homes to lease their property to a housing association in return for a non repayable grant to bring them up to the decent homes standard.

- 85** The partnership with the HIA is providing a positive range of services and delivering in reasonable timescales. The HIA publicises the service and in 2009/10 it dealt with 212 enquiries, supported 24 DFGs, delivered 108 handyperson jobs and supported two home repair grants. It will also advise households who are not eligible for grant funding and will access charities to support some cases. Processing of major DFGs is taking approximately 35 weeks from when they first receive contact from a client.
- 86** There are projects and partnerships in place to drive forward the energy efficiency agenda. The Council has used its housing renewal grant to top up Warmfront grants made by vulnerable householders who are unable to meet the shortfall in funding. The private sector renewal assistance policy has been amended to enable assistance to Almshouses and mobile homes to improve poor thermal insulation in these properties. In 2009 the Council worked with the Energy Saving Trust and conducted a home energy mailing targeted at 'able to pay' households. A regional sub-group energy partnership, HEEP, has been established. This is led by an Uttlesford officer and provides a wide range of free or subsidised energy efficiency measures to vulnerable private sector occupiers, and during 2009/10 129 private sector properties benefitted from the scheme. The private sector SAP<sup>i</sup> rating is 60.1 which is amongst the best 25 per cent of performers when compared nationally and above the central region average of 54 (2008/09).

### Enabling the provision of more housing to meet needs

- 87** In the last inspection strengths outweighed weaknesses in this area. There was clear leadership within the Council for the delivery of more affordable housing in towns and rural areas. This was supported by a well developed corporate and partnership approach that was maximising opportunities for development. Schemes were delivered to a high standard and effectively monitored by the Council. However, the approach was not based on the most up-to-date understanding of what was needed.
- 88** In this re-inspection we found this to be an area of strength. The Council has sustained the delivery of affordable homes on urban and rural sites, despite the recession. Homes have been completed to a high standard, and there are high levels of satisfaction from the developments in the rural areas. The future projection of land availability and housing delivery looks positive. There has been some slight performance deterioration in the planning service, and some levels of housing need not yet met or known.
- 89** The Council has sustained its delivery of new affordable homes over the last three years. The Council set a target to deliver 100 affordable homes a year. Although this is somewhat off the level of need identified in the housing needs survey update 2005 (174 per year), the sub-regional housing strategy 2009 (400 homes per year to 2021) and the SHMA 2009 (4,300 intermediate homes and 1300 social rented between 2007-2026), it has been a consistent and realistic target that the Council has aimed for. In the last three years 297 affordable homes have been delivered; this is positive in comparison to the annual national average of 157 (based on 2008/09 performance).

---

<sup>i</sup> Standard Assessment Procedure - SAP is a measure of the energy efficiency of homes

## How good is the service?

- 90 The Council has an inclusive and proven approach to rural exception site developments. Strong partnership work has been established and maintained between the Council, rural housing enabler and parish councils. Housing needs surveys have been carried out at almost 50 per cent of parishes and high satisfaction levels of new developments are used to promote developments in other areas. On two recent sites, local lettings plans have been used to ensure a percentage of homes were allocated to village residents; however, formal guidance has not yet been developed for this approach. There has been a steady flow of rural housing sites developed, with more in the pipeline, and satisfaction testing has shown high levels of satisfaction from new residents, local residents and the parish councils of developed areas.
- 91 The Council has taken a sensible but flexible approach to ensure that sustainable development continues during the economic downturn. This has included the Council identifying and gifting to an HA Council owned sites (mainly former garage sites) for development; developing itself a site for the first time in 20 years; a flexible approach to negotiating section 106 agreements; and a strong approach to negotiating affordable home levels. In only one case has the Council lowered the level of affordable homes to 20 per cent, and this followed a robust level of challenge applied by the Council. The Council has been able to continue developing new homes, and partners have encountered no difficulties in selling shared equity homes in the current climate.
- 92 The Council actively monitors the level of land and developments available for future delivery. The planning department has completed a Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) for the next five years, and together with planning applications it is projected that the delivery of affordable housing units will be 69 (2010/11) lower than target due to the economic climate, 174 (2011/12) and a subsequent 300 to 400 thereafter. This places the Council in a strong position to continue delivering new homes.
- 93 Completed affordable housing sites are attractive and in keeping with properties in the local area. Visits to a variety of sites found affordable homes completed to a high standard, pepper potted and blended in with the development. The residents that we met were very satisfied with the properties and service received both from UDC and the managing HA. In some instances the Council has worked closely with developers and Occupational Therapy to develop schemes and individual homes that meet the needs of individual customers. New homes are meeting the needs of those in most need.
- 94 There has been some deterioration on planning performance. The service has suffered with some long term sickness and staff vacancies, and in view of the recession and projection that planning applications would reduce recruitment to these posts were not made until recently. Year end (2009/10) performance stood at 68.75 per cent for processing major applications (down from 80.65 per cent 2008/09), and 58.16 per cent for processing minor applications (down from 70.67 per cent 2008/09) against targets of 65 per cent. There have been some initial improvements in performance since the recruitment of staff, particularly in dealing with minor applications, but these are yet to be sustained.

- 95 There are some groups whose housing need is not yet being met or known. There is only one extra care scheme within the district, and an increasing demand for extra care due to the growing older population in the district, although the Council has been working with the Department of Health and secured funding to develop a further scheme. The needs of some groups are not fully known, including those experiencing domestic abuse, those with drug and alcohol problems, offenders and the BME population. This potentially means that their needs are not currently being effectively met.
- 96 The Council is not measuring satisfaction levels of new residents in urban development sites. While the developing HA generally tests satisfaction and sometimes discusses the outcomes with the Council, this is not a systematic or consistent approach. This is a missed opportunity from ensuring satisfaction levels are high, and learning from resident feedback.

---

### Is the service delivering value for money?

- 97 The last inspection found this was an area of weakness. The Council did not know the costs of all of its strategic housing functions or how they compared to others, and could not demonstrate whether the service delivered value for money. There was no overarching strategy guiding value for money and the approach to procurement was not fully developed. There was very limited focus on value for money within the strategic housing functions and plans for improvement. The Council had made some savings as a result of organisational re-engineering, but these have not led to demonstrable service improvements.
- 98 In this re-inspection we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths in this area. The Council does not have a value for money framework, strategy or culture in place of routinely assessing value for money. Improvement plans do not consistently feature value for money targets and benchmarking is underdeveloped. The Council has achieved some savings and benefitted from working with partners.

### How do costs compare?

- 99 The service has done very little to identify service costs, or compare costs with other providers. There has been some work at a corporate level to break down and compare service costs, around areas where the Council is progressing shared service options with other Councils. Officers involved in the strategic housing functions are members of various groups, but benchmarking of costs is underdeveloped and has not driven value for money improvements. This means that the Council does not know how well costs compare with other providers, and whether it is providing services that are value for money.

## How good is the service?

### How is value for money managed?

- 100** There is no strategic value for money framework and a consistent and embedded approach to value for money is not yet in place. There is no value for money strategy, and a new corporate procurement strategy has only recently been introduced in January 2010. Improvement planning does not always incorporate value for money targets, and investigations into service costs have generally been triggered by projected budget overspends. This is positive in relation to monitoring budgets, but is not a proactive or planned approach to assessing value for money.
- 101** The Council has recently started value for money service area reviews. The Business Improvement and Performance Team (BIPT) have carried out pilot reviews across housing, waste and corporate services, which provide valuable information at both service and managerial level and can lead onto a Business Improvement Review if weaknesses are identified. These aim to assess performance and cost, but, as at the time when we were on site, a programme for future reviews had not been set.
- 102** The Council does not evaluate the value for money or impact of some of its partnerships. While it financially supports partnerships, including the CAB and the HIA, it does not actively monitor performance of the services provided or assess performance against the cost of the service. For example, the Council receives some information from the CAB on the number of cases dealt with, but it does not receive data on or monitor access to and usage of the service in relation to homeless intervention or other aspects or service user satisfaction; and the HIA does not use schedule of rates for works (apart from stairlifts), but tenders each job. This is not maximising value for money through procurement and potentially extends the lead-in times for the work to be completed. While these services are clearly providing important services to residents of the district, the Council cannot be sure that services are being maximised and value for money achieved.
- 103** Benchmarking is not well developed or having an impact on improving value for money. The housing division has recently joined a national benchmarking club. It has submitted historical data, and as part of a pilot the club is planning to provide a more detailed assessment of cost and performance for housing advice, housing register/lettings and homelessness services. There has also been information produced on private sector housing through the sub-regional LCB. However, this information has not been reported or used to assess value for money or as part of service planning.
- 104** The housing service can demonstrate savings and is attracting external funding to support service delivery, including the following.
- The Council's rented telephony system saves an estimated £70,000 per annum (based on actual call usage cost three years ago). There are no call charges incurred with the current system, and this is of particular relevance given the increased use of mobile telephones and the potential higher cost when calling a mobile phone.
  - Due to reduced usage the cost of bed and breakfast provision has reduced significantly from £38,911 in 2007/08, £24,619 in 2008/09 to £13,738 in 2009/10.

- The Council has been successful in obtaining £60,000 homelessness prevention funding for the last four years. This has been used to ensure adequate staffing levels in the team to enable a focus on homelessness prevention.

**105** There are positive partnerships in place that have benefitted the Council through the commissioning or delivery of joint services, including the following.

- The CBL scheme is administered at sub-regional level enabling costs to be shared across all six partner landlords.
- The Council's steady programme of developing on rural exception sites (in comparison to their sub-regional partners) means that it receives a high level of officer time from the rural housing enabler, a shared resource across the sub-region.
- The Council has participated in a consortium approach to purchase stair-lifts for DFGs. Through the introduction of a fixed price a reduction on previous costs has been achieved, and a potential to reduce lead in times.
- Sub-regional schemes such as the PLACE scheme for returning empty homes back into use and HEEP for increasing energy efficiency.

# What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

---

## What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 106** In the last inspection the Council was found to have a limited track record of delivering service improvements across the strategic housing functions and weaknesses outweighed strengths in this area. The Council had been slow to identify and tackle areas of weakness. It could not demonstrate a consistent track record in delivering its strategic housing functions. Robust performance management, comprehensive customer satisfaction monitoring and an overall evaluation of services was absent. Nor did it have a track record of delivering value for money. The Council performed well against most of the best value performance indicators (BVPIs). It had enabled the development of more new affordable homes and through partnership work had developed a number of initiatives, but these were yet to have a sustained impact for those in housing need.
- 107** This re-inspection found an improved demonstration of track record, and an overall balance of strengths and weaknesses. The Council has significantly improved its financial position since the last inspection. However, this has meant that some areas have not developed as well as they could, such as diversity and value for money. Similarly there are weaknesses in how well the Council has delivered the recommendations from the last inspection, and progress against its own action plans. There have been key benefits delivered to local residents, including a steady rate of new affordable homes in urban and rural areas despite the recession, an increase in service provision from the homelessness and housing options service, and specific outcomes including an increase in the number of households prevented from becoming homeless.
- 108** At the time of the last inspection the Council was in a severe financial position, and its key focus since 2008 has been to improve this. Through the voluntary improvement board, external support, capacity building and an improved approach to financial management this has been achieved. The Council is now a financially stable organisation.
- 109** The Council was seen as 'improving' in the 2009 Audit Commission Organisational Assessment. The December 2009 assessment scored the Council as two, 'An organisation that meets only minimum requirements, Performs Adequately'. This was on the basis that the Council is improving services, although this is not yet consistent in all areas.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 110** The Council has continued to deliver at a steady rate new affordable homes including homes on rural exception sites. This is at a time when many organisations have suffered in developing new homes due to the recession. The Council has taken a flexible approach, used some of its own land for development and delivered 297 new affordable homes over the last three years: 50 (2007/8), 140 (2008/09) and 107 (2009/10) against an annual target of 100 (300 total). This means that 297 households have had their housing need met in the last three years through the delivery of new homes.
- 111** Specialisation within housing services has led to improvements since the last inspection. The separation of housing management activity from homelessness and housing options activity has ensured greater capacity for homelessness and housing options and the opportunities for staff to gain greater expertise on the service area they have responsibility for. Together with the Council's focus on homeless prevention performance the service has improved significantly, including increased levels of prevention and decreases in the level of presentations, acceptances and the number of people in temporary accommodation.
- 112** There are a number of service improvements that service users would directly notice and experience. These include a more accessible and specialised housing options service with specialist officers, duty officers, a surgery in Great Dunmow, an on-line homeswapper service for mutual exchanges and a range of new information leaflets for customers. Access to direct service provision has improved and is more available to customers.
- 113** Performance against strategic housing and related service performance indicators is mixed, but generally positive. Performance has improved in homeless presentations, acceptances and the number of people in temporary accommodation, the time taken to process housing benefit applications and the level of non-decency in Council homes. Performance has been sustained in the delivery of affordable homes, despite the recession. Performance has been poor in the time taken to re-let Council homes but since April 2010 the Council has started to report performance more accurately, and whilst there has been some deterioration in the time taken to process minor and major planning applications, there is an early indication that the Council is improving performance, particularly with minor applications.
- 114** The Council's focus on improving its financial position has meant that improvements in some services have not progressed as quickly as they could. For example, while positively the Council self assessed itself as achieving level two of the former equality standard in February 2009, and the LGA survey indicated that the Council is at the same position of the new standard as 43 per cent of its peers it has not yet formulated a strategic action plan to improve to the 'achieving' level of the new standard. Neither has a value for money framework been developed and there is limited demonstration of value for money achievements.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 115** Some recommendations from the previous inspection have not been sufficiently delivered. As set out in Appendix 2 there are a number of recommendations both strategically and service focused that have not been fully delivered, for example the approach to and development of private sector housing, and the development and monitoring of service standards. While progress has been made on some recommendations, many are still outstanding or in the process of being delivered. This means that the strategic housing function has not sufficiently improved or developed as well as it could have.
- 116** It is difficult to assess the Council's track record of delivering against its own action plans. Action plans are not always SMART and have lacked comprehensive measurable outcomes. Progress reports to the Strategic Management Board (SMB) and Performance Select Committee (PSC) have not been sufficiently robust, and lack sufficient information to demonstrate that actions have been achieved against target times and measurable outcomes. Further detail is provided in the next section. During 2007 and 2009 the housing strategy was without an action plan, while the Council awaited guidance from the government on housing strategies. While a number of actions were delivered during this time, it is difficult to assess the overall level of achievement without an action plan. Overall while the Council has progressed in a number of areas, the above mentioned factors make it difficult to clearly assess how well the Council has delivered against its action plans.
- 117** The Council does not have a consistent and developed approach in place to measure customer satisfaction. As detailed in the 'Access' section satisfaction measurement is not collected across all the strategic housing functions and where it has been collected it has not been done on a routine basis. Neither does the Council measure satisfaction with complaints handling. This prevents the Council from demonstrating a track record in delivering strategic housing services that service users are satisfied with.

---

## How well does the service manage performance?

- 118** In the last inspection weaknesses were found to outweigh strengths in this area. Leadership and customer involvement were not driving forward improvements. The performance management framework and culture was not sufficiently developed. The focus was on performance monitoring and not performance management across the strategic housing functions including inconsistent target setting, performance appraisals, and tackling weaker performing areas. The approach to service planning was weak and action plans were not consistently SMART. Risk management had not been applied to all areas. While improvements had been made to the corporate performance management arrangements, these were not embedded within all strategic housing functions. Positively, however, the Council was learning from others.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 119** In this re-inspection we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There have been improvements in the leadership and vision of the Council that has driven forward corporate improvements such as financial and risk management, corporate and divisional improvement planning, and high level performance monitoring at the PSC and SMB. The Council is an open and learning organisation. However, there are significant weaknesses in the overall approach to improvement planning, benchmarking is underdeveloped and there are some areas where performance management is not yet sufficient.
- 120** Leadership within the Council has improved, and there is a clear drive from the Chief Executive and SMB to drive forward and improve performance. The Chief Executive has had a clear and prioritised vision to improve the Council's financial position (now complete), improve the management structure and capacity (underway) and to work with partners to deliver and improve services. Members support this approach, and were complimentary of the Chief Executive who was considered pivotal in steering the Council through a difficult two years. Officers that we spoke to welcomed the Chief Executive's briefings and felt informed on the strategic direction of the Council, and the Council has allocated £547,000 to support the change management programme. This provides the Council with a sound platform for escalating its approach to improving performance.
- 121** The approach to financial management has been considerably strengthened. Members received training in Autumn 2008 and budget holders have received ongoing one to one support and development from the finance team. Budget holders receive monthly budget reports and work with a designated accountant to forecast out-turns. Budget forecasts are reported to the SMB and Finance and Administration Committee (five times a year) across the 74 service areas. Both the general fund and Housing Revenue Account (HRA) are currently forecast to underspend in 2010/11.
- 122** The Council has reviewed and enhanced its approach to risk management. This was developed through joint officer and member working and training to managers. A reviewed and comprehensive risk register was introduced for 2010/11, divisional plans incorporate the risk analysis, and overall risk management will be overseen regularly by the PSC. The Council has identified the key risks and incorporated actions to its improvement planning framework to minimise the risks.
- 123** The Council has focused on improving the corporate approach to improvement planning. The work of the Business Improvement and Performance Team's (BIPT) has assisted in improving clarity and delivery of the Council's corporate and strategic aims. As a result the corporate plan is a clearer document, and the divisional plans for 2010/11 are now SMARTer documents. For example risk, resource and equalities implications are considered in the delivery of objectives, and objectives demonstrate a clear link to corporate plan actions and related performance indicators. The Council also plans to use the 'progress bar' in its IT performance management system to report on the level of delivery against the action plan from July 2010, which is more meaningful than that previously used, as indicated earlier. Staff have annual appraisals and the appraisal documents that we looked at provided staff with clear targets and objectives that reflected those of the corporate and divisional plans. This means the Council will now have a more joined up approach at a high level to improvement planning and monitoring.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

124 There are, however, weaknesses in the Council's approach to improvement planning. While improvement plans generally recognise key areas for improvement, there are some significant weaknesses that prevent the approach from ensuring that the Council is proactively monitoring progress. These include the following.

- Action plans are not consistently SMART, and in particular lack clear and measurable outcomes. For example objectives in the housing strategy action plans lack prioritisation, milestones, consistent target dates and clear and measurable outcomes. While the Council has made numerous improvements in tackling homelessness, the homelessness strategy action plan lacks detail on outcomes, actions required, and partnership involvement and while resources are identified, detail is sometimes lacking. The empty homes strategy action plan lacks detail in a number of areas and does not provide concrete outcomes against which the success of the strategy can be measured.
- The monitoring and scrutiny of progress against action plans is not consistently robust. Action plan progress reports that we looked at for the housing strategy, homelessness strategy, divisional plans and the previous inspection recommendations do not consistently and sufficiently reflect progress against the original action, for example the extent of delivery, timescales and outcomes. Where actions have been delayed, further deadlines are not always set. Action plans for the equality schemes have not been routinely reviewed on an annual basis as set out as an objective in the plans.
- Private sector housing is not sufficiently reflected in improvement planning. The housing strategy lacks clarity on how the Council intends to improve in this area, and there has been a lack of co-ordination on some of the objectives for private sector housing. While environmental health sits in the operational directorate, actions for delivering the PLACE scheme have been in the planning and housing strategy divisional plan (development directorate) for the last two years, and the delivery potentially over-looked.
- An action plan is not in place for the Council to reach the 'achieving' level of the equality framework for local government, despite this being a corporate objective since at least February 2009.
- The Council does not have a clear improvement plan for addressing weaknesses in the improvement planning and performance management system. While there is an awareness of what needs to be done, including to improve the SMARTness of action plans, incorporate value for money in improvement planning, develop the use of the performance management IT system and to improve service level performance indicator monitoring, it is not clear how and when these improvements will be addressed.

These weaknesses prevent the Council from accurately reflecting and measuring how well it has delivered its improvement plans, building on the progress made to date and overall ensuring that it is progressing at a realistic but challenging pace.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 125** The Council is an open and learning organisation. It has been open to learning through external challenge, for example the voluntary improvement board that was set up shortly after the last inspection. Further support has been gained from Improvement East for a consultant to develop a workforce plan that will consider current practices and areas for improvement. Managers are members of various work groups and partnerships that enable them to identify good practice, and partners were complimentary of officers and their willingness to consider new initiatives. This provides the Council with added capacity through its willingness to look at its peers and learn.
- 126** Performance reports to the PSC and SMB are comprehensive, other than lacking benchmarking data. They include national, corporate and service indicators; highlight performance across three ranges, on target, less than 10 per cent below target and more than 10 per cent below target; and provide an explanation and action taken to address performance. The majority of indicators for strategic housing services are included within the reports, although there are some gaps as detailed later. The reports provide a reasonably sound basis for the Council to monitor performance across services.
- 127** There are some areas where performance monitoring could be further enhanced. There are only a small number of operational level performance indicators in place and the Council does not monitor the level of decency or letting of HA homes, the outcomes of which have a significant impact on the delivery of strategic housing. Performance reports and monitoring for the HIA and CAB are underdeveloped, despite the Council funding aspects of their delivery. This prevents the Council from ensuring that its services and those of its partners are performing and contributing to the districts strategic delivery of housing services, and in the case of the HIA and CAB that they are delivering value for money.
- 128** Performance monitoring is not sufficiently customer focused. There is no evidence of systematic monitoring of performance against service standards, or reporting how well the Council is performing against the standards. Customer satisfaction information is not regularly reported across the strategic housing services, either to managers alongside performance information used to manage service performance or externally to service users. This prevents the Council from demonstrating that it is meeting the service standards that it agreed with customers, and that customers are satisfied with the services that are being delivered.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 129** Benchmarking is not yet systematically and fully utilised. It is positive that the Council has recently joined a national benchmarking group and is in the process of submitting data that will compare cost and performance. Similarly that development control has completed some data capture that will feed into a three partner arrangement. However, at the time of the inspection we found an overall lack of benchmarking being used, including on the high level performance reports to the PSC and SMB. While some officers referred to aiming for top quartile, the reports only quote the average performance of the Essex Policy and Performance Network (EPPN) group, of which there are very limited comparisons. For strategic housing and related services benchmarking data is restricted to housing benefit and planning. The reports have no benchmarking data for housing delivery, homelessness and private sector, and no benchmarking figures at all in the end of year report. In some areas housing data has been collated across different organisational groups, but it is not clear how the Council has used this information to target and improve performance. This prevents officers and members from continuously assessing the level of Council performance against peers, and ensuring that performance and improvements are challenging.
- 130** There are numerous projects planned and in the process of being delivered that will support the delivery and performance of strategic housing. These include the development of a new allocations policy; the 'Green Doctor' scheme that aims to provide advice and practical assistance to low income residents on fuel poverty and sustainability awareness due Summer 2010; the provision of four self-contained furnished temporary accommodation units due for completion by August 2010, which should help avoid the use of bed and breakfast; a cross authority young parents scheme in Ongar due for completion by September 2010; Council agreement to develop the current CBL scheme into a sub-regional scheme; a 'Housing service evidence base' with sub-regional partners to compare information on services and performance; the commissioning of a BME housing needs survey with Essex Housing Officers Group to inform a sub-regional BME housing strategy; a corporate complaints management system to be introduced before the end of 2010; and the developed corporate citizens panel (Uttlesford voices) for consultation purposes.

---

## Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 131** In the last inspection there was a balance of weaknesses and strengths in this area. The severe financial pressures on the Council, poor financial management, and basic approach to procurement had a negative impact on the capacity of the Council to improve its strategic housing functions. However, the Council was working with external and interim support to stabilise its financial capacity, had added capacity through partnerships and had plans to improve some of its systems and services.
- 132** In this re-inspection we found that strengths considerably outweighed weaknesses in this area. The Council has a robust medium term financial strategy that identifies how savings will be achieved in the next five years, and is starting to develop its approach to value for money. The Council has built its capacity through working well with partners, attracting external funding and ICT developments, although ICT is not yet being used to its maximum potential. New management structures aim to deliver a more streamlined approach and staff turnover, staff sickness levels and morale levels are stable.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 133** The Council has a comprehensive medium-term financial strategy for 2010-2015. It gives due consideration to internal and external financial factors, and the necessity for the Council to make significant savings across the five years of the plan, due to reduced levels of income. The Council has been proactive and considered the current changing climate and pressure on local government financing. A strategic solutions programme underpins the strategy and identifies where the savings can be achieved across five workstreams of shared services, devolution of services, income generation, service reductions and efficiency savings. These will potentially enable the Council to meet the accumulated savings required by reducing its annual running costs by £2.2 million by the year 2014/15, and therefore reduce the risk of the Council not having sufficient finances to deliver services.
- 134** Partnership work is well developed in the strategic housing services. This has not only bought about positive working practices, but has secured external funding to support and deliver strategic objectives including £2.5 million Growth Area Funding for the Stansted Area Housing Partnership; government funding for the PLACE scheme; HCA development funding for the Council to develop its own first new build development at Leaden Roding; Department of Health funding to proceed with an extra care housing facility with Essex County Council social care as a private finance initiative (PFI) project; funding through the Government recession impact initiative for homelessness services; and funding for the HEEP scheme. All of this will add capacity to the service and the ability to deliver new homes and address housing need within the district.
- 135** There are a number of organisational and staffing changes proposed that will potentially strengthen and support the strategic housing service. The new management structure to be implemented by Autumn 2010 will mean that all of the strategic housing functions will report to one director, and the post of head of planning and housing strategy, that has been vacant since June 2008, will be recruited to. Specific development expertise has been sought in the recruitment of the Housing Enabling and Development Officer, and recruitment is underway for an officer to co-ordinate the approach to empty homes across the five partner PLACE authorities. This should enable the Council to place more emphasis on and co-ordinate its strategic role more effectively in housing delivery.
- 136** Corporately the Council is starting to improve its focus on value for money. The Council's Chief Finance Officer leads on procurement, and a procurement manager is currently being recruited. A comprehensive procurement strategy was introduced in January 2010, underpinned by a clear action plan and set of procurement performance indicators for 2010/11 that give consideration to cost, service delivery and performance. The business improvement and performance team have carried out three pilot value for money service reviews, as a starting point for how value for money can be assessed. While these initiatives are very much in the early days they are a step in the right direction, and raising value for money up the agenda within the Council.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 137** Corporately the Council has taken steps to increase its ICT capacity, and there are further actions to be taken, including an upgrade to 60 PCs in the last year, upgrading to the Finance IT system in April 2010 that reduced the scope for errors and enhanced reporting tools and a new network to be installed shortly that will provide Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) telecommunication. The Council actively promotes and supports home working, and currently has a potential 150 people that can work from home. The Council considers this to be a particular bonus in retaining staff that have moved home and away from the district. The Council is using and planning its ICT improvements to support service delivery and improvements.
- 138** However, there are some ICT systems that the Council is not yet using to their maximum potential. The Council has had an IT based performance management system in place for a number of years, but on the Council's choice it is not being used throughout the Council to monitor progress against action plans, collate and monitor performance indicators below SMB and PSC reporting level, and monitor performance against individual performance appraisals. In addition housing strategy recently purchased an IT system capable of cost and viability assessments for new developments. The application of the system is not yet routinely used, and the Council has not yet considered how it will be used. The Council and its staff are not using available resources to their maximum ability to support the management of service improvements.
- 139** Staff turnover and sickness levels are stable and relatively low respectively. Staff turnover levels have significantly reduced from the peak of the Council's financial crisis and redundancy exercise in 2007/08 of 24.31 per cent, to 15.91 per cent (2008/09) to 8.92 per cent (2009/10). The average sickness levels in 2009/10 were 8.2 days against a target of 8 days (long/short term) and 5.1 days (excluding long term). Overall sickness levels have remained relatively static, with levels at 7.61 (2008/09) and 8.97 (2007/08). While the Council has not benchmarked staff turnover and sickness levels, this is favourable performance and this means the Council generally has a stabilised workforce to support the delivery of services.
- 140** The Council is in the process of developing and investigating a number of corporate developments. The Council is entering into a Single Conversation Local Investment Plan with Epping Forest and Harlow that would enable wider consideration to the provision of joint services and improvements. The Council has agreed to pursue an option of amending its decision making process and introducing a cabinet structure (post May 2011 elections). The leader of the Council and senior managers consider that this has the potential to provide the Council with clearer ownership and points of contact through portfolio holders, including one for housing. Should this option not be pursued, the Council plan to sharpen its approach to decision making through the committee system. These initiatives should assist in developing the future capacity of the Council.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

**141** The levels of staff morale and staff satisfaction are mixed. Based on a 61 per cent response level the 2009 staff survey found 31.2 per cent reported very high/high morale levels (slight decrease from 32.1 per cent in 2008), and 26.1 per cent reported low/very low morale levels (decrease from 32.1 per cent in 2008). The operations directorate (incorporating housing, homelessness and housing options, and environmental health) had the highest level of low/very low morale levels at 32.3 per cent, with 46.2 per cent indicating their morale had changed for the worse. Overall 54 per cent rated the Council good/very good as an employer (increase from 47 per cent in 2008). Whilst the Council has not widely benchmarked the survey results, it has compared some satisfaction levels with a neighbouring district council, and has generally found that the annual survey results provide a positive indication of trends. Both managers and staff considered that staff morale levels are at a reasonable level, particularly taking into account the difficult decisions that have had to be taken in order to address the financial problems that the Council were faced with.

# Appendix 1 – Performance indicators and statistics

**Table 1 Performance indicators**

Performance Indicator	2007/08	2008/09	2009/10	UDC target 2009/10	Averages (based on 2008/09)
NI 154 Net additional homes (UDC Corporate Indicator – CI 47)	538	438 (437 UDC)	605	525	472 National Average 391 Central Average
NI 155 No. of affordable homes delivered (gross) (CI 24)	50	140	107	100	157 National Average 137 Central Average
NI 156 % of non-decent homes (Council) (CI 20)	NA	1.6%	NA	6%	19% Central Average
Re-let times (Council) (UDC Service Indicator - SI 20)	NA	43 days	**32.8	28	31.9 National Average 34.1 Central Average
NI 157a Processing of planning applications: Major	NA	*80.65%	*68.75%	*65%	
NI 157b Processing of planning applications: Minor	NA	*70.67%	*58.16%	*65%	
NI 156 Nos. of households in temporary accommodation (CI 19)	NA	*17	*4	*23	
(SI 21a) Nos. of people presenting as homeless	NA	*48	*26	*50	
(SI 21b) Nos. of people accepted as homeless	NA	*25	*10	*35	
(SI 22a) Average length of stay in B&B – families	NA	*1.36 weeks	*1.14	*2	
(SI 22b) Average length of stay in B&B – others	NA	*5.25 weeks	*6.1	*3	

## Appendix 1 – Performance indicators and statistics

Performance Indicator	2007/08	2008/09	<sup>i</sup> 2009/10	UDC target 2009/10	Averages (based on 2008/09)
NI 181 Time taken to process HB/CT benefit new claims and change events	NA	*11.6 days	*6.5	*14.5	
Private sector dwellings > 6 months as a % of dwelling	NA	1.2%	NA	No target	2% Central Average
Average SAP private sector	NA	60.1	NA	No target	54 Central Average
% of private sector homes with CAT 1 hazard	NA	2.25%	NA	No target	9% Central Average
% of homes made free of CAT 1 hazard as a % of those with hazard	NA	4.13%	NA	No target	34% Central Average
(CI 18) Nos. of private sector vacant dwellings that are returned into occupation or demolished	NA	*13	*25	*2	

\* From 2009/10 end of year performance reported internally at Uttlesford District Council

\*\* From the 2009/10 BPSA (Business Performance Statistical Appendix) return from Uttlesford District Council. The figure for 2009/10 does not include major works voids (in line with the BPSA guidance), whereas the 2008/09 figure does.

NA - Not available

# Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

**Table 2 Recommendations of January 2008 inspection**

Recommendation	Progress
<p>R1 Strengthen the focus on customers and access by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• updating and expanding the range of housing information booklets;</li> <li>• involving customers in determining measurable service standards across all strategic housing functions, and monitoring performance against these;</li> <li>• further develop methods to gather and use ongoing customer feedback, comments and informal complaints to help shape and improve services;</li> <li>• improving access to services by assessing how well the current arrangements meet customer needs; and</li> <li>• fully incorporating strategic housing functions within the customer relationship management system.</li> </ul> <p>To be implemented by December 2008.</p>	<p><b>Achieved</b></p> <p><b>Partially achieved</b></p> <p><b>Partially achieved</b></p> <p><b>Partially achieved</b></p> <p><b>Partially achieved</b></p>
<p>R2 Strengthen the Council’s approach to diversity by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• providing clear leadership at Member and senior management level to demonstrate a commitment to diversity and to ensure that work to take forward diversity is fully supported and progress monitored;</li> <li>• developing comprehensive customer profile information to monitor equality of service delivery and take action to remove any barriers to accessing services; and</li> <li>• comprehensively monitor services by diverse needs and use the information to improve services and show that they are being delivered fairly to all groups.</li> </ul> <p>To be implemented by July 2008.</p>	<p><b>Partially achieved</b></p> <p><b>Partially achieved</b></p> <p><b>Partially achieved</b></p>

Recommendation	Progress
<p>R3 Strengthen the Council's strategic approach to housing by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• improving the co-ordination of strategic housing functions;</li> <li>• developing robust monitoring arrangements to assess that the strategic approaches adopted are meeting the intended outcomes; and</li> <li>• regularly updating housing data to get a better understanding of the housing market and local affordable housing needs, including the condition of private sector housing.</li> </ul> <p>To be implemented by July 2008.</p>	<p><b>Partially achieved</b></p> <p><b>Partially achieved</b></p> <p><b>Partially achieved</b></p>
<p>R4 Improve the use of the existing housing stock by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• assessing the effectiveness and impact of the approach to homelessness prevention;</li> <li>• improving the publicity of the 'HomeOptions' choice-based lettings scheme;</li> <li>• developing a strategic approach to proactively improve and enforce housing conditions in the private sector;</li> <li>• regularly liaise with landlords and owners to improve standards in the private rented sector and bring properties back into use in order to reduce the number of empty properties; and</li> <li>• improving referral and take up arrangements for Disabled Facilities Grants.</li> </ul> <p>To be implemented by December 2008.</p>	<p><b>Achieved</b></p> <p><b>Achieved</b></p> <p><b>Very limited progress</b></p> <p><b>Very limited progress</b></p> <p><b>Partially achieved</b></p>
<p>R5 Improve the approach to value for money by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ensuring information about the cost, quality and performance of all services, and how they compare to others, is regularly reviewed and used to identify value for money and inform service improvements;</li> <li>• at a corporate level, developing a strategic framework for value for money to ensure it is embedded as a way of working throughout the organisation; and</li> <li>• demonstrating the value for money provided by projects and partnerships.</li> </ul> <p>To be implemented by December 2008.</p>	<p><b>Not achieved</b></p> <p><b>Very limited progress</b></p> <p><b>Not achieved</b></p>

## Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Recommendation	Progress
<p>R6 Strengthen improvement planning and performance management by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• providing clear leadership in driving forward improvements and performance management to ensure it is embedded as a way of working in the organisation;</li> <li>• making full use of the performance management framework and IT system to ensure that performance for all strategic housing functions are reported on, scrutinised and timely action is taken to address weaker performing areas;</li> <li>• increasing the use of local performance indicators and setting challenging targets across all strategic housing functions;</li> <li>• increasing customer involvement in influencing and monitoring service delivery;</li> <li>• ensuring service plans are in place to bridge the gap between divisional plans and appraisals; and</li> <li>• ensuring all action plans are SMART.</li> </ul> <p>To be implemented by December 2008.</p>	<p><b>Partially achieved</b></p> <p><b>Partially achieved</b></p> <p><b>Partially achieved</b></p> <p><b>Partially achieved</b></p> <p><b>Partially achieved</b></p> <p><b>Partially achieved</b></p>
<p>R7 Strengthen financial management by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• filling vacancies and increasing the capacity of the finance team to support the strategic housing functions;</li> <li>• deliver the revised medium-term financial strategy to address the current financial situation, and link budget setting to improvement planning processes; and</li> <li>• fully exploit the financial IT system.</li> </ul> <p>To be implemented by July 2008.</p>	<p><b>Achieved</b></p> <p><b>Achieved</b></p> <p><b>Achieved</b></p>

# 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 partners;
  - interviews with senior managers, service managers, councillors and key stakeholders;
  - site visits;
  - complaints file checks; and
  - mystery shopping.

---

# 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](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk)

---