

Re-inspection

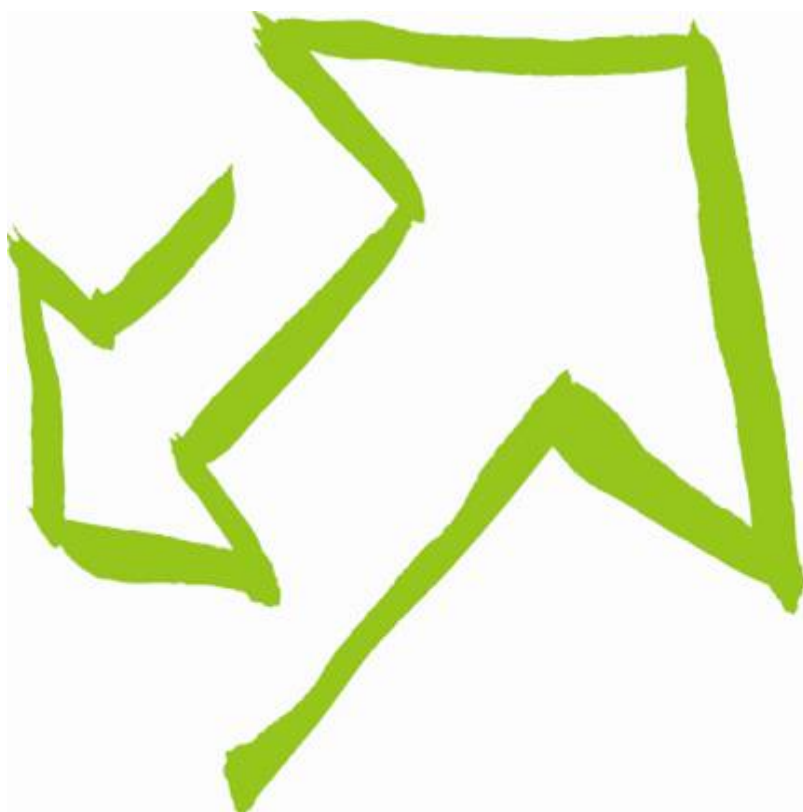
Strategic

Housing

Services

West Somerset District Council

March 2010



Contents

Local Authority Housing Inspections	3
Summary	4
Scoring the service	5
Recommendations	8
Report	12
How good is the service?	15
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	34
Appendix 1 – Progress against previous report recommendations	44
Appendix 2 – Performance indicators	47
Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken	48

Local Authority Housing Inspections

The Audit Commission is an independent body responsible for ensuring that public money is spent economically, efficiently and effectively and delivers high-quality local services for the public.

Within the Audit Commission, the Housing Inspectorate inspects and monitors the performance of a number of bodies and services. These include local authority housing departments, local authorities administering Supporting People programmes, arms length management organisations and housing associations. Our key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) set out the main issues which we consider when forming our judgements on the quality of services. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing.

This inspection has been carried out by the Housing Inspectorate using powers under section 10 of the Local Government Act 1999 and is in line with the Audit Commission's strategic regulation principles. In broad terms, these principles look to minimise the burden of regulation while maximising its impact. To meet these principles this inspection:

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

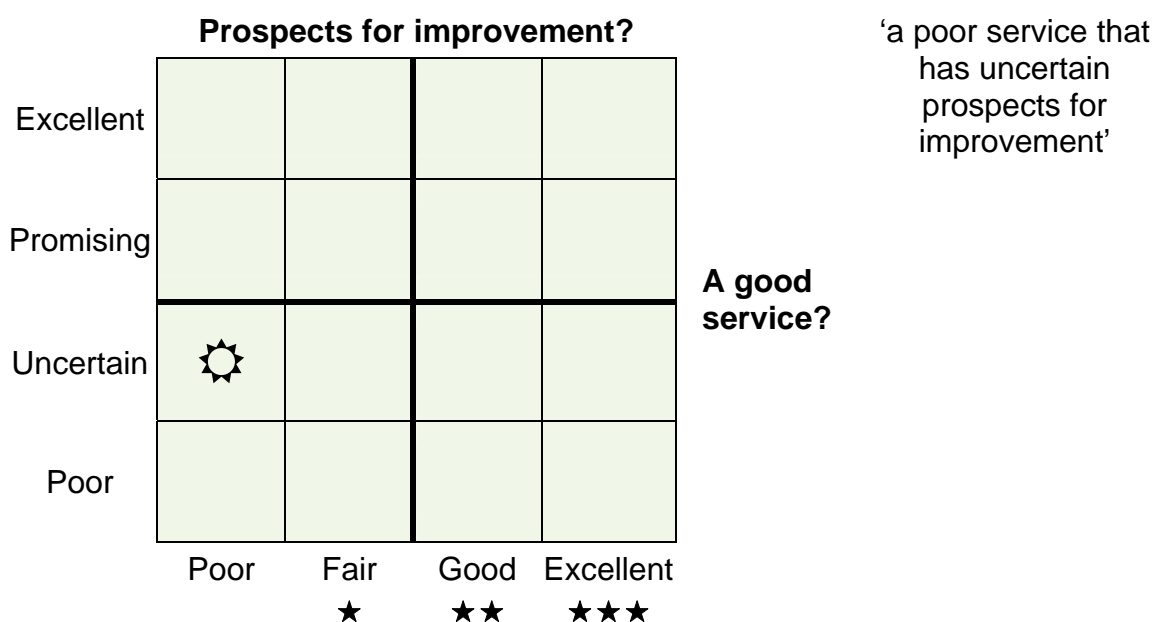
Summary

- 1 West Somerset District Council is providing a poor strategic housing service with uncertain prospects for improvement.
- 2 Services are not always customer focused - telephone access can be difficult, customer feedback is not used effectively to shape services and the use of service standards remains an area for improvement. The service lacks a clear understanding of community need and the service has not embedded equality and diversity issues in the way services are delivered. Service-level plans often have weaknesses and strategic plans for improving the relatively poor private sector housing conditions are weak.
- 3 The Council has had little success in returning empty homes to use or in helping homeowners improve homes that have poor energy efficiency or are in unsatisfactory condition. In addition, outcomes for many vulnerable people such as those living in temporary accommodation, unsuitable or poor housing still fall well short of the best performing councils. The number of new homes built, especially affordable housing is not meeting needs. There continue to be key strategic weaknesses in the service's approach to managing value for money.
- 4 There are some positive elements to the service. Face-to-face contact with staff is easy and there is a satisfactory range of information about the service available to local people. There are examples of some positive outcomes for vulnerable service users supported by good partnership working. The Council now has a sound understanding of its housing markets and most high-level strategies are strong. Outcomes in several important areas have improved. More new homes have been built, access to social housing is easier, homelessness prevention is more effective, disabled facilities grants are now managed well and there is a more proactive approach to improving privately rented homes. Savings and efficiencies have been made in the service and there is an improved approach to budget management.
- 5 There are some important drivers for improvement. There is strong political leadership and a clear focus on service improvement. Organisational capacity has been enhanced in many ways including management development, partnership working, focusing resources on weaknesses and a high level of staff commitment. The Council knows what it needs to do and its high-level plans are mostly strong. It has made good progress on its corporate Improvement Plan and outcomes for local people have improved in most service areas.
- 6 However there remain several significant barriers to improvement. The service has made poor progress on implementing the recommendations made in the previous inspection. The scale of service improvements still fall well short of the best performing councils. The performance management and reporting arrangements framework and its approach to learning are all areas for improvement. The Council's financial position is fragile and management capacity is reduced by the operational demands and of the service.

Scoring the service

7 We have assessed West Somerset District Council as providing a 'poor', no-star service that has uncertain prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 8 Despite improvements since the last inspection, the service is developing from a low base and there remain a number of key areas which are not yet satisfactory:
- services are not always customer focused - telephone access can be difficult, customer feedback is not used effectively to shape services and the use of service standards remains an area for improvement;
 - the service lacks a clear understanding of community need and the service has not embedded equality and diversity issues in the way services are delivered for example, through target-setting, training and the use of equality impact assessment;
 - strategic plans for improving the relatively poor private sector housing conditions are weak and service-level plans often have weaknesses that means targeting resources to best deliver outcomes is more difficult;

¹ The scoring chart displays performance in two dimensions. The horizontal axis shows how good the service or function is now, on a scale ranging from no stars for a service that is poor (at the left-hand end) to three stars for an excellent service (right-hand end). The vertical axis shows the improvement prospects of the service, also on a four-point scale.

- the Council has had little success in returning empty homes to use or in helping homeowners improve homes that have poor energy efficiency or are in unsatisfactory condition;
- despite improvement outcomes for many vulnerable people such as those living in temporary accommodation or unsuitable or poor housing still fall well short of the best performing councils;
- despite increased focus and capacity to support delivery the number of new homes built, especially affordable housing is not meeting needs. Performance in the development control service is weak and support for developers is of mixed quality; and
- there continue to be key strategic weaknesses in the service's approach to managing value for money.

9 However, there are some areas of strength:

- face-to-face contact with staff is easy and there is a satisfactory range of information about the service available to local people;
- there are examples of some positive outcomes for vulnerable service users supported by good partnership working;
- the Council now has a sound understanding of its housing markets and most high-level strategies are strong;
- outcomes in several important areas have improved. More new homes have been built, access to social housing is easier, homelessness prevention is more effective, disabled facilities grants are now managed well and there is a more proactive approach to improving privately rented homes; and
- there is an improved approach to budget management, successes in drawing in additional funding and the delivery of savings and efficiencies. However, the strategic weaknesses mean that these are likely to fall short of what could have been achieved.

10 There are some important drivers for improvement:

- there is strong political leadership and a clear focus on service improvement;
- organisational capacity has been enhanced by management development, a high level of staff commitment and by focusing service and corporate resources to address weaknesses;
- capacity is also being increased through partnership working, investment in ICT, effective human resources management and by attracting external funding;
- major construction projects proposed for the area could provide significant opportunities for improving housing supply;
- the Council knows what it needs to do and its high-level strategies are mostly strong with gaps in plans being addressed and a number of new services soon to be put in place;
- good progress has been made on the corporate Improvement Plan; and
- outcomes for local people have improved in most service areas.

Scoring the service

11 However, there remain several significant barriers to improvement:

- the service has made poor progress on implementing the recommendations made in the previous inspection report;
- the scale of service improvements still fall well short of the best performing councils;
- improvements in value for money are likely to fall short of what could have been achieved, services are still not delivered in a consistently customer-focused way and progress on equality and diversity has been slow;
- service-level plans often have weaknesses and the performance management framework, performance reporting arrangements and risk management are all areas for improvement;
- the service is open to learning from others but is not consistently taking opportunities for learning from its own experience and customer feedback;
- the Council's financial position is fragile; and
- management capacity is reduced by the operational demands and of the service.

Recommendations

- 12** 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 costs¹ 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 residents and councillors and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations:

Recommendation

R1 Improve the service to customers and take steps to embed a customer-focused and equalities-focused culture by:

- establishing challenging targets for telephone answering and ensuring those targets are met by introducing a robust and comprehensive monitoring process;
- introducing challenging service standards and customer feedback across all service areas and analyse performance to inform service development;
- rolling out a training programme on customer care for all staff and councillors;
- establishing an action plan to attain a higher rating against the Equality Framework for Local Government;
- researching best practice and then following through on a realistic timetable for completing Equality Impact Assessments which includes a robust quality assurance component;
- researching best practice and then undertaking a resident profiling exercise to better understand how services can be tailored to address needs; and
- improving the promotion of energy efficiency advice and assistance to increase the number of referrals made to assistance agencies.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more accountable services;
- fewer barriers to service access facing customers; and
- better staff awareness of customer aspirations.

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

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

Recommendations

Recommendation

- R2** Improve the strategic approach to housing services by:
- adopting a comprehensive Private Sector Housing Strategy;
 - identifying how home renewal assistance can be targeted to heighten impact;
 - developing strategic plans to address the housing needs of all vulnerable groups;
 - developing with customers and implementing an improvement plan to improve performance in the development control service to meet customer expectations;
 - ensuring that all current and future plans have SMART and outcome-focused targets that set a clear 'local' and sub-regional direction for the service; and
 - ensuring that steps are taken to embed tenure, housing size, design, sustainability and provision for disabled people in future planning policy'.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- housing services which better meet local need; and
- improved ability to direct resources based on clear plans.

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

Recommendation

- R3** Make better use of the existing and future housing stock and service arrangements by:
- identifying where there are currently gaps in housing or related support for vulnerable groups and working with partners to address those gaps;
 - reducing the length of stay in temporary accommodation and ensuring that it is better distributed throughout the district;
 - ensuring that the new Private Sector Housing Strategy leads to more effective outcomes in terms of energy efficiency and fuel poverty; and
 - reducing the waiting times for Disabled Facilities Grants.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- housing services which better meet local need and more effectively address health and safety; and
- removal of barriers to new house delivery and home improvements.

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

Recommendation

R4 Improve the approach to value for money by:

- carrying out impact assessments of partnerships, services and funding streams;
- analysing performance feedback in all areas to learn from success and failure;
- developing a comprehensive understanding of costs and how they and service outcomes compare; and
- carrying out robust service-centred reviews to identify opportunities for improving value for money and establishing clear value for money targets in service plans.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better information for decision makers;
- 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 December 2010.

Recommendation

R5 Improve performance management and reporting arrangements and maximise capacity by:

- implementing a robust performance management framework which assigns responsibility for performance management at appropriate levels and establishes a comprehensive suite of PIs and targets for all strategic housing services, ensuring that they are robustly monitored by the appropriate level of officer and Councillor and that underperformance is effectively responded to;
- ensuring that all action plans and targets are effectively tracked and reported within the Council and to the West Somerset Housing Forum; and
- setting clear individual and team targets within the performance appraisal process.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a better understanding of how well services are meeting corporate and customer aspirations;
- more capacity for senior managers to focus on strategic developments;
- an improved ability to respond to underperformance; and
- the increased likelihood that services will meet targets.

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

Recommendations

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

Dates of Inspection: 30 November to 4 December 2009.

Report

Context

The locality

- 14** West Somerset is a rural area on the south west coast of England. The majority of the population lives in the four main settlements of Minehead, Williton, Watchet and Dulverton. Minehead is the biggest town with a population of over 12,000. Two thirds of the area and one fifth of the population is within the Exmoor National Park. The Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA) is the planning authority for this area and there are therefore two Local Plans and two planning authorities within the Council's boundary.
- 15** The district is sparsely populated with over half of the population living in the narrow coastal strip. The proportion of over 65 year olds (33 per cent) is almost twice the national average and almost 23 per cent of the population have a limiting long-term illness. The BME population is small (0.8 per cent). The population is expected to reach 39,600 by 2026 (from 35,500 at present) and the number of households is expected to increase from 16,000 in 2006 to 20,000 in 2026.
- 16** Low and seasonal wages and part-time working associated with tourism and agriculture account for the district being rated as the 106th (out of 354)ⁱ most deprived in England and Wales. Average earnings are over 15 per cent below the national average. Almost one fifth of households in the district are in fuel poverty. Unemployment compares with the national average during off-season periods but the number of jobs available is decreasing.

The Council

- 17** West Somerset is the smallest council in England measured against population. The Council came under control of an independent administration in May 2007. There are 15 Independent coalition councillors, 13 Conservative and 3 unaligned to any group. The Cabinet is composed of six members. It is chaired by the Leader with five lead members each taking responsibility for specific areas of delivery within the council.
- 18** Shortly after the last inspection an improvement plan was put in place to tackle all of the issues that existed within the Council. This plan is monitored by an Improvement Board, which is chaired by the council leader and comprises IDeAⁱⁱ, the Audit Commission, GOSWⁱⁱⁱ, the leader of the opposition group and key council staff.

ⁱ The 2007 Index of Multiple Deprivation

ⁱⁱ Improvement and Development Agency for Local Government

ⁱⁱⁱ Government Office South West

Report

- 19 Following a recent reorganisation, the Management Team now consists of an Executive Director, a Corporate Director and four Group Managers who make up the senior management team. The Group Manager for Housing and Community is responsible for the private sector housing, housing options and planning policy functions and the Group Manager for Environment and Services, Development, Tourism and Transport is responsible for the Planning/Development Control function.

The housing context

- 20 There are almost 18,000 homes in the area with the average age of homes slightly less than the English average. However almost a quarter pre-dates 1919. Owner occupation in West Somerset is slightly higher than that for England as a whole and the proportion of privately rented stock (14 per cent) is slightly higher. The stock condition survey in 2008 revealed that an estimated 8 per cent (or 5,500) of properties are empty which is significantly higher than the national average (3.3 per cent). Over 26 per cent) of the stock fails to meet minimum standards (the Decent Homes Standard) with a total cost to make decent of £34.9 million. Category one hazardsⁱ were found in 5.2 per cent of the stock. The average SAPⁱⁱ rating for local homes is 48 with 21.5 per cent of homes having a SAP less than 35 meaning that these occupants are likely to experience excessive cold. One fifth of households are in fuel poverty.ⁱⁱⁱ
- 21 The capital budget for the service (£560,000) is shown below.
- Disabled Facilities Grants: £200,000
 - Beat The Cold: £72,000
 - Decent Homes: £50,000
 - Fuel Poverty and Energy Efficiency: £60,000
 - Empty Property Grant: £40,000
 - Funding Home Improvement Agency: £63,000
 - Somerset West Private Sector Housing Partnership: £25,000
 - Low Interest Loan Scheme: £50,000
- 22 The area straddles two housing markets; the Northern Peninsula Strategic Housing Market Assessment (NPSHMA) estimates the net annual need for affordable housing to be 271 dwellings across West Somerset while the Somerset Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SSHMA) estimates the annual need for affordable housing to be 269 dwellings. Affordability is a key issue; the average house price in West Somerset is £239,935, which is 10.6 times the average salary. Many local people cannot afford to buy in the area.

ⁱ As defined by the Housing Health and Safety Rating system introduced by the Housing Act 2004

ⁱⁱ This is a government-specified energy rating for a dwelling which is expressed on a 1-120 scale. The higher the number the better the standard

ⁱⁱⁱ That is, they need to spend more than 10% of their gross income on heating.

- 23 During 2008/09, 181 households applied as homeless to the Council and 18 were accepted as having a priority need. During the same year, there were 85 council nominations to housing associations homes, 11 nominations for new build affordable homes to rent and 9 affordable homes were completed to buy. There are over 18,000 people registered on the county-wide shared housing register and allocation to social housing is delivered through a county-wide Choice-Based Lettings system. The main housing association in West Somerset owns and manages 1869 properties in the area and relets about 160 new homes each year.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 24 Housing is identified as a key theme in the West Somerset Sustainable Community Strategy. The Strategy contains the following housing aims: 'to provide sufficient appropriate housing', 'to improve the condition, energy efficiency and resource efficiency of housing' and 'to reduce levels of homelessness and use of temporary accommodation'.
- 25 'Housing and Wellbeing' is one of the Council's corporate priorities and principal objectives for the period 2009 to 2012.
- 26 The Housing Strategy 2009-12 is organised around three themes with nine priorities:
- People
 - Priority 1: Address the housing needs of an ageing population
 - Priority 2: Tackle worklessness and address other social investment priorities
 - Priority 3: Prevent / deal with homelessness and housing support priorities
 - Future housing development and increasing the availability of affordable housing
 - Priority 4: Provide the framework for future housing provision
 - Priority 5: Increase the provision of new affordable housing
 - Priority 6: Make best use of existing housing stock
 - Promoting good housing conditions and energy efficient homes
 - Priority 7: Encourage good quality accommodation and management
 - Priority 8: Promote energy efficient homes
- A final, ninth priority is to continue to drive forward performance improvement.
- 27 The sub regional Homelessness Strategy 2008 to 2011 identifies actions under five priorities: floating support services, homeless prevention, improved access to the private rented sector, improved access to appropriate housing and improved protocols and to tackle homelessness.
- 28 The draft RSS sets a baseline for development of 2500 houses in the West Somerset Planning area and 400 in the Exmoor National Park planning area up to 2026. The Somerset LAA contains two key indicators relating to housing development; West Somerset Council has an average target of 40 affordable houses per annum for its planning area with an additional 14 per annum in the ENPA area.

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

Access and customer care

- 29** In the previous inspection, we found this to be an area where weaknesses outweighed strengths. Reception facilities and information provided for customers was generally satisfactory. However, there were weaknesses in service access by telephone, in person or through the website. Service standards and customer feedback systems were not in place and complaints were not well managed.
- 30** In this reinspection we found that weaknesses continue to outweigh strengths. Services are not consistently customer-focused and customer feedback is not used effectively to shape services. There remain weaknesses in contacting the service by telephone and the use of service standards and promoting services are areas for improvement. Face-to-face contact with staff is generally easy and there is a satisfactory range of information about the service available to local people.
- 31** Face-to-face contact with Council officers is generally easy. The two main reception points in Minehead and Williton are DDA¹ compliant; they are modern and well-equipped with good public transport access and offer both drop-in and appointment facilities for interviews with staff. A Customer Services Team offers a professional reception service and has had training to offer a one-stop-shop approach. The service offers home visits and this is well publicised. The Housing Options team run a monthly drop-in surgery at the Hope Centre in Minehead. While offices do not currently operate beyond 'office hours', there are robust arrangements for dealing with emergencies outside of these times. These arrangements mean that residents face few barriers to accessing services.
- 32** There remain weaknesses in contacting the service telephone. The Council has set an unchallenging performance target that 80 per cent of calls are to be answered within 30 seconds. In the first six months of the current year, 10 per cent of calls were abandoned (17 per cent in April), only 61 per cent were answered within target (just 42 per cent in April) and the average waiting time was 67 seconds (81 seconds in April). The Council has introduced text messaging but it is not yet implemented in this service. The capacity of Customer Services Operators to deal with calls can be limited at certain times and callers who are in a waiting system are not advised where they are in the queue. The monitoring system does not operate for calls made directly to the service areas. Given the dispersed nature of the population in this rural area, this can cause problems for residents trying to contact the Council.

¹ Disability Discrimination Act 2005

How good is the service?

- 33** The service is providing a satisfactory range of information about the service available to local people both in writing and through the website although more could be done to promote services. In addition to a wide range of informative bespoke leaflets, information is also presented through TV display screens in the reception areas of both offices. The quarterly newsletter is used well to promote services and uses digital TV which allows customers to request key forms and access information. The website provides useful information and access to services. It is easy to navigate around, provides good links to relevant sites and the online forms section provides easy access to documentation. Visits to the housing services section on the website has increased by 25 per cent in the last year. However, assistance for addressing energy efficiency has not been effectively promoted and so referrals in the West Somerset area are comparatively low (dealt with in a later section). Strong provision for information helps customers identify solutions to their housing problems.
- 34** The use of service standards remains an area for improvement. Standards have been developed for the private sector housing services but not in the development control or housing options areas. Where they are in place they are not always appropriately challenging. For example, ten days to make contact following an enquiry for home improvement assistance, to issue grant approval following a completed grant application, or to check work on completion. Corporate service standards are in place for letters and email responses but they are not well known by staff, performance against the standards is not reported and there is no assessment of the quality of the interaction. The service cannot therefore demonstrate how well it is performing and customers cannot make informed assessments based on service promises.
- 35** Customers and customer feedback are not being used consistently and effectively to shape services. 'Exit' surveys of service users are not in place across all service areas and the information that is provided is not effectively analysed or reported. For example, the homelessness service is not routinely surveying satisfaction levels of customers. Mystery shopping has not been used to assure managers of service quality. The Council has not yet consulted its customers to gain assurance that its access arrangements meet their expectations or needs. Positively, the Council has organised some specific consultation events (such as that with the Polish community and older people) but these did not provide a clear direction for service development. Complaints are not being used to support learning. The service is therefore missing an opportunity to learn from its customers and to use this information to deliver services which meet their aspirations.
- 36** Services are not consistently customer-focused. The Council has not developed a strategic approach to access and customer care. No customer care training has been rolled out to staff to help embed a customer-focused culture. Reception points are not effectively monitoring the number of customers who had their enquiries fully addressed at first contact or waiting times. There is not a specific Directory of Housing Services which maps out the range of support and accommodation providers to help people facing housing crisis. In addition, response targets to complaints are not challenging (25 days and a further 15 working days if the complainant 'appeals' to the Executive Director) and the policy makes no reference to compensation. The lack of customer focus can result in services failing to meet the needs of customers and add to their frustration while facing housing problems.

Diversity

- 37 In the previous inspection we found an undeveloped corporate approach with poor progress on equality and diversity. Leadership was weak and there was limited training of officers and councillors. Barriers to services had not been identified because Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) had not been carried out, the Council was not engaging with diverse groups and community profiling was undeveloped.
- 38 In this inspection we found that weaknesses outweigh strengths. Progress on embedding equality and diversity has been poor with target-setting, training and the use of EIAs not being used consistently to embed an equalities-focused culture. The service does not have a clear understanding of its customer profile to tailor services to needs of the community. However, there have been some positive outcomes for vulnerable service users and some good partnership working to help support better outcomes.
- 39 Progress on embedding equality and diversity has been poor. Some key examples are set out below.
- The Council's ambitions for improving equality and diversity outcomes are limited. It has only attained Level 1 of the Equality Framework for Local Government. A SMART¹ action plan to progress actions to achieve Level 2 and higher has not been developed. More positively, the Council has now agreed a Corporate Equality Scheme that covers all six strands of equality.
 - The percentage of the top five per cent of earners in the Council with a disability, who are women or from a BME background is well below average and the percentage of staff compared with the working population from those groups is in the worst performing twenty-five per cent (2007/08).
 - Equality and diversity is not being consistently embedded into the organisational culture. Since the last inspection equality training has been delivered to 90 per cent of staff. However, only one third of councillors have attended diversity training and no analysis has been made of how training has influenced staff behaviour.
 - Equality and diversity targets are not integrated into service improvement processes. Equality and diversity receives a limited consideration in service plans and there are no clear targets and very limited description of what improved outcomes will be available to residents.
- 40 There has been very little progress in completing EIAs. Only a first stage screening exercise and a timetable for this work has been implemented and the target for completing all EIAs by March 2010 does not appear realistic. The EIA for Choice-based lettings (CBL) has been completed by members of the county-wide working group (led by the Somerset Supporting People team) and provides a strong model. Without robust Equality Impact Assessments the service cannot be sure that it is always treating people fairly.

¹ A SMART action plan is one which is Specific, Measurable Achievable, Resourced and Time-bound.

How good is the service?

- 41 The service does not have a clear understanding of its customer profile so that it can tailor services to meet the diverse needs of the community. There is no strategic approach to understanding or addressing the housing needs of vulnerable groups such as older and young persons and migrant workers. Although meetings have been held with some of these groups and their advocates, there does not yet appear to have been any housing actions emerging from the consultation. This lack of awareness means it is unlikely to deliver services which meet all needs.
- 42 Despite the lack of a robust strategic approach to equality and diversity, there are a number of positive outcomes for vulnerable people in West Somerset. For example:
- the Council part funds the domestic abuse posts based at Magna West Somerset Housing Association Ltd and have helped furnish four 'safe houses' in the district. This includes an advocacy service for victims, and referral of perpetrators to a correction programme. Victims also have access to refuges outside the district;
 - the Somerset West Care and Repair Home Improvement Agency (HIA) is providing, in addition to mainstream support for home improvements, a number of value-added services including income maximisation, sourcing charitable and other additional funding for clients, a hospital discharge scheme (helping 109 people to date), a handyman scheme (dealing with 100 people a year), support for people who are living in a property which is no longer suitable and a partnership with the Centre for Sustainable Energy which employed a worker to deliver fuel poverty advice (more information on outcomes are reported in a later section);
 - improvements in the Disabled Facilities Grants service (discussed later); and
 - the Council uses 'The Big Word Group' for telephone, face to face and document translation and the Somerset Association for the Blind provides services for audio, Braille format and signers. Most printed information offers alternative formats and accessibility functions on the website are good.
- 43 The Council is working with partners to help support better outcomes. It has recently joined the RIEP¹ Peer Initiative Programme aimed at improving the quality of outcomes from Equality Impact Assessments across the County. The Council are the lead agency on (and chair) the West Somerset Strategic Partnership Against Hate Crime (PAHC). It is a member of a range of other groups including the county-wide Somerset Equalities Group, the Supporting People Core Strategy group, the Multi Agency Assessment Panel, and the MARAC. These arrangements give the Council greater potential for improving its awareness of diversity and addressing it through policy making and services.

Strategic approach to housing

- 44 In the previous inspection we found that this was an area where weaknesses outweighed strengths. There was a reasonable understanding of housing needs but weaknesses in strategic plans, including a misalignment between needs and targets, the lack of SMART action plans and some gaps in provision for particular groups.

¹ Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership

- 45 In this inspection, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The Council now has a sound understanding of its housing markets. The Council's high-level strategies are generally strong apart from private sector housing services. Service-level plans also often have weaknesses. The Council is working well with partners and internally to deliver better outcomes for local people.
- 46 The Council now has a sound understanding of its housing markets:
- two Strategic Housing Market Assessments (SHMAs)¹ have been completed for both market areas in the past 18 months which build upon the county-wide assessment completed in 2006;
 - two Strategic Land Viability Assessments were completed in conjunction with the respective SHMAs;
 - a programme of parish surveys has now covered more than two-thirds of parishes;
 - an annual affordability survey is carried out by the ENPA; and
 - a private sector house condition survey was carried out in 2008/09 (some weaknesses are discussed in the following paragraph).

The Council is now better placed to develop plans to meet needs.

- 47 There are still some gaps in the understanding of housing needs although these are generally being addressed. The Stock condition survey does not align stock condition, fuel poverty, SAP levels and deprivation to provide a basis for an area-based approach. However, work is underway to plot the data on GIS mapping systems. Following the outcome of the RSS Examination in Public, it was realised that there were gaps in the gypsies and travellers information base. A refreshed detailed assessment of Gypsy and Traveller needs has been commissioned in conjunction with the other Somerset Local Authorities and is underway. However, there is no completed research into the housing needs of migrant workers and no clear plans are in place to develop this evidence. These gaps mean that plans cannot be robust until the research is completed.
- 48 The Council's high-level strategies are generally strong except for private sector housing but service-level plans often have weaknesses that means targeting resources to best deliver outcomes is more difficult. For example:
- the Housing Strategy 2009-12 has recently been adopted, based on effective research and consultation, and has the potential to set a strong strategic direction for the service. However, the underpinning action plan is neither SMART nor outcome-focused and is not clear about what the Council will do to address its findings;

¹ The council straddles two housing market areas - the Northern Peninsula Housing Market area and the Taunton Deane Housing Market Area.

How good is the service?

- the Somerset Homelessness Review and Prevention Strategy 2008-11 is again based on good research, analysis and consultation. It sets out a range of actions that would be expected in a contemporary homelessness strategy. However, there are often not SMART targets set against the actions and many are not outcome-focused so it is often not clear what it is trying to achieve. Importantly at a local level the Council has not developed a plan that sets out how the county-wide strategy will be delivered in the district;
- there is currently no adopted strategic approach to private sector housing. The Private Sector Housing Strategy 2006-2009, Empty Homes Strategy, Fuel Poverty Strategy and HMO Strategy are all time-expired;
- while the Local Plan 2006-11 followed guidance for affordable housing provision at the time of its adoption, it does not maximise the delivery of affordable housing so as to better meet identified needs. It requires 25-30 per cent of dwellings on qualifying sites to be affordable with development thresholds set for different areas that are generally high (for example, it is a threshold of 15 in Minehead). This contrasts with the findings of the SHMAs which are suggesting a 40 per cent affordable housing quota on larger greenfield sites and the proposed SPD¹ which is suggesting a threshold of eight dwellings in Minehead. In addition, there is no specific policy or guidance in terms of sustainability, lifetime homes, tenure, mix, design and tenure-integration. Other potential barriers to delivery include a restriction of developer contributions to the village where a development is taking place and priority for affordable homes to buy over those to rent;
- current ENPA planning policy (specifically, the 'mortgagee in possession clause') has stopped lenders providing development funding to housing associations (a number told us that they are no longer able to build within the park boundary). The ENPA are currently lobbying government through the parks organisation to remove this clause. This will impact on the ability of people living in rural situations to access housing and the sustainability of those communities; and
- there is a small Park Homes site in the district but conditions have not been assessed.

The weaknesses that exist in the Council's plans compromise the Council's ability to target its limited resources to the areas that will best deliver outcomes for local people.

- 49 While the delivery of new housing is almost meeting current targets, it will not address known need. LAA NI 155 sets an annual target for 40 affordable homes for West Somerset. However, the draft South West Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) has set a requirement for 2500 additional dwellings to be provided in West Somerset between 2006 and 2026 (125 per year with at least 35 per cent of these being affordable (44). For the Exmoor National Park area, the emerging RSS requires that an estimated 400 homes should be built with 280 in the area of the park that falls in West Somerset. However, both SHMAs estimate the net annual need for affordable housing to be approximately 270 dwellings. Targets which are met but fall below need mean that the extent of under-provision can be masked and subsequent plans may therefore be inappropriate.

¹ Supplementary Planning Document

- 50** There are stronger links between the local strategic partnerships and the Council's housing services. The delivery of the housing ambitions of the West Somerset Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) is monitored through the multi-agency West Somerset Housing Forum. The Forum now has better links with the Council and is able to influence and support the strategic framework. The refreshed Affordable Housing Group membership now includes private developers, housing associations, the Rural Housing Enabler, Council officers and the portfolio holder); it oversees the delivery of affordable housing and reports directly to the West Somerset Housing Forum which is also supported by the Supported Housing Forum. This helps to ensure that the service is supporting the LSP priorities and is influenced by key stakeholders.
- 51** Better partnership working has led to better services. The Council has entered into a partnership with Sedgemoor District Council (the Somerset West Private Sector Housing Partnership) to deliver an improved private sector housing service. A Monitoring Board oversees its work (outcomes are discussed in later sections). Partnerships with the HIA and the West Somerset Advice Bureau are key to supporting vulnerable people in the area (again, outcomes from these are discussed in later sections). Joint working with the Rural Housing Project is helping the Council identify and address rural housing needs. County-wide working with other councils through the Somerset Strategic Housing Partnership and the Strategic Housing Officers Group has led to jointly commissioned housing market and land availability surveys, the introduction of choice-based lettings and the stock condition survey. The willingness to develop partnerships has had significant benefit in terms of lower cost, better strategic planning and improved services for customers.
- 52** There is improved cross-service working between the planning and housing elements of the strategic housing service. This has been assisted by the new organisational structure which co-locates planning policy with housing services and the new purpose built accommodation which facilitates joint working. This helps the teams to better understand and work together to address the key challenges facing the service.

Making the best use of existing housing

- 53** In the last inspection we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Homelessness prevention was effective and home owners received a range of renewal assistance. The partnership with the HIA was not working well and the regulation of rented accommodation and the approach to empty homes was not being effectively delivered. Joint strategic working with the main housing association needed development.
- 54** In this inspection we found that there continues to be a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The service is increasingly effective in preventing homelessness but it lacks a local focus in its strategic approach. It has successfully reduced the use of temporary accommodation but the length of stay for some people is too long. The Council has had little success in returning empty homes to use or in improving the energy efficiency or poor conditions in the worst private sector housing. The service is taking a more proactive approach to improving privately rented homes but its overall approach to privately rented homes is not yet comprehensive. The management of Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) is now sound but it still takes too long to meet applicants' needs. Access to social housing is much improved and housing association homes are in good condition and relet quickly.

How good is the service?

Homelessness

- 55** The service is effectively preventing homelessness. It has reduced homeless acceptances from 29 in 2006/07 to 18 in 2008/09 and placed it in the best performing twenty-five per cent in 2007/08. The percentage of homeless acceptances that were repeat cases was also in the best performing twenty five per cent. In 2009 a survey established that there are no rough sleepers in West Somerset. The number of refusals and decisions made also reduced over the last three years. Improved prevention work has helped people avoid homelessness and find housing solutions.
- 56** The range and quality of prevention 'tools' is generally positive and includes:
- a service level agreement with Somerset County Council and the West Somerset Advice Bureau (WSAB) to provide a generalist advice service and specialist services such as representation at County Court hearings. Shelter holds a surgery at the WSAB in Minehead and NOVAS (a floating support provider) have an open door session at the customer centre in Minehead and at Williton. The housing options team also holds a drop-in surgery at the Hope Centre each month;
 - a Rent Deposit/Rent in Advance scheme with 223 'live' current deposits;
 - an appointment or drop-in service at Minehead and Williton or customers can opt for a home visit. An emergency out-of-hours service is available which is complemented by the council's own out of hour's duty officer;
 - specialist benefit staff are now available at contact centres. New claims for housing benefit are now processed on average in 17.8 days (reduced from 65 days in 2006/07). The time taken to deal with a change in circumstance has reduced to five days (from 37 days). The Housing Options team and the housing benefits team have an improved working relationship. The residents survey in 2009 shows high levels of satisfaction with the service;
 - the Council funds the Multi Agency Assessment Panel (MAAP), hosted by the West Somerset Advice Bureau. This Panel ensures that clients with complex needs can be dealt with effectively and appropriate solutions found (out of the eight cases heard so far, there has been a positive outcome for seven of them);
 - the team has authorisation to use the 'spend to save' Housing Prevention Fund budget of £12,000 and this has been used imaginatively to secure housing options including removal costs, supporting loans and paying for move-in costs; and
 - mediation based on a 'pay as you go' arrangement with Somerset Mediation.
- 57** However, there are some important weaknesses:
- the homelessness team are not monitoring the impact of housing advice providers, the utilisation of the Homeless Prevention Fund or customer satisfaction;
 - although housing associations notify the service when they are taking eviction action, this notification is too late in the process and the team cannot affect the outcome;

- increased demand for debt and financial advice from WSAB means that there is currently a four-week wait for an appointment; and
- the Council received £9,740 for the current financial year from government for discretionary housing payments to prevent homelessness. It was able to top this up by £24,350 but spent the government contribution by the end of October 2009 and did not make additional funding available.

Strong prevention work will help people avoid homelessness and locate long-term housing solutions.

- 58** There are some stronger aspects to the services' customer focus. For example, the service signposts customers to the specialist advice and assistance they may need after an initial assessment. The Council employs an independent medical adviser to fast-track decisions. 'Decision' letters to customers are clear and comprehensive and set out what support and advice services are available. Caseloads are manageable which allows decisions to be made quickly (averaging 12.5 days over the last four years). All decisions are counter-signed by the team manager to provide a level of quality assurance. The team re-assesses clients who challenge their CBL banding, auto-bidding has been set up for people who are unable to enter bids on line (the highest level in the county) and the Council will submit bids on their behalf when requested. This helps to ensure that decisions are made quickly and accurately.
- 59** There are some gaps in homelessness service provision. Services to support people with learning disabilities are limited and there is no facility with high level support in the district. There are no arrangements in place for pre-tenancy training or developing life skills and well-being for those whose circumstances make them vulnerable. This means it is hard for those customers to move into and sustain independent living in the future. Access to private sector lets is difficult (exacerbated by the rent deposit schemes limiting applications to the homeless). There are gaps in the availability of accommodation for young single people. These gaps in provision will make it difficult for the service to identify long-term solutions for some groups.
- 60** There is not a clear strategic approach to homelessness in West Somerset. Positively, partners were consulted on the new county-wide homelessness strategy. However, no sub-strategy that provides a clear local focus for West Somerset has been put in place. There are no local targets and monitoring of the action plan is ineffective. There are a number of county-wide homelessness and CBL groups operating whereas a smaller number of groups may deliver better value for money and have more focus. Despite the formation of the new MAAP, there is not a comprehensive range of protocols in place to ensure that all relevant agencies are involved in key decisions where vulnerable people are in housing need. A weak local strategic focus will make it difficult for the service to assess its impact and direct resources appropriately.

How good is the service?

- 61** The Council is successfully reducing the use of temporary accommodation. The Council passed the Government's 2010 target for a 50 per cent reduction in temporary accommodation in 2008/9. The number of households in temporary accommodation in March 2008 (39) was below the national average. People who are allocated to temporary accommodation are well supported through pre-allocation interviews, a Temporary Accommodation Pack, a thorough assessment of support needs and delegated authority for out-of-hours duty staff to provide emergency temporary accommodation. Extensive use is made of private sector leasing properties. This not only ensures that people facing homelessness are provided with better housing solutions but also supports them in sustaining their new accommodation.
- 62** However, people are staying too long in temporary accommodation and it is not always in the location that suits them best. In 2007/08 the average length of stay in bed and breakfast was in the worst quartile and the percentage change in the number of families in temporary accommodation was also in the worst performing twenty-five per cent. The service uses bed and breakfast accommodation which is all outside the district boundary (in Taunton) – averaging 10 such cases each year - and has occasionally placed families with children in bed and breakfast. There has not been a thorough analysis of DDA compliance in temporary accommodation. Extended placement in temporary accommodation restricts the ability of people to make long term plans and may cause them to lose social and support networks.

Private Sector Housing

- 63** Private sector housing conditions are relatively poor. A summary of these conditions are set out in the earlier 'Context' section of this report. While these conditions are a reflection of a rural and 'harder-to-treat' stock, it remains the case that poor housing conditions are affecting the health, safety and life chances of residents.
- 64** The current policy to assist home owners make improvements to their properties is weak. There is currently no policy guidance on when a loan or a grant will be appropriate and the assistance 'offer' is not publicised or adopted as policy which does not meet legislative requirements. There is not a strong link between the current assistance and the stock condition survey. This means that assistance may not consistently be targeted at the highest needs.
- 65** There is limited assistance to help homeowners improve their properties. The grant assistance amounts to just £1,000 per property and is restricted to vulnerable people who meet prescribed eligibility criteria (there is also assistance provided for 'special' circumstances, energy efficiency and some people may be able to access a low interest loan). However, the Council's homeloan scheme compares reasonably well with other districts in the region with 67 referrals made and 37 agreed. These loans have been imaginatively used; for example, a loan to convert a stable block into accommodation, a first time buyers scheme and loans to help Low Cost Home Ownership purchase. Some residents may therefore be unable to improve their homes.

- 66 The delivery of home improvement assistance is much improved. Between 2007-09, the average times between application for a home improvement grant and approval was 100 days and between application and completion of works was 298 days. In 2009, the average times were 58 days and 59 days respectively. The HIA has reduced its processing times by 33 per cent. Overall customer satisfaction for the service in 2008/09 was high at 96 per cent. This means that people who are able to access assistance can do so quickly.
- 67 There are partnerships to address home energy efficiency but there are weaknesses in the way services are promoted to potential customers and outcomes have not been consistently strong. A regional energy advice centre operates as the delivery agent for advice and Government funded energy efficiency grants. Other partners provide a range of services including energy advice, home energy audits, promotion work, signposting to other agencies, energy and benefits advice to the over 60s and advice to people to address fuel poverty. However, SAP ratings are well below average. West Somerset was the worst performing area under the energy efficiency grants programme ('Warmstreets') in 2008-09. Of the total number of referrals made to the scheme across the seven councils in the sub region, only seven per cent were residents in West Somerset and, of the total number of jobs completed, it was only four per cent. In the current year, West Somerset has the tenth lowest number of referrals in the South West region (which consists of 45 councils). Consequently, of the total available grant funding of £96,000 for West Somerset in the current year, £93,400 remained unspent by the end of August. The lack of uptake on this initiative means that residents are missing an opportunity to address energy efficiency in their homes.
- 68 The service is taking a more proactive approach to improving privately rented homes. The level of action the Council is taking to improve conditions has increased from 26 informal interventions in the last inspection to 69 in 2008/09. Formal interventions have increased from 2 notices in the last inspection to 25 in 2008/09. Robust work was carried out to identify premises which fall under the HMO¹ licensing legislation and the mandatory licensing of HMOs has now been completed. Premises that have been inspected are now risk assessed and a new proactive programme of cyclical visits has been introduced. A protocol has been agreed with the National Trust which structures regulation activity in their housing portfolio. Relationships with landlords are improving through the re-establishment of the Landlords Forum and, although no Accreditation Scheme is yet in place, the draft scheme is well advanced and of high quality. This will help to ensure that the health and safety risks to tenants are being addressed.

¹ Houses in Multiple Occupation as defined by the Housing Act 2004

How good is the service?

- 69 However, the approach to improving the private rented sector is not comprehensive and in some respects falls well short of good practice. The Council has not set out a strategic approach to regulating conditions in the private rented sector which is supported by a clear enforcement policy. Information leaflets do not provide comprehensive details of standards required and help available. The service does not yet have a comprehensive register of all privately rented accommodation in the district. There is no protocol which structures how both the Council and the housing associations will respond where disrepair is reported to the Council. There are no detailed procedures in place to support the consistency and quality of regulation activity and, while there is some quality control carried out by the line manager, it is not well structured. There is not a rigorous programme of pre-inspection in place to ensure that properties which are involved in the rent deposit scheme are also all pre-inspected. This will affect the effectiveness of regulation activity.
- 70 The approach to managing Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) is now sound but performance is weak and it still takes too long to meet people's needs. There are no waiting lists and the Council does not 'manage' the release of applications, approvals or payments to control its budget. A protocol with the HIA sets out challenging timescales for delivering each stage in the process and empowers the agency to bring forward cases according to established priority criteria. Written confirmation (with timescales) of the DFG process is sent to each applicant. A DFG review group meets regularly to review cases and a DFG managers group meets to review resources, policy and procedures. Effective monitoring allows average times in each stage of the process to be identified. Better working between the key agencies has seen the number of disabled facilities grants awarded almost double over the last three years. However, in the current year the average time taken between initial enquiry and completion of work has been 329 days (an average of 226 days between enquiry and approval and 136 days between approval and completion of works). While the smaller adaptations are completed more quickly, the larger adaptations are taking too long and effectively pushing up the average times. This performance does not meet the targets in the protocol or good practice. Delays in this service prolongs the period before disabled people are able to live independently.
- 71 The Council has been ineffective in returning empty homes to use. In its Government returns, the Council reported the percentage of private sector homes empty for longer than six months as zero and this is unlikely. The number of empty homes returned to use in the last three years (4, 18 and 6 respectively) is in the worst performing 25 per cent - the stock condition survey shows that 2,671 dwellings were empty at the time of the survey and that 212 of these were long term vacant and 333 were mid-term vacant. Failure to address this issue results in detriment to the environment, places additional pressure on housing markets and extends the time that people are unable to find housing solutions.

Working with housing associations

- 72** Access to social housing has significantly improved. The five Somerset district councils, along with 47 housing associations, introduced a new CBL scheme in December 2008. It brings together a range of housing options including shared ownership, low cost home ownership, private rented housing and mutual exchanges. All applicants are assessed under one clear lettings policy and the scheme has joined up the five former housing registers. The development of one application form (paper based and available online) gives applicants the opportunity to bid for housing vacancies across Somerset. A robust process was undertaken to ensure that people on the previous housing waiting list had the opportunity to 'convert' to the CBL scheme. This not only helps people to access affordable housing but also addresses low demand for some properties.
- 73** The main housing association is ensuring that its vacancies are quickly relet and its stock is of a reasonable standard. The average relet time in 2008/09 was 21 days. Housing association staff have carried out an exercise to review occupancy levels and has undertaken a number of measures in conjunction with the Council to reduce under-occupancy which mostly involved management transfers. At present, 92 per cent of their stock meets the decent homes standard and is on track for full compliance by 2010. This rationalisation of occupancy is helping to ensure that social housing is used to most effect.
- 74** The Council has strengthened its relationship with the main housing association. The Council's Group Manager meets with the association every two months to jointly monitor performance and find solutions to challenges facing both organisations. The association has also taken the decision to open its performance up to the Council's scrutiny committee twice a year. Better communication helps the Council to deliver its strategic role more effectively.

Enabling the provision of more housing

- 75** In the last inspection this was an area where weaknesses outweighed strengths. The delivery of affordable housing was not meeting need and the administration of the planning system and delivery in rural areas was also weak.
- 76** In this inspection we found that weaknesses continue to outweigh strengths. The delivery of new housing has improved and there is now an increased focus, improved partnership working and capacity to support delivery. However, new housing completions are not meeting current and predicted need, performance in the development control service is weak and support for developers is of mixed quality. There is better joint working to deliver new social housing.
- 77** The number of new homes built continues not to meet needs or targets. The number of additional affordable dwellings developed (in the last three years) scaled by average numbers on the housing register is in the worst performing 25 per cent of local authorities. The percentage of new homes built on previously developed land (47 per cent) was in the worst performing twenty-five per cent in 2007/08 but this increased to 67.5 in 2008/09. The following table demonstrates how far delivery has fallen short of targets and needs in the last four years:

How good is the service?

	RSS: all new homes Annual Targets	RSS: Affordable Housing Annual Targets	Both SHMAs: Annual Affordable Housing Needs	Annual LAA targets: Affordable Housing	Housing Strategy Annual Targets: Affordable Housing	Nos. New Homes Delivered	Nos. Affordable Homes Delivered
2005/06	-	-	-	-		190	11
2006/07	139	-	-	-		222	27
2007/08	139	-	-	-		146	25
2008/09	139	51	269/271	40		120	29
2009/10 (YTD)	139	51	269/271	54	54	-	9 YTD
2010/11	139	51	269/271	52	130	-	-

- 78** New affordable housing is not in line with identified needs. In the last two years, the proportion of affordable housing delivered on qualifying sites has averaged just over 25 per cent (and just 17 per cent of all new housing was affordable in 2007/08). Only one third of affordable housing has been for rent in the last two years. However, the 2008 SHMA suggests a tenure split for new housing of around 65 per cent market housing and 35 per cent affordable (of which around 75 per cent should be rented and 25 per cent should be intermediate housing). The Council cannot provide information on the number of new dwellings which have been built to Lifetime Homes standard or are fully wheelchair adapted. This increases the barriers to residents in finding homes in West Somerset.
- 79** It is unlikely that the housing market in West Somerset will be fully balanced in the near future. The Council is establishing a 'pipeline' of development sites. For example, Alcombe will deliver 23 new homes (all affordable) and Exford a mixture of 9 flats, houses and bungalows for rent. There are also a number of legacy projects on council owned land at Carhampton and Simonsbath. This will be supplemented by a large site at Seaward Way, Minehead which will be released as part of a wider regeneration of that area. The number of affordable housing completions in the current year should rise to 54 and predictions are that this will continue to rise in successive years. However, the Northern Peninsula HMA estimated that affordable housing need is 217 per cent of the annualised housing number in the RSS (based on the assumption that the Council could clear all the existing people on the housing register and all the newly arising need over a ten year period). This means that, at current build rates, even if all of the housing provided in West Somerset were affordable, it would still fall well short of meeting affordable housing need.

- 80** There is increased focus and capacity to deliver new housing. The Development Register now provides a sound monitoring vehicle for tracking the progress of all schemes, including section 106 agreements and potential developments, providing accurate records of the balances held and sums received and expended. A new 'Section 106' group and a new post of Section 106 officer has been set up to ensure that funds are correctly allocated and match council priorities. Contributions are now secured for specific projects and purposes (previously these were taken on an open ended basis). An Enabling Officer has been appointed and has established regular meetings with developers. The new Affordable Housing Group meets every eight weeks and is attended by a range of developers and other stakeholders to review and monitor the delivery of affordable housing and to link with other groups and forums. This improved focus is already being reflected in an increase in the delivery of new homes.
- 81** There is a better structure to working arrangements with housing associations and developers on the delivery of affordable housing. There is a protocol in place between 'developer' members of the Affordable Housing Group which describes how sites are to be allocated to housing associations and the circumstances in which bids to the HCA will be supported. This has helped remove inefficient competition between associations and to add transparency to decision-making.
- 82** The Council has encouraged the supply of new affordable housing during the recession. For example, in Stogursey, low demand for intermediate housing resulted in close working with the HCA¹ to change the tenure from shared ownership to rented to maximise the take-up of the new dwellings. A lender's requirement for a 20 per cent deposit on new build properties in Alcombe led to the Council channelling funding, via its homeloan scheme, to assist with a top-up loan to ensure the Scheme's success. A planned exception site in Watchet for 32 homes will include a number of bungalows to tackle the issue of under-occupation in existing housing association stock. A scheme using an empty homes grant will bring forward two vacant flats which are to be rented at an affordable rate. This will help re-balance the housing market and provide housing to people facing more limited options.
- 83** Performance in the development control service is weak. The performance for the proportion of major (50 per cent) and minor (65 per cent) planning applications dealt with in Government timescales was in the worst performing twenty-five per cent for 2007/08. The satisfaction levels of applicants with the planning service and the assessment against a quality of planning services checklist was also in the worst twenty-five per cent. However, more positively, the percentage of planning appeals allowed was in the best performing twenty-five per cent. The resident's survey in 2009 shows poor levels of satisfaction with planning services (33 per cent). This is causing delays in the delivery of new housing.

¹ Homes and Communities Agency.

How good is the service?

- 84 The quality of support to developers at pre-application stage is mixed. There is no specific written guidance to help developers understand current policy requirements, for example, on sustainability or design. This means that such matters are reliant on the negotiating skills of individual officers which can lead to inconsistency and a lack of transparency and clarity for developers. Pre-application advice (not charged for) is encouraged although no standards or protocols are in place to define its terms. The Council does not use standard section 106 agreements or clauses which increases costs and slows down the process. There are no mechanisms in place to capture feedback from occupiers of new homes to inform future processes and decisions. More positively, a range of reasonable planning service standards are set out in a leaflet and on the Council's website. Planning applications are available for downloading on the Council's website and can be submitted via the planning portal which also enables an applicant to view plans and pay online. Guidance on the planning system is also available. Developers we met said that the pre-application process meets their needs and is tailored to suit a particular development of needs of the developer. Inconsistent support to developers can mean delays, unsuccessful applications and missed opportunities to support wider agendas.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 85 The previous inspection concluded that this was an area of weakness. Where costs were known they were higher than average and service quality was often below average. The service lacked information to assess value for money and procurement and budget management was weak. Some (but isolated) examples of good value for money practice were found.
- 86 In this inspection we found that weaknesses outweigh strengths. The service has made limited progress in understanding its costs and how the cost and quality of its services compare. There is no strategic value for money framework and a value for money culture has not been embedded. Positively, budget management has improved and there have been savings and efficiencies made as well as successes in drawing in additional funding to support services. However, the service has also missed opportunities to improve value for money and the strategic weaknesses mean that savings and efficiencies are likely to fall short of what could have been achieved.

How do costs compare?

- 87 The service has made limited progress in understanding its costs and how the cost and quality of its services compare. Benchmarking comparisons for the homelessness service were carried out with 11 similar councils which showed it was among the most expensive 25 per cent. In 2007/08 expenditure per head on the service was the second highest. However, no comparison was made of cost against performance and so no conclusion on value for money for the service can be reached. No other benchmarking has been completed. The housing service does not know if it provides value for money to the local community.

How is value for money managed?

- 88 There is no strategic value for money framework and a value for money culture has not been embedded. There is no value for money strategy and the Procurement Strategy 2005 is weak and no longer used by officers. Service Plans do not include value for money targets and managers are not using information that is available (such as performance against service standards, performance indicators or customer feedback) to assess service quality and value for money. Weaknesses in action plans mean that limited resources are not being effectively focussed on priorities. This means that a value for money culture has not been fully embedded throughout the Council and this increases the risk that opportunities will be missed.
- 89 The housing service can demonstrate savings and more efficient work practices.
- The Somerset West Private Sector Housing Partnership (SWPSHP) has shown efficiency savings of £140,000 on staff costs and £45,000 by jointly procuring a house condition survey. New administrative arrangements are reducing costs and leading to a more efficient service. For example, Sedgemoor make all home maintenance payments and then provide the Council with a single invoice which means that it is only handling one payment and has been able to reduce back-office staff. A Fuel Poverty/Energy Efficiency Officer is employed jointly by the partnership which reduces revenue costs.
 - The relatively successful homeloan scheme means that more residents can be supported to improve their homes for the same budget.
 - A contractor has been commissioned to re-cycle DFG equipment on a fixed 'removal and storage' price (£172.50) which includes a two year warranty. The average cost of a new stairlift installation is £2,721 and the average cost of a recycled stairlift is £1,098. Eight recycled stairlifts were fitted in 2008/09. Again, this means that more residents can be supported for the same budget.
 - The reduction in the use of temporary accommodation has resulted in savings of £36,000 in 2008/09 with a further £20,000 savings predicted in the current year.
 - An out-sourcing arrangement is in place for both benefits processing (with an external provider) and for legal services (on a pay-as-you-go agreement with Mendip District Council) which means that the Council only pays for the services it is actually receiving rather on a block-payment basis. The Council has worked with the other Somerset councils to commission the SHMAs and the stock condition survey which both reduced costs and ensured a holistic approach.

How good is the service?

- 90 However, there also missed opportunities to improve value for money in the service. There is no evidence that SWPSHP has compared average costs for each home improvement. It has not been able to negotiate reduced prices with suppliers using 'consumer power' advantage gained through joint procurement with other providers and councils. There remains some double handling of work between the Council and the HIA. Service costs currently exclude support service recharges and no assessment has been made on whether corporate services (such as the contact centre) are providing the strategic housing services with value for money. Housing associations and the County Council are not making significant contributions to the cost of providing adaptations under the DFG service. This increases the potential for the available budget to be unable to meet demand.
- 91 The Council has been effective in drawing in additional funding to support services. Examples include monies from Supporting People for the Handyperson Service, £135,000 from the ESTAC for hard to treat properties, £15,000 from the Primary Care Trust for the hospital discharge pilot being operated by the HIA and (with the five local housing authorities in Somerset) securing the maximum sum available (£100,000) from the Government to fund the development of the CBL scheme. The SW RIEP (then Lift SW) awarded £325,000 to the Council to support delivery of the Improvement Plan. However, using the lack of referrals to energy efficiency funding mentioned earlier as an example, it has not always been successful in fully utilising the monies that are available.
- 92 A better relationship with the HIA has improved value for money. The HIA receives £63,000 from the Council and fees from each grant are now being paid in one block annual payment which reduces administrative costs. It has developed a fixed-price agreement with contractors for fitting showers which has resulted in faster installations and reduced administrative costs through the elimination of tendering. In the last 12 months, the agency has levered in charitable funding (£20,543), client funding (£7,680) and energy grants (£17,300). It has also helped residents to access Welfare Benefits in the sum of £71,400 and delivered the hospital discharge scheme and handyperson scheme at not extra cost. Successful funding sourcing by the HIA means that residents are able to benefit from a wider range of services at the same cost to the Council.
- 93 The service is not yet in a position to assess the value for money from its partnerships. While it states that this is a priority, this work has yet to be planned. It has missed key opportunities to develop this approach; for example, a new Service Level Agreement has been put in place with the WSAB but there will not be a clear understanding of its impact because there are not sufficient outcome focused PIs within the agreement. This can mean that funds are used to support partnerships which are not most effectively meeting needs.
- 94 Budget management has improved. In the last inspection we found a range of significant overspends on the housing capital programme in one year followed by major underspends in the next. However, in the last two full budget years there has been a slight underspend of 6 per cent and 9.5 per cent which is satisfactory against an overall programme in excess of £3.8 million. This is helping to focus expenditure on the Council's priorities and minimises delays for residents in obtaining assistance.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 95** In the previous inspection we identified more weaknesses than strengths in this area. Inadequate improvements had been made in key areas, especially diversity, value for money and customer focus and the service had been slow to implement the recommendations from the previous inspection. Progress was better in some areas such as the use of temporary accommodation and support for homeowners.
- 96** In this inspection we found that weaknesses continue to outweigh strengths. The Council has made good progress on its corporate Improvement Plan but progress on the recommendations made in the previous inspection report have been weak. Outcomes for local people have improved in most service areas although the scale of improvement means that performance still falls well short of the best performing councils. Improvements in value for money are likely to fall short of what could have been achieved, services are still not delivered in a consistently customer-focused way and progress on equality and diversity has been slow.
- 97** The Council has made good progress on its corporate Improvement Plan. Following the last report and a number of other corporate assessments, an Improvement Board was established that included GOSW, the Audit Commission and IDeA to oversee the production and implementation of an improvement plan. The plan is currently 'on track' with just 8 per cent of corporate action points showing as 'amber' status.
- 98** Progress against the recommendations made in the previous inspection has been weak. The Council has failed to implement many of the recommendations made in the previous inspection (more information is contained in Appendix 1). Of the 32 key recommendations made in the report:
- 10 recommendations show no or very limited progress;
 - 13 recommendations show weak progress;
 - 5 recommendations show strong progress; and
 - 4 recommendations have been fully achieved.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

99 The service is improving outcomes for local people in most service areas but performance still falls well short of the best performing councils. Generally housing performance indicators (PIs) are improving over the last three years (with the exception of empty homes and planning applications) and the customer satisfaction survey in March 2009 showed that 93 per cent of respondees were satisfied with the housing service. However, the scale of improvement is inconsistent and in many key areas outcomes delivered still fall well short of the best performing councils.

100 Planning and enabling

- Considerable progress has been made on the consultant's recommendations' for improving the administration of Section 106 arrangements and it is now using best practice in many aspects of planning obligations. The Affordable Housing Group has also ensured a better understanding and working relationship between developers and the Council.
- However, the number of new homes built, especially affordable housing is not meeting needs and performance in the development control service is weak.

101 Private sector Housing

- The delivery partnership with Sedgemoor has improved outcomes for customers in housing renewal and regulation activity. Increased capacity has ensured that budgets are fully utilised and increased approval rates have included 33 Decent Homes Grants and 30 low interest loans. In total 173 customers were assisted in 2008/09. The number of homes improved using DFGs rose by one third and the number of formal regulatory interventions in the private rented sector rose substantially.
- However, the condition of the private sector stock is relatively poor and the current policy and supporting guidance to assist homeowners to make improvements to their properties is weak. There is not a strong link between the current assistance and the stock condition survey. There has been very little progress made in returning empty homes into use and it is still taking too long for help to be provided to disabled people to adapt their homes.

102 Homelessness

- The service has continued to reduce the use of temporary accommodation and homelessness acceptances and decisions through prevention work are falling. New arrangements to manage housing waiting lists have been put in place through the countywide CBL scheme. There has been strong progress made in benefits processing times.
- However, people are staying too long in temporary accommodation and it is not always in the location that suits them best.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 103** There have been customer-focused improvements that local people will value but services are still not delivered in a consistently customer-focused way. For example, customer feedback is yet to be fully used in shaping services. Service standards have been introduced in some but not all areas and performance against them is not being tracked to inform managers of service quality. Those which are in place are sometimes unchallenging. Weak performance around telephone answering is a significant issue given the rural nature of the area and the centralisation of service access points in two locations. More positively, information about services and face-to-face contact with officers is well provided for.
- 104** The service has been slow to embed equality and diversity issues in the way services are delivered which was identified in the last inspection. In particular it has not completed any EIAs, training has not been received by all councillors and it is yet to understand the needs of its customers though a robust profiling exercise and so to tailor services. While more effective partnership working has improved outcomes for some groups (such as victims of domestic violence or vulnerable households seeking support in accessing home improvement assistance), there are still no high level plans for identifying and addressing the housing needs of other vulnerable groups such as older and young persons and migrant workers. Consequently, the Council remains on the bottom rung of the Equality Framework for Local Government.
- 105** The service has made some value for money improvements but the strategic weaknesses these are likely to fall short of what could have been achieved. There remain key strategic weaknesses in the Council's approach to managing value for money that mean that basic practices such as benchmarking and value for money targets have not been put in place in the service. It is clear that a value for money culture is not embedded in the organisation but the service can demonstrate a number of examples where it has introduced savings alongside improved services or better services for the same budget. It is alive to external funding opportunities and there is an improved approach to budget management and partnerships working to reduce costs and improve outcomes for customers.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 106** In the last inspection we found this to be an area of weakness. There was a gap in leadership at an officer level, weaknesses in performance and budgetary management and data quality. It had a limited approach to learning and there were weaknesses in its future plans.
- 107** In this inspection we found that this was an area where strengths and weaknesses are now in balance. There is strong political leadership and a clear focus on service improvement. The Council knows what it needs to do and its high-level strategies are mostly strong with gaps in plans being addressed and a number of new services soon to be put in place. However, service-level plans often have weaknesses and the performance management framework, performance reporting arrangements and risk management are all areas for improvement. The service is open to learning from others but is not consistently taking opportunities for learning from its own experience and customer feedback.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 108** There is strong and proactive political leadership of the service. Members have taken ownership of the Council's problems, set clear priorities and demonstrated leadership by taking tough political decisions. The housing portfolio holder is seen by stakeholders as being a passionate and effective ambassador for the service with an informed understanding of the service and what is required to make it effective. Lead councillors for housing and planning work well together despite having no formal arrangements in place to ensure they consistently coordinate efforts in support of a joined-up service. The Council has made considerable progress from a low base towards establishing the key building blocks it needs to stabilise its financial position, strengthen political leadership and governance and create strategic management capacity. It has moved on significantly in recent years and now has more credibility with the community and partners but lead Councillors recognise that this is from a low base and much more needs to be done. This has helped to ensure that housing is a much higher priority for the Council.
- 109** There is a clearer focus on housing services and a high level of self-awareness about what needs to change and how the Council can deliver. This has led the Council to work in partnership to improve private sector housing services. It has also led to prioritisation of work within the service to improve its understanding of its housing markets and develop a new SPD that better meets local people's needs. Corporately, too there has been prioritisation of investment in building blocks to support organisational improvement for example, ensuring that the organisational structure supports the delivery of coordinated services. The Council has also worked hard to improve budgetary management.
- 110** The service does not yet have a comprehensive performance management framework in place. While relatively stronger at the highest levels in the Council, it is weaker at service level. Many service areas are not yet tightly monitored through a wide range of PIs and a clear assignment of responsibility. There is not a performance management culture in place or an expectation that principal officers have a management role (and is particularly evident in some poorly performing areas such as development control). This means that a great deal of the performance management role falls to very senior officers which diverts them away from a more strategic role. The Council's arrangements for ensuring the accuracy of data it uses for decision-making remain inadequate. This compromises governance arrangements and means that the organisation is unable to react quickly to underperformance.
- 111** Performance reporting arrangements are not effective. For example:
- the Council put in place a sound framework to manage the delivery of the recommendations emerging from the last inspection, including a detailed action plan, the formation of a housing group to monitor delivery and progress reports to the Scrutiny Committee (and then cabinet) and to the Improvement Board. However, as reported in the previous section, this framework has been ineffective in securing satisfactory progress;

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- progress on the high level housing action plans (for example, the Housing and Homelessness Strategies) is not being monitored within the Council other than by the Group Manager. There is no report to members or other stakeholders which tracks progress. A proposal for the delivery of the Housing Strategy 2009-12 action plan to be closely monitored on a quarterly basis by the West Somerset Strategic Housing Forum has not been realised; and
- progress against the comprehensive affordable housing delivery plan is reported to the Affordable Housing Group and delivery is reported to Scrutiny committee and the West Somerset Housing Forum who, in turn, report into the LSP. However, this has failed to prevent delivery falling below target.

112 However, corporate improvement mechanisms are now better with revised political management structures (including the new Policy and Advisory Groups (PAGS) and a strengthened scrutiny role). The Improvement Plan was put in place during 2008. Lead officers and members are allocated to each priority and a Programme Manager is dedicated to the monitoring and delivery of the plan. The Improvement Board meets bi-monthly and Scrutiny Committee, Cabinet and Council are presented with reports on a quarterly basis, enabling them to monitor progress. The Sparnet system is in place to support performance management. Senior management have a clear idea about what the corporate priorities are for improvement, in recognition that they do not have the capacity to make significant improvements in all areas (the priorities next year will be value for money, data quality, EIA, and customer engagement). This has helped ensure that its Improvement Plan is on track.

113 The Council's high-level strategies are generally strong apart from private sector housing but service-level plans often have weaknesses. The action plans supporting high level strategies (such as the Housing and Homelessness Strategies) are generally not SMART and lack an outcome and customer focus. The housing service plan 2009-12 contains very few SMART, outcome-focused targets and does not set out clearly how the service will contribute to corporate agendas such as equality and diversity or value for money. It is not fully integrated with financial management and planning or corporate priorities (there is no cascade from the corporate plan) and it does not inform team and individual targets (the service has recognised these shortfalls and is engaging specialist support to address future improvement). This means that progress monitoring cannot be accurate and stakeholders, Councillors and service managers will not be able to understand what success will look like or when it has been achieved.

114 The Council has reintroduced Personal Development Review's for all staff but there remain weaknesses in their use. Personal development interviews are carried out annually (with a six-monthly review). Training for line managers has been provided and staff are assisted via written guidance and a standard template to support consistency in key areas such as skills audits and training and development opportunities. Performance reviews are signed off by higher management to provide quality control. However, officers do not consistently work to a clear set of outcome-focused targets. The appraisals are not yet forming an integral part of a systematic performance management framework to support corporate priorities and so appraisals are not as effective as they might be.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 115** Budgetary management has improved. Group Managers receive monthly reports from the finance team and spending is profiled throughout the year with forward projections to avoid major variances at year end. Monthly reports to the management team and quarterly reporting of financial information to Scrutiny and Cabinet has significantly improved using a traffic light format which makes it easier for them to monitor spending and challenge performance. Consequently, budget allocation and spend is now much closer.
- 116** The approach to risk management is not robust. The risk register for strategic housing sets out the service risks and, where appropriate, they are added to the corporate risk register. However, the strategic housing services risk register fails to identify some key issues as a risk. The 'failure to deliver affordable housing' is logged in the corporate risk register (despite not appearing in the service risk register). Prevention actions are not comprehensive or robust. Work is currently underway to address this issue; the Corporate Risk Register is being reviewed by the Audit Committee in December 2009. All Risks and subsequent actions will be monitored via the SparNet performance management system.
- 117** The Council is in the process of developing new strategic plans which will address many of the gaps identified. These include:
- progression of the Local Development Framework (LDF) evidence collection (for example, a county-wide Gypsy and Travellers Accommodation Assessment). The LDF is scheduled for adoption in 2011 and a LDF Panel is in place to oversee progress;
 - a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) in advance of the Core Strategy which sets out the Council's requirements from planning obligations is to be adopted in December 2009. It sets out lower thresholds and a requirement that qualifying sites should provide 35 affordable units for every 65 market units in line with recent market and viability assessments. It also relaxes existing requirements for off-site provision on rural developments. This should help the Council's ability to negotiate schemes in future;
 - a new joint private sector housing strategy with Sedgemoor is being developed and will be considered for adoption in April 2010. It has been the subject of extensive consultation and will incorporate:
 - a new Home Maintenance Strategy. The SWPSHP is currently analysing stock condition information to identify opportunities for proactively targeting areas with home maintenance assistance in addition to reactive assistance;
 - a Fuel Poverty and Affordable Energy Strategy (covering Sedgemoor, West, and Taunton Deane Councils) supported by a draft action plan which sets out a range of appropriate actions to be overseen by a steering group. The Council has also changed the eligibility criteria to widen the accessibility of the existing Warm Streets grants and has commissioned a project to identify good practice for 'hard to treats';
 - a new Empty Homes Strategy and more staff resources (a jointly funded Empty Properties Officer will start early in 2010). The draft strategy sets out a joint approach by the three councils which involves good practice in this area and will be considered by Executive for adoption in December 2009;

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- a new HMO strategy and enforcement policy; and
- a DFG policy for housing associations which will address issues such as joint funding, delivery targets and option assessment.
- the Council has prepared a draft Value for Money Strategy and a draft Procurement Strategy. While the former is in the early stages of development, it is suggesting a more robust approach and the latter has progressed further with a good range of PIs set out to help monitor the outcomes.

118 However, there are no clear plans in place to address some of the strategic gaps we have identified. For example, the Council has not developed strategic plans to identify and address the housing needs of diverse groups. There are no plans to improve access arrangements by telephone or its customer focus through training. The SPD has missed an opportunity to strengthen its approach to sustainability and addressing the needs of disabled people in new-build housing and it is not clear what proposals are in place to improve the development control service. There is no action plan to improve the Council's current assessment against the Equality Framework for Local Government. This will mean that some residents may continue to be not served well by the Council.

119 A number of new services are about to be put in place which will improve outcomes for customers. These include a Landlord Accreditation Scheme which will go live in January 2010. It aims to target 150 properties in the first year and is closely aligned to best practice. A new Fuel Poverty post has been created with a remit covering fuel poverty and will target priority areas based on information mapping. Extended customer access to services outside of traditional office hours is being re-examined as part of a countywide project and a corporate review of customer service standards is being undertaken.

120 The service is open to learning from others but is not consistently taking opportunities for learning from its own experience and customer feedback. The homelessness service demonstrated its willingness to learn through the peer review carried out by Kerrier Council and has implemented most of their recommendations. There has been learning on Accreditation Schemes from those operated by other Councils and testing of their standard forms (consequently, the proposed scheme is close to best practice). A number of consultants have been commissioned to make recommendations for improvements (such as the report on section 106 processes) and, generally, these have been taken forward. However, a learning culture is not yet embedded and this is primarily demonstrated in the failure to take forward benchmarking. The service does not use valuable information such as performance against service standards, customer feedback or the experience of new staff to support service development. Just over 37 per cent of homelessness 'appeals against decisions' have been reversed in the last three years but the service has not explored these outcomes to identify any themes emerging or learning opportunities. While the service is responsive to external challenge and assistance, there is limited evidence of change and innovation being driven from within the organisation.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 121** In the previous inspection we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. Increasing capacity was being derived from partnership working and a focus on staff resources to address weaknesses. However leadership capacity was more limited, financial capacity was uncertain and there were weaknesses in IT systems.
- 122** In this inspection we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Capacity has been enhanced by management development, a high level of staff commitment and by focusing service and corporate resources to address weaknesses. Capacity is also being increased through partnership working, investment in ICT, effective human resources management and by attracting external funding. Major construction projects proposed for the area could provide significant opportunities for improving housing supply. However, the Council's financial position is fragile and management capacity is reduced by the operational demands and of the service.
- 123** The Council has taken steps to enhance management capacity but this is reduced by operational demands. A three-part leadership-training programme was rolled out in 2008/09 to the top management team and service managers and the Cabinet and two thirds of the Scrutiny Committee have attended the training. The Executive and Assistant Directors are growing in confidence in their leadership of the organisation. The senior management team is settling down well, with a good balance of skills and experience. However, the Executive Director frequently gets drawn into operational issues and some councillors have identified significant workload pressures involved in this role. Group managers are also under considerable pressure as they try to balance strategic management with day-to-day operational duties. Current practice does not clearly assign responsibility for the supervision of operational performance to team leaders. This means that the current structure and ways of working does not have the right balance of delegation to the lowest practicable level to maximise strategic and supervisory capacity.
- 124** The Council is seeking to create additional capacity in key areas. A new Head of Development Control is now in post. This should enhance the Council's knowledge and experience in this area and also provide the leadership and direction to the team (which has been without full time management over past five years). However, capacity to drive improvement in the strategic housing service is reduced because of the need for most of the new manager's time (currently 80 per cent) to be focused on the proposed nuclear power development at Hinkley Point. However, through a Planning Performance Agreement with EDF, the Council has already secured £100,000 which has allowed the appointment of external consultants to deal with major applications associated with Hinkley Point as well as backfilling management capacity lost to the development. The contract with the consultancy used to help the Council on this development includes a clause to capture learning from this experience but plans have yet to be developed to ensure that the service will maximise the benefit from this external learning.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 125** The service is arranging itself to ensure that it is focusing its resources to address service weaknesses. A new appointment has been made to accelerate the production of the Local Development Framework. The Council is in the process of jointly funding (with Taunton Deane and Sedgemoor) the new post of an Empty Properties Officer which will commence early in 2010. In addition, a consultant has been commissioned to assist in addressing weaknesses in the approach to service planning. The governance and management structures have been significantly improved and relationships between officers and members have improved markedly.
- 126** Staff capacity is being increased through effective human resources management. Staff are committed to improving the service and the number of days lost through sickness absence is below average. Workforce planning has improved through a Workforce Development Strategy. This, together with a skills audit of all staff, will be used to inform a corporate training plan which links staff development needs with corporate priorities. The Job Evaluation process is now completed.
- 127** Capacity is being increased corporately to improve progress in the cross-cutting areas. The track record of improvement in the cross-cutting areas has been slow because of the need to prioritise front-line service delivery and service planning. To address this, an Executive Support Team had been created just prior to the inspection to support the senior management team in delivering key areas such as diversity, performance management and value for money (developing a Terms of Reference and future work programme will be its first tasks). This is a key part of the Council's overall improvement programme that has not progressed to date.
- 128** Capacity has been enhanced through a wide range of partnerships and this should continue to develop. This report has previously identified some strong outcomes from existing partnerships. In addition, a pioneer project for 2009/10 (using RIEP funding) will develop the joint delivery of housing services across Somerset and help to create a shared strategic housing service. It is intended to explore options for development and enabling, CBL administration and the housing register, homelessness and housing advice services, strategy (including policy research and development), supporting people and Gypsies and Travellers. Proposals to expand the SWPSHP to involve Taunton Deane have been agreed (although while this offers opportunity it also carried some degree of risk). The Council is leading the Somerset Wide Strategic Housing Integration Project largely because the principle of joint working is relatively advanced in West Somerset. This project has the potential to significantly improve the capacity of the service to tackle outstanding challenges. West Somerset Council is also participating in the re-emerging Somerset County Housing Enablers Group. It is anticipated that this group will look at shared policies and lobbying as well as focusing on the 'single conversation' bidding process with the Homes and Communities Agency.
- 129** The Council's financial position is fragile. Currently, the MTFP shows £62,000 credit at the end of 2008/09 and there is a need for further savings of around £450,000 in 2010/11 (10 per cent of current total spend) and £350,000 in the following year. The Council has identified savings for 2010/11 of £405,000. There is still no answer to the risk of future financial non-viability of the council which has a £12 million debt and associated interest payments on loans (although it is anticipating a significant capital receipt of £9 million in 2010).

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

130 The Council will increase its resources through external funding. For example:

- the tendering process for the county-wide HIA is underway and new contracts are expected to be in place in April 2010 which will bring in approximately £1 million extra funds from other providers;
- the Council received £320,000 RIEP funding which is still being used to support improvements;
- the CSE have secured funding from the Nationwide Foundation to deliver a fuel poverty advice project across Somerset over the next three years;
- the Council has received £95,000 Housing and Planning Delivery Grant which is more than twice what was anticipated; and
- if delivered, the RSS targets for an additional 2,500 residential units could provide between £25-£45 million in developer contributions.

131 Large construction projects proposed in the area could have a major impact on the housing infrastructure. There are major construction projects being discussed including the proposed development at Hinkley Point of a twin-reactor power station. These could yield significant gains for West Somerset in terms of income from planning applications, planning mitigation (such as new units of accommodation required to house the construction workers being left as a housing legacy) and pure community benefit (for example, providing solar panels). The Council will be meeting with EDF in March to agree the level of funding and has engaged expertise in this area to ensure it maximises this opportunity. While this is a significant opportunity, construction projects of this scale involving several thousand workers will require a considerable amount of temporary and permanent accommodation and this could unbalance the housing market if not well planned for.

132 Investment in ICT is supporting service improvement. As part of the introduction of Homefinder Somerset, the Council has been able to introduce a new IT platform which now operates all housing options services. The system is well regarded by officers, is fully integrated with key partners (for CBL) and provides a strong framework for managing services. Similarly, the housing system supporting the private sector housing service is highly regarded by staff for its support and management capability.

Appendix 1 – Progress against previous report recommendations

Table 1 Progress against recommendations

Recommendation	Progress to date
<p>R1: Improve customer access/equality & diversity by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing mechanisms for ongoing consultation (including satisfaction surveys following the delivery of a service) with the local population to produce a robust understanding of the needs/requirements of all residents; • improving access to services through the office, by telephone and on-line and exploring other ways of customer contact and service delivery; • improving translation facilities and access to all council offices; • developing in consultation a comprehensive suite of service standards and making them easily accessible; • considering the need for and benefits of adopting more customer focused opening hours and examine ways to improve access to local people who live remote from offices; • carrying out equality impact assessments on key policies and procedures and reviewing them to ensure they are also customer-focused; and • taking positive steps to embed equality and diversity and a customer focused culture across the organisation for example, through training of staff and councillors, by reviewing and updating the current Equal Opportunities Policy and the Race Equality Scheme and adopting a Disability Equality Scheme and a Gender Equality Scheme and by setting challenging targets and objectives for improving outcomes for the whole community. 	<p>Weak progress</p> <p>Weak progress</p> <p>Strong progress Weak progress</p> <p>No or very limited progress</p> <p>No or very limited progress</p> <p>Weak progress</p>
<p>R2: Improve the quality of the service future plans by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving the understanding of housing need for example, through parish surveys, carrying out a strategic housing land availability assessment and a better understanding of private sector housing conditions; • setting out, in a comprehensive delivery plan, how the 490 units of affordable housing identified in the Housing needs Survey 2003 will be provided by 2009 and establishing a robust monitoring regime to assess progress; • developing an integrated and SMART action plan to underpin actions in all strategies and recommendations arising from this report and other external reviews for example, the consultant's findings in relation to section 106 agreements; 	<p>Recommendation achieved</p> <p>Recommendation achieved</p> <p>Weak progress</p>

Appendix 1 – Progress against previous report recommendations

Recommendation	Progress to date
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ensuring the Local Development Framework process addresses the high threshold level in Minehead, the current on-site proportion of development which comprises affordable housing and the restriction of developer contributions to a particular parish; and developing and implementing an action plan to identify and address the needs of migrant workers and older persons. 	<p>Strong progress</p> <p>No or very limited progress</p>
<p>R3: Improve the use of the existing housing stock by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> developing a more robust approach to dealing with the private rented sector and empty homes; effectively promoting assistance available to home owners and tenants; developing more effective ways of working with the SCHIP; developing a more strategic approach to partnership working with housing associations; reviewing current arrangements for carrying out disabled adaptations in social housing stock; consulting on how the Tenant Incentive Scheme can have more impact; and introducing comprehensive, outcome-focused service standards and targets with the West Somerset Advice Bureau. 	<p>Strong progress/no or very limited progress</p> <p>Weak progress</p> <p>Recommendation achieved</p> <p>Weak progress</p> <p>Strong progress</p> <p>No or very limited progress</p> <p>No or very limited progress</p>
<p>R4: Improve value for money by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> developing a comprehensive understanding of how costs compare; developing a value for money strategy that includes challenging targets and cascading these to teams and managers through performance management and service planning systems; routinely reviewing service cost alongside service performance; improving the approach to procurement through a procurement strategy; demonstrating the value for money provided by partnerships; and improving budget management arrangements. 	<p>No or very limited progress</p> <p>No or very limited progress</p> <p>No or very limited progress</p> <p>No or very limited progress</p> <p>Weak progress</p> <p>Strong progress</p>
<p>R5: Improve performance management by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> broadening membership of the Affordable Housing Group and establishing their primary role as that of managing the delivery of all aspects of affordable housing with detailed and timely reports to the Performance Committee from this group; developing comprehensive service plans which embody action points from action plans; ensuring that a comprehensive report on performance against all targets (national PIs, Local PIs, service standards and service plans) is developed and considered by the Corporate Management Team and the Performance 	<p>Recommendation achieved</p> <p>Weak progress</p> <p>Weak progress</p>

Appendix 1 – Progress against previous report recommendations

Recommendation	Progress to date
<p>Committee on a monthly basis until performance meets the target set out in the draft Corporate Improvement Plan;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• providing detailed and regular reports to the West Somerset Housing Forum on all key aspects of the housing service;• developing a comprehensive risk register for the housing service and establishing proposals to address those risks; and• implementing robust systems and processes to ensure the collection of accurate and reliable performance information.	<p>Weak progress</p> <p>Weak progress</p> <p>Weak progress</p>

Appendix 2 – Performance indicators

PI	2007/08	2008/09
No of private sector vacant dwellings that are returned into occupation or demolished	18	6
Number of homes improved through the use of disabled facilities grants	59	66
Average no of weeks spent in B&B by families	3.8	3.5
Number of families in B&B at 31st March	3	0
Number of families in other temporary accommodation at 31st March	30	17
Number of households living in temporary accommodation at 31st March	33	17
Number of homelessness applications	244	181
Number of homelessness acceptances	43	18
Number of people sleeping rough	-	0
Speed of processing - new HB/CTB claims	32.7	18.7
Speed of processing - changes of circumstances for HB/CTB claims	13.7	5.07
Speed of processing all benefit claims -the 'right time indicator'	n/a	8.1
New homes built on previously developed land	45.89%	67.5%
Planning appeals allowed	19%	0%
Processing of planning applications: Major applications	60%	33%
Score against a quality of planning service checklist	88.8%	88.8%
Net additional homes provided	146	120
Number of affordable homes delivered (nos rented shown in brackets)	25 (8)	29 (13)
Percentage of affordable housing being achieved on qualifying sites	25%	25%
Number of homes achieved through s106 agreements	12	16
Number of grant-free affordable housing completions	15	6
Number of homes completed on rural exceptions sites	0	0

Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

Before going on site and during our visit, we reviewed documents as requested on our standard document request list and a number of additional documents which the Council and stakeholders felt would be helpful in reaching our judgements.

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 the quality of the service. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about how the strategic housing service works, in practice. These included partner focus groups and visits to various neighbourhoods and housing schemes.

We met and interviewed a range of people involved in delivering the service and carrying out related corporate functions. We also interviewed the portfolio holders for housing and planning.

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