

Re-inspection of Strategic Housing Services

South Kesteven District Council

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Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

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

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

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

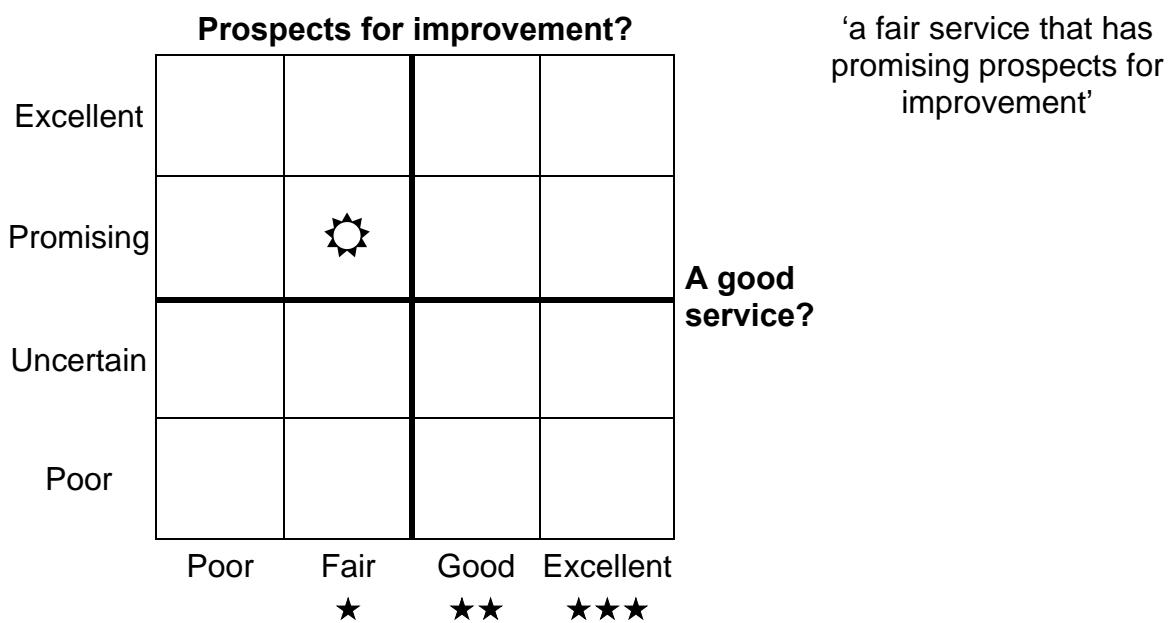
Summary

- 1 South Kesteven District Council is in South West Lincolnshire, in the east of England. The population of the area is 127,700 of which 1.6 per cent are from minority ethnic communities. On the index of multiple deprivation for all districts, South Kesteven ranks at 256 of 354 local authorities in England.
- 2 The Council comprises 58 councillors with the Conservatives in overall control. It employs over 600 staff across all services.
- 3 The Strategic Housing Services inspection covered strategy and enabling, homelessness and housing needs and private sector housing. The revenue budget for delivering the service is £655,000 for 2006/07 and there is a capital budget of £350,000 for grants in the private sector.

Scoring the service

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

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

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

- 5 We have assessed the Strategic Housing Service as fair because:
 - access to services is focused on meeting customers' requirements and is supported by a range of informative and easy to read leaflets;
 - there is a sound strategic approach to diversity with effective partnership work to identify and improve services to meet diverse needs;
 - the Housing Strategy is comprehensive setting out clear priorities for the Service;
 - the Council is working well in partnership to deliver creditable levels of affordable housing;
 - there is effective partnership working around preventing homelessness and meeting the needs of vulnerable households;
 - temporary accommodation for homeless households is of a good standard and limited use is made of bed and breakfast; and
 - the Council ensures that resources are aligned to delivering priorities.
- 6 However, a number of areas require improvement.
 - Information on the services available is not comprehensive or consistently available, and customer feedback is not informing service development and improvement.
 - The information on the customer profile is limited, and monitoring of services by diversity is not effectively used to identify service improvements or to demonstrate that services are delivered equitably.
 - Services are not systematically tailored to meet the needs of vulnerable customers.
 - Homelessness prevention work is under developed and the arrangements for homeless households to access permanent secure tenancies through the Allocations Scheme are not satisfactory.
 - There is limited analysis of homelessness trends to inform service improvement and the impact of partnership working is not captured and evaluated.
 - The Council's strategic approach to private sector housing is under developed, there has been limited action to improve private sector stock condition or to bring empty properties back into use, and enforcement activities are largely reactive.
 - Applicants for disabled facilities grants have received an inconsistent service subject to delays.

- The mandatory licensing scheme for Houses in Multiple Occupation is not fully implemented.
- The Council cannot demonstrate value for money in delivering its strategic housing services. It does not know the detailed costs of providing its services and there has not been any benchmarking of costs.
- Procurement is not yet embedded as a means of delivering value for money.

7 The Council has promising prospects for improvement because:

- the Council has clear priorities for the Housing Service;
- significant improvements have been delivered in some service areas;
- there is a robust system for monitoring and managing performance;
- the Council is responsive to external challenge and actively seeks to learn from others;
- the Council has the capacity and financial resources to deliver improved services;
- partnership working is used to increase the capacity to deliver services; and
- the Council has successfully attracted external resources to support service improvements.

8 However, we identified the following barriers to improvement.

- Progress in delivering improvements in some areas has been limited.
- Performance is not improving across all service areas.
- Some service weaknesses are not adequately addressed by improvement plans.
- Performance indicators are not sufficiently targeted to effectively manage all areas of performance.
- Partnerships have not been evaluated to assess the added value they bring.

Recommendations

9 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation
<p>R1 Strengthen the focus on customers by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>ensuring that comprehensive information for all services is consistently available to customers;</i> • <i>using feedback from customers to develop and improve services;</i> • <i>continuing to build up information on the customer profile, cross-referencing it with other sources, and making it readily available to all staff;</i> • <i>using the monitoring of services by diversity to demonstrate that services are delivered equitably and identify service improvements; and</i> • <i>using the information collected on user's diverse needs to develop systematic tailoring of services to meet these.</i>

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to give customers clear expectations about the services they receive;
- to allow services to respond more effectively to customer needs;
- to ensure services are provided equitably and sensitively and in response to known needs; and
- to improve customer satisfaction.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2007.

² Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high costs is over 5 per cent.

Recommendation

R2 Strengthen the homelessness and housing needs service by:

- *reviewing the Allocations Scheme as a matter of urgency to ensure that homeless households, owed a duty by the Council, can properly and equitably access permanent accommodation as secure tenants;*
- *increasing homelessness prevention work and maximising the outcomes from partnership working; and*
- *monitoring and analysing homelessness trends to inform service development.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to ensure that homeless households can access secure accommodation on an equitable basis, which is clear and transparent, and in accordance with the relevant Codes of Guidance;
- to increase the prevention of homelessness through improved levels of advice and assistance; and
- to respond effectively to any changes in housing needs and homelessness.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2007.

Recommendation

R3 Strengthen the private sector housing service by:

- *providing a strategic framework for delivering the service through the development of the Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy;*
- *addressing non-decency in the private sector, ensuring that all available resources are spent and targeted appropriately at the most vulnerable households;*
- *developing a proactive approach to enforcement activities, including identifying and inspecting HMOs;*
- *developing a strategic approach, and taking action to bring empty properties back into use; and*
- *delivering a customer focused, consistent and timely service to applicants requiring disabled facilities grants, with clear information available about the level of service that can be expected.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to deliver private sector housing services in a co-ordinated way;
- to make best use of resources to assist vulnerable households;
- to give landlords and private rented tenants clearer expectations about the Council's role in private sector housing;
- to make more homes available to meet housing needs in the district; and
- to allow customers applying for disabled facilities grants to be aware of the service they should receive.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2006.

Recommendation

R4 Improve value for money and integrate it into working practices by:

- *systematically collecting and analysing the costs of delivering services;*
- *comparing the costs and quality of services with others; and*
- *embedding procurement as a means of achieving value for money.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to make more effective use of resources and demonstrate how services deliver value for money.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2007.

Recommendation

R5 Strengthen improvement planning and performance management by:

- *ensuring that improvement actions are identified that tackle all areas of weaknesses; and*
- *assessing the local performance indicators collected, revising or introducing new ones as appropriate, so that critical areas of success are measured in all service areas.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to improve all areas of service; and
- to manage performance more effectively.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2006.

Recommendation

R6 Maximise the additional capacity brought by partnership working by:

- *evaluating the added value brought by working with partners and identifying where improvements can be made.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to effectively target the Council's own resources in supporting partnership work, and to identify ways of increasing outcomes for customers.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2007.

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

Dates of inspection: 17 July to 21 July 2006.

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Report

Context

The locality

- 11 South Kesteven is in South West Lincolnshire, in the east of England. It is a large rural area with four main towns and over 80 villages. The population of the area is 127,700 of which 70 per cent live in the towns. 1.6 per cent of the population are from minority ethnic communities. The predominant group is the established Chinese community, although there is also a growing population of residents from some European countries, for example Portugal and the Baltic States.
- 12 Unemployment stands at 2.1 per cent at March 2006 compared with the national average of 3.1 per cent. The average gross weekly pay in South Kesteven is £429.80 which is below the English average of £518.70. Within the district, the principal sources of employment are the public sector, agriculture, engineering, manufacturing, haulage and storage, service industries and food processing/packaging, although many residents commute from the district to the nearby cities of Nottingham and Peterborough.
- 13 On the index of multiple deprivation for all districts, South Kesteven ranks at 256 of 354 local authorities in England. Of its 34 wards, one ranks amongst the 10 per cent most deprived wards in the country and six wards are in the 10 per cent least deprived. There are pockets of rural deprivation, especially towards the east of the district in the fenland region.

The Council

- 14 The Council comprises 58 councillors. The Conservatives have overall control with 34 seats. Currently, a Leader and cabinet of six councillors govern the business of the Council.
- 15 The political structure is supported at officer level through the Chief Executive, three Strategic Directors and five Corporate Heads of Service. These arrangements are following a recent restructure and at the time of inspection a number of these posts were still to be appointed to.
- 16 The Council employs over 600 staff and its overall General Fund budget for the year 2006/07 is £14.455 million. General fund reserves were £4.657 million with a balance of £3.099 million. The Housing Revenue Account budget is about £34 million with reserves of over £9 million and balances of over £4 million.

The service

17 The Strategic Housing Service is responsible for:

- housing strategy and enabling the provision of affordable housing;
- homelessness and housing needs; and
- private sector housing.

The services are delivered by the Housing Solutions Team, which is part of the Sustainable Communities Division. The revenue budget for delivering the service is £655,000 for 2006/07 and there is a capital budget of £350,000 for grants in the private sector.

18 There are about 55,000 households in the district. 76 per cent of these are owner occupied, 12 percent are rented from the Council, 2 per cent are rented from Registered Social Landlords and 10 per cent are privately rented. 70 per cent of stock has been built since 1945 and a recent stock condition survey suggests that 80 per cent of private homes meet the Decent Homes Standard. It also shows that 23 per cent of vulnerable households live in non-decent properties. Unfitness levels are at 2.7 per cent which is below the national average with unfitness concentrated in the private rented sector, pre-1919 properties and converted flats.

19 Demand for affordable housing is high. There were 2,800 applicants on the Housing Register at March 2006. House prices are rising faster than national and regional averages. The proposed Lincolnshire Structure Plan allocates provision for 9,200 properties in South Kesteven for the period 2001/21. The housing needs survey in 2005 identified that 646 new affordable homes were required annually to meet housing need in the district.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

20 The Council's vision is:

'To ensure that the residents of South Kesteven are proud of their district and their council.'

This is underpinned by five core values:

- performing by resourcing and delivering the Council's priorities;
- respecting all residents and their particular needs;
- informing all residents and enabling them to become involved;
- developing our communities; and
- enabling staff to unlock their full potential.

21 The Council has identified four ambitions to deliver its vision and against which priorities for investment are assessed:

- community safety;
- economic development;
- healthy environment; and
- community engagement.

22 The Housing Strategy 2005/09 sets out three priorities for housing. These are:

- affordable homes within sustainable communities;
- prevention of homelessness and the promotion of choice; and
- delivering decent homes in the public and private sectors.

23 The Council has set its ambitions in line with the priorities agreed between central and local government, and within the context of the agreed local priorities for the district as developed through the Community Plan. The Housing Strategy priorities support the delivery of the Council's ambitions and clearly reflect the national priorities for housing.

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

Access and customer care

- 24 In our previous inspection we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths. There were no clear service standards in place and limited ways of assessing customer satisfaction and obtaining feedback. There was little customer involvement in the service. However, the Council provided reasonable access for service users and a clear complaints procedure was consistently applied.
- 25 In this inspection we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Access to services is a high priority of the Council with investment resulting in improved levels of corporate access. Access to the services provided by Housing Solutions is geared to meet customers' requirements and attractive leaflets and information on most services have been introduced. Corporate service standards for access and some service standards for Housing Solutions are in place and satisfaction surveys are being carried out. However, information on the services is not comprehensive or consistently available, there is little service user involvement in developing services and standards, and monitoring of the standards for Housing Solutions to assess performance has only just started. Satisfaction surveys are not analysed to inform service development and improvement.
- 26 Access to services is a high priority of the Council and a strategic approach has been developed through the corporate access and modernisation agenda. This is resulting in major investment in the service to deliver improved, and customer focused, reception facilities in Grantham, with modern telephone answering services, supported by the development of a customer relationship management system (CRM).
- 27 Access to the service in person is made as easy as possible through four well located offices throughout the district. The main offices at Grantham are supported by three area housing offices at Stamford, Bourne and Market Deeping. Housing services can be accessed from all these offices and there is a housing options officer working from the Bourne office providing the service for the Eastern part of the district. Appointments are offered for homelessness interviews at any office and home visits are available for those who are unable to attend one of the offices.

- 28 The offices provide a welcoming environment for customers, are accessible for wheelchairs and parents with pushchairs and have minicom/loop systems available for the hard of hearing. The Council has assessed that they meet the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). The Grantham office was undergoing major refurbishment at the time of inspection with a new customer services reception nearing completion. The design and facilities which will be on offer are to a high standard. The remaining offices have satisfactory facilities but are not well signed from the outside. A range of leaflets were on display but were not consistently provided and varied from office to office. The complaints leaflets were not on display but were available when asked for. This inconsistency in the provision of information means that customers visiting the offices experience different levels of service.
- 29 Telephone access is readily available through the Council's call centre, although direct line numbers are also available. The short messaging service for customers with mobile phones has been introduced and has been successful as a means of contact. The Council is part way through rolling out its CRM system with some services now benefiting from this. The Housing Solutions Service is not yet part of the system. The aim is to satisfactorily deal with 80 per cent of enquiries at the first point of contact. Performance is currently around 35 per cent. To improve access to the homelessness service the Council has introduced a homelessness duty officer sitting in the customer service team. This allows telephone callers and customers visiting the office to be quickly referred and their enquiries dealt with in an appropriate way.
- 30 Arrangements for the homelessness out-of-hours service work effectively. Calls are initially taken by the Care Centre and referred to a homelessness duty officer who takes appropriate action and arranges temporary accommodation where necessary. However, the out-of-hours emergency number is not clearly displayed outside all of the offices, which limits access to the service.
- 31 Access to services for customers who do not have English as their first language is satisfactory. Language Line is available, although this is not consistently advertised in all the offices, and usage of the service is limited. Access has recently been enhanced by the introduction of a county-wide initiative called 'Talk Back'. This provides direct access to a telephone answering service in a number of languages. The service makes arrangements on behalf of the customer to access the required service from the relevant council.
- 32 Customer care training has not been comprehensive throughout the organisation. Service sections can request or arrange customer care training and the Council corporately is a member of the Institute of Customer Services. However, there is not a corporate approach to ensuring that all staff have customer care training appropriate to their position within the organisation.

- 33 There are appropriate corporate service standards for access to services which are monitored. Response times for telephone calls, letters and emails are monitored on an ongoing basis and other standards are monitored through mystery shopping exercises. For the first quarter of 2006/07 performance for the Housing Solutions Service was strong with 94 per cent achieved for letters, 100 per cent for emails and 99.6 per cent of appointments made and kept. A similar level of performance was achieved for the last two quarters of 2005/06 when the new team was established. Telephone answering within response times on a corporate basis is also strong.
- 34 There are a range of informative and attractive leaflets for the Housing Solutions Service, but these do not cover all aspects of the services offered, and there has been little involvement of service users in their development. There are leaflets on the housing advice and homelessness service, and also for private rented tenants and landlords. Service standards have also been developed but these relate mainly to the housing advice and homelessness service, and monitoring performance against these has only just started. There is no information available on private sector grants for disabled adaptations or improving private sector stock, and no promotion of this service. Service users have not been effectively engaged in identifying information needs or the service standards they can expect. However, the leaflets that are in place are easy to read and are attractively designed in accordance with corporate branding. The leaflets include straplines to inform customers that they can be offered in the community languages and in other formats.
- 35 The website is comprehensive and fairly easy to navigate. There is an option to have each page read out or to have in translated into a number of languages, although the availability of these options is in small print and could be missed by customers.
- 36 The use of customer surveys is not comprehensive and there is limited analysis to inform service improvement. Customer surveys are carried out in a number of areas but their effectiveness is hindered by low response rates and they are not always capturing the most useful information on which to assess the service. A quarterly homelessness survey was recently carried out. 124 surveys were sent out resulting in a 21 per cent response rate. This showed that applicants were generally satisfied with the service offered. It also highlighted that applicants with a disability were more likely to say that they waited too long for their application to be determined. However, the survey information did not allow for this to be drilled down to enable a better understanding of the issues. A survey is also carried out following disabled facilities work. This results in fairly high response rates but is based mainly around the quality of the work and does not pick up some of the broader issues. The results from these are recorded and individual areas of concern addressed but they are not being used to identify service improvements. Surveys in private sector enforcement work are not being consistently carried out and are not monitored with the purpose of improving services.

- 37** The Council is active in seeking to improve customer feedback as a result of learning from its survey work. New surveys have been developed for the housing advice and homelessness service based on a three staged approach, each aimed at gathering different levels of information covering access, customer care and satisfaction with service standards. These surveys started in July and the results will be analysed on a quarterly basis and used to inform service development.
- 38** There is a sound corporate complaints procedure which operates effectively. Where customers are not satisfied with the outcome following a complaint there is an escalation procedure to ensure that a comprehensive and proper investigation takes place. The complaints system asks officers to identify any policy or procedural changes that may be needed to ensure that learning from complaints is encouraged. Complaints are recorded and monitored centrally. However, performance is not currently reported to Members, although this is planned with effect from August along with performance against service standards.
- 39** Three complaints have been received in Housing Solutions since January and all were responded to within the set timescales. The complainants received full explanations which addressed the issues raised. Satisfaction surveys are sent out to complainants on a quarterly basis but these are not being collated, analysed and reported on.

Diversity

- 40** In our previous inspection we found few strengths in this area. There was lack of awareness in identifying and addressing the needs of diverse groups, with no systematic gathering of information and no consistent approach to ensuring that access to services was equitable.
- 41** In this inspection we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The information on the customer profile, although increasing, remains limited. The monitoring of services by diversity is not effectively used to identify service improvement or to demonstrate that services are delivered equitably. Services are not systematically tailored to meet the needs of vulnerable customers. However, there is a sound strategic approach to diversity supported by arrangements to deliver operational improvements, and the Council has progressed to level 2 of the Equalities Standard. There is effective partnership working to identify diverse needs and improve services.

42 Information on the customer profile is limited but the Council is taking action to build this up. Information on diverse needs in relation to age, gender, ethnicity and disability, is being gathered through the CRM system when customers contact the Council. At the time of inspection information had been gathered on about 12 per cent of the population through this process. The introduction of the monitoring was advertised in the press explaining why these questions are being asked, and if customers refuse to answer the questions a follow-up letter with the survey questions is sent. This explains the reasons why the information is needed and asks the customer to complete and return the survey form. In addition, the questions were sent out with the concessionary travel card scheme which resulted in a good response rate. However, this information has not yet been added to the CRM data base.

43 Information on diverse needs is collected for most, but not all, of the services provided by Housing Solutions but this is not being systematically monitored and used to inform service development and improvement. The Housing Needs Survey gathered useful information at a general level across the district. Diversity information is collected for applicants registering on the Housing Register, seeking housing advice and applying as homeless. Satisfaction surveys also capture diversity information. However, diversity information is not collected on service users in private sector grants and enforcement activities. The information that is available on diverse needs is not currently cross-referenced with, or added to the CRM data base. The lack of co-ordination and analysis of the information collected limits the Council's ability to develop services to respond to particular needs and means that it cannot demonstrate that services are provided equitably.

44 The Council is carrying out Equalities Impact Assessments to assess whether its services are meeting diverse needs and are provided equitably, but the effectiveness of these is hindered by the lack of detailed information on the customer profile. Training on carrying out the assessments has been delivered to responsible managers and guidance issued. Targets have been set to carry out impact assessments on both existing and new policies and strategies, with the aim of completing these by December 2007 in order to assist in reaching Level 3 of the Equalities Standard. An initial impact assessment has been carried out for the Housing Strategy, which determined that a further detailed assessment is required. The initial assessment highlighted the difficulties with the lack of comprehensive information, and recognises that this needs to be increased before the next stage of the assessment takes place. This approach, although not delivering tangible outcomes at present, is developing the foundations which will assist in demonstrating whether services are being delivered equitably, provide sound information on which to develop service improvements and enable services to be tailored to meet diverse needs.

- 45 The Council does not tailor its services to meet diverse needs in a systematic way but there are some examples of it responding to the needs of vulnerable tenants. Assistance is given to vulnerable customers to complete disabled facilities grant applications, although limited staff resources has meant that this has not been consistently offered. Arrangements are made to take interpreters on home visits where this is needed. Arrangements are also in place to give extra support to young people and guide them through the process should they present as homeless.
- 46 The Council has developed a sound strategic approach to diversity across the organisation through its Generic Equalities Scheme. This was revised and approved in March 2005 and sets the strategic framework for developing the service with an action plan to achieve the various levels of the Equalities Standard in Local Government. The Council assessed itself as achieving Level 2 of the Standard in March 2006 and obtained an external view from DIALOG to this effect. A target date of December 2007 has been set for achieving Level 3. The Generic Equalities Scheme is scheduled for review later this year as part of ensuring compliance with the Disability Equality Duty which comes into force in December 2006.
- 47 The work on diversity has recently been strengthened by the establishment of the Equalities and Diversity Steering Group made up of representatives from Members, Strategic Directors and Corporate Heads of Service. Staff representatives from the black and minority ethnic (BME) communities are also invited to sit on the group, although there is only one staff member currently. The group is responsible for the strategic direction of the organisation. The implementation of the strategy is through the Equalities Performance Management Group which focuses on operational issues and would determine for example, how monitoring is introduced and carried out.
- 48 A Diversity Champion has been appointed at a Member level whose role is to provide an overview, and ensure that all parts of the organisation are progressing in this area of work. Equality and Diversity work is monitored by the Engagement Development and Scrutiny Panel who assess progress against the Generic Equalities Scheme and receive the minutes of the various groups tasked with taking the agenda forward.
- 49 Diversity is not fully embedded throughout the organisation as a way of working, but action is being taken to address this. Mandatory equalities awareness training started in November 2005 and most staff have now completed this. The training is also provided for Members and any Member who wishes to sit on the Development and Scrutiny Panels must have undertaken it. The training is evaluated and the feedback has been positive. However, ways of assessing the impact on customers as a result of increasing awareness and embedding diversity are not in place.
- 50 The workforce is not representative of the communities it serves with 0.9 per cent from BME communities. Targets have been set to increase the percentage and adverts for vacancies are placed in publications and areas which may attract applicants from particular communities.

- 51** The Council has developed initiatives to try and engage with under represented groups in the community, but has had limited success in involving them in identifying their service needs and developing services accordingly. Local Forums which meet across the district encourage attendance from under represented groups but with limited success, although attendance at meetings is growing. Some work to engage with young people has been carried out through the 'YELLS' scheme but there have been limited outcomes. However, a youth representative sits on one of the Local Forums. There has been limited work with disability groups and the Council is now considering county-wide consultation exercises using government funding. A data base of agencies who work with under represented groups has been established county-wide through a project funded by the DCLG for capacity building which will assist in developing work in this area.
- 52** There is effective partnership working to take forward diversity issues in the district through the Multi Cultural Forum. This was set up in May 2005 and is attended by statutory and voluntary agencies including the Police, the Primary Care trust, the CAB and community workers. It has not been possible to involve representatives from community groups and the Forum has, therefore, focused on identifying ways of engaging with the various communities. This has included council officers attending the local college when English speaking classes are being run to explain the services that the Council can offer and to listen to the concerns of the communities. The high proportion of Portuguese people settling in the area was identified through these means. A poster explaining the Council's services was produced and distributed with a number to contact for any enquiries. This had a good response which enabled the Council to identify the most commonly used languages, which the poster was then translated into and distributed to appropriate venues including the two Portuguese cafes in Grantham.
- 53** The Multi Cultural Forum was also involved in developing the hate incident reporting procedure and is currently exploring ways of increasing the information on migrant workers in the area. The Council is exploring joining with other councils to carry out survey work. A representative from the Gangmasters Licensing Authority recently attended a Forum meeting, which was extended to Members and other parts of the Council, to talk about issues relating to migrant workers. Opportunities for information sharing have been identified, particularly in relation to where migrant workers live, as many occupy Houses in Multiple Occupation which may not be known to the Council.
- 54** The Council works in partnership to address domestic violence and hate incidents. Work to raise the profile of domestic violence has been carried out through a forum run by the Crime Reduction and Disorder Partnership, and through leaflets developed through the Kesteven Forum on domestic violence. Victims of domestic violence who approach the Council for help are offered different housing options according to their circumstances and wishes. However, information on the level of incidents is limited as the figures kept by the Police are for all violent crime and the Council does not collect figures across services.

- 55** A hate incident policy has been developed and complaints are investigated jointly with the Police where the complainant is happy with this. The policy and reporting forms are available on the Council's website. Six cases have been reported to the Community Safety team since April 2006 when monitoring began. However, there are no common monitoring procedures with partners which means the Council cannot be clear on the overall level of incidents.
- 56** There has been positive work around Gypsy and Travellers' issues. A specific part of the Housing Needs Survey in 2005 identified the housing needs of this group. This showed that more permanent and transitional pitches are required and the Council is now seeking suitable sites for possible provision. Consideration is also being given to joint funding a post on a county-wide basis so that a co-ordinated approach can be adopted.

Housing Strategy and enabling

- 57** In our previous inspection we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths. The housing strategy was under developed and the Council lacked robust information about housing needs and stock condition. There was poor performance in delivering affordable homes.
- 58** In this inspection we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. The strategic approach to housing has been strengthened based on sound information around housing needs and stock condition. The Housing Strategy has been assessed as Fit for Purpose. The Council is now delivering creditable levels of affordable housing and has arrangements to secure affordable homes in the future. However, there has been less progress in delivering affordable homes in rural areas, and the provision of supported housing needs is not part of a co-ordinated framework.
- 59** The Housing Strategy has been assessed as Fit for Purpose by the Government Office for the East Midlands and is providing the strategic framework for the service. The Housing Strategy sets clear priorities, reflecting both national and local priorities, identifies the resources needed to deliver the priorities, and has an action plan to show how these will be delivered.
- 60** The Housing Strategy has been developed over the last year by the Council with external consultancy support. There was extensive consultation with partners and stakeholders on the strategy through a series of forums and events, including Registered Social Landlords (RSLs), landlords in the private sector and parish councils. There were articles in the residents' newsletter and information and a questionnaire on the Council's website. The consultation exercises showed broad agreement for the priorities in the Housing Strategy and in particular the need for more affordable housing.

- 61** The Council has a sound information base about housing needs and stock condition which informs the development of its strategic approach. A Housing Needs Study and Private Sector Stock Condition Survey were carried out in 2005, and the information gathered through these underpins the Housing Strategy. Arrangements to keep the information up-to-date have been strengthened by additional research capacity in the Housing Solution Team, which is allowing analysis of other sources of needs information such as the Housing Register and the Land Registry records. Housing market analysis is planned and the Council is contributing to funding to carry out needs assessment with neighbouring councils in the Peterborough housing market area.
- 62** The information on housing needs in rural areas is not comprehensive. The housing needs survey provided some information at a parish level. A parish housing needs survey has been carried out in one of the larger villages by an RSL, and the Council is assisting two parishes with their parish plans in relation to affordable housing needs. However, as rural housing needs are often hidden, the lack of detailed information limits to ability of the Council to direct and prioritise schemes.
- 63** The Council is working in partnership to deliver its strategic housing priorities. Housing, and in particular the provision of affordable housing, is a key priority of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and the Community Strategy. A Housing Implementation Group has been set up as a sub-group of the LSP to deliver its housing priorities. The group, which includes RSLs, private developers, resident association representatives, Social Services and other agencies, is currently focused at a strategic level on delivering affordable housing and increasing the level of floating support in the area.
- 64** The Council has been a member of the Welland Partnership for a number of years, which has partnership arrangements across a range of council services. Joint working through this resulted in the shared private sector renewal strategy and also the development of a Section 106 Protocol for affordable housing. More recently the Council has joined in the partnership arrangements for the County and is now active in the Lincolnshire Housing Forum and a number of its sub-groups. This has also enabled access to a number of joint funding initiatives, for example around homelessness prevention.

65 The Council has a clear commitment to the provision of affordable housing, and increasing numbers of affordable homes are being delivered. In 2005 it agreed affordable housing as a Priority A, which means that significant investment is required to achieve step change. Additional capacity for the enabling role was created through a dedicated post, as part of the restructuring for strategic housing services. Resources to support the delivery of affordable housing have been increased by the provision of Council owned land to RSL partners at nil cost. A commitment has been given that 50 per cent of the net capital receipt will be used for affordable housing should the large scale voluntary transfer of the stock proceed. The remaining 50 per cent will be used for sustaining communities work. Receipts from Right to Buy sales of the Council's stock are ring fenced for housing purposes and have historically been used to invest in the maintenance of the stock. These are currently being held and their use will be determined when the outcome of the stock transfer decision is known.

66 Resources for affordable housing have also been increased through successful bids for funding through the Approved Development programme (ADP). For 2006 to 2008, £6.6 million was awarded which will deliver 156 new affordable homes, including an extra care scheme of 34 flats.

67 The Council is successfully using Section 106 Agreements to deliver affordable homes. The current planning requirement on developments is for 31 per cent affordable housing on sites of 25 dwellings or more. This is based on the findings of the previous housing needs survey. The housing needs survey carried out in 2005 identified that 646 affordable homes were needed each year to meet housing needs in the district. Based on this the current proposals, as part of developing the Local Development Framework, is for 50 per cent affordable housing on sites of 15 or more dwellings in urban areas and two or more in rural areas. These proposals are currently out for consultation as part of the planning process.

68 In 2005/06 the Council achieved 24 per cent affordable housing on sites eligible for Section 106 Agreements, which is an improvement on previous years. Historically the Council has not actively pursued Section 106 Agreements as a means of delivering affordable housing, and previous developments and some ongoing developments have low requirements for affordable housing, which impacts on the current figures. The Council seeks provision on-site for affordable housing but accepts commuted sums if appropriate. There is currently £684,050 negotiated as commuted sums of which £415,000 is committed and £262,500 has been received.

69 Monitoring arrangements for the delivery of schemes do not include any assessment of how developments compare in terms of value for money. For example, between those which are provided with grant aid, and those that can be developed without grant but with perhaps free land. The monitoring sheets used have been amended to show the funding streams so that the Council is in a position to carry out some analysis. This would enable the Council to develop its value for money approach in respect of enabling affordable housing.

- 70** The Council is proactive in identifying how affordable housing will be delivered in future. Planning applications are monitored by housing so that potential sites and Section 106 Agreements for affordable housing are identified. Section 106 Agreements are tracked to ensure that the affordable housing requirements are met and the number of affordable housing units negotiated is monitored as a local indicator. By the end of 2005/06, 363 affordable housing units had been negotiated and planned for future years.
- 71** The Council is in the process of identifying and assessing its own land bank for use as affordable housing schemes. The larger and easier to develop sites have been identified and RSL partners are carrying out feasibility studies on these. This includes some exception sites in rural areas. The land will be given to RSLs at nil cost and may be further supported by grant through the ADP or commuted sums depending on the costs of development.
- 72** There is effective joint and partnership working to deliver affordable housing. Housing and Planning Services work closely together to bring sites forward for development and negotiate Section 106 Agreements. Work with RSL partners has been formalised through a Partnership Agreement. Five RSLs are signed up to this but more are interested in joining. The agreement provides the framework in which the parties work together. A Section 106 Protocol is being developed to reflect the current arrangements, although the principles in the Section 106 Protocol developed through the Welland partnership are still followed. Working arrangements with developers are also improving, with a number contacting the Council in advance of any planning applications to discuss the Council's requirements and work towards accommodating these.
- 73** The impact of the Council's work in enabling affordable housing is a significant increase in the number of affordable homes delivered compared to previous years. In 2005/06, 112 homes were achieved against a target of 80, an increase from 50 delivered in 2004/05 and considerably lower numbers prior to this. In 2006/07, 44 affordable homes had been completed from April to July. Annual targets of 100, 150 and 160 have been set for 2006/09. The homes provided are a mix of rented and shared ownership on a split of about 60:40. The build is phased so that they are completed at regular intervals throughout the development programme.
- 74** The Council has enabled some affordable housing developments in rural areas but homes have not yet been delivered on rural exception sites. Planning applications have been submitted on three exception sites and the Council is now actively pursuing these.
- 75** The approach to providing supported housing through the enabling programme is not fully developed, and is hindered by the lack of prioritisation of supported housing needs through the County Council's Supporting People Programme. Supported housing needs were identified as part of the development of the Housing Strategy but these are not prioritised. RSL partners have difficulty in proposing and developing schemes because of the lack of clarity over the revenue funding from the Supporting People Programme and what type of schemes would receive support.

76 However, some supported housing schemes have been delivered. A supported housing scheme in Grantham for young people has been developed by an RSL partner. An extra care scheme is also being developed following work with the Health Service to identify needs. This involves demolishing an existing sheltered scheme and provision of a new scheme with extra care for older people. The Council recognises the difficulties with the Supporting People funding and is exploring ways of securing supported housing without relying on it. However, without a clear and co-ordinated framework which prioritises needs there is a risk that resources are not targeted at those most in need.

77 The Council is responsive to meeting supported housing needs on an individual case basis. There is a multi-agency Social Care Group, which meets regularly to identify, and find ways of meeting, specific housing needs. The group includes Social Services, Health and RSLs and in particular looks at cases where the need cannot be met through a disabled facilities grant. Five new homes have been designed and built to meet specific client requirements.

Homelessness and housing needs

78 In our previous inspection we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths. Housing advice and the approach to preventing homelessness was under developed. There was no supported temporary accommodation for vulnerable homeless people. However, the standard of temporary accommodation was good and the rent deposit scheme had been established to assist in preventing homelessness.

79 In this inspection we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The Council has a sound strategic approach to homelessness. It has initiatives in place and works well in partnership to prevent homelessness and meet the needs of vulnerable groups. There is limited use of Bed and Breakfast and the standard of temporary accommodation is generally good. However, homelessness prevention work is under developed and the arrangements for homeless households to access secure tenancies are not satisfactory. There is limited analysis of homelessness trends to inform service improvement and the impact of partnership working is not captured and evaluated.

80 The Council delivers its homelessness and housing needs service within a strategic framework. The Homelessness Strategy 2003/06 was developed through the Welland Partnership and sets out the key themes for the service. The Council is currently part of the Lincolnshire County Housing Group responsible for developing the revised county-wide homelessness strategy for 2007/10. Need mapping exercises are currently being carried out and consultation events are planned. The strategy is due to be in place from April 2007.

81 The strategic approach is supported through the South Kesteven Homelessness Forum, which is a multi-agency group meeting quarterly, responsible for ensuring progress against the strategic aims and objectives and identifying areas of concern. For example, how to meet the housing needs of 25 to 60 year olds who often fall outside the priority categories. The Forum has also recently been involved with the review of the rent deposit scheme.

82 The allocations policy is not being effectively used as a strategic tool to meet the housing needs in the district. The allocation policy assesses and prioritises housing need to ensure that allocations are made to those with the highest needs. However, although the Council records the number of lettings that are made to existing tenants transferring homes, and to applicants on the Housing Register, there is not robust monitoring and analysis to show any trends, and allow an assessment as to whether the policy continues to meet the potentially changing housing needs of the area.

83 The arrangements for homeless households to access secure tenancies through the allocations scheme are not satisfactory. The Council uses its own stock as temporary accommodation for homeless households, initially on a licence pending a decision being made. If the duty to provide accommodation is accepted the tenancy is offered as non-secure in discharge of the duty and the homelessness case closed. This is not good practice and the duty should not be ended until an offer of a secure tenancy is made through the allocations scheme, or such an offer is refused, or the household secures its own accommodation.

84 Arrangements were in place to convert the non-secure tenancies for homeless households into secure ones within a certain timeframe, provided the tenancy had been properly conducted. However, this means that secure tenancies are being offered outside of the allocation scheme and the Council is not following the Code of Guidance on the Allocation of Accommodation, in respect of homeless households where a duty has been accepted. The Council is failing to give reasonable preference, as required by law, to homeless households for an offer of secure accommodation through the allocation scheme.

85 Furthermore the arrangements to convert tenancies from non-secure to secure have not been followed recently, and at the time of inspection there were between 300 and 400 households who had been accepted as homeless but have remained as non-secure tenants. The Council has started an exercise to address this and arrange for tenancies to be converted into secure ones. Although the outcome is the same in that the tenancy becomes secure, the offer of the secure tenancy is not based on the priority system set out in the allocations scheme, again contravening the Code of Guidance on offers of secure tenancies. This is poor management of the allocation system and disadvantages homeless households who have not been able to access a secure tenancy in an appropriate way. It also means that while tenants remain as non-secure they are not benefiting from the rights enshrined in secure tenancies.

86 Homelessness prevention activities are not fully developed but capacity is being increased in a range of ways to increase the provision of this service. As part of the restructuring the homelessness role was widened into a housing options role, to increase the emphasis on prevention work. However, prevention work is hindered by staffing shortages in the team. Work in investigating and processing homelessness applications restricts the time available to focus on prevention activities. Two agency workers have been employed to increase capacity and two vacancies are currently being advertised. However, in the meantime the prevention service offered in house is limited.

87 The Council has recently entered into an arrangement with the CAB to increase the capacity to provide housing advice and information. The Council identified a budget of £18,500 for the external provision of housing advice and asked for bids. The CAB successfully bid and is providing the service for the Council under a specific Service Level Agreement. The Council is providing training to the CAB to support their role and on using the Initial Enquiry Form, so that the same level of service is offered regardless of where the service is accessed. As part of the arrangements the CAB is able to make appointments for customers to see a SHELTER advisor where the case appears complex, and can also make appointments with local Solicitors who provide advice on relationship breakdown and family and property law, where this is required. The first quarter figures for April - June 2006 showed that the CAB had dealt with 177 housing enquiries. The working relationship with the CAB is very positive and the arrangements in place are increasing the level of housing advice offered in the district and providing access to the service through an independent source.

88 The Council has improved its procedures to enhance its homelessness work. It has introduced an 'Initial Enquiry Form' for customers seeking help with housing. This is in line with good practice, as promoted through the Government's Homelessness Directorate. This approach enables detailed information to be gathered before a formal homelessness application is made, and allows prevention work to be explored at an early stage. There have been some difficulties with the form and following comments from the CAB it is currently being reviewed. All young people making enquiries are automatically referred to the homelessness duty officer and are helped in completing the form, but this is not consistently offered to all customers, and some forms are returned incomplete. This limits the effectiveness of the approach. However, it is a positive initiative, although it is too early to assess the impact it is having.

89 The Council is working in partnership with the CAB and East Lindsey District Council on a project to improve homelessness prevention work. The scheme is government funded with contributions from the two Councils. The project is focused on preventing homelessness in the private rented sector through better advice and information for both landlords and tenants. The project has only just started and it is too early for any outcomes.

90 The Council makes effective use of its rent deposit loan scheme to assist households to obtain accommodation in the private sector and prevent homelessness. In 2005/06, 30 households were helped. The Council also makes use of discretionary housing benefit for households with a genuine financial need to maintain their rent payments. In 2005/06, £16,619 was paid which represents 78 per cent of the fund available. The use of this fund enables households to stay in their homes and potentially avoids them becoming homeless.

91 There is limited use of mediation as a means of preventing homelessness. Housing options officers carry out some mediation and some is available through the specialist agencies. The Council is considering how it can extend its mediation arrangements and the funding implications for this.

92 Joint discussions about households who are facing possession proceedings for rent arrears takes place between Housing Solutions and Tenancy Management, aimed at sustaining the tenancy and preventing eviction. The intention is to ensure that where evictions are carried out sufficient help will have been offered to the tenant to allow the Council to make an intentionally homeless decision. This addresses concerns in our previous inspection where such liaison arrangements were not in place and tenants evicted for rent arrears were subsequently rehoused.

93 There is little analysis of the trends in homelessness. Homelessness presentations dropped by over 100 from 2004/05 to 2005/06, although the ratio of acceptances remained about the same. However, the Council is not clear why this is the case and whether its homeless prevention activities have impacted on these figures. Prevention and repeat homelessness figures are gathered for the BVPIs but are not being used along side other information, such as that gathered on the government quarterly returns, to analyse and understand any changes in homelessness. This limits the Council ability to respond to changing circumstances and inform service improvement.

94 There are a number of effective joint working arrangements which assist vulnerable customers. The Council has referral arrangements with a number of agencies to provide advice and support to vulnerable households who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. These include arrangements with Sure Start for families with children who are five and under and with the Connexions Service for young people. There is also access to a scheme run by NACRO which offers assistance to clients of any age who are ex or current drug users or who are at risk of re-offending. This includes a supported housing scheme with two of the properties provided from the Council's own stock.

95 There is limited monitoring to evaluate the effectiveness of the joint working and referral arrangements. Feedback on individual cases is given to the Council but there is no overall monitoring of the numbers of referrals made and the impact these have in supporting the housing needs and homelessness service. This makes it difficult to establish the extra value and capacity that joint working brings to the service and limits the opportunities to identify service improvements and target the Council's own activities.

96 Referral arrangements are in place to provide young people aged 16 to 25 with supported housing. Demand is higher than supply but schemes are available in Grantham and Stamford. The most recent scheme in Grantham was enabled through the Council's development programme and provides supported housing in eight self-contained units in a converted house, with a further 15 units in an adjacent block offering move on with a lower level of support, pending permanent housing being secured. The scheme offers a high standard of service and accommodation.

97 There is a lack of move on arrangements for supported housing clients which restricts the 'flow through' and builds up the waiting list. The Council has not yet explored how this could be improved, perhaps by quotas through the allocations scheme. There is also no access to immediate supported accommodation, and the Council relies on facilities in other council districts. The Council recognises this as issue and is considering how bed spaces for this can be developed.

98 The Council works with Grantham Poverty Concern who offer practical support, such as food and other items, to vulnerable people. It also provides statistical information to the Council on their clients, including the usage of their facilities and services, and identifies how many of their clients are homeless.

99 Information on rough sleeping in the district has not been formally gathered and assessed, although a rough sleepers' count is planned for the Autumn. The Council is of the view, based on discussions with partner agencies, that there are few rough sleepers but that 'sofa surfing' is an issue.

100 The Council offers a sensitive and appropriate response to victims of domestic violence, although not all available options are on offer. There is joint working between Grantham Women's Aid, the domestic violence unit of the Police and the Council, to respond to cases of domestic violence. Victims of domestic violence are offered temporary accommodation or fast tracking of a permanent move. If the victim wishes to remain in their home a lifeline alarm is offered which is monitored through the Care Centre. Additional security measures are offered through links with the Police. There is no women's refuge in the South Kesteven district and the Council relies on links with the Women's refuge in Lincoln when a refuge place is required.

101 The Council recognises it needs to be more proactive in its response to domestic violence. Domestic violence as a reason for homelessness increased from 14 in 2004/05 to 21 in 2005/06. The Council has agreed joint funding with North Kesteven District Council to employ a domestic violence co-ordinator. It is intending to increase publicity by re-branding some of the work done by North Kesteven, and is developing plans for a sanctuary scheme to help victims feel safe in their own homes.

102 Homelessness investigations are thorough and appropriate decisions are made. An electronic procedure manual has been introduced to support and guide staff. Performance in making and notifying decisions in 33 days is satisfactory, with performance improving from 85 per cent for January to March 2006 to 93 per cent for April to June.

103 A sound review procedure is in place and applicants seeking a review are advised of the service offered by SHELTER to support them. The review is carried out by a senior officer as required by the legislation, and the Council offers a further stage of review by a Member Panel. Since January two requests for review have been received of which one was upheld and the other withdrawn.

104 The Council makes limited use of Bed and Breakfast as temporary accommodation for homeless households. In 2005/06 the average length of stay was 0.4 weeks and the expenditure incurred was £12,000. However, the length of stay in other temporary accommodation is not monitored and so the Council cannot assess how well it is performing in keeping this time to a minimum.

105 The standard of temporary accommodation is generally good. There are 11 furnished self-contained properties which are maintained in a reasonable state of repair and cleanliness. Bed and breakfast accommodation is also to a generally good standard and is provided above public houses, in guest houses and travel lodges. Temporary accommodation is also provided in the Council's stock.

106 There are arrangements to offer support while households are in temporary accommodation but advice and information on Council and other services is limited. A housing options officer visits households in the furnished accommodation on a weekly basis, and there is floating support for clients who need additional assistance. There is provision for floating support for 36 clients at any one time. Priority is given to teenage mothers and then according to need for homeless households and council tenants. However, other advice and information, for example about services and facilities in the area is limited. A notice board was in place in one of the furnished blocks but was empty and did not appear to have been used.

Private sector housing

107 In our previous inspection we found weaknesses considerably outweighed strengths. The Council did not have comprehensive information on private sector stock condition and was not successfully tackling unfit properties or bringing empty homes back into use. It had failed to spend its budget on disabled facilities grants and partnership working was under developed.

108 In this inspection we found that weaknesses outweigh strengths. The Council's strategic approach to private sector housing is under developed, there has been limited action to improve private sector stock condition, and applicants for disabled facilities grants have received an inconsistent service subject to delays. The approach to private sector enforcement activities is largely reactive, the mandatory licensing scheme for Houses in Multiple Occupation is not fully implemented and progress in relation to empty homes and energy efficiency is limited. However, there is sound information on private sector stock condition which is being used to develop a strategic approach, there is an effective response to private sector complaints, with cases appropriately dealt with and the budget for disabled facilities grants has been spent.

109 The strategic approach to private sector renewal is under developed. The Housing Strategy includes some broad principles in relation to private sector housing but does not provide a strategic framework. The Council was party to the Welland Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy but did not implement a number of the objectives within this. The Council is taking action to develop a strategic approach.

- 110 The Council has sound information on stock condition in the private sector, based on a stock condition survey carried out in 2005. This showed that in general the stock is in a reasonable state of repair with 2.7 per cent of properties classified as unfit, which is below the national average, and 8.4 per cent requiring a mandatory response under the Housing, Health and Safety Rating System. 80 per cent of properties are assessed as meeting the Decent Homes Standard and those that do not fail mainly on the thermal comfort criteria. It is estimated that 23 per cent of vulnerable households live in non-decent properties.
- 111 The Private Sector Housing Renewal Strategy is in development. This is being informed by the private sector stock condition information and the contextual information for the district. Given the relative lack of deprivation in the area the Council recognises that the strategic approach must promote the owner's responsibility in maintaining their home. The proposals in the strategy include loans for owner occupiers and also grants for landlords who agree to let their properties at affordable rents. The intention is to target resources at the most vulnerable groups as identified through the stock condition survey, from existing regional information and from information from the energy companies on where energy efficiency measures have been taken up. Some of the proposals have been discussed at the Landlord's Forum but the strategy will be consulted on more widely in due course. The strategy is scheduled for completion by November 2006 so that it can form the basis of bidding for funding to the Government Office for the East Midlands.
- 112 The grants service is being determined, pending the development of the Private Sector Renewal Strategy, through an interim grants policy. This offers disabled facilities grants (DFGs), discretionary repair grants up to £3,000 to address category 1 hazards under the Health and Safety rating System, and top up grants for the Warm Front scheme. Consultation on the policy was carried out through two workshop sessions. These were advertised and attended by stakeholders and some members of the public. The budget for 2006/07 is £350,000, with £300,000 allocated to DFGs, £20,000 for discretionary DFGs, £20,000 for repair and improvement grants and £10,000 for empty homes.
- 113 There is limited publicity and promotion of the private sector housing services, and in particular a lack of targeted publicity to reach potential service users. Some leaflets are available, which are informative, but there is no promotion of the grants service. There is also a lack of publicised service standards for the service. This makes the service less accessible to a client group which includes a high proportion of vulnerable customers.
- 114 There is an active Landlords Forum which the Council makes effective use of in relation to its work in the private sector. Consultation to assist in developing strategies and policies takes place and the Council regularly arranges presentations to the Forum. The Forum is actively engaged in discussing the proposals in the 2004 Housing Act and in particular the arrangements for the mandatory licensing of HMOs.

- 115 There are a lack of comprehensive procedures in place to guide the delivery of private sector grants and enforcement activities. Standard letters have been developed and some brief procedure notes but these are not sufficiently comprehensive to guide staff and ensure a consistent service is provided.
- 116 The Council's intervention to encourage improvement in private sector stock condition through grant aid is limited. Although the interim grants policy enables grants to be offered, there has been no private sector repairs assistance through grants or loans in the last two years. A budget was set at £50,000 but was not used. The budget for this year is £20,000. Funding from the Government Office for £52,000 to deliver decent homes for vulnerable people in the private sector has been made available for 2006/07, and a further £27,000 for 2007/08. This money will be largely targeted at minor repair grants and top up grants for Warm Front. However, the Council has made little impact to date in assisting vulnerable customers in the private sector to improve their homes.
- 117 Disabled facilities grants (DFGs) are being delivered but customers have received variable levels of service over the last year. Responsibility for disabled facilities grants has rested with Tenancy Services until recently. Recruitment difficulties within the Housing Solutions Team meant that this area of work could not be transferred to them as early as planned. Responsibility for the service now rests with the Housing Solutions Team and a partnership has been entered into with the Home Improvement Agency to deliver the grants with effect from the 24 July 2006. However, staffing shortages in Tenancy Services has meant an inconsistent service for customers and a lack of progress monitoring and chasing. Some applicants have been offered advice and assistance and their cases dealt with efficiently, while others have not been offered help, and applications have been subject to considerable delays. Weak co-ordination in the handover arrangements to Housing Solutions has meant further delays, while cases in progress and on the waiting list are checked to assess their current status.
- 118 The expenditure on DFGs in 2005/06 was £322,000 against a budget of £300,000, delivering 51 grants. The over spend was accommodated by the non-DFG private sector grant budget which was set at £50,000 but against which no expenditure was incurred. Historically the DFG budget has under spent by about a third. There has also been a lack of control over the works being carried out through DFGs and these have sometimes been beyond meeting essential needs. The Council has now clarified with the Occupational Therapy Service what will be paid for through DFGs to address this. However, this means that resources have not been best used to assist as many vulnerable clients as possible.
- 119 The DFG budget for 2006/07 is already committed, with a projected spend of about £318,000. There are currently 84 applications either being processed, or waiting processing with the oldest application dating back to April 2005. To enable these applications to be dealt with, and to respond to current demand, a bid for further resources is being made to the Council's capital programme.

120 The processes for prioritising DFGs are underdeveloped. The referrals from the Occupational Therapist Service do not have a clear priority attached to them, although some discussion may take place over the level of urgency for particular cases. The Housing Service may also prioritise cases but there is no clear criteria set out for this. Without a clear priority system the Council cannot ensure that resources are targeted at those most in need and that customers are being treated equitably.

121 Joint working with Social Services is underdeveloped. There are no protocols in place to govern the relationship between the Council and the Occupational Therapist Service, or in relation to hospital discharges. There is a lack of clarity over the level of minor adaptation work, under £1000, that will be carried out by the County Council. Discussions have taken place but it is not clear how these are being progressed. There is no cross-county working which limits the opportunities for sharing good practice and identifying efficiencies. There is no joint monitoring of the service around waiting times, and whether the DFG service is successfully meeting the needs of vulnerable customers. However, there are joint meetings held with the Occupational Therapy Service every two months to discuss current cases and some joint visits take place

122 The arrangements with the Home Improvement Agency (HIA) were due to start the week after our inspection. The difficulties experienced by the Council in recruiting its own private sector grants staff led to the arrangements being brought forward earlier than planned, and the Council has worked successfully with the Agency to achieve this. However, protocols governing the arrangements are still to be put in place. The Council intends to use the protocols already agreed with other councils as a basis for its own arrangements, and also intends to benefit from the procedures and joint working arrangements that the HIA already has in place with its other partners.

123 The time taken to deliver DFG grants is monitored from the stage of referral from the OT to the completed application, and from completed application to approval. In 2005/06 performance respectively was 108 days against a target of 180 and 13.5 days against a target of 22 days. However, this does not include the total time the customer waits as the time taken for the Occupation Therapist to visit is not included. The targets are set globally for all grants as the Council does not operate a priority system. More meaningful information could be obtained if a priority system was agreed and targets were set and performance monitored against these. This would link performance more closely to the needs of the most vulnerable customers.

124 Customer satisfaction levels with the DFG service are relatively high. Service users are sent satisfaction surveys and of the 59 sent out last year, 29 were returned, which is a reasonable return rate.

125 The Council's approach to Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) is not sufficiently robust. There are about 240 HMOs in the district, of which 40 have been identified as falling under the mandatory licensing scheme. There are no arrangements to proactively identify HMOs, with new HMOs only currently being identified through complaints. However, some discussions have taken place with the Gangmasters Licensing Authority which may help identify HMOs occupied by migrant workers.

126 The Council has introduced the new HMO licensing scheme but implementation has been slow. The new licensing scheme was promoted in the press and discussions and consultation on the arrangements took place through the Landlords Forum. Applications forms were handed out at a promotional event in March and assistance offered with completing them. Some applications have been returned but there are no clear arrangements for chasing those that have not, or where information is missing. No inspections have yet been carried out and no licenses have been issued. Landlords of HMOs requiring licensing who have not submitted applications are now in breach of the HMO legislation. Procedures for enforcement of the licensing scheme have not yet been agreed and actions to ensure these landlords submit applications have been limited.

127 Inspections of HMOs have taken place in the past based on risk assessment but there is no current programme in place. The procedures and programme for inspection of HMOs which do not fall under the licensing scheme have not yet been agreed.

128 Private sector enforcement work outside of HMOs is limited and based on responding to complaints. However, the Council is signed up to the Enforcement Concordat and complaints received are properly investigated and appropriate action taken. Quality control procedures are followed so that between five and ten per cent of cases are checked to ensure that they have been dealt with properly. A target has been set for contacting complainants within five days and this is being achieved. In 2005/06 the Council dealt with 42 disrepair complaints and served ten notices. Satisfaction surveys have been sent out in the past to users of the service but had poor response rates. Surveys are not currently taking place.

129 There is little proactive work in bringing empty properties back into use. There is no empty homes strategy, although it is intended to include this as part of the development of the private sector renewal strategy. A budget for empty homes has been agreed at £10,000 for the current year but it is not clear how this can be accessed and the interim private sector grants policy does not address this.

130 Few empty homes are returned to use as a result of the Council's action. 528 homes had been empty for longer than six months at March 2006. During 2005/06, 11 empty properties were bought back into use in 2005/06 which was an improvement on the previous year's figure of five. Information is available quarterly based on Council tax records but this is not well categorised for analysis and no analysis is currently taking place.

- 131 Energy efficiency work is not well linked into the work of private sector housing, and promotion and publicity is limited. There is some information about energy efficiency in the Council's reception area and on the website. However, there is little general promotion through presentations and articles in newsletters. Energy efficiency issues are not routinely raised with users of the grants service or picked up as part of any enforcement activities. There are few links between the energy advice service and the private sector housing service and enquiries are not proactively directed between services.
- 132 Monitoring of energy efficiency work is underdeveloped. The number of referrals for Warm Front and the total value of the grants offered are recorded but there is not wider monitoring around the number of enquiries, referrals to the energy agencies, and levels of access to external funding for the various schemes. Specific energy efficiency surveys have not been used and there has been limited use of the private sector stock condition information to guide the development of energy efficiency work. However, a Private and Public Sector Housing Efficiency Policy was developed in March 2006, followed by an improvement plan in June 2006, which will address some of these issues.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 133 In our previous inspection we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths. There was no systematic collection of service costs and service quality and no comparison of costs with others. Staff were not deployed to maximise value for money and procurement was not being used effectively.
- 134 In this inspection we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The Council cannot demonstrate value for money in delivering its strategic housing services. It does not know the detailed costs of providing its services and there has not been any benchmarking of costs. Procurement is not yet embedded as a means of delivering value for money. However, the Council does ensure that resources follow priorities, and service planning is used to challenge and assess value for money. Partnerships are adding value to the services provided, and work and expertise is shared through joint working with other councils.

How do costs compare?

- 135 The Council has limited information on the costs of delivering its strategic housing services, and has not carried out any benchmarking of costs with others. A corporate exercise was carried out to broadly assess the costs of the various service areas. Strategic housing services accounts for 2.5 per cent of the Council's overall budget, and its costs were assessed in relation to per head of population, as below the median when compared nationally. However, the Council does not have information on the detailed costs of its services, such as the cost of processing a DFG or homelessness application. Without this detailed information the Council is not in a position to effectively benchmark with others, and cannot demonstrate whether its services are delivering value for money.

How is value for money managed?

136 The Council has made delivering value for money a high priority and has set the Use of Resources as a priority A. It ensures that resources are aligned to priorities through a system of gateway reviews in respect of its overall priorities, and the service plans to support these. Gateway reviews are carried out by Members and senior managers and are used to challenge services and the costs of providing them, and ensure that budgets are allocated accordingly. Revenue and capital budgets are subject to challenge and service plans include an assessment of value for money in relation to the services provided. The gateway review process enables the Council to clearly identify how resources are being used.

137 The Housing Solutions Team was established with effect from December 2005 and the budgets set to support the structure. An assessment of value for money was made as part of developing the service plan. The effectiveness and value for money of the restructured service will be subject to challenge this year as part of the service planning framework.

138 Assessment of value for money is being aided by a new financial ledger system, which was introduced from April 2006. This offers improved financial information to managers and is easily accessible. As part of the system a time recording module is being purchased which will enable activity-based costing and allow the Council to identify its costs. Capacity in the Finance Service is being increased to support service managers to develop and embed value for money as a way of working.

139 The annual efficiency statement for 2006/07 identifies £725,000 of efficiency gains of which £362,000 are cashable. Housing Solutions identified savings of £1000 on bed and breakfast costs as the contribution from strategic housing services. Once the restructured service has operated over time more detailed assessment of potential savings will be made.

140 Procurement is being developed corporately across the Council but is not yet embedded as a means of delivering value for money. Capacity has been increased through a dedicated procurement post and a procurement strategy developed. This will be supported with detailed guidance for staff. Targets have been set to achieve savings through procurement over a three-year period.

141 Some savings have been delivered through procurement, but it is not yet delivering substantial tangible outcomes. Savings were made for internal audit services through joint procurement with another Council. There has also been savings on IT equipment and stationery. 'E' procurement has recently been introduced which is a more efficient way of working. However, there has been little use of procurement in private sector housing activities, in particular in relation to how the work for disabled facilities work is procured.

142 To improve the outcomes from effective procurement the Council and its Welland Partners have recently established a Procurement Board, which will operate to jointly procure goods and services across the partner authorities. This approach is in accordance with good practice national procurement guidelines.

- 143 Joint working with other councils is delivering efficiencies through developing and sharing projects. For example there is joint work to develop the homelessness strategy and the documentation for HMO licensing was also developed jointly.
- 144 Housing Solutions adds value to its services by working in partnership. A number of partnerships operate, described earlier in the report, which enhance the services available. These are not formally evaluated to show the extent of the added value, which limits the Council's assessment of their effectiveness and their contribution to the housing strategic objectives. However, expressions of interest were sought for the external housing advice service, and although only one bid was received, this was evaluated against agreed criteria including an assessment of value for money. The Council has also set up arrangements with the Home Improvement Agency to jointly fund two posts to deliver the grants service.
- 145 The Council keeps the use of bed and breakfast as temporary accommodation to a minimum, which limits expenditure. For 2005/06 expenditure was £12,000. The Council also seeks to ensure that housing benefit is claimed so that housing subsidy on temporary accommodation costs can be sought, although this is not yet being maximised. The use of discretionary housing benefit to prevent homelessness also represents an effective way of achieving value for money. There is effective use of section 106 Agreements to develop affordable housing. In these ways the Council is seeking to maximise the resources available to it to deliver its housing priorities.

Summary

- 146 We have assessed the Housing Strategic Service provided by the Council as a 'fair' one-star service.
- 147 Access to services is focused on meeting customers' needs, supported by easy to read leaflets and there is partnership work to identify and improve services to meet diverse needs. The Housing Strategy is comprehensive, setting out clear priorities for the Service, and the Council is working well in partnership to deliver creditable levels of affordable housing. There is effective partnership work around preventing homelessness and meeting the needs of vulnerable households, a good standard of temporary accommodation is available and limited use is made of bed and breakfast. The Council ensures that resources are aligned to priorities and partnership working is adding value to the services provided.
- 148 However, information on the services available is not comprehensive or consistently available, and customer feedback is not informing service development and improvement. The information on the customer profile is limited, the Council cannot demonstrate that services are delivered equitably and services are not systematically tailored to meet the needs of vulnerable customers. Homelessness prevention work is under developed and the arrangements for homeless households to access permanent secure tenancies are not satisfactory.

149 The Council's strategic approach to private sector housing is under developed, there has been limited action to improve private sector stock condition, or bring empty properties back into use, and enforcement activities are largely reactive. Applicants for disabled facilities grants have received an inconsistent service subject to delays. The Council cannot demonstrate value for money in delivering its strategic housing services and procurement is not yet embedded as a means of delivering value for money.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

150 In our previous inspection we found little evidence of improvement in service delivery and little progress against key elements in the housing strategy action plans.

151 In this inspection we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There has been mixed progress in delivering service improvements. Significant progress has been made in some areas, such as enabling affordable housing but limited improvements have been made for private sector housing services. Performance is improving in some but not all areas, and a lack of information makes it difficult to assess improvement in relation to customer satisfaction with the services.

152 Progress against the Strategic Housing Improvement Plan has been mixed, with slippage against time scales in a number of areas. The time scales set in the improvement plan were challenging, and at the time of developing it the recruitment difficulties in filling key posts were not anticipated. Tasks have been rescheduled and progress is monitored with regular reporting to Members. Improvements that have been delivered include:

- development of the Housing Strategy and achieving a 'Fit for Purpose' assessment from the Government office for the East Midlands;
- significant increase in the number of affordable housing units, rising from 50 in 2004/05 to 112 in 2005/06 and on track to reach the target of 150 for 2006/07; and
- improved information for customers through the introduction of a range of leaflets, branded in the Council's corporate style.

153 Other actions that have been completed underpin future improvements. For example the Council has carried out housing needs and private sector stock condition surveys, which provide the basis for further improvements. The Private Sector housing Renewal Strategy, scheduled for completion later this year, is being developed using the stock condition information. However, there have been few improvements delivered in private sector housing services that are resulting in tangible outcomes for customers.

154 Some improvements are not sufficiently embedded for customers to recognise. Whereas customers on the Housing Register benefit from the additional supply of affordable housing, the improved information has only recently been introduced and will not yet have made an impact. Customer satisfaction levels are monitored in a number of areas but analysis and tracking over time has been limited which hinders any robust assessment as to overall trends.

155 Performance in some service areas shows improvement. The length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation (BVPI 183a) has reduced from 2004/05 to 2005/06, performance in processing homelessness applications in 33 days (recently introduced as a local performance indicator) has improved since January 2006 when the restructured team took responsibility, and the performance in delivering affordable homes has improved. However, there has been limited improvement in returning empty properties to use (BVPI 64) and no improvement in the percentage of unfit properties returned to use, although this is no longer monitored as a BVPI.

156 The Council cannot demonstrate sustained improvement in delivering value for money. Systems and arrangements are in place which focus on value for money but the outcomes from these are not yet evident over time.

How well does the service manage performance?

157 In our previous inspection we found limited improvement plans in place and performance management for housing was not robust at any level in the organisation. There was no evidence to show that the Council learned from others or from customer feedback. However, the Corporate Management Team had made an open and honest acknowledgement of the need for improvement in its strategic housing service.

158 In this inspection we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. The Council has clear priorities for housing, has improvement plans in place addressing most service weaknesses and a performance framework to deliver these. There is a robust system for monitoring and managing performance. The Council is responsive to external challenge and seeks actively to learn from others. However, proposals for improving private sector housing do not address all service weaknesses and the links between the improvement plans and the Service Plan are underdeveloped. Performance indicators are not sufficiently targeted to effectively manage all areas of performance.

159 The Council has a clear vision supported by strategic priorities, which complement those in the Community Plan. The priorities are challenged and ranked through a system of Gateway Reviews, whereby Members and Senior Officers determine the highest priorities and allocate resources to these. There is clear commitment to strategic housing services at Member and Senior Officer level demonstrated by the service being assessed as a Priority A, meaning it requires significant resources to achieve step change.

160 The Housing Strategy identifies clear priorities for the Housing service, which are set out earlier in the report. These support the delivery of the Council's ambitions, and reflect national and local priorities. A performance management framework has been developed to deliver the priorities, and improvement planning is used to address service weaknesses.

161 Improvement plans are in place to address most service weaknesses. Following our last inspection the Council developed a strategic housing improvement plan to tackle the weaknesses identified and implement the recommendations made. This resulted in an extensive action plan with 90 milestones to be achieved. The plan sets out the action needed, the resources required, the time scale and the responsible officer.

162 A further improvement plan has been developed as part of the Housing Strategy. This builds on, and links to the strategic housing improvement plan, and aims to take the service forward. The Council intends to merge the outstanding actions from the strategic housing improvement plan so that proposed improvements are rationalised into one improvement plan. The improvements include:

- year-on-year increases in the number of affordable housing units delivered;
- increasing the floating support services in the area;
- developing an action plan to meet the needs of Gypsies and Travellers;
- offering housing options for people fleeing domestic violence;
- wider involvement of stakeholders and users in service improvement; and
- at a corporate level opening the new customer services centre to offer a high quality environment and service to customers.

163 The improvements plans do not adequately address all the service weaknesses in private sector housing. Although there are actions to develop and implement the private sector renewal strategy and to improve joint working around energy efficiency, there are not specific proposals to move the Council towards delivering a more proactive enforcement and inspection service or to address some of the issues in delivering disabled facilities grants.

164 There are plans to improve value for money. The annual efficiency statement identifies efficiency gains of £1.087 for 2005/06 to 2007/08 of which £0.543 are cashable. Some of these are to be delivered through improved procurement. The 'Procurement Card' system will be introduced from September 2006, and the recently established Welland Procurement Board will be setting up arrangements for the joint procurement of goods and services aimed at achieving better value for money.

165 There is visible leadership of the organisation with Members and Senior Managers focused on delivering the priorities. At the time of inspection there was restructuring ongoing at management levels to create a four tier system of strategic directors, corporate heads of service, heads of service and team leaders. The Housing Solutions Team was established to reflect this structure and is not therefore subject to further restructuring. There are positive relationships between Members and officers in the Housing Solutions Team, which supports delivery of the service. Chairs and vice chairs of the Development and Scrutiny Panels were selected on the basis of application and an evaluation against agreed criteria in order to strengthen their role in challenging policies and performance.

166 Service planning is used, as part of the performance management framework, to cascade the Council's priorities through the organisation and deliver the actions in the improvement plans. Gateway Reviews are used to challenge service plans and ensure that they meet the priorities of the service and that the appropriate resources are in place. The links between the Housing Solutions Service Plan and the improvement plans are not fully developed to comprehensively show how the service will be delivered. However, the service plan for strategic housing services was produced for the first time in November 2005, along with the establishment of the Housing Solutions Team, and did not have the benefit of being built up from an established base. The service plan will be reviewed later this year as part of the annual cycle.

167 Personal and Development Reviews (PDRs) are used to translate the priorities and objectives in the service plans into individual objectives and targets. Performance is also discussed and assessed through this process. PDRs have not been consistently carried out throughout the organisation, but these are now monitored as a local performance indicator. Managers are required to complete all PDRs by September 2006, which will enable them to be brought into line with the service planning timeframe.

168 There are robust arrangements to monitor and manage performance. The Housing Operations and Development Group, made up of managers in the Housing Service, meet on a monthly basis, and as part of the agenda, discusses performance across a range of indicators. The Portfolio Holder for Housing also attends these meetings. If a service is not performing as expected remedial action is taken which may involve developing an action plan to address the areas of concern.

169 Monthly performance reports, based on BVPIs and local performance indicators, are produced for the Management Board and are presented to the Cabinet. Development and Scrutiny Panels receive the performance information every six weeks. Performance is monitored against a traffic light system and if targets are not being met an explanation is asked for. If performance does not improve there is an escalation process which involves developing an action plan, followed by a 'performance clinic' which involves a senior manager from another service, and finally a Best Value Review of the service. Performance is not yet linked to costs but it is planned that budgetary information will be presented to the Management Board along side the performance indicators in future.

170 The performance indicators used to assess the strategic housing services are not sufficiently comprehensive to effectively manage all areas of performance. BVPIs and a range of local performance indicators are collected on a monthly or quarterly basis. Local performance indicators cover, for example, the number of affordable housing units negotiated through Section 106 Agreements and the number of housing applications from people fleeing domestic violence. However, other measures of performance are not included, such as the time spent by homeless households in temporary accommodation other than bed and breakfast, or the time taken to process disabled facilities grants, which includes the time taken up to the Occupational Therapist referral or the time for different priorities of cases. The Council has not scrutinised the performance indicators it uses, and cannot therefore assess if they are the most appropriate to demonstrate how well the service is performing.

171 The arrangements for managing budgets are satisfactory. Budgets are in the process of being devolved to budget holders. Some budgets have been delegated, although some, mainly the salaries budget, is held centrally. Budget holders have on line access to budget information and are sent monthly reports from the Finance Division. The Council is strengthening the arrangements by restructuring and creating extra capacity in the Finance Division to enable greater support from accountants to budget holders. Budgets are scrutinised as part of the service planning process to ensure they are set at the appropriate level.

172 Procedures for managing risk are in place but need to be embedded throughout the organisation. There is a strategic risk register which is monitored monthly by the Management Board and any new risks considered. Operational risks are identified through the service plans and managed as part of the service planning framework. Members are not actively involved in managing risk but receive an annual report. The Council recognises it needs to strengthen its arrangements and is seeking to co-ordinate operational risks so that they can be monitored corporately. There is also training planned for later this year on risk management.

173 The Council is self-aware of the areas it needs to improve and is responsive to external challenge. The self-assessment was an honest and open appraisal of the service.

174 The Council is keen to learn from others and seeks out good practice. It sought advice and assistance from an 'excellent three star' strategic housing service in developing its improvement plans. It has taken on board good practice promoted through the Government Homelessness Directorate. Learning from others has resulted in the Council introducing initiatives and ways of working that improve its own service delivery. The Council also learns from its own experiences, but learning from customer feedback is under developed.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

175 In our previous inspection we found that the level of resources and the right balance of skills were not in place to deliver substantial improvement in the service. However, the Council was engaging external consultancy to increase capacity where this was lacking.

46 Re-inspection of Strategic Housing Services | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

176 In this inspection we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. The Council has restructured to create the capacity to provide improved services and has identified the financial resources to deliver the priorities. Partnerships are being used to increase capacity and the Council has been successful in attracting external funding. However, recruitment difficulties have hindered the Council's ability to deliver some improvements as quickly as intended, and partnerships have not been evaluated to assess the additional value they bring.

177 The capacity to deliver the strategic housing services is now in place. The various elements of the service were brought together under the Housing Solutions Team, as part of a major restructuring of the Housing Service during 2005. The revised establishment consisting of 15 posts came into effect from December 2005. Prior to this internal secondments, external consultancy support and temporary posts were used to deliver the service and develop and implement the improvement plan. Additional resources of £150,000 were made available as a one off cost to pay for this additional capacity, and projects such as the housing needs and stock condition surveys. An extra £60,000 has been allocated to the establishment to increase overall capacity on a permanent basis.

178 The ability to implement service improvements has been hindered by recruitment difficulties to the new posts. Although posts were advertised several times during 2005 the Council was unable to recruit suitable candidates. At the time of inspection two manager posts had only recently been filled, there were four vacancies for housing options officers, and vacancies in private sector housing. The Council has taken action to address these shortages. Two agency staff are employed in housing advice and homelessness and two vacancies are currently out to advert. An arrangement has been made with the Environmental Health Service to carry out private sector enforcement activities, including the inspection of Houses in Multiple Occupation. Unsuccessful attempts to recruit private sector workers to deliver the grants service led to the Council bringing forward the proposals to work with the Home Improvement Agency (HIA). Two private sector officers have now been employed by the HIA, jointly funded with the Council, to deliver disabled facilities. However, the impact of these difficulties has meant that some of the improvements planned have required rescheduling, and existing staff have been stretched.

179 The financial resources to deliver the services have been put in place. The level of reserves held by the Council has been assessed and plans developed as to how some of this can be used for developing services, although this is dependent on generating future savings to make up the loss of interest. £1.8 million has been identified for potential use in 2006/07. Capital receipts from Right to Buy Sales are ring fenced for housing purposes. These stand at £3 million and are currently being held pending the outcome of LSVT ballot. Receipts available to the Council in future are likely to generate about £1.5 million annually.

- 180** The Priority A status of strategic housing services ensures appropriate resources are made available. The provision of land at nil cost to RSLs and effective negotiation of Section 106 Agreements is providing the basis to secure affordable housing units in future to meet the targets set. Budgets for private sector grants have been set on historical information but a bid for further capital resources is currently being made, based on an assessment of the budgetary requirement of current applications.
- 181** The Council manages its human resources to increase the capacity of its workforce. A senior manager competency framework was developed with assistance from the Improvement and Development Agency, and in 2005 each manager in the Council was assessed against this and awarded a competency level. There is a financial reward for those achieving the highest level. This will be an ongoing process in future.
- 182** There are arrangements to support the organisation through training. Training needs are identified through Personal Development Reviews. Corporate themes are picked up through the Human Resources Service and a training programme developed. In the 2005/06 the 'Learning for All' programme was based around IT skills, customer care and personal development such as confidence building. Training needs are also identified by managers through their service plan so that they are aligned to meeting business needs. Managers have a training budget and are responsible for arranging training to meet these needs.
- 183** The Council also receives government funding to deliver a Leadership and Development Programme in partnership with two other councils. The funding ends after two years but the Council intends to continue the programme with its own resources so that the programme can be extended to all tiers of management. The course results in accreditation by the Institute of Leadership Management
- 184** Procedures are in place for the management of absence and flexible arrangements are offered to those returning to work, based on individual needs assessments in liaison with the occupational health service. In 2005/06 sickness absence was 8.1 days, which is a reduction from the previous year. Comparisons are made with other councils in the County, and South Kesteven performs favourably.
- 185** Communication in the organisation has been strengthened by the introduction of formal team briefings. There is also a staff newsletter sent out every two months. Annual staff surveys are carried out and the results considered by the Management Board. Communication was identified as an issue through these and the team briefing system was set up to help address this.

186 Partnership working is increasing the Council's capacity to deliver and improve its services. A range of partnerships are operating to support housing needs and homelessness in the district bringing expertise and additional services. Housing advice aimed at preventing homelessness has been increased by additional funding to the CAB, which adds further value through their arrangements with the voluntary sector and private firms of Solicitors. The Home Improvement Agency is enabling the delivery of disabled facilities grants through joint funding with the Council, and adds further value through its county-wide arrangements. However, there has been little evaluation of the added value brought by the different partnerships, which limits the Council's ability to target its own resources to support it in the most effective way.

187 Joint working with other councils is also increasing capacity through the sharing of tasks and expertise. There are joint working arrangements to develop strategies and procedures across a number of activities. Joint working has also resulted in attracting external funding. A successful bid was made, with East Lindsey District Council, for Government homelessness funding for £26,000 to increase housing advice and homelessness prevention in private sector housing. £50,000 has been received, subject to match funding, from the East Midlands Sub Region for Housing Market Assessment for the Peterborough sub-region.

Summary

188 We have assessed the Council as having promising prospects for improvement.

189 The Council has clear priorities for the Housing Service and significant improvements have been delivered in some areas of service. There are improvement plans in place addressing most service weaknesses and a robust system for monitoring and managing performance. The Council is responsive to external challenge and seeks actively to learn from others. The Council has the capacity and financial resources to deliver its priorities and improved services. Partnerships are used to increase capacity to deliver services and the Council has been successful in attracting external funding.

190 However, progress in delivering improvements in some services has been limited and performance is not improving across all areas. Some service weaknesses are not adequately addressed by the improvement plans and performance indicators are not sufficiently targeted to effectively manage all areas of performance. Partnerships have not been evaluated to assess the additional value they bring.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 1 Best value performance indicators

Performance indicator	All England top quartile 2004/05	South Kesteven 2003/04	South Kesteven 2004/05	South Kesteven 2005/06 (unaudited figures)
BVPI 62 Unfit homes made fit or demolished	4.69	0	0	N/A
BVPI 64 Vacant private homes returned to use or demolished	56.25	1	5	11
BVPI 183a Average length of stay in B&B in weeks	1	0	2	0.41
BVPI 183b Average length of stay in hostels in weeks	0	0	0	0
BV203 Percentage change in average no of families in TA	N/A	N/A	-35%	-22%

Source: Audit Commission audited figures

Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
 - the Council's self-assessment of the service;
 - Corporate Plan;
 - Housing Strategy;
 - Homelessness Strategy;
 - Housing Service Plan;
 - previous Audit Commission report and action plan;
 - various committee reports and minutes of meetings; and
 - leaflets and information for tenants.

Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
 - visits to temporary accommodation for homeless households;
 - visits to partner agencies;
 - various file checks;
 - visits to development sites;
 - review of councils website and leaflets; and
 - interviews with staff, councillors and partners.

Appendix 4 – Positive practice

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

Access to services

- 1 Access has recently been enhanced by the introduction of a county-wide initiative called 'Talk Back'. This provides direct access to a telephone answering service in a number of languages. The service makes arrangements on behalf of the customer to access the required service from the relevant council.
- 2 To increase access to services for diverse communities, council officers attend the local college when English speaking classes are being run. They use the opportunity to explain the services that the Council can offer and to listen to the concerns of the attendees. A poster explaining the Council's services has also been produced and was distributed at various outlets. This included a number to contact for any type of enquiries. This had a good response and enabled the Council to identify the most commonly used languages. The poster was subsequently translated into these languages and distributed to appropriate venues.

Meeting diverse needs

- 3 A representative from the Gangmasters Licensing Authority was invited to a meeting attended by council officers and other appropriate agencies, to talk about issues relating to migrant workers. Opportunities for information sharing have been identified, particularly in relation to where migrant workers live, as many occupy Houses in Multiple Occupation which may not be known to the Council.

Value for money

- 4 The Council ensures that resources are aligned to priorities through a system of gateway reviews. Gateway reviews are carried out by Members and senior managers and are used to challenge services and the costs of providing them, and ensure that budgets are allocated accordingly. Revenue and capital budgets are subject to challenge and service plans include an assessment of value for money in relation to the services provided. The gateway review process enables the Council to clearly identify how resources are being used.