

Landlord Services

Dartford Borough Council

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

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

Tel: 020 7828 1212 Fax: 020 7976 6187 Textphone (minicom): 020 7630 0421

www.audit-commission.gov.uk

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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 and national 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 Dartford Borough Council is a district council in Kent, in the South East of England. The population of the district is 87,000 of which 6.5 per cent are from minority ethnic communities.
- 2 The Council is led by a coalition of Conservative and Residents' Association and Independents Group councillors with 26 of the 44 seats.
- 3 The Council employs 420 staff across all services, of which 70 work in landlord services.
- 4 The scope of the landlord services inspection covered stock investment and asset management, income management, resident involvement, and tenancy and estate management. In addition the inspection covered the three cross-cutting areas of access and customer care, diversity and value for money.
- 5 The revenue costs of the service are estimated to be £6,086,420 for 2005/06. The housing management services are provided by an in-house team, and major maintenance services are provided by contractors.

Scoring the service

- 6 We have assessed Dartford Borough 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.

Table 1 Scoring chart¹

	Prospects for improvement?				
Excellent					'a fair service that has promising prospects for improvement' A good service?
Promising		☀			
Uncertain					
Poor					
	Poor	Fair ★	Good ★★	Excellent ★★★	

Source: Audit Commission

- 7 We consider the service to be a fair one-star service because of the following positive aspects.
- The service is generally easy to access.
 - Progress has been made with taking account of the views of some minority groups especially young people.
 - The condition of the housing stock is understood and the decent homes standard should be achieved by 2010.
 - Repairs to occupied and empty homes are done on time, and nearly all homes have up to date gas safety certificates.
 - Income collection is improving for both rents and service charges.
 - Dealing with anti-social behaviour (ASB) is a priority and staff work closely with partners to prevent ASB and tackle it when it arises.

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.

- Estates generally appear tidy and clean, free of graffiti, dumped rubbish, abandoned cars and other eyesores.
 - Residents have been involved in local schemes focused on practical issues such as the Gunn Road regeneration project, and tenant service monitoring is being developed.
 - Major cost savings on staff and repairs and consequent efficiency gains have been made in the last three years.
- 8 However, there are a number of areas for improvement including the following.
- The Council does not systematically use feedback to hear and take account of what its customers are saying about the service.
 - The diversity of customers is not understood and services take little account of diverse needs.
 - Individual communications and other needs are not adequately recorded and there is no policy on alternative media such as audio tape and large print, and translation services.
 - The repairs appointments system is not working properly.
 - The adaptations service keeps some people waiting too long and needs reviewing with partner organisations.
 - Debt advice is very basic and is unlikely to meet all users' needs.
 - Performance on ASB is not measured and adequate records are not consistently kept.
 - Cleaning of estates is not consistent with some problems both inside and outside the flatted blocks, and the inspection regime is not sufficient to deal with these issues.
 - Resident involvement in policy and decision-making is over-reliant on a central forum and needs to be broadened in a demonstrably representative way.
 - Construction and maintenance services are all procured traditionally with schedules of rates or input based contracts, and there is no use of modern procurement methods.
- 9 The service has promising prospects for improvement because of the following drivers for change.
- Changes bringing significant improvements which have directly benefited customers have been delivered in the recent past.
 - Measured performance including tenant satisfaction has in most cases improved in the last three years.
 - There is strong leadership in place.
 - Obvious gaps in service planning and performance management at service level are being addressed as a priority.

8 Landlord Services | Summary

- The Council is positive about learning from inspection and has a positive record in responding to the CPA finding on decent homes.
- There is sufficient staff capacity to make the improvements needed, and human resources planning is becoming embedded and producing positive outcomes.
- The housing revenue account has been significantly strengthened and the long term financial position is positive.
- The Council is making effective use of IT.
- The Council is planning to modernise its construction procurement from 2007.

10 However, there are a number of barriers to overcome including the following.

- The decision in 2005 to retain the housing stock has not yet been consolidated by the development of appropriate strategic objectives and priorities, and it is likely to be up to a year before these are set and reflected in an integrated way in the plans.
- Plans are not generally SMART and financial planning and planning for improved value for money are under-developed.
- Learning is not adequately focused on the examples of best performers.
- Training is not adequately planned.

Recommendations

- 11 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition we identify the approximate costs 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

R1 Strengthen the focus on customers by:

- *developing systematic use of feedback from service users, including identifying possible barriers to gaining access to services;*
- *improving the repairs appointments scheme and ensuring all eligible repairs are done through appointments;*
- *reviewing the adaptations service with partners to ensure it meets best practice standards;*
- *developing the complaints scheme to ensure it is readily accessible at all stages by customers including those who may prefer to make complaints verbally;*
- *reviewing the provision of debt advice services and ensure arrangements are in place to provide suitable advice to all customers in need; and*
- *reviewing tenancy management arrangements including the tenancy agreement to ensure a clear and consistent approach is achieved throughout the tenancy.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved services to customers generally and especially to more vulnerable customers needing specific services such as adaptations and debt advice;
- improved understanding of customer needs and ability to improve services in response to their needs; and
- new tenants better able to understand rights and responsibilities, and to settle into their homes, and improved consistency of treatment on issues relating to their tenancies throughout the tenancy.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. Costs may fall into the medium range depending on the conclusions of the adaptations review. This should be implemented by March 2007.

Recommendation

R2 Strengthen the approach to diversity by:

- *developing the monitoring the diversity of service users in key service areas, and the means to review findings;*
- *developing an approach to achieving a comprehensive understanding of the diversity profile of customers;*
- *developing comprehensive records of customer communications and other individual service needs, including where customers may present a risk to staff;*
- *reviewing policies to ensure the diverse needs of customers are taken into account; and*
- *agreeing with customers a policy on the availability and promotion of alternative media and translations for published information.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- policies take account of the diverse needs of customers and services are provided in ways most suited to those needs;
- the Council communicates with customers in ways which suit them best; and
- publications are produced in forms such as large print which more closely meets user needs and users are more aware of what is available.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact, especially for more vulnerable tenants, with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2006.

Recommendation

R3 Improve the involvement of residents in the decisions which affect their homes by:

- *reviewing the Compact and agreeing strategic aims for RI and an action plan to deliver these;*
- *expanding the range of ways in which residents can be involved in decision-making, ensuring as many residents are able to be involved as possible, and that involvement is demonstrably representative; and*
- *developing with customers a policy on choice on services including on fittings and finishes in refurbishment works.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- residents have greater practical opportunities to have their voices heard and feel more empowered and satisfied with opportunities for participating in decision-making; and
- the service more closely meets the needs and aspirations of its customers.

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

Recommendation

R4 Improve performance management at all levels of the service by:

- *reviewing with customers and clearly setting out the strategic objectives and priorities of the landlord service, ensuring these are fully integrated into SMART service and improvement plans at all levels, and that specific service strategies are developed where these are needed to drive service improvements in key areas, such as ASB;*
- *extending the range of performance measures to cover the range of key service activities including ASB, and ensuring arrangements are developed so that this data is effectively used for service improvement;*
- *developing with customers a comprehensive set of service standards for all services;*
- *developing an approach to ensure that the service focuses on learning externally from best performers, and sets up the means to bring in good practice routinely to the service and to disseminate this internally; and*
- *reviewing the purpose and form of landlord service records to ensure they are consistently fit for purpose.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- overall improved approach to planning including a clear direction for the medium and long term with identified priorities for action and better quality plans;
- improved understanding of performance of key service areas and ability to track progress on improvements methodically over time;
- better use of resources applied to ASB and scope for planned improvements to ASB services over time; and
- customers have greater clarity over what standards of service they are entitled to expect.

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

Recommendation

R5 Integrate value for money into working practices through:

- *developing a comprehensive action plan to support the strategic objective of modernising procurement, extending this to cover all major contracts including estates services;*
- *taking forward the cost benchmarking of services, establishing comparative costs and integrating challenging and clear cost and non-cost VFM targets within the service plan; and*
- *agreeing with in-house providers the key features and provisions of major internal support services.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved use made of potential of market to achieve greater service efficiencies and/or cost savings; and
- understanding of areas, both externally and internally, where there is further scope for cost savings and efficiencies, and the capacity for further reallocation of resources to higher priority areas of direct benefit to customers.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs, and has scope for significantly improving efficiency. This should be implemented by March 2007.

Recommendation

R6 Address capacity issues by strengthening the approach to staff and member training, reviewing how needs are assessed, and how training plans are prepared and delivered.

- 12 The expected benefits of this recommendation are that staff and member skills and knowledge gaps addressed and better able to meet the objectives of the service for the benefit of customers.
- 13 The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. It should be implemented by December 2006.
- 14 We would like to thank the staff of Dartford Borough Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 27 February - 3 March 2006.

Regional contact details

Audit Commission

1st Floor, Millbank Tower, Millbank

London SW1P 4HQ

Telephone: 0207 828 1212; Fax: 0207 976 6187; www.audit-commission.gov.uk

Report

Context

The locality

- 15 Dartford is located in north-west Kent, the River Thames forming its northern border and outer London its western. It is the smallest district in Kent both in terms of area and population, which is currently around 87,000. The major urban centre is Dartford town in the north-west part of the borough, and in contrast the south and east of the borough are largely rural with a number of historic villages and settlements. It is well served by roads, being bisected north–south by the M25, and east–west by the A2, and is easily accessible by rail from London.
- 16 The economy is healthy with unemployment lower than the national average, and incomes higher. Economic activity is diverse and includes distribution, manufacturing and financial administration. The borough is at the heart of the Thames Gateway development area and large-scale commercial, industrial and residential developments are planned. Nearly 900,000 square metres of new employment space is planned, there will be a new international rail station at Ebbsfleet and 15,500 new homes are being built, 7,000 at the Eastern Quarry site. The population is rising accordingly, with an estimated increase of 35 per cent in the period 2001 to 2021.
- 17 The proportion of the resident population from black and minority ethnic communities is 6.5 per cent, compared with about nine per cent nationally; Asian or Asian British people are the largest minority ethnic group at 1.85 per cent. There are slightly fewer people over 60 years in the borough than the national average. There are significant contrasts in terms of affluence across the Borough (ranked 170 out of 354 districts nationally), with sub-areas of the wards of Swanscombe, Joyce Green, Princes and Littlebrook among the 20 per cent most deprived in the country.
- 18 The average cost of a terraced house is £168,000. The average Dartford income level is £18,500 which produces an affordability house price earnings ratio of 9.1 compared with a national average of 6.5. There is therefore a high demand for affordable housing which is almost certain to be sustained. At April 2005, the Common Housing Register showed 2,652 households seeking accommodation – an estimated shortfall of 395 affordable homes per annum.

The Council

- 19 The borough has 17 wards and a total of 44 Councillors. It has had a cabinet and leader model of governance since 2000, and there were originally two overview and scrutiny committees one of which focused on service issues. This has been revised and currently Scrutiny Committee challenges the work of Cabinet and Officers, while the Quality Services Committee carries out the overview function and service reviews.

- 20 The last election was held in 2003 and the political composition is 21 Conservative councillors, 16 Labour, 5 Residents' Association and Independents' Group, and 2 New England Party. The Conservatives and the Residents' Association and Independents formed the new coalition administration in 2003.
- 21 The Council was assessed as 'good' in the 2004 Comprehensive Performance Assessment carried out by the Audit Commission. The housing diagnostic part of the CPA which covered work being done to achieve the decent homes standard assessed the Council as having a 'high' risk of service failure in that area.

The service

- 22 The Council is the largest landlord in the borough, owning 4,437 homes, 1,362 garages and 373 leasehold properties in April 2005. Most of the stock is located within five main estates, with most of the remainder in villages.
- 23 The housing service was named Darthomes in the early 1990s, but the name has now been dropped and a new name not yet agreed. The service was outsourced from 1995 to 2000 to a housing association. A major staff restructuring was completed in 2005 and a new head of service took up post in January 2006. Landlord services are now part of the Executive Directorate. There are 70 staff employed in the housing service, out of a total of 420 employed by the Council.
- 24 The total HRA budget for 2005/06 was £11.455 million, and the capital budget £3.905 million. In 2004/05 the gross spend was £14.480 million, of which £2.102 million was spent on responsive repairs and planned or cyclical maintenance. In addition, a total of £3.937 million was spent on capital works to improve the housing stock.
- 25 Past works programmes have included key building component renewals. At present nearly all homes have double glazing and all tenants have been offered gas central heating where gas is available. The rating of energy efficiency achieved so far puts the Council in the top 25 per cent of districts. Currently 36 per cent of homes do not meet the decent homes standard.
- 26 The Council completed its stock options appraisal in 2005 and decided, with the support of the great majority of tenants who responded to the final survey, to retain the stock and aim for the relatively modest level of improvements which this option allowed for.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 27 The Council's corporate plan for 2005/06 sets out a vision for Dartford which is 'to make Dartford *'the place of quality and choice', a place where people choose to live, work and enjoy their leisure time'*. The objectives for housing are chiefly concerned with development, and are:
- to facilitate the building of communities, not just houses;
 - to ensure that there is an appropriate range, diversity, and mix of housing within the borough;
 - to offer support to families; and
 - to ensure new houses go to residents rather than speculators.
- 28 The draft 2005/10 Housing Revenue Account Business Plan sets out a list of 14 priorities for housing owned by the Council, of which the following 12 are relevant.
- To ensure that by 2010 all properties meet the minimum requirements set out in the Government's Decent Homes Standard (DHS).
 - To provide a financially sustainable business framework for the management and improvement of the Council's housing stock over the next 30 years.
 - To seek to identify funding to accelerate proposed works programmes or maintain properties to a standard in excess of the Government's DHS.
 - To reduce anti-social behaviour and improve quality of life in the environments on estates.
 - To ensure that all properties meet the minimum requirements set out in the Government's DHS from 2010 to the end of the Plan Period.
 - To ensure that tenants and residents of the Borough are able to be more actively involved in shaping the services the Council provides.
 - To promote independent living and to ensure that the vulnerable in the community benefit from being able to access accommodation and support.
 - To ensure that all tenants and residents have fair and equal access to housing and services.
 - To ensure continuous improvement of the performance of the overall Housing Service.
 - To seek to deliver the overall Housing Service at a performance level that exceeds the performance of 75 per cent of providers (upper quartile performance).
 - To ensure that management and direct costs are maintained at as low a level as possible to maintain the service.
 - To publicise Service Standards.

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

Access and customer care

- 29 The Council shows an overall balance of strengths and weaknesses in the way it deals with its customers. There is a developing corporate commitment to modernising customer services, which is building upon an already sound set of access arrangements. However, the commitment is not yet fully embedded and some access to services such as repairs appointments needs developing, and the Council is not yet systematically listening to what its customers say and using this to develop services in the right direction.
- 30 The Council has a corporate commitment to improving customer care which it is demonstrating in significant practical ways. While the inspectors were on site, a major refurbishment of the Civic Centre public areas was completed. A new pedestrian footway link to the town centre has also just been opened, partly funded through planning gain resources released by the Council. The refurbishment will provide the facilities to enable the Council to fulfil its plan to set up a contact centre using Customer Relations Management information technology. Staff are positive about the scope for improving customer services offered by the changes, and customers can already experience the benefits of this investment in terms of improved interview facilities, seating and environment.
- 31 The Council has also made progress in setting out the standards which customers should expect in their dealings with the Council. There is a customer service charter setting out specific standards on access and related services. Some key standards such as replying to letters are measured and reported to tenants through the tenants' newsletter, and performance is generally sound with 90 per cent of letters answered within deadline in 2005. There is an adequate code of conduct for repairs contractors. In key areas customers have clarity over what they can expect from housing services.
- 32 Tenants are generally able to reach their landlord easily and through an appropriate variety of means. Tenants can call at the Civic Centre reception during office hours, and staff at the reception desks have a positive and helpful attitude. The telephone service operates 24 hours a day, with a satisfactory out of hours emergency service run by a major external provider with extensive experience in the field. The website is attractive and informative. Tenants are helped to report repairs through the Council's website by an interactive repairs diagnostic tool. Other online services are available for payments, exchanges and Choice Based Lettings (CBL). Customers in most cases are able to request services and make enquiries when they need to.
- 33 There is a range of attractive and helpful information in the form of leaflets, handbooks and newsletters provided to tenants. The handbooks for tenants and sheltered tenants are easy to use, and contain a wide range of useful information. They provide clear guidance on who to contact and how to reach them, and there is information on other agencies and local services.

Handbooks are complemented by a range of service information leaflets which are clear and up to date, and there is a set of estate information sheets providing details of health, transport and other facilities. The Link and Sheltered Grapevine tenant newsletters are bright and attractive, and are issued four and three times a year respectively. They have a range of features providing information on services, community events, and what the Council is doing in other fields. Overall the information should be of real value to residents.

- 34 The way the Council deals with complaints is sound in many but not all respects. There is a three stage complaints scheme which is set out in a clear leaflet. The quality of replies to individual complaints is satisfactory and details are given of the next stage should complainants want to take the complaint further. There are weaknesses however. Only 60 per cent stage one complaints in 2005 were dealt within the deadline set. Stage two complaints have to be made in writing according to the published information. This may be off-putting for some people, who may have practical difficulty in pursuing complaints beyond stage one.
- 35 There are other significant weaknesses in the way the Council manages its relations with its customers. Service standards have not been fully developed for all aspects of landlord services. The service standards set out in the customer charter have not been reviewed since 2002 and there is lack of a robust approach to monitoring them. Staff do not receive local performance information about telephone call handling or the time taken to deal with correspondence. There has been limited consultation with staff, and residents' views have not been sought on how they would like the planned contact centre to operate, and there are no new service standards yet agreed. Customer service training has been limited and not specific to the housing service.
- 36 Some access arrangements have scope for improvement, and the Council has not specifically tried to find out if some customers might be having difficulty in reaching it. Performance in answering the telephone is below that of the best landlords, though performance is not routinely monitored and the system does not measure rerouted calls, hence it is not possible to say with certainty what performance is. There are no texting services yet available. No systematic attempt has yet been made to find out if some tenants are having difficulty in using the current means of accessing their landlord, so the Council cannot yet be sure if it is unintentionally excluding some people from receiving services.
- 37 There is scope for improvement in making repairs appointments so tenants can readily receive this basic landlord service. Repairs appointments were developed relatively recently and the scheme is basic in nature. Policy is to provide appointments for category three and four repairs, though appointments were made in only 48 per cent of category three and four repairs ordered. While 94 per cent of these were kept, just over half of eligible repairs do not have appointments made, and customers are not receiving this service. Tenants we spoke to confirmed that offering appointments had not yet become routine. Tenants' needs for more certainty on when repairs will be done are not consistently met.

- 38 The Council is not yet systematically making best use of feedback from tenants. We found the approach recently has been mixed. For example, the Council responded positively to the 2005 cleaning survey which found a wide extent of tenant dissatisfaction. It has agreed a programme of catch-up deep cleaning works with the contractor, some of which are paid for and some which the contractor is doing as part of the normal contract payment. On the other hand, feedback from tenants who have had repairs done to their homes has not been effectively used. Performance has not been reported and no systematic attempt made to identify areas of possible weakness. Generally the Council is not proactive in seeking customer views and staff rely on a lack of complaints or negative feedback as an indicator of customer satisfaction. The opportunity to use feedback to address immediate service issues and to develop services to meet changing needs in the longer term is not being taken.

Diversity

- 39 The Council has a great deal of ground to make up in this area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. The corporate culture on diversity has in the past been weak and has only recently begun to be strengthened. Not enough is known about the diversity of tenants or about their specific individual needs. Some progress has been made, especially in involving young people and in tackling domestic violence.
- 40 The Council has not yet moved beyond level one of the Equality standard for local government, the most comprehensive national benchmark for corporate progress on diversity. It has not yet started to carry out diversity impact assessments. A team has been set up as part of the plan to reach the level two Equality standard, but it does not yet have a work programme.
- 41 The Council has limited understanding of the diversity profile of its customers. It does have ethnicity data on 67 per cent of tenants but has no substantive data on other aspects of diversity such as age or disability. It has no plans to improve the profile other than by progressively taking account of the data made available when people are rehoused into its homes. This is insufficient to give it useable data which it can apply to service development purposes, and it cannot be sure if it providing the services necessary to meet tenants' needs.
- 42 This has contributed to the lack of progress made by the landlord service in ensuring its services meet the needs of all of its customers, especially those who may be vulnerable. No account is taken of possible cultural or gender needs in repairs policies. The special provisions relating to how arrears accrued by frail and elderly tenants are acknowledged to be out of date. A substantial minority of tenants may not be receiving services in a way appropriate to their needs.
- 43 The Council holds some data on individual customer communications and other needs but this is not recorded or used systematically. Currently it relies chiefly on case records held on file or in computer notes systems. This weakness also applies to data on tenants who may present a risk to staff, where the central Council register is distributed in hard copy only. The Council is not able to show it communicates effectively with its customers, nor to plan for the systematic use of alternative media or translated information when communicating with residents.

- 44 The approach to providing information in alternative media such as audio tape and large print copies, and in translation is inconsistent and under-developed. There is no corporate policy on advertising the availability of alternative media or translations, or on what these should be. Some important documents such as the sheltered handbook have nothing about alternative media and translation, and elsewhere even where these are promoted there is no consistency of approach. Customers needing such services are not served as well as they should be.
- 45 The Council is not aware of the diversity of its service users. The Council does not monitor the ethnic origin of service users using the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) recommended ethnic categories. It does not know therefore if there are any ethnicity, disability, age, gender or other issues in terms of accessing or receiving services, and cannot compare its performance in such respects with other organisations.
- 46 The Council also does not have a robust approach to ensuring consultation and resident involvement is carried out on as representative a basis as possible. While there is a stated aim to improve the representativeness of the key Tenants' and Leaseholders' Forum, this has had little impact. The diversity of residents who become involved at the forum or through other means is not monitored, and there has been little change in forum attendance for some time. It is unlikely that those residents involved in decision-making currently reflect the diversity of residents overall.
- 47 The Council does not fully comply with the CRE Code of Practice in Rented Housing, which is a mandatory best value performance indicator. While it complies in most respects, and has submitted a positive performance indicator return each year, an audit shows some areas where compliance is not achieved or is under-developed. Services in effect may be less sound than they should be.
- 48 The Council has not yet developed an overall approach to tackling harassment. While it has singled out racial harassment as an area requiring specific procedures and policies, other forms of harassment such as gender, homophobic or disability-related are dealt with under the general ASB policy. The racial harassment procedure does not have sufficient details on key issues including working with partners and victim support and record keeping. This presents a risk that people facing similar threats will receive different standards of service.
- 49 The Council has made some progress on diversity and has some evident strengths. Its 2004 Equalities Policy set out a clear way forward based on adopting and working through the levels of the Equality Standard for Local Government. The diversity profile of Council staff is already positive in some respects. Overall the Council employs a percentage of black and minority ethnic (BME) staff which reflects the overall community. In housing, women form a majority of staff at both managerial and supervisory level and administrative and clerical level. The Council carried out mandatory equalities training for 430 staff in 2003, mandatory training on the CRE equalities standard and impact assessments for 25 key managers in 2004. The Council has signed up to the Two Ticks Disability Scheme which sets out the Council's commitments relating to the employment of staff with disabilities. Overall these steps are setting the right basis for a fairer service in future.

- 50 The Civic Centre which provides the housing service customer access services is accessible to wheelchairs users, and is now accessible by wheelchair from the town centre. However, at present the Council acknowledges that neither of the two rent offices complies with the Disability Discrimination Act access standards. There are plans to achieve the DDA standards in rent offices by relocating one office and by improving the other, and finance and a timetable to deliver the plans are agreed. However, until this is completed customers with disabilities are only well served at the main housing service point.
- 51 Some facilities for people with specific communication needs are provided. Languageline is available for use, and a signer can be engaged when needed. An induction loop is installed in the reception area.
- 52 The Council has made progress on the need to take account of the views of minority groups when developing its services. Stakeholders including community and special interest groups are routinely consulted on policy and account taken of responses. Groups include the Community Youth Association, MIND, and Mencap. Consultation on the stock options appraisal included meetings with the Minority Ethnic Communities Information Sharing Group and the Youth Forum. This provides the basis for ensuring a wide range of community views are considered when determining policy. Sound progress has also been made in involving young people in developments directly affecting their lives. They have been consulted on the major play areas renewal programme and on the Gunn Road regeneration scheme, and forthcoming Ridgeway project. A wide range of young peoples' views are taken account of.
- 53 The Council is seeking to improve the reporting and recording of racial incidents. It accepts that there is under-reporting and has agreed a policy which aims to improve reporting rates and to develop a central record which could be used to tackle problems on an area basis. This sets out a sound basis for developing a more strategic approach to the problem.
- 54 The Council has developed effective policies and procedures for tackling domestic violence (DV). It has clear policies and facilitates a quarterly domestic abuse forum attended by stakeholders and partner agencies. The North Kent Domestic Abuse Forum is a well-attended and wide-ranging group which has developed an action plan to improve services. Policies focus on the needs of the victim. Overall the Council has taken a positive position on dealing with the housing aspects of DV.

Stock investment and asset management

- 55 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this service area. The Comprehensive Performance Assessment inspection of the Council in 2004 was critical of the progress the Council was making towards achieving the decent homes standard and judged that there was a high risk at that time of service failure in terms of decent homes. The future investment framework has now been settled and plans are being made to deliver this investment, and repairs to occupied and empty homes have improved and are sound in many key respects.

Overall investment resources currently identified will not however meet all the improvement aspirations of tenants nor many of the environmental and communal area needs. The adaptations service has significant weaknesses.

Capital, planned, and cyclical maintenance

- 56** Following criticism in the 2004 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) report, the Council acted to complete its stock options appraisal (SOA) within the national deadline of July 2005. It now has an agreed way forward to address the needs to meet the decent homes standard (DHS) and to modernise its homes to a DHS plus standard. In July 2005 the Council agreed to retain the stock on the basis of the findings of the SOA, which were that retention would allow the DHS to be met by 2010, and internal modernisation to an agreed standard to be achieved over 20 years. Customers now know what they can expect both in terms of management and investment in their homes.
- 57** Resources to meet the DHS and other modernisation objectives have been identified. The cost of meeting the local DHS plus standard is approximately £25 million in the period to 2011/12 and £93 million over the full 30-year plan period. A long-term investment plan has been prepared to meet these costs from a mix of repairs allowances, capital receipts and revenue contributions. For the first five years the plan does include some DHS plus works but if less funding is available than planned, priority will be given to DHS works. Overall the Council is well placed from a funding point of view to achieve the DHS and other objectives in the required timescales.
- 58** The Council is now taking steps to turn the strategic investment decision into a practical and effective works programme. It has a reasonable understanding of the condition of its stock and has a sound approach to improving this understanding within a suitable timeframe. Since the ten per cent survey by consultant surveyors in 2004 which informed the stock options appraisal, it has carried out a survey through another consultancy of a further 600 homes to inform the preparation of the detailed works programme and proposes to complete a 100 per cent survey by April 2007 using in-house staff. This provides a sound basis for effective works programming to achieve the DHS and related aims from 2006-07 onwards.
- 59** The stock condition data is not updated automatically to take account of responsive repairs and replacements. The Council accepts that it is behind with such updating and has appointed an Asset Information Officer, part of whose job will be to deal with the issue until software upgrades allow automatic updates.
- 60** There are weaknesses in the investment strategy itself. The DHS plus standard which the Council has agreed is not ambitious and does not meet tenants' aspirations as assessed in the SOA. The standard provides for refurbishment over 20 years to the extent that by 2025 no kitchen will be more than 20 years old and no bathroom more than 30 years, and for front door renewals.

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While tenants clearly expressed their preference to stay with the Council, and this is therefore all that is affordable, the preference was a choice of what they currently know against the concept of transfer, not against possible transfer partners with specific improvement offers on the table. Overall this imbalance of aspiration and provision will provide a long-term challenge for the Council.

- 61 The strategy also has little scope for external repairs and improvements or meeting related aims around security and ASB. There is significant need on estates both for environmental repairs and renewals and for works to replace worn out components inside blocks, which the DHS plus standard does not cover. While some works are being done these are limited in scope and are largely done on an annual programme basis. However, there is no longer term programme yet agreed and neither staff nor residents know more than for the forthcoming year what works will be done.
- 62 The delivery of the strategy has not proceeded smoothly. The Council's annual capital programme did not progress as planned in 2005-06 as a decision was taken to stop internal refurbishments, due to acknowledged weaknesses in the way the Council managed the contract. Only £300,000 of the budget of £3.42 million is projected to be spent. While this will not result in any overall investment loss, the delay means some tenants are experiencing delays in having their homes modernised.
- 63 Involvement of residents in capital works has not yet been adequately developed. This applies both to involvement in determining the works programme and involvement with works to their own homes. There is no policy on tenant choice in bathroom and kitchen refurbishments or other areas where some degree of choice is possible. This failure to build on the involvement generated through the SOA is a missed opportunity.
- 64 In terms of planned and cyclical works, the approach to electrical work is robust. Regular electrical checks on a five-year cycle form part of the planned maintenance programme. This will help to manage risks to tenants from the fixed wiring in their homes, and has already led to 30 total rewires being completed.
- 65 The Council is strengthening its approach to dealing with asbestos. Its current system does provide automatic flagging of known asbestos materials on repairs orders and contractors have copies of the database. However, the Council acknowledges that the database is not adequate in terms of the risk presented and plans to do a comprehensive re-survey probably over five years starting in 2006-07. This will improve the approach both in terms of individual sites and dealing with planned removal.
- 66 The Council has not had a positive approach to fire safety in the past although it has now improved this approach. It has very recently decided to install mains powered smoke alarms when it rewires its homes. This will in time improve standards of protection although over a very long period.
- 67 The Council has no policy at present on sustainable materials, ethical disposal or other green issues in its housing investment programmes.

Responsive repairs

- 68 Tenants are positive about most aspects of the day-to-day repairs service. The great majority find it easy to get in touch with the right section, and find both housing and repairs staff helpful. Satisfaction is measured through the questionnaires left with a freepost envelope after each repair and in 2005 overall satisfaction with the service was 97 per cent, with 94 per cent of tenants who replied saying that housing was helpful to them.
- 69 Repairs performance data confirms this positive view. Responsive repairs are being carried out within the target timescales in most cases. In 2004/05, 97 per cent of priority one and two repairs were done within deadline, and 93 per cent and 98 per cent of priority three and four repairs respectively were completed within time. We have described the issue over appointments not being consistently made in the section on access and customer care, but where appointments are made the performance in keeping them is sound.
- 70 Repairs inspections are being carried out appropriately. About 10 per cent of repairs are inspected before an order is placed, and surveyors use hand held computers to speed the subsequent ordering process. In 2004-05 the Council inspected ten per cent of completed repairs in total, and in 2005-06 to February 2006 this had increased to 15 per cent. This achieves an appropriate balance in the use of resources to ensure works are completed to the required standard at the agreed cost.
- 71 The repairs policy is wide ranging, detailed and up to date. It is clear what the Council will and will not do and what it will recharge tenants for. This reduces the scope for dispute and conflict over what will and will not be done.
- 72 The operational arrangements for carrying out repairs are sound. Contractors have to seek Council agreement to variations while in the home, and in nearly all cases of works involving two or more core trades, one operative will complete all tasks required avoiding further visits. This should help to minimise inconvenience to customers and to ensure a high proportion of jobs are completed on the first visit. One weakness in the Council's approach is however that it does not measure this key aspect of performance, and it cannot be sure therefore that a sufficiently high number of jobs are completed in this way, nor identify what steps need to be taken to improve the service if they are not.

Repairing empty homes

- 73 Performance in ensuring empty homes are repaired within deadline to a satisfactory standard is sound. The total period it takes to relet empty homes has been reduced from an average of 32 days in 2002/03 to around 24 days, which is the 2005/06 target. This has been helped by improved specification of works and liaison with the voids repairs contractor who as a result in 2005 completed 97 per cent of voids within target time. Overall rent loss and waiting times for those in need are being reduced.

- 74 The condition of empty homes following repair is also satisfactory. We looked at a variety of types of homes which had been prepared for reletting and found them to be clean, in reasonable and habitable condition, and with no significant outstanding repairs. Tenants we spoke to in a telephone survey all said they had found no problems in carrying out any decorations needed, and all rated the overall rehousing and moving in services on a scale of good to excellent. Most needs of new tenants are adequately met.
- 75 Achieving overall sound performance is helped by the rigorous approach taken to visiting outgoing tenants before they leave and the policy of recharging for damage and unwarranted disrepair. These enable the Council to assess possible liability for repairs and to ensure outgoing tenants understand their responsibilities. This contributes to the overall effective reservicing of empty homes.
- 76 The voids procedure is up to date and overall it provides the right basis for ensuring voids are let promptly. It includes important good practice features including accompanied viewings in all cases, decorations allowances both where the condition of decorations is poor and when current colours or finishes have limited appeal, and a welcome pack including light bulbs.
- 77 The written standard to which empty homes are brought before occupation is not sound. Some standards are low or unclear, with no direct link to the DHS or DHS plus standards. For example washing machine plumbing and electric points are not provided and kitchen unit provision is minimal and not related to property size. The condition of decorative surfaces is not covered. The Council provides a summary of the relet standard to prospective tenants at offer stage but this is of limited practical value and does not adequately empower tenants in their dealings with housing staff.
- 78 Best use is not made of empty homes to carry out DHS or DHS plus related works. This was previously done but was stopped in 2004 partly because of complaints raised by current tenants. The scope offered by voids for improving efficiency in terms of decent homes and other works is not being used.

Gas safety

- 79 The Council is making real efforts to meet its legal duty in terms of gas safety and 99.88 per cent of homes have current gas safety certificates (CP12 certificates). While nothing less than 100 per cent is satisfactory, this reflects improving performance locally, and puts the Council among the best performers nationally. Overall the great majority of tenants with gas appliances have the assurance of a certified safety check.
- 80 The approach to gas safety checks reflects positive practice in a number of areas. All homes with a gas supply are included in the safety check schedules even if no appliance has been previously recorded. The Council carries out safety checks for tenants who exchange their homes, and it is policy to provide CP12 certificates for new tenants. These practices have contributed to moving the service overall in a positive direction.

- 81 The audit of the gas contractor's safety checks has been approached adequately. Prior to 2004/05, a five per cent plus audit was carried out by a technically qualified member of staff. In 2004/05, an audit was carried out through the Council's insurers, though the numbers of homes audited fell well short on the five per cent minimum we would expect. From 2005/06, the work will be carried out by the contractor's independent agent, again to a minimum of five per cent of total. This provides a sound basis for ensuring technical quality standards are maintained.
- 82 However, there are still some concerns in this area. The procedures for ensuring gas appliance servicing is carried out in all cases are not satisfactory. While it is clear what the contractor has to do and at what stage cases where access has not been obtained are passed to the Council, the Council's procedures are not sufficient. They rely on an initial letter followed automatically by service of a Notice of Seeking Possession (NSP), and subsequent action is determined on a case basis without any further guidance provided. This presents the risk of inconsistent and insufficiently timely action.
- 83 The Council's gas record system is flawed. While CP12 copies for all homes should be traceable through the main Academy property database, when we tested this for five homes we found that in four cases the data had not been input and the CP12 forms were not locatable, even though we later found that they did exist. One consequence of this is that the Council does not have an effective way of checking that contractor returns on completions are sound, nor indeed has the Council sought to do this. Despite this issue, we believe the figure for the percentage of homes with gas safety certificates is accurate. The Council responded positively during the inspection to our concerns and identified the cause of the data input problem, and will introduce a cross-checking process covering the contractor's safety check returns and CP12 certificates. The actions being taken in response to our concerns provides the means to ensure the quality of the returns is controlled.
- 84 Output and outcome performance reporting on gas services has not been developed. While overall performance is sound there is no system of performance reporting on this area of statutory responsibility at service or higher levels. Satisfaction cards are left after all service calls but returns are not routinely collated or reported. Overall these amount to significant gaps in the management of the service.
- 85 The Council is not giving the prominence to promoting gas safety that it could. The 2005/06 annual gas safety programme was promoted in the newsletter but lacked impact and did not include additional information about gas leaks and other home safety issues.

Adaptations for people with disabilities

- 86 Adaptations services are not being delivered within a clear and coherent framework involving partnership working, clear aims and objectives, a related budget and effective performance management. While the budget is committed and work is being carried out, the current approach needs review in order to achieve such a framework.

- 87 The revenue and capital budgets for adaptations are not sufficient to ensure adaptations requested by social services are carried out within a reasonable timescale. Consequently housing staff have in effect informally prioritised adaptations on the waiting list which has meant excessive waits for some tenants, and conflict between the parties in some cases, especially where the most expensive works are involved. Eleven people have been waiting for major adaptations since 2004, though this may not have been widely known as performance is not currently reported. Options to resolve this unsatisfactory situation have not been fully explored on a partnership basis with social services. Liaison with social services on adaptations is not always positive. There is no protocol in operation and therefore no agreed standards over such matters as the form of specification provided to housing, and joint exploration of alternatives to proposed major adaptive works. Needs of some vulnerable tenants are not being addressed.
- 88 The Council acknowledges it may not know the location of all homes which have been adapted for people with disabilities, and has not recorded all such homes on its property database. While adaptations should be noted in voids inspections and account then taken in lettings, this cannot be guaranteed and best use may not always be made of these facilities as a result.
- 89 The recent policy review of adaptations led to the adoption of a harsh and potentially discriminatory policy. This policy states that tenants in arrears or 'where another debt is owed' will not have adaptations carried out. This inflexible approach may cause undue individual suffering.

Housing income management

- 90 Income management has a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Performance in both rent and service charge arrears has recently recovered and is on the right track, although there is not yet a cohesive overall approach to income management. Procedures and systems are sound in most respects, with early intervention high on the agenda. The approach to debt advice and income maximisation remains basic. The Council is complying with statutory requirements on rent setting and rent restructuring, and 99.4 per cent of homes will be within five per cent of target rents by the deadline of 2012.
- 91 The Council provides a good range of payments methods for tenants. These include standing orders and direct debits (DD), and three cash office points including two rent offices located on estates. Tenants and leaseholders can also pay through the Council's website online facility, though the leaseholder payment route lacks clarity. Leaseholders cannot yet pay by DD but this is being made available shortly. Generally most customers should find a suitable way of payment without difficulty.
- 92 The Council's rent statements are generally sound. They are well set out and provide tenants with details of charges and payments over the last quarter in table form. It sets out the current charges and highlights any balance on the account. There is a weakness however in that the font size is small and payment information is difficult to read.

- 93 Performance on rent collection is now positive after a difficult period from 2002/03 to 2004/05. In those years performance fell and targets were not met. In 2005/06, while the target of 98.5 per cent is not likely to be met, performance has improved to 98.01 per cent at January 2006, compared with the benchmark figure of 98.74 per cent achieved as a minimum by the top 25 per cent of districts. Performance has been well publicised in the newsletters. The Council is now moving in the right direction, putting it within reach of the achievements of the best performers.
- 94 The Council has an up-to-date, appropriate and effective approach to dealing with rent arrears. It has developed a comprehensive recovery procedure. This sets out a firm but sympathetic approach to rent arrears recovery, with an emphasis on prevention, early intervention, direct and personal contact, and with eviction as the last resort. It facilitates rent payments by having rent free weeks at appropriate times of the year. Overall these arrangements provide a solid foundation for effective income recovery.
- 95 The arrears procedure is applied consistently and fairly. We sampled a number of arrears files to look at the approach taken in practice to dealing with tenants who have rent arrears. We found that in general the action taken was appropriate to the circumstances and levels of debt. There was evidence of attempts to contact tenants to discuss arrears at various stages. The standard letters used for rent arrears are customer focussed, in straightforward language and easy to understand. The reverse side of standard letters is printed with details of how and where to pay rent. However, details of how to seek advice from the Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) and other agencies were not prominently displayed. Generally the right balance is achieved between the needs to collect as much rent as possible while treating customers in a helpful and respectful way.
- 96 The key issue of managing the housing benefit aspects of rent arrears is dealt with effectively. There is a good working relationship between the housing benefit team and the housing arrears team. The new service level agreement (SLA) has helped to reduce bureaucracy and speed up the flow of information. Housing staff are able to view benefit applications on line and see what action is being taken, which in turn enables them to prioritise their work more effectively. This both contributes to ensuring that recovery actions are appropriate and take account of housing benefit, and to achieving an overall improved level of performance.
- 97 The rent accounting system is sound and supports the Council's work on income collection. The tenant's payment history and previous action taken is readily accessed. The Council has recently reintroduced a facility to prompt or direct the housing officer to the next stage of the arrears procedure. This might be generating a standard reminder letter or referring the case for legal action. This was not used to maximum effect previously because staff did not fully understand the system and there was some resistance to change. This has improved the efficiency of the collection process.

- 98 The Council is aware of the need to ensure customers' incomes are maximised and debts managed, though arrangements so far in place provide no more than a basic level of service. The service is based on housing officers directing tenants experiencing difficulty with their rent to specialist agencies such as the CAB where appropriate. The CAB is substantially funded by the Council and there is a service agreement in place. The CAB works in sites across the district and has a home visiting service, hence is reasonably accessible. The Council also promotes the telephone based Debtline service in its publications though it is not clear how effective this is in reducing debts or meeting tenants needs. The basic nature of the Council's approach to debt is also reflected in the lack of a current corporate debt policy, which presents a risk of different council teams seeking to recover debts from tenants in an uncoordinated way. Overall while some tenants may receive appropriate specialist advice and counselling as a result, the current approach to debt is unlikely to meet everyone's needs.
- 99 Performance on service charge collection is now positive. There have been major deficiencies in this area in the past. Until recently, there was no service charge collection procedure in place, and although invoices were being sent out to leaseholders on a quarterly basis, debts were not being collected. The Council has 380 leaseholders who pay service charges ranging from £100 to £500 per year, representing a significant income to the Council. Management changes provided the driver for reviewing arrangements, and debts are now actively chased. Between November 2005 and the end of February 2006, the new arrangements led to the reduction of the level of service charge arrears from around £50,000 to £39,402.
- 100 Performance on and arrangements for the collection of former tenants' arrears (FTA) are not adequate. The use of a debt collection agency for these arrears is not delivering the results anticipated by the Council. An FTA debt of £83,000 was referred to the agency, and the Council has paid £1,472 in fees but only £1,854 has been received in income. Officers are reviewing the contract and considering using the corporate debt collection agency, used by the Council to collect council tax arrears.
- 101 Performance management arrangements for rent arrears work are under-developed. There are no individual or team targets set for cash collection. Although individuals are able to see the total level of arrears for their patch listed each week on a spreadsheet, they cannot easily see how much cash has been collected or the percentage reduction of arrears. Until this is remedied a possible driver to further performance improvement is being overlooked.

Tenancy and estate management

- 102 Overall there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in the tenancy and estate management service areas. Tackling ASB has been the priority in tenancy management and sound remedial and preventative work has been achieved though some key areas such as measuring performance have not yet been addressed. Other areas of tenancy management have received less attention and there is ground to be made up. Generally estates do give a positive overall impression and look clean and tidy.

However, a closer look reveals inconsistencies in standards which need to be addressed, probably related to the under-developed approach to inspection.

Tenancy management and tackling anti-social behaviour

- 103** The Council takes a strong stance on tackling ASB. It used the available remedies robustly and has developed sound partnership arrangements, and advertises its successes as a warning to others. It also recognises the need to work at community level to reduce the scope for ASB both in terms of improving security and developing local leisure and youth meeting facilities.
- 104** The Council has shown its commitment to dealing with ASB by using the full range of remedial measures available to it. It uses anti-social behaviour orders (ASBOs), acceptable behaviour agreements (ABAs), introductory and demoted tenancies, possession action and eviction, and in one case injunction. Cases we reviewed demonstrated a variety of appropriate actions taken and the involvement of a range of partners including the police. Staff understand the importance of dealing with ASB and have the experience to deal with cases individually on their merits. It has clearly shown it has the resolve to use strong measures where warranted.
- 105** The Council has addressed the key need to develop effective partnership working on ASB by setting up the ASB Group. The Group, which is a sub-group of the Crime and Disorder Partnership, involves a wide range of agencies who have agreed clear procedures for assessing and dealing with serious cases. In 2004/05 there were 26 referrals to the Group from the 76 reported complaints on estates, and this resulted in 11 ABAs and 9 ASBOs. The Group agreed a robust information protocol based on a county model document in use elsewhere. Overall the Group is a significant operational resource in tackling ASB, and cases referred to it should receive appropriate and integrated action.
- 106** Housing officers have been active in trying to change the behaviours of people responsible for ASB. For example, young people may be referred to the Power Project which provides one to one coaching, or to the Fairbridge scheme which provides a six weeks course on social skills. This helps to provide real solutions to the causes of ASB rather than just dealing with problems as they arise.
- 107** The Council has been active in taking measures in conjunction with residents to reduce the level of ASB on estates. At Gunn Road, the Council tackled ASB and crime on an area basis with residents by redesigning the paths and other infrastructure of the area. Other examples include the youth shelter at Temple Hill, monitored closed circuit television (CCTV) schemes at Temple Hill and Alamein Gardens and a number of perimeter security schemes. These measures have reduced the scope for abuse of the areas and removed the feeling of neglect. This joint approach should make best use of resources for preventing ASB.

- 108 The housing service is maintaining an active approach to reducing ASB on estates. The ongoing major play area improvement programme funded by the General Fund is providing extensive new play facilities including facilities such as ball game areas, skate board tracks and meeting shelters aimed at young and mid-teens. At Ridgeway, housing is working with the police, the Council's horticultural service and with residents including young people to deal with a much abused area of overgrown shrubs. The environment is being improved and secured and the scope for young people to get into trouble is reducing.
- 109 Procedures support an effective approach to tackling ASB. The housing service has agreed wide-ranging and helpful procedures to guide staff who are dealing with ASB, neighbour dispute and harassment cases. Overall staff have an adequate basis for dealing with this important area of work.
- 110 The Council makes appropriate use of its allocations arrangements to manage ASB by operating a system of suspension of applicants who have been ASB perpetrators. This provides a significant incentive not to become involved in ASB.
- 111 The provision of floating support services to tenants, which may help to sustain vulnerable tenants both by reducing disruption they might be causing to others and by simply helping to keep the household adequately managed and bills paid, is not fully satisfactory. There are a range of providers and 16 referrals have been taken up from housing since early 2004. However, all except the organisation providing services for older people are at full capacity, and it is very likely that there is unmet need for such services especially from people with less serious mental health issues.
- 112 Some aspects of dealing the ASB are not satisfactory. One of the most important is that performance in dealing with ASB is not routinely measured. The Council does not know in any quantified sense how well it is doing in this key service area, including how satisfied complainants are with the service, or whether it is improving.
- 113 Housing has not yet developed a strategic approach to ASB service development. While it is to some extent involved positively with the Community Safety Strategy this is not specific to estates and no additional housing ASB strategic objectives and action plans have been produced. There are some weaknesses in the Statement of Housing Landlord's Policy, which does not adequately consider the key areas of racial and other harassment policies, nor provision to support perpetrators and vulnerable groups. Both strategy and policy are under-developed, and may mean services are not as effective as they might be.
- 114 Records for ASB cases are not well kept. There is no systematic approach to maintaining the case files, and in particular no document log or designated events record form. Some file notes are handwritten and difficult to read, and the narrative is difficult to pick up for someone coming new to the case. While there is sound evidence of the use of complaints diaries, the records do not give a full picture of how complainants have been kept informed of progress or responded to in other ways. As a result, case files are not as effective in supporting case management as they should be.

- 115** Other aspects of tenancy management have not received the priority given to ASB and the Council has considerable ground to make up. The tenancy agreement is not satisfactory. One type of agreement is intended to cover both secure and introductory tenancies, and this is at times confusing. A number of provisions are unclear. Overall this does not provide a readily comprehensible form of contract between the Council and its customers.
- 116** The arrangements for ensuring new tenants are properly introduced to their rights and responsibilities, and understand how to run their homes, are not fully sound. There is no detailed checklist form in use to ensure everything is properly covered at sign up. Information in the Welcome Pack for new tenants is not adequate. While there is a set of local estate information sheets covering local facilities, these are not always put in the pack and useful items such as the latest newsletter or heating instructions are not included. Housing officers do not routinely visit new tenants at home after they have been in residence for a few weeks. Overall new tenants may not appreciate either what is expected of them or establish early and positive relationships with housing staff.
- 117** While a number of key tenancy management areas are adequately covered by procedures, there are some significant gaps. For example there is no specific guidance on issues such as working from home, temporary absence and pets, which are likely to be of importance to individual tenants. Overall much is left to discretion which may result in inconsistency.
- 118** There is no tenancy audit programme operating. While individual cases are investigated if a reason arises, there are no targeted checks made on at risk homes. The risk of unauthorised occupation and other tenancy abuses is not systematically addressed.

Estate management

- 119** Estates generally have an overall tidy and litter free appearance, with grass cut and no dumping of unwanted furniture or other items, or extensive graffiti or vandalism. Visitors and others passing through are unlikely to feel threatened by the environment but instead will feel a landlord presence is maintained.
- 120** The Council has developed a number of positive practices in its estate management service. The grounds maintenance contract is the subject of comprehensive technical monitoring. The Council employs a handyman who carries out some responsive repairs on a flexible basis and also visits estates to check on safety and other concerns and acts or reports findings for action where needed. Local housing staff have a small budget of £12,000 to spend on environmental works to deal with issues such as abuse of grassed areas. These all contribute in their respective ways to maintaining the overall cared for impression.

- 121** The Council is developing a potentially very useful scheme for local service monitoring. It is trying to get residents involved as service monitors. It has appointed 31 monitors so far and is keen to increase this number. Monitors have a remit to check on cleaning and some attend the monthly contract monitoring meetings. This local presence should provide a sound complement to more formal monitoring.
- 122** Garages are generally maintained in a safe and tidy state, and are well managed. The Council has a significant number of garages and at present 142 out of 1,362 are empty, and empty garages are in all but one case evenly distributed. Overall reasonable use is being made of these facilities and significant income obtained.
- 123** However, there are significant weaknesses both in the approach to managing estates and in the standards achieved in some specific service areas. The overall estate inspection regime is not robust. Resident involvement is very limited as the inspections are not widely advertised and tenant representation is often provided by a Tenant Forum member rather than on a local basis. Inspections were suspended in June 2005 as they were considered to be ineffective and to be raising false hopes of improvements, and were only restarted in early 2006. The estate inspection form does not provide a systematic guide to what should be inspected, for example in terms of internal cleaning, or a means to record findings of satisfactory and unsatisfactory performance. It is likely that the weaknesses in the inspection approach have contributed to the specific service area failings described next.
- 124** Some external areas lack a cared-for appearance when examined more closely. We found some paths where drifts of autumn leaf falls were evident, and there was some litter. Significant areas of soft landscaping are degrading. This applies both to shrubbed areas which in some places are worn out and to lawn areas which are damaged by foot and vehicle traffic in parts and by what may have been inappropriate mowing methods in others. Overall this presents an unsightly and neglected appearance in the affected areas.
- 125** Road verges on some cottage estates are unsightly, in most cases as a result of vehicle damage. While these are the responsibility of the county council they clearly have a negative effect on the estates environment and the Council has not yet achieved agreements on maintenance and improvements with the county to address the issues.
- 126** Internal cleaning of blocks is variable in quality. In some cases the weekly cleaning regime is not being applied resulting in a grimy appearance and accumulations of dust and debris especially in corners. There is also occasional graffiti on walls, doors and windows. Residents are not routinely informed about what cleaning should be done and when. A survey of 160 residents in September 2005 showed 63 per cent of respondents rated the service as poor or very poor. While housing staff have since been working with the contractor to deep clean some areas and standards overall are improving, there is still some way to go and some tenants are not receiving the promised services.

- 127** Some communal area components and environmental features have fallen into disrepair and have not been dealt with through the maintenance regime. Inside some blocks, such features as balustrades, floor surfaces and entrance doors are either at the end of their useful lives or require repair. Outside, features such as low level fencing around shrub beds and some hard surface areas obviously need repair or renewal. Where a number of these are co-located, there is an impression of significant neglect.

Resident involvement

- 128** Resident involvement (RI) is a predominantly weak area, its two main strengths being the Council's recognition of this weakness and preparedness to act, and the dedication of the small number of Forum representatives who have worked hard to ensure a resident voice has continued to be heard. Residents do not influence the service sufficiently and are not yet adequately encouraged to participate in decision-making.
- 129** The Council has not developed a range of mechanisms through which residents can routinely be involved in decision-making and the management of their homes. It has relied heavily on the Tenants' and Leaseholders' Forum which meets monthly, and is open to all tenants and leaseholders whether or not they hold any office in an association. There are a number of residents' and community associations in various parts of the borough though only one at Temple Hill focuses on tenants' and leaseholders' interests and links directly into the Forum at present. The Forum is attended by a dedicated group of tenants and leaseholders most of whom have been active for some time. The Council might have readily improved its position on RI by identifying a representative panel or jury of tenants who were prepared to be consulted in a variety of ways, and the tenants we spoke to at the focus group were all enthusiastic about such a prospect, but this has not happened. Overall the Council has failed to develop sound arrangements to involve tenants and ensure that the tenant influence on decision-making is sufficiently representative.
- 130** The Council has not made best use of the potential of the Forum or developed it adequately. Attendance is low and generally no more than eight, and an aim of making it more representative has not been met. There has been little training for 18 months, and no attempt to assess training needs. There has not been sufficient effort made to address these weaknesses. With the exception of the 2004 front line service review, there has been little real involvement in key developments such as preparing the HRA Business Plan, and little attempt to develop an adequate understanding of this and other key issues. The Forum does not have input into the content of the newsletter. The potential of the Forum has not been used to best effect.
- 131** Involvement has not been driven in the recent past by a robust Tenant Compact. The current compact was last revised five years ago. Local compacts have not been developed to complement the central compact.

In part due to the lack of agreed standards there has been no attempt to measure performance on RI, apart from the mandatory best value performance indicator, which showed a level of tenant satisfaction with involvement of 59 per cent in 2004, compared to a figure of 70 per cent achieved as a minimum by the best 25 per cent of districts. The potential of a revised compact to establish an agreed set of standards, from which performance can be measured, and to set out a development plan has not yet been developed.

- 132** Resources overall for RI are potentially adequate but with the exception of spending on involvement in the SOA, have not been applied properly this year. Of the 2005/06 involvement budget total of £36,350, only 26 per cent had been spent by February. There has been ample scope for spending the available budget but a lack of focus on the service has meant opportunities for improving involvement through effective use of the budget have largely not been taken.
- 133** Because of the intrinsic weaknesses in the RI structure, the impact of routine resident involvement on decision-making and the direction of the service has been limited. There have been some instances where the Forum has been involved in major issues which has demonstrably led to significant changes, notably the 2004 frontline service review which resulted in a number of significant changes to maintenance policies, with a focus on identifying what areas could best be trimmed to meet the need to reduce spend. However, this is not the norm and the Council has not achieved the continuous stream of impact which a more robust structure is capable of delivering.
- 134** Impact has been strongest where tenants have been involved with specific schemes or issues. Resident involvement at Gunn Road in preparing for the environmental improvements was extensive and well structured through representation on the steering group. Residents have been positively involved in other small scale improvement schemes such as on Temple Hill and Alamein Gardens, and in helping to plan the play area refurbishments, assisted by the 'Talking Trailer' display unit. Involvement in the SOA was adequate after a slow start though numbers joining in the final survey of opinion were still relatively low. This involvement has been significant and has contributed to ensuring that the Council is taking account of tenants' views on specific schemes.
- 135** Both councillors and managers acknowledge that much more needs to be done to ensure appropriate and representative tenant and leaseholder involvement. A high level working group of councillors, managers and tenants has been set up and has sketched an outline plan as the basis for further more detailed discussions, and the new Council leadership puts improved involvement as a prerequisite for a wider housing service improvement agenda. Tenants who are involved are starting to feel more supported and understand there is a consensus for change, and there are signs that the information flow to the Forum is increasing. Tenants are optimistic that involvement will really improve as a result.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 136** There is a balance of strengths and weakness in this area. A strong value for money (VFM) culture is not yet embedded but the Council is moving in the right direction, and has a Quality Service Committee established to help maintain the momentum. Major efficiency improvements driven by the need to save costs and put the revenue account on a sustainable footing have recently been achieved. However, gains from modernising procurement have yet to be made, though the process is now beginning.
- 137** The housing service has achieved a fundamental improvement in terms of costs and efficiency over the past two years. Councillors and managers acknowledge that prior to 2003 the staff establishment had been growing on a piecemeal basis over the years without any proper attempt to review or rationalise it, and no account had been taken of the falling stock due to Right to Buy sales. Service costs especially for repairs have also not been adequately controlled in terms of the resources available. These high costs were not justified by high performance and it had become clear that they were not affordable in the long term and were putting the future of the HRA in jeopardy. The Council set out the areas where it expected to make savings in the 2003 Annual Efficiency Statement (AES). Managers had a clear brief on the direction to take.
- 138** The Council has delivered on the AES objectives, and actual core cost savings made have been very substantial in the two years following the statement. The staff review in the housing service completed in mid-2005 has achieved full year cost savings of around £400,000, which is 16 per cent of the housing staff budget. The review of front line services which included revising repairs policies and the relet standard happened at the same time as a new repairs contract was being set up and a new contractor appointed, and overall repairs costs were reduced by 29 per cent from 2002/03 to 2005/06, amounting to over £400,000 a year. As a result of these and other changes, the position on the surplus of the revenue account has been greatly improved. An overall major step forward in improving efficiency has been achieved, and the HRA is now on a long term sustainable footing.
- 139** Tenants were involved positively in the cost review process. A working group of staff and tenants from the Forum looked at a range of services, and decisions were made including introducing charges for gardening, and significantly curtailing the internal decorations programme. This ensured input from residents in deciding the lower priority services areas where savings could most reasonably be made.
- 140** At the same time as these major cost reductions were being achieved, Dartford housing service has been making sound progress in developing a robust and appropriate approach to managing its costs on a day to day basis. There is cost awareness and a clear understanding at all levels of the need to work within agreed budgets. Managers have a degree of flexibility and are encouraged to seek the most advantageous arrangements when obtaining goods and services within the Council's financial regulations.

Monthly budget reports are issued to spending managers and spend is screened routinely and frequently by finance officers, and financial reports are produced for leading councillors and directors, highlighting areas where action is required. This controls budgets and prepares the ground for a more value for money approach to develop.

- 141 The change in its cost base position has generated surpluses in the revenue account which have been allocated to agreed priorities elsewhere. The surpluses are to be invested in the decent homes and decent homes plus programmes. The estimated revenue contribution to capital outlay (RCCO) made available through this means is £1 million a year until 2010. This forms a significant improvement in resource use and is a major gain for residents in terms of value obtained from the revenue account.
- 142 The service does not yet know how its costs compare with others. It had benchmarked costs before the recent reviews but has not yet had the capacity to carry out a further exercise though it is a member of a national benchmarking organisation and proposes to carry out the exercise soon. It cannot yet know therefore how far its reviews have achieved a cost base comparable with the best performing social landlords.
- 143 On a day-to-day basis the Council has developed a number of positive practices which contribute to making most effective use of its resources. Council staff carry out legal action administrative work and represent the Council at court, minimising legal costs. There is a clear policy for recharging tenants the costs of repairs in appropriate circumstances, which has led to receipts of about £27,500 in the past two years. Legal action for disrepair is not a threat to the Council's maintenance budgets. No actions have been taken since 2003-04, and even then costs were minimal. There is little or no risk of resources being diverted from more constructive uses to fund legal and other non-productive costs.
- 144 In other respects best use of resources has not yet been achieved. Responsive repairs fall short of good practice standards in terms of the ratio of urgent to non-urgent repairs ordered. In 2004-05 the ratio was 44:56, with good practice being at 30:70. While there are no contractual charges for urgent repairs this level of ordering is likely to affect the overall contract price and overall contractor efficiency. Neither is the Council achieving the good practice ratio of planned to responsive maintenance spending. At the end of the third quarter of 2005/06, the ratio was 42:58, against a benchmark of 60:40. An improvement in the ratio would improve the overall value achieved from maintenance spend. Arrangements for investing in landscaped areas are not satisfactory. All small scale improvements and replanting and other works to tackle degraded areas are carried out on an annual programme basis, and there is no understanding of overall investment needs. The Council cannot be sure it is spending on the right works or what overall it needs to be spending either to maintain an overall status quo position or to achieve a longer term improvement in the appearance of the estates.

- 145** The Council has inadequate information about the costs of the various rent and service charges payment methods. It does not know the costs of cash or cheque transactions, though it is able to produce detailed information about the cost of direct debit, standing orders and credit and debit card transactions. It is not yet able to consider the rent payment options from a properly informed basis and in particular to decide on the viability of the two rent offices it maintains.
- 146** Corporate services are not in any real sense delivered through service level agreements (SLAs), and most services are not covered by such agreements. The view from the top of the organisation is sceptical about the value of these agreements. The potential value of such agreements in setting out the scope and standards of services to be provided and the working arrangements required to ensure good relations are maintained and issues dealt with promptly, is not being developed. Housing services internal spend on support services remains without a tangible framework.
- 147** The Council has not yet modernised the way in which it procures its maintenance services. The Council has historically had a positive approach to the market. However, it contracts with providers on a traditional schedule of rates (SoR) basis or uses input specifications setting out what providers should do rather than the standards or outputs which are required. While relations with providers are satisfactory, these arrangements are contrary to government policy on procurement and may not make the best use of what the market has to offer, particularly in terms of longer term improvements to services and most effective use of the resources applied.
- 148** The Council is now changing direction and exploring how best to modernise procurement. It has agreed a housing procurement strategy which has the objective of partnering in line with the 'Rethinking Construction' principles as set out in the report of the task force led by Sir John Egan in 1998. In 2005 it stopped its refurbishment programme because it was clearly not achieving an effective use of resources. It has now agreed in principle to package its responsive and capital works programmes in one long term partnering contract and is looking at the options and experience elsewhere to decide which technical approach to take.

Summary

- 149** We consider the landlord service to be fair overall. It is generally straightforward to get access to the service, and customers are well received, although the customer viewpoint is not routinely explored. Diversity has not been a sufficient focus of attention to date, and there is much work to be done in developing a sound understanding both the overall profile of the tenants and of individuals' communications and other needs. Maintenance and repairs are carried out well in many respects, one important exception being the appointments system. Most day-to-day repairs are carried out within timescales, and performance on gas and empty homes has improved. With regard to major works, while the programme has recently been halted it should soon be back on track to deliver decent homes by the 2010 deadline. The adaptations service for people with disabilities is in need of urgent review.

Income management performance has recovered after a period of decline, and tenants have a wide choice of how to pay, though debt advice is a very basic part of the service.

- 150** The Council corporately takes a strong position on ASB and this is reflected in robust partnership working and other positive practice in housing. Estates generally look clean and tidy though closer inspection reveals a range of issues around cleaning and maintenance which need to be addressed. Resident involvement services are very basic and rely on a small dedicated group at present, and the Council needs to ensure it involves a wider and demonstrably representative group in future. Major improvements have been made in terms of the service costs base and efficiency over the past two years though a value for money culture is not yet embedded and the detail of a longer term approach awaits development.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 151** The service track record demonstrates more drivers than barriers to improvement. Many tenants have already benefited directly from the changes made in the last few years, some very substantially, and more stand to benefit in future. Most though not all of the key performance indicators have been doing well, and satisfaction is also rising. Costs have been controlled, and the outlook for further value for money gains is positive.
- 152** The housing service has carried out a wide range of changes in the last few years, leading to significant and meaningful improvement for its customers. Changes have been driven both internally and externally. Internal drivers have included the best value review of landlord services following the ending of the outsourcing of housing management, and the staffing and other cost-related reviews. External drivers have included the CPA inspection findings, and the priorities of the national housing agenda, to both of which the Council has responded appropriately with sound outcomes for customers.
- 153** As a result of the changes made, a substantial range of improvements have been delivered which directly benefit customers. These include the following:
- the completion of the home improvements programme covering heating and double glazing. All but 24 of homes have double glazing, and all but 100 have full gas central heating, with all tenants having been offered the opportunity for such heating where gas is available;
 - major and continuing investment in play areas across the estates, producing high quality and relevant facilities for children and young people to mid-teens; in 2004/05 three areas were done at a cost of £346,000, and in 2005/06 two areas will be completed at a cost of £209,000;

- the completion of a major physical regeneration scheme to tackle neglect, ASB and crime in the Gunn Road area;
 - the choice based lettings (CBL) scheme which for the first time gives those in need a direct opportunity to be involved in the allocations of homes;
 - the introduction of online repairs reporting and payment services, and the direct debit facility for rents;
 - the repairs appointments scheme including compensation for broken appointments; and
 - the mediation service.
- 154** A further range of improvements have been completed which indirectly but significantly benefit customers, and which in some cases lay the basis for subsequent direct benefits, including:
- the stock options appraisal has been completed and a stock option agreed, and the HRA position improved to the extent that a million pounds a year is being released for home improvements;
 - the application of introductory and demoted tenancies to increase the range of remedial measures available to it to tackle ASB;
 - a revised and improved domestic abuse policy has been agreed, supporting the sound existing partnership working in this field; and
 - a customer services charter has been introduced and some customer services performance is being monitored.
- 155** Performance as measured by the majority of indicators has improved significantly over the last three years. A detailed table is given towards the end of the report. Responsive repairs performance has improved significantly since 2002/03 especially in terms of the percentage of priority two and three repairs done within deadline. Performance on letting empty homes has also improved and is now at around 24 days on average. Energy efficiency of the Council's homes as measured by the SAP rating has greatly improved, and the Council's performance now puts it among the top 25 per cent of districts.
- 156** Tenant satisfaction with services has also improved to a significant extent. Overall satisfaction improved from 2001 (75 per cent) to 2004 (79 per cent) and satisfaction with opportunities for participation improved from 51 per cent to 59 per cent. In terms of overall satisfaction, Dartford's performance and rate of improvement puts it within reach of the level achieved by the best performing 25 per cent of districts.
- 157** However, performance has not improved in every area. Rent collection performance fell from 98.2 per cent in 2002/03 to 97.72 per cent in 2004/05, although it has recovered subsequently to 98 per cent at January 2006.

- 158 Value for money has improved substantially over the last three years. As described in more detail in the section on Value for Money, previous high staff and repairs costs have been greatly reduced while at the same time in most respects services have been maintained or improved. The principle of modernising procurement on partnering lines is agreed and detailed work is beginning, giving overall a sound basis for sustaining the recent VFM improvements in the future.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 159 There is a balance of drivers and barriers to positive change in the area of performance management. Leadership from officers and councillors is sound and is improving in capacity, and leaders have recognised the need to address the current lack of certainty over the direction of the service. Weaknesses in planning and performance management at service level are being addressed, building on the positive developments at corporate level. The approach to learning from inside and outside the organisation is under-developed and does not yet support the positive changes taking place.
- 160 The Council has not yet reached the stage where it has an agreed set of coherent, challenging and strategic objectives and priorities for its landlord services. This lack of clarity on direction has been in part a result of the delay in completing the SOA. It is reflected in the inconsistencies in plans at corporate and service levels and is acknowledged as a weakness by the leadership of the organisation.
- 161 The objectives of the current corporate, business and service plans are inconsistent and do not set out an integrated and challenging guide on what direction change should be taking. The corporate Performance Plan 2005/06 has limited objectives and short term and unchallenging targets. The Corporate Plan, a separate document from the Performance Plan, does not have appropriate landlord strategic objectives and its priorities as set out in the annual targets are limited and do not adequately reflect the priorities in the Performance Plan. The objectives and priorities set out in the HRA Business Plan and Housing Strategy Statement are in themselves more wide ranging and some are very challenging, but are not adequately reflected in and supported by the 2005/06 service plan, which was the first major service plan revision for three years. Those carrying out the plans have not had the benefit of a clear vision for the service to guide them and ensure they prioritise their actions appropriately.
- 162 There are now positive signs that this lack of clear and coherent ambitions for the service is understood and is set to change. Councillors and managers are aware that a clear future direction needs to be agreed and also that it is a major task which will take up to 12 months to complete. They also accept the importance of involving residents more extensively and creatively in the process, and hence it should be an iterative process involving customers, managers and councillors.

- 163** Significant progress is already being made on strengthening the aims and targets at the service planning level. An improvement plan for 2006/07 is being prepared by the new service head, including actions which closely relate to our findings. This should contribute significantly to driving change and improvement on a planned basis in the right direction, and will also contribute significantly to informing the development of the necessary long term strategic objectives.
- 164** The format and quality of plans have generally not been satisfactory in the past. The 2005/06 housing service plan sets out clear priorities, and a set of targets for each of these. However, not all are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound), and the plan fails to describe what actions are needed to deliver the targets. This has increased the risk that such plans will not be effectively delivered.
- 165** The integration of financial plans with corporate and service delivery plans has not always run smoothly. The practice has been that corporate plans are updated towards the end of the financial year and managers update their service plans, indicating what resources they are likely to need taking account of any efficiency gains achievable. The Council acknowledges that the system needs review. Until this happens a risk remains of available resources not being fully matched to planned needs.
- 166** There are no quantified and agreed further plans for improving efficiency and VFM overall. While the service has been through a radical review of costs the Council has yet to get to the next stage of developing a more focused value for money plan both in terms of identifying further cash savings and in identifying where non-cash VFM improvements should be sought.
- 167** Leadership of the organisation is increasingly effective and recent weaknesses are being addressed. The new leader of the Council has a positive view of the future for housing and is keen to work at a practical level to deliver a service which compares well to other quality service relationships in customers' lives. A high level liaison group comprising managers, residents and lead councillors has been set up to strengthen and broaden resident involvement. Two key management posts have recently been filled, one the head of housing which had been vacant since mid-2004, in part due to tragic circumstances beyond the Council's control, and the second the maintenance operations manager. Overall there are sound prospects that leadership will drive the further improvements required.
- 168** There is little risk that current and future improvements will be jeopardised through political disputes between the parties represented on the Council. Both main parties are clear that they wish to see the housing service put on a much stronger footing than in the past, with more emphasis on performance and service quality, and they are co-operating with each other to achieve this, for example on the appointment of the head of housing. Energies are not wasted on unproductive disagreements.

- 169 Arrangements for reporting and managing performance corporately have been adequate and a basis for further improvement has been introduced. A quarterly Cabinet report covers performance on a range of housing PIs and progress on service targets in the performance plan. New performance management software was introduced in 2005 to improve the recording of data and progress against targets, and the quality and range of reports for managers and councillors. This has interrupted the production of reports to Cabinet for two quarters and reporting resumed from the third quarter of 2005/06. Overall the basis for effective performance management is developing on positive lines.
- 170 Arrangements for reporting and managing performance at the more detailed service level have been inconsistent and in significant respects have been weak. The focus diminished when the last permanent service head left in mid-2004, and the form of reports has been basic. Performance data has been brought together on a monthly basis on a spreadsheet, which does not provide cumulative data or provide trends or any graphical assistance. The range of indicators has been limited and has not included customer services or satisfaction data. The service plan has not been reviewed and monitored adequately for some time, and the risk assessment and management process has not been meaningfully applied. Overall managers have been left to get on with reviewing their own performance areas and plans, leading to a high risk lack of consistency on progress and failure to achieve target and plans.
- 171 Performance management at service level has some positive features. Management of contractors has been maintained effectively and performance improved in important respects. Residents have been increasingly involved in monitoring performance and resident attendance at repairs, cleaning, environmental maintenance and out-of-hours service monitoring meetings is now standard. Financial monitoring is routine and managers have become increasingly cost aware. Some key staff performance management features are in place, and staff have annual appraisals, regular supervision, and have targets set. There is an adequate basis of strength here from which to address the weaknesses elsewhere.
- 172 The weaknesses in managing performance and in particular the inadequate approach to performance monitoring and reporting at service level are being addressed by the new service head in an appropriate way and with urgency. A revised reporting scheme and format is under development based on a model from another authority, and this addresses weaknesses including the previous limited range of indicators and the poor report format. An improvement plan is being actively developed. Overall a sound basis for a sustained improvement to performance management is being built.
- 173 The Council has made only limited progress in developing a sound approach to learning. Although the Council is open to new ideas and ways of working, it does not have any formal suggestion schemes or staff incentives schemes to promote continuous improvement. It has however recognised the value of learning from staff. Working through the corporate change team, in 2004 it undertook an exercise to find out what were the barriers to giving the customer the type of service they wanted.

Unnecessary rules and excess bureaucracy were said by staff to be the key issues. Since then the Council has worked to simplify processes and improve services. This should contribute to improving services though further potential remains untapped.

- 174 Use of feedback from customers is limited. Complaints are not routinely used to identify possible barriers to good service and routine satisfaction monitoring has not developed beyond traditional satisfaction cards, which are not in any case routinely reported or results considered. The customer experience of services is not being explored sufficiently and learning from that experience is undeveloped.
- 175 The Council has sought to learn from other social landlords when looking at changing and developing its services, but has not yet routinely developed the approach of identify the best performers when doing so. The approach has tended to be more to see what others are doing rather than finding how to do it best. In the course of the best value reviews, there were a variety of visits undertaken and information obtained to inform the review, though the landlords who were looked at were chiefly other Kent district councils, and in only one case was a high performer specifically targeted for assistance. Best use was not made of the opportunities available.
- 176 The Council is positive about the value of inspection and the learning benefits it provides. Managers and councillors are open to constructive criticism and see inspections as opportunities to identify address weaknesses and thereby put the Council in a stronger position.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 177 In terms of capacity there are more drivers than barriers to achieving future improvements. The Council now has the staffing and financial strength to move forward. Its human resource planning and internal communications are positive in many respects although training for staff and councillors is under-developed. Developments in IT are promising, and plans are being made to introduce modern construction procurement from next year.
- 178 The overall level of staff skill and capability has improved as a result of the rationalisation of the service in 2005 and recent recruitment of high calibre managers. While there has been a major restructuring, managers are aware that there is potential to develop and refine the structure, and further ideas are being explored. Staff attitudes are also positive in some key relevant respects; for example 86 per cent said they were able to discuss performance and development with their manager. While the long period without a service head has been difficult and recent changes are still being embedded, there is now the staff capacity to deal with the pace and extent of change needed.
- 179 Relations between councillors and officers are improving and now generally positive, and are governed by a clear and understood framework. The Council has in place appropriate arrangements to give guidance and clarity on respective roles and conduct expected of officers and councillors. There is clear commitment to work together for the common purpose.

The growing mutual respect between senior managers and councillors should help to develop and maintain the impetus for change.

- 180** The Council has already made effective use of information and communications technology (ICT) and is building on these successes. A new website is being introduced in April 2006, following the appointment of a fulltime webmaster, and e-mail marketing and texting is being strengthened. Information technology usage is being extended in the maintenance services field and surveyors already use handheld computers which download automatically to the repairs system. A new customer relations software system is being applied in the new contact centre which is now being set up. These and other changes are facilitating improvements in a wide range of areas.
- 181** A more proactive approach to managing human resources (HR) has developed over the past few years and this is now producing positive outcomes. The approach has helped to ensure that employment is open to all and best use made of the diverse employment market. It has exceeded its best value targets in terms of numbers of people from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities and women in employment. The Council has reduced excess sick leave among housing staff. Some of the improvement has been achieved by positive intervention such as influenza jabs and health screening. Recruitment practices have been updated. For example by recruiting a pool of administrative staff through a twice yearly assessment centre, it has saved time and costs.
- 182** Future planning on HR is likely to have equally positive effects. The Council is planning its pay and workforce strategy to take account of the likely impact of major initiatives in the area, such as the Thames Gateway development zone, on recruitment and retention of skilled and experienced staff. Overall, capacity is being strengthened and future risks to maintaining a strong staff group are being managed.
- 183** The approach to internal communications has been revised and put on a sound footing. There are now a number of internal communication arrangements in place which are used by staff, management and councillors. These include the intranet and online discussion board, staff newsletter, and the staff group, which include union representatives. This should help to ensure staff understand and stay involved with the future changes necessary for further improvements.
- 184** Training is currently under-developed. Very little formal staff training was provided in 2004, and while this improved in 2005, it is not yet at the level appropriate to the size and nature of the organisation. Records are inadequate and there is no comprehensive record of staff training needs or to what extent these have been met. While training needs are assessed as part of each annual appraisal, there are no skills audits or specific work planning initiatives in place for housing, and there is no housing training plan in place. Staff skills and knowledge are unlikely to be developed to best meet the needs of the service.

- 185** Training and development of councillors is limited and at an early stage. The Council is in the process of carrying out a standard needs assessment internally, and is signed up to formal training through the Local Government Association. However, neither have yet been completed, and the Council cannot be sure councillors are as well prepared as they might be to fulfil their roles in improving landlord services.
- 186** The Council has a sound approach to expanding its capacity through working closely with partners and contractors. Partners and contractors generally have positive views about the Council, which they believe is a listening organisation which works with them to get things done. Working relationships with staff are strong. This forms a solid basis for making effective use of partners when developing future improvements.
- 187** The financial base for future developments is generally sound both in terms of the general fund and the HRA, with credible financial plans in place. The Council has significantly improved the financial basis of landlord services. In 2003 there were concerns over the viability of the HRA but the position has been recovered and a surplus of £2 million is predicted for the 2005/06 out-turn. The position is satisfactory in the medium to long-term. There is some risk; for example, the subsidy settlement for 2006/07 was negative leading in to an unplanned £1 million loss, and the Council is concerned about the impact of possible future reductions, while it is at the same time trying to deliver improved efficiencies. Overall however there should be capacity to fund improvements.
- 188** The outlook for the general fund is positive. The medium term financial plan (MTFP) 2007/08-2009/10 is funded for two years. The Council believes that the position is satisfactory for the next three years from April 2006 and that it will be able to meet its objectives. This provides a sound financial basis on which the corporate initiatives benefiting the landlord service can move forward as planned.
- 189** The Council's developing approach to procurement will support an improvement agenda and value for money. It has in the past sought to make best use of the market through a rigorous approach to tendering on traditional lines, choosing contractors providing the best combination of quality and price. It has now agreed to modernise its construction procurement along partnering lines, planning to combine all responsive and capital works in one long term evolving contract, due to commence in April 2007. In other forms of procurement it is also taking steps to improve VFM. It is exploring the creation of a Kent wide procurement organisation with other Kent districts such as Gravesham. Overall the outcome should be that resources are applied more effectively and contractors become a more integrated part of the improvement process.
- 190** The Council has brought in significant additional external funding to support its priority initiatives in some cases. Over £200,000 in Urban Thames Gateway Trust grant funding was invested by the Council in the Gunn Road regeneration project. This was a significant contribution to tackling deprivation on an area basis. It has received 90 per cent Home Office grant funding for CCTV at Temple Hill. The Kent County Council local area agreement has led to some benefits for the Council. These have been primarily environmental, responding to county wide problems such as flytipping, graffiti and abandoned vehicles.

The Cubit initiative to clear and crush abandoned vehicles worked well in the borough. This enhances the mainstream spending programmes and enables the Council to achieve a greater range of improvements.

Summary

- 191 We consider the landlord service in Dartford has promising prospects for improvement. There is a clear track record in delivering service improvements which benefit customers, and performance has improved in a number of significant areas. Costs have been much reduced recently. Leadership of the service is sound and while the long term objectives are unclear, this is recognised and there is a will to set a direction for the future. Performance has been not been managed adequately especially at service level but actions are now being taken to put this on a much more solid footing. There is further work to be done however before the service makes best use of learning particularly from outside. Recent changes have enhanced both the staff and financial capacity of the service, and HR planning is beginning to produce positive outcomes. Increasing use is being made of IT to improve services. Procurement has not yet been modernised but this is now set to change and partnering arrangements are on course to start next year.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	Top quartile districts 2004/05
Best value PIs				
BV 66a Rent collected as a percentage of rent owed	98.3%	97%	97.72%	98.74%
BV 63 Average SAP rating	56.2	61.2	68.2	67
BV 74a Tenant satisfaction with the overall landlord service	75% (2001)	79%	NA	85%
BV 75a Tenant satisfaction with opportunities for participation in management and decision-making	51% (2001)	59%	NA	70%
BV 184a Proportion of homes non-decent at start of year	NA	21%	27.1%	17%
BV 184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes during the year	NA	21%	24.9%	25%
BV 185 (until 2004-05) Proportion of responsive (but not emergency) repairs for which appointments were both made and kept	NA	NA	74.4%	90.4% (all authorities)
Local PIs				
Average relet times for empty homes	32 days	27.9 days	24 days	NA
Percentage of Priority 1 repairs completed in timescale	95%	97%	97%	NA
Percentage of Priority 2 repairs completed in timescale	79%	91%	97%	NA

	2002/03	2003/04	2004/05	Top quartile districts 2004/05
Percentage of Priority 3 repairs completed in timescale	73%	88%	93%	NA
Percentage of Priority 4 repairs completed in timescale	95%	99%	98%	NA

Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
 - a self-assessment of strengths and weaknesses completed by the Council;
 - a range of performance data;
 - the draft HRA business plan and housing strategy statement;
 - the community strategy, the Council's corporate and performance plans and the service plan for landlord services;
 - a range of strategies including communications, community safety;
 - a range of policies relevant to the services inspected, and corporate policies including procurement and equalities;
 - the Tenants Compact;
 - the Tenants Handbooks and information leaflets, and newsletters; and
 - minutes of a range of meetings including the Cabinet, the ASB Group, the North Kent domestic abuse forum, and various relevant committee reports and reports on the stock options appraisal.

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 empty homes ready for letting;
 - visits to estates and to blocks of flats;
 - speaking to tenants who has recently taken up a new tenancy, to tenants who had recently had a repair done to their homes, and to tenants who has complained of ASB;
 - focus groups with residents, front line staff and managers;
 - checks on gas safety records; and
 - reviews of ASB case files and of complaints files.

Appendix 4 – Positive practice

- 1 *'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)*

Service monitors

The Council has developed a scheme through which local residents act as contract monitors for estate cleaning. The residents complete regular returns on issues and problems to inform contract monitoring and some attend the monthly contract review meetings with the contractor.

ASB group

The group comprises staff from the major partner organisations involved in taking remedial measures to tackle serious cases of ASB. Referral is straightforward and there are clear procedures for assessing referrals and establishing agency involvement. Information exchange is governed by a robust model protocol.