

Affordable Housing

Mid Sussex District Council

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Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

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

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

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

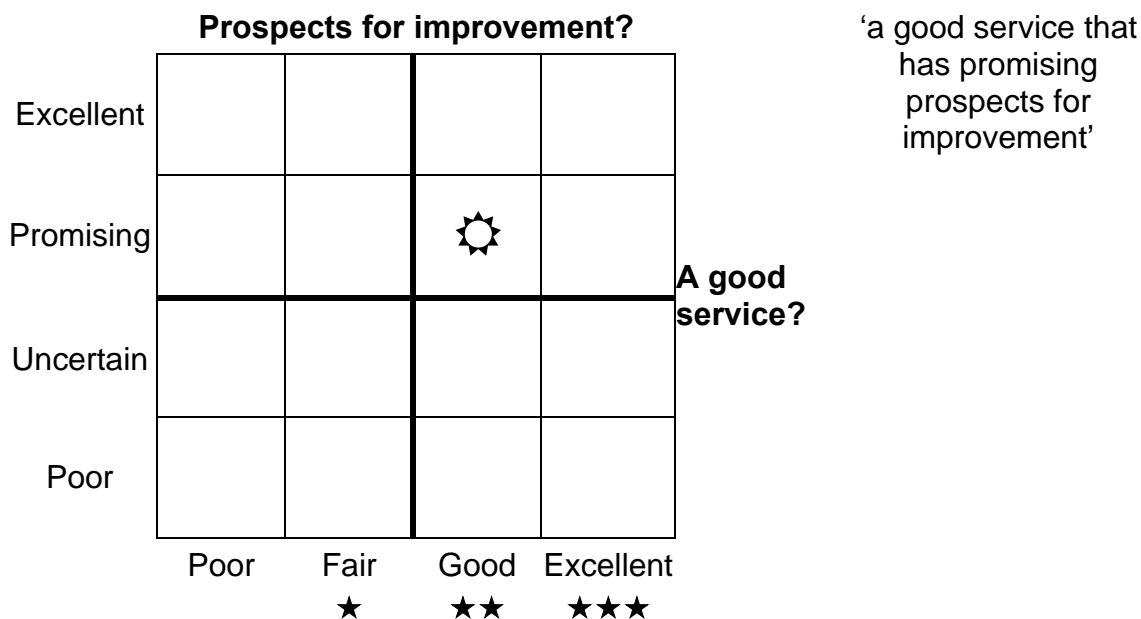
Summary

- 1 Mid Sussex District Council is responsible for administering an area of 128 square miles in the South East of England. The population is 128,000 of which 6.4 per cent are from minority ethnic communities.
- 2 The Council is Conservative led with 28 seats; the Liberal Democrats hold 24 seats and Labour have two.
- 3 The three main towns in the district are Haywards Heath, Burgess Hill and East Grinstead. The area is characterised by its attractive villages and the fact that 58 per cent of the district is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Communication links are good and Gatwick Airport is a few miles from the boundary.
- 4 The area is generally prosperous with low levels of unemployment and low levels of deprivation. House prices are above the regional average and unfitness levels are low.
- 5 In 2003, a comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) by the Audit Commission rated the Council as 'fair'. A balancing housing markets diagnostic was completed at the same time and this found a high need for service improvement.
- 6 The Council employs 450 staff across all services. For 2006/07 the Council has a capital budget of £2.2 million, of which £950,000 is set aside for housing, and gross expenditure of £53.5 million.
- 7 The Council transferred its housing stock in 1990. The stock is now owned by Downland Housing Association who also manage the common housing register. The inspection covered a broad range of services which contribute to the delivery of affordable housing, including planning, homelessness and housing advice, private sector housing and strategy and enabling.

Scoring the service

- 8 We have assessed Mid Sussex District Council as providing a ‘good’, two-star service that has promising prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹:



Source: Audit Commission

- 9 The service is good because:
- it is easy for people to obtain information about housing options both from the Council's offices and on its website;
 - the Council has enabled the provision of a diverse range of affordable housing to meet the housing and support needs of different client groups;
 - a broad range of partnerships and a strong multi-agency approach is supporting the Council in the delivery of its housing priorities;
 - the Housing Strategy provides a clear framework for addressing affordable housing issues. It is based on a sound understanding of housing need;
 - the Council is taking proactive measures which are enabling the delivery of significant numbers of new affordable homes, planning policy is being robustly applied to maximise provision of good quality, well integrated dwellings;

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.

- a focus on a housing options approach has had a significant impact on reducing the number of homeless people and the use of temporary accommodation;
- steps are taken to encourage the availability of accommodation in the private rented sector to meet the needs of homeless people. This includes a rent deposit scheme, use of discretionary housing payments and good use of publicity information; and
- there is good quality support provided to older and disabled residents to enable them to stay in their own homes through the home improvement agency and positive work is undertaken to promote energy efficiency and reduce fuel poverty.

10 However, there are some areas for improvement:

- mechanisms have not been established for seeking customer feedback on all housing services, the quality of housing advice is not systematically checked and consultations with service users over housing strategies and policies is weak;
- the Council has not undertaken an evaluation of the value for money provided through the outsourcing of the administration of the common housing register;
- the strategic approach to some aspects of the housing service including rural housing and empty homes is underdeveloped; and
- information on housing conditions and the strategy for dealing with private sector housing are out of date.

11 Prospects for improvement are promising because:

- there is a very positive track record of delivering improvement. Weaknesses identified in the balancing housing markets assessment in 2003 have largely been addressed;
- improvements are bringing discernable benefits to residents. Over the past three years the Council has been successful in reducing homelessness and the use of temporary accommodation, and the numbers of affordable homes built has increased;
- corporate plans articulate that affordable housing is a key priority and action plans are being implemented which will deliver improvement in many of the areas identified as weaknesses within this report;
- action plans relating to strategies are clear and progress in implementation is closely monitored;
- the organisation demonstrates clear leadership. New management structures have been introduced which provide clearer lines of communication and greater autonomy for heads of service;
- the Council demonstrates that it is open to learning from others and that it is able to make tough decisions to support its priorities;

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- staffing capacity has been strengthened in both the housing and development control sections, and management capacity is being increased through training programmes. Human resources policies are having a positive impact on staff recruitment and retention; and
- financial resources are available to deliver a level of new affordable housing including contributions from the Council's reserves.

12 However, there are some barriers to improvement:

- there have been some areas of slippage in meeting targets set within plans;
- some targets are not stretching and there is a lack of clear targets for improving value for money within the housing service;
- the Council is not systematically learning from complaints; and
- there is limited capacity to implement improvements in relation to private sector housing, particularly in relation to housing standards in private rented accommodation.

Recommendations

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

Recommendation

R1 Improve access to services across the whole district by:

- *ensuring that customer feedback is collected consistently across all housing services and that systems are in place to review and act upon the results in developing policies and strategies;*
- *developing robust systems of engagement with rural communities to ensure opportunities for the development of affordable housing in villages is maximised; and*
- *developing a robust quality assurance system to ensure that housing advice meets the standards required by residents.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased ability to learn from service users and meet changing needs;
- increased customer satisfaction;
- reduced incidence of homelessness; and
- better access to affordable housing in rural communities.

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

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

Recommendation

- R2 Improve the Council's approach to private sector housing renewal and empty homes by:*
- producing a revised private sector renewal strategy which makes it clear how the decent homes standard and all requirements of the Housing Act 2004 will be delivered;*
 - reviewing the budget for private sector renewal in the light of the awaited findings of the house conditions survey;*
 - increasing the promotion of the availability of renovation loans;*
 - undertake a full cost benefit analysis of landlord accreditation and introduce a scheme if it provides value for money; and*
 - developing a clear understanding of the extent and nature of empty homes and revising the strategic approach to bringing them back into use.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- making better use of the existing stock;
- long-term improvements in the quality of private rented accommodation; and
- increased capacity to prevent homelessness.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by December 2006 (April 2007 for landlord accreditation).

Recommendation

R3 Strengthen management and value for money within the Council by:

- *ensuring that a robust training programme is developed for all councillors to address diversity and equalities issues and which raises awareness of all aspects of affordable housing;*
- *ensuring that the annual efficiency statement takes account of housing savings and that there is a robust plan for monitoring implementation of the identified efficiencies;*
- *reviewing all affordable housing targets to ensure that they remain stretching yet achievable;*
- *taking steps to measure the effectiveness and value for money delivered by partnerships; and*
- *routinely benchmark the quality and costs involved in delivering affordable housing with comparable organisations and use this information to review and improve services.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to be able to demonstrate that housing services are delivering value for money;
- improved services;
- improved awareness of diversity, equality and affordable housing issues; and
- ensures that targets continue to be challenging as the number of homes delivered through the planning system increases.

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

Recommendation

R4 Use this inspection report to drive improvement by:

- *developing an action plan to address all other weaknesses identified within the report; and*
- *reporting the findings to the Performance and Scrutiny Committee.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- to deliver improvements which tackle weaknesses and ensures that councillors are fully briefed.

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

- 14** We would like to thank the staff of Mid Sussex District Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 8 May to 12 May 2006.

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Report

Context

The locality

- 15 Mid Sussex District Council is responsible for administering an area of 128 square miles in the South East of England. The three main towns in the district are Haywards Heath, Burgess Hill and East Grinstead. The area is characterised by its attractive villages and the fact that 58 per cent of the district is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Communication links are good and Gatwick Airport is a few miles from the boundary.
- 16 The population is 128,000 of which 6.4 per cent are from minority ethnic communities. 16.9 per cent of the population is over 65 years of age compared with 16 per cent nationally. The number of older person households is expected to rise significantly, by 43 per cent in the retired population and 34 per cent in the over 80 year old population, between 2001 and 2021.
- 17 The area is generally prosperous with low levels of unemployment and low levels of deprivation. Overall, the district is ranked 346 out of 354 in the index of deprivation (one being the highest). At £242,894 average house prices are above the regional average of £233,426³. Housing unfitness levels are low with only 0.9 per cent unfit compared to a national median of 3.9 per cent⁴. A Housing Requirements Study carried out in 2004 identified a need for 551 new affordable homes per year. In 2005/06 the Council enabled the provision of 104 new affordable homes.

The Council

- 18 The Council is Conservative led. Of 54 councillors, 28 are Conservative, 24 Liberal Democrats and two Labour. The governance of the Council is through a Leader and Cabinet structure. The Cabinet has five portfolio holders including Environment and Community Services. There are three Policy Advisory Groups reflecting the corporate themes of Better Environment, Better Lives and Better Services.
- 19 The Council employs 450 full time equivalent staff. It is organised into ten divisions including Housing, Planning Policy, and Environment which encompasses Development Control and Housing Standards. For 2006/07 the Council has a capital budget of £2.2 million, of which £950,000 is set aside for housing, and gross expenditure of £53.5 million.
- 20 In 2003, a comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) by the Audit Commission rated the Council as 'fair'. A balancing housing markets diagnostic was completed at the same time and this found a high need for service improvement.

³ Source: Office of National Statistics May 2005

⁴ Source: HIP return 2004

The service

- 21 The Council transferred its housing stock in 1990. The stock is now owned by Downland Housing Association who also manage the common housing register. The Council has retained direct provision of homelessness and housing advice services.
- 22 The inspection covered a range of services which contribute to the delivery of affordable housing. These were primarily: the housing enabling, needs and standards (private sector housing) teams. Elements of the Council's planning service were also included.
- 23 The inspection looked at how well the Council works in partnership with others to deliver affordable housing and how well it understands the housing market. It assessed how well the Council enables the provision of all types of affordable housing, from new homes to the re-occupation of empty housing. The inspection also focused on how well the Council makes best use of the existing housing stock to help residents remain in their own homes or to make homes available to those people in the greatest housing need.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 24 The Council's Corporate Plan which covers the period from 2004 to 2007 and was refreshed in July 2005 sets the following statement of purpose:
- 'Working in partnership for the well being of all in the community.'*
- 25 The Corporate Plan establishes the three key themes for the Council. These are listed below together with the most relevant objectives in relation to affordable housing.
- Better Environment.
 - Maintain and enhance the environment.
 - Revitalise the town centres.
 - Better Lives.
 - Increase the provision of affordable housing.
 - Improve community safety and reduce the fear of crime.
 - Enhance social inclusion.
 - Better Services.
 - Deliver value for money and improving services.
 - Improve the quality of our customer service in all our work.
- 26 The Housing Strategy 2005-2009 establishes five objectives.
- Increase the supply of affordable housing.
 - Reduce homelessness.
 - Promote community safety.
 - Help people live independently by providing appropriate housing and support.
 - Repair and improve the home.
- 27 Through its plans and strategies the Council has sets some key targets in relation to affordable housing. The most significant of these are listed below.
- Structure Plan target: to identify and deliver sites for 637 dwellings in 2006/07.
 - At least 55 per cent of new housing on previously developed land.
 - Draft revised housing policies in place by March 2008 and the Local Development Framework (LDF) core strategy formally adopted by March 2009.
 - Develop a minimum five affordable homes per year in rural settlements.

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- Ensure the delivery of a minimum of 90 affordable homes per year (300 new affordable homes between 2005/6 and 2008/9).
- House 15 key workers per year.
- Reduce the number of households accepted as homeless to a maximum of 100 - reduce number of people in temporary accommodation.
- Continue with and expand the housing options approach, preventing homelessness for at least 50 households a year.
- Continue to achieve processing of all new benefit claims within 35 days.
- Complete approximately 70 disabled adaptations annually.
- Help adapt or improve 400 homes over the next four years and reduce energy use in homes by eight per cent over that period.

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

Access and customer care

- 28** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in terms of access and customer care. There are a broad range of options for customers to access information and advice and this is available to people unable to visit the Council's main offices. A wide range of information on housing options is available through leaflets and the Council's website. Service standards make it clear what customers should expect and the Council responds promptly to contact from the public. However, reception areas lack some facilities and mechanisms for seeking customer feedback have not been fully implemented.
- 29** There are a broad range of options for customers to access information and advice. Housing advice and support is accessible from the Council's reception in Haywards Heath. The offices are open from 9am to 5pm Monday to Thursday and 9am to 4pm on Fridays. Visitors can obtain advice during these hours without the need for an appointment. The reception area provides a reasonable environment although there is only limited space. There are private interview facilities but no toilets are available for the public. The location of the offices some 10 to 15 minutes walk from the town centre is a weakness which the Council has plans to address. The offices are well sign posted.

- 30** Housing information and advice is accessible to people who are unable to visit the Council's main offices. Help points are run in conjunction with the county and town councils in the two other main towns of East Grinstead and Burgess Hill. The quality of the help points has been recognised through a Charter Mark accreditation. Housing advice surgeries are held at the help points at regular times which are well published. The Council publishes a commitment to see people without an appointment during these surgeries which operate for two hours, a day a week in Burgess Hill and East Grinstead as well as three days a week in Haywards Heath. There is also a commitment to offer appointments for housing advice. Housing advice and housing benefit officers regularly conduct home visits to customers who are unable to reach one of the offices and there is a publicised commitment to carry out home visits where a customer is disabled.
- 31** Good use is made of telephone access to housing services. There is a single telephone number for accessing housing advice. Direct lines to named staff are included on all letters. Performance reports show that 99 per cent of housing service calls were answered within six rings with an average response time of five seconds.
- 32** Good use is made of the website to increase awareness of the housing services available. The website provides a wide range of links to other agencies including those involved in providing housing advice and letting of private rented accommodation. The site is easy to navigate and clearly lists a menu of options including homelessness, the common housing register, housing advice and housing renewal. Performance reports indicate that the site is well used. During March 2006 there were 523 visits to the housing services website and the housing advice section received 266 'hits'. However, the website is not yet fully interactive. For example housing applications cannot be made on line.
- 33** The Council provides a wide range of information leaflets which are written in a clear style. A series of 12 'housing options' leaflets are available both in reception areas and on the website. These leaflets provide useful information on a full range of housing related issues including: where to get housing advice, how to apply for social housing, finding somewhere to rent privately, guidance on the rent deposit scheme, help available for homeless people, information on low cost home ownership options and housing options for older, disabled and other vulnerable groups.
- 34** Housing customer service standards are published making it easy for people to know what they can expect from the Council. A leaflet clearly sets out a list of service standards for housing. A total of 13 standards cover a broad range of issues including a commitment to provide a female staff member to conduct interviews with women suffering from domestic violence, a commitment to respond to complaints about poor housing conditions within five days, and a commitment to provide a telephone interpreting service.

- 35 The common housing register partnership provides a single point of access for affordable housing. The register is managed on behalf of the Council by Downland Housing Association. This means that people seeking social housing need only complete a single application form to be registered with 18 housing associations which have housing stock in the district. Satisfaction with this service is high. Satisfaction survey returns during 2005/06 indicated that 97.5 per cent of respondents found it easy to complete an application for the register.
- 36 Specialist housing officers are available out of hours to provide support and advice to homeless people. Outside of office hours calls to the Council telephone number are automatically re-routed to a call-centre (First Point) operated by Downland Housing Association. The call-centre number is publicised on the website and in leaflets. The Council operates a duty rota of Housing Needs Officers who are all experienced in dealing with cases of homelessness. Call centre operators refer calls to the appropriate officer. This means that people who present as homeless at weekends or at night are able to get access to suitable support and advice.
- 37 A clear corporate complaints system ensures that all complaints are recorded and reported to the relevant standards committee. The Council has recently refreshed its complaints system and publicity about how to complain is readily available and well publicised. An annual complaints register is reported to the Standards Committee. However, the new arrangements have not yet become fully effective as the Council have not yet used their system to incorporate improvements into the organisation.
- 38 Mechanisms for seeking customer feedback have not been fully implemented across all housing services. Only limited customer surveys have been undertaken on key housing services. During 2005/06 only 20 housing advice and nine homeless satisfaction survey results were recorded. This is insufficient information to ensure that customer feedback can be used to further develop services.
- 39 The Council is not currently making use of mystery shopping to test the quality of access to housing services. Some mystery shopping was carried out as part of the corporate review of customer services and this contributed towards changes in reception arrangements. Joint work is currently being undertaken with other councils in the county to develop a scheme to test housing advice and homelessness services.

Diversity

- 40 There is a mix of strengths and weaknesses in relation to diversity. The affordable housing programme has delivered a broad range of supported housing schemes. The Council has taken steps to understand the diverse needs of the community and the housing strategy broadly reflects these needs. Steps have been taken to make services accessible to diverse groups. The reporting of service provision by ethnicity is well developed. However, most councillors and staff have not received training on equalities issues for two years and strategies to meet the needs of specific groups are not fully developed.

- 41 There is a broad range of innovative supported housing schemes available within the district. The affordable housing development programme has included housing schemes which reflect the specific demographics of the area and meet the needs of specific groups. There is a high provision of extra-care sheltered housing and supported housing within the district. For example during the past three years the development programme has included, Roman Court, Burgess Hill, a housing association development providing a combination of flats for older people, disabled people and with six flats leased to a specialist housing association for use by people with learning disabilities. Prescott House, Burgess Hill provides a combination of extra care, sheltered housing and accommodation for people with learning disabilities. Wareland House, East Grinstead combines a Social Services resource centre for older people with flats for older people and disabled people.
- 42 The Council also works with its housing association partners to provide community resources in the most deprived areas of the district. For example a house has been provided in conjunction with Downland Housing Association to provide support in the Denham Road area of Burgess Hill. This is important as it reflects recognition of the key role that housing plays in tackling social exclusion. Through providing additional security, the Safe at Home scheme has supported women wanting to stay in their home. Accommodation is available to women escaping domestic violence and this includes outreach facilities. This has resulted in reduction in the number of women made homeless as a result of domestic violence from 16 in 2001/02 to 7 in 2004/05.
- 43 Steps have been taken to improve understanding of the diverse needs of the community. The Council operates a supported housing needs database which matches applicants with housing support needs to vacant properties. The housing requirements study 2004 and the common housing register both provided analysis of housing need by ethnicity which has been used to inform the housing strategy. It specifically identified the need for some larger family housing and targets for this have been built into the strategy's action plan. The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) commissioned a community profile study in 2003 which provides a useful data source identifying the needs of diverse groups within the district.
- 44 Steps have been taken to make services available to diverse groups. The recent reconfiguration of the main reception area has ensured that the offices are accessible to wheelchair users with the doors being electronically operated and the reception counter being lowered. Hearing loops are provided and the reception has been assessed as meeting the RNIB's accessibility standard for the partially sighted. Information leaflets are available in large print, on tape, in Braille and in alternative languages on request. A strap line makes readers aware of this although only recently published leaflets contained this information. A telephone interpreting service is available.

- 45 The Council records and reports service provision by ethnicity in areas relating to affordable housing. An annual report of the performance in relation to housing advice, homelessness and the common housing register for 2005/06 provides clear information on ethnic monitoring. It demonstrates that the Council knows the ethnic background of those seeking housing advice and those becoming homeless and reports on whether there is an over or under representation of any particular group compared with census information.
- 46 The Council is making progress on its overall approach to diversity and equality issues. It is currently at level 2 of the Equalities Standard (on a scale of one to five) and a target has been set to achieve standard 3 by April 2007. The Council undertakes impact assessments of its strategies and policies but it is unclear what has been changed as a result of this work. A corporate review of youth and social inclusion issues has led to the development of a social inclusion action plan. Tasks undertaken as part of this plan include undertaking ward profiles to provide key statistics highlighting geographical areas vulnerable to social exclusion. This approach however, falls short of a full and comprehensive social inclusion strategy.
- 47 The Council is taking a positive approach to supporting the needs of gypsies and travellers within the district. Mid Sussex is working with neighbouring councils to locate a suitable site for travellers' transit provision and to help integrate settled travellers and gypsies into their communities. Mid Sussex has four travellers sites and a significant traveller community in Denham Road is provided with support through the community resource centre where events have been held to promote inclusion.
- 48 Training for staff and councillors has been inadequate. Apart from the induction programme, a diversity awareness programme was last delivered in 2003/04 following the adoption of a corporate diversity policy. This means that most councillors and staff are not properly equipped to understand and respond to the diverse needs of the community. A series of diversity awareness sessions for middle managers commenced in May 2006 and further diversity training is being scheduled for officers and councillors later in 2006.
- 49 Supporting strategies to meet the needs of specific groups have been slow to be developed. The need for such strategies has been recognised by the Council and a project implementation plan has been developed for an older persons housing strategy. The absence of specific strategies to meet the needs of groups such as older people reduces the effectiveness of the Council in ensuring diverse needs are addressed.

User and stakeholder involvement

- 50** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in the Council's approach to user and stakeholder involvement. There is good quality stakeholder involvement and consultation over its future plans and this is supported by a clear framework of communication and consultation plans. Stakeholders have been engaged in the development of strategies. However, service users have not been sufficiently involved in the development of strategies. Until recently engagement with parishes on affordable housing issues has been limited.
- 51** The Council is embracing the requirements to undertake good quality stakeholder involvement and consultation over its future plans. Wide scale consultation is being undertaken in developing new planning policies. In development of the Local Development Framework and small scale housing allocation document the Council has used the Area Community Forums as a vehicle for consultation. Consultation was also undertaken with hard to reach groups including travellers representatives and rural groups. It has also engaged other public bodies including the utilities companies. In developing an Area Action Plan for East Grinstead the Council engaged consultants to undertake a series of three stakeholders' events. The Council recognises that it faces a high degree of resistance to the large scale plans for new development in the major settlements and it is tackling this proactively through high quality consultation exercises. Developers are consulted through a development control agents panel, this has led to changes in planning application processes.
- 52** There is a clear structure for engagement with partners over development and monitoring of progress on housing strategies. A Housing Communications Plan sets out reasons for engagement, the target audience and the method of consultation. For example, it states that in reviewing the housing strategy priorities the LSP, Area Community Forums and the Housing Association Forum will be key consultees. A Strategic Development Group has been established with clear terms of reference which includes implementation and review of the Council's housing strategy. The homeless strategy action plan is reviewed by a multi-agency Homelessness Steering Group. The Statement of Community Involvement (a requirement of the LDF process) spells out clearly what documents will be produced through community involvement, when and how the community can get involved in planning decisions.
- 53** Stakeholders are engaged over the development of housing strategies. The development of the housing strategy was influenced by consultation and partnership. For example the key worker housing priority was influenced by the LSP, Area Community Forums and the outcome from a Housing Strategy Planning Day. The Homelessness Strategy was influenced by the work of the multi-agency steering group. A 'planning the future' consultation day brought together a wide range of some 60 stakeholders from voluntary and statutory organisations.

- 54 However, consultation with service users over housing strategies and policies has been weak. There have been some positive examples of consultation including a survey carried out by Shelter of people in temporary accommodation which led to the introduction of support and liaison with service users over the design of new adapted flats. The Council has also invited comments on its strategy through the quarterly magazine. But overall, strategies have been insufficiently influenced by the views of those using the Council's housing services. While the charter for housing services was influenced by the results of earlier consultation, there was no specific exercise to consult and involve residents in the development of these specific service standards.
- 55 The Council is beginning to increase the level of work to engage with rural communities. In November 2005 all 24 parish councils were sent a letter to offer support in helping to meet needs for affordable housing. There have recently been meetings with around eight parish councils. Area consultation meetings were held with three over the draft small-scale allocation Supplementary Planning document (SPD). The meetings were attended by housing staff and a specialist housing association provided an exhibition about rural exception sites. There is also informal liaison between the respective district and parish councillors. However, development of rural sites often require a lengthy and intensive degree of engagement between housing staff and parishes to enable sites to be identified, local needs identified and developments built. The lack of long-term engagement over development of rural housing sites may have contributed to the fact that no rural exception sites have been developed since 2000.
- 56 There is engagement with private sector landlords and agents through two landlords forums. The Gatwick Area Landlords Forum consists of representatives of the Southern Private Landlords Association and six local authorities. It provides an opportunity for landlords to meet and engage with Housing, Housing Benefit and Housing Standards staff from the Council. The forum has been productive in terms of the development of guidance to landlords on letting property. The Council has recently initiated a separate landlords forum in Mid Sussex. Aimed more at the smaller landlords, the forum is not yet fully established. A successful meeting has been held and there are plans for a further meeting in July 2006. The forum has not yet developed clear terms of reference.

Partnerships

- 57 The approach to partnerships in relation to affordable housing is a considerable strength. A broad range of partnerships increase capacity to deliver affordable housing. A strong multi agency approach is helping to address housing problems. However, the Council has not carried out a review of the partnership which delivers the common housing register to evaluate its contribution to efficiency and value for money.

- 58 There is effective partnership working with the Council's development partners. The Council work primarily with three preferred registered social landlords (RSLs) on new developments. These partners work closely with the Council to deliver the affordable housing programme. Through being a part of the Council's Strategic Development Group these key partners have developed protocols to ensure they do not bid against each other for sites and they have agreed minimum space standards for affordable housing. Other housing providers meet regularly with the Council through the Housing Association Forum. Close working is demonstrated through the effectiveness of the common housing register.
- 59 The Council maintains strong working relationships with Downland, the LSVT landlord which plays a full part in community initiatives in the district for example the community house at Denham Road and a scheme for victims of domestic violence. Downland is represented on the LSP, the crime and disorder reduction partnership and the Homelessness steering group. The association manages the common housing register on behalf of the Council. Senior officers, councillors and board members formally meet at six monthly strategic liaison meetings and performance of the association is monitored through a service level agreement relating to the common housing register. The positive working relations between the Council and the stock transfer landlord are an important factor in achieving the successful delivery of the priorities set out in the housing strategy.
- 60 Capacity is being increased through close working with other councils. Mid Sussex chairs the West Sussex Planning and Affordable Housing Group. Positive outcomes from the group have included the joint commissioning of a countywide financial viability study to underpin affordable housing policies. The group is also exploring with the Government Office the most appropriate way of taking forward sub-regional housing market assessments and it has looked at options for providing affordable housing without public subsidy. Through working with the West Sussex Chief Housing Officers Group, the Council participated in the joint commissioning of a housing needs study in 2004. Similarly, a partnership approach is being taken to the development of mystery shopping of housing advice services. Prescribed standards for Houses in Multiple Occupation have been jointly developed with other councils in Sussex. Housing services also benefit from broader cross-county working such as the joint development of IT provision.
- 61 Current arrangements with health and social care agencies demonstrate that multi-agency working on housing issues is effective. Close working with Social Services and the PCT has resulted in effective delivery of the broad range of supported housing. Joint assessment of housing applicants is undertaken to ensure the correct level of care and support is in place to deliver the successful management of tenancies. Positive relations with the Supporting People team ensure that Mid Sussex plays a key role in housing and social care activities within the County. This has resulted in jointly commissioned county-wide housing resources such as the provision of a women's refuge and a resource for people with substance misuse problems. Although outside the district, these schemes provide a benefit to people in housing need within Mid Sussex.

- 62 Effective partnership working through a broad range of agencies is helping the Council to address housing problems. The Council works in partnership with Anchor Staying Put to deliver an effective home improvement agency. Through the North Sussex Key worker Alliance the Council has jointly commissioned assessment of key worker housing needs and has developed a clear information pack for key workers. On a wider scale, the innovative 'Better Mid Sussex' programme demonstrates a commitment to partnership in regeneration of the three town centres.
- 63 However, there has not been an assessment of the cost effectiveness of the arrangements for outsourcing of the common housing register. This means that the Council cannot fully demonstrate that this partnership represents the best value for money.

Strategic approach to housing

- 64 There is a mix of strengths and weaknesses in terms of the Council's strategic approach to affordable housing. The Housing Strategy provides a clear framework for addressing affordable housing issues based on a sound understanding of housing need. Effective progress is being made on development of the local development framework. Different parts of the Council work well together to address affordable housing issues. However, the strategic approach to delivery of affordable housing in rural areas is underdeveloped and the private sector housing renewal policy is out of date.
- 65 The Housing Strategy provides a clear framework for addressing affordable housing issues. The housing Strategy 2005-09 was adopted in August 2005. It meets the Government's fit for purpose criteria. The document identifies clear links with the national and regional housing agenda. There is evidence from the strategy that the Council understands its role in delivering sustainable communities. A table within the document clearly sets out how the strategy aims to respond to the national and regional agenda. It summarises the housing elements of other strategies including the community priorities set out in the Community Plan and has clear links with other Council strategies such as the Local Plan, the Corporate Plan and the Homelessness Strategy.
- 66 The Council has a sound understanding of the housing needs of the district. The Housing Requirements Study carried out in 2004 provides comprehensive data on the housing requirements across all tenures. The data is kept updated annually, for example information about house prices, rents and local earnings are reviewed. The common housing register is analysed to inform the development programme. A supported housing database provides valuable information about the needs for specialist housing provision and is used as a guide to the Supporting People strategy. This means that the Council has a sound understanding of all the main factors which influence the supply and demand for various forms and tenures of affordable housing.

- 67 Work is undertaken to understand the needs of key workers. The Council jointly commissioned a study of key worker housing needs with other Councils in the area known as the 'Gatwick triangle' in 2002. This information was updated in 2003 when the Council's Key Worker Housing Strategy was completed. More recently, since 2005 information is collated from the common housing register on key worker applicants to analyse incomes and areas of preference.
- 68 Homelessness and housing advice activity is monitored to identify trends. The Council closely monitors incidence and the causes of homelessness. It records the amount and nature of housing advice being given. This is consolidated into an annual report. This information is used to inform the annual review of the housing allocation policy. This is important as it ensures that the Council's policies are updated to reflect any changes in trends in homelessness and housing needs.
- 69 The Council is working with partners to explore sub-regional housing market analysis. The Housing Requirements Study was undertaken on a common basis with other West Sussex councils meaning that it will be easier to undertake sub-regional analysis of housing needs. Work has been undertaken to identify and understand travel to work patterns. The Council and its neighbours are currently exploring with the Government Office the most appropriate approach to be taken to carry out further work on sub-regional analysis.
- 70 The Council has a well developed approach to planning policy which supports affordable housing. The Local Plan was adopted in 2004 and the related supplementary planning guidance for affordable housing has been applied since 2002. The Council was one of the first in the region to apply a lower threshold of 15 units or 0.5 hectares for sites where there would be a requirement that 30 per cent of the development should be affordable housing. The policy requires serviced land for affordable housing to be provided at nil cost. The Council is making good progress in preparing the LDF. Councillors have recently approved key documents including a small scale housing allocation document and a Development and Infrastructure SPG. A sustainable construction SPD is at the draft stage. The Cabinet has approved the new affordable housing policy for the purposes of public consultation. The policy sets a requirement for all sites over five dwellings to provide 30 per cent affordable housing. The Council expect to submit the revised policy in September 2007 and to be able to implement it from that date, and to formally adopt the policy in 2009.
- 71 Information on housing conditions and the strategy for dealing with private sector housing are out of date. The last house condition survey was undertaken in 2000. Although at the time it identified low levels of unfitness, it does not allow the Council to understand to what extent the housing stock meets the decent homes standard. Understanding of the condition of the housing association stock is stronger with approximately 92 per cent of this stock meeting the standard. Without up to date information about the private housing stock, the Council cannot review its strategies to ensure that resources are appropriately targeted towards tackling poor housing conditions. It is a significant weakness that this has meant that the Private Sector Renewal Policy adopted in 2003 and reviewed in 2004 is now out of date.

- 72 The Council has a reasonably good understanding of the availability of future development sites. An urban potential study was carried out in 2004 to identify possible sites for future development. The Council has an asset register and an asset management plan is in place. The Council recognises that asset management can be further developed and to this end it is a key part of the 'Better Mid Sussex' work to review the use of all assets and land holdings and to decide on how they can be used to support the delivery of priorities.
- 73 The Council's fuel poverty strategy and the health promotion strategy set a clear direction in terms of the contribution energy efficiency measures can have in maintaining affordability of housing costs. The strategy focuses on working with health bodies and energy companies to increase awareness of the availability of insulation grants and other energy efficiency measures. This has an important impact on reducing costs and enabling people to remain in their homes.
- 74 The strategic approach to the delivery of affordable housing in rural areas is currently underdeveloped. The Council has not developed a specific strategy setting out how it plans to tackle the shortage of affordable housing in rural areas. Given the nature of the district this is a significant gap.
- 75 The Council's strategic approach to social inclusion is underdeveloped. A social inclusion action plan was adopted in 2005 but this does not amount to a full strategy and most of the target dates have now passed. The Corporate Plan brings together a broad range of actions which contribute to social inclusion. Impact assessments are currently being undertaken on council services and it is intended that these will inform future strategic development. However, the current lack of a formal social inclusion strategy which clearly draws out the full contribution the Council is to make to promote social inclusion means there is a risk that the Council's potential in this area will not be maximised.

Enabling new housing

- 76 The Council's action in enabling the delivery of new affordable housing is a strength. Significant numbers of new affordable housing are being delivered through the planning system and the social housing grant programme. The Council is supplementing available grants through its own resources. The quality of new housing developments is high and steps are taken to ensure affordable housing is well integrated. There is a broad range of provision to meet the needs of different groups. However, there is scope to further strengthen the use of the planning system to deliver affordable housing, particularly in rural communities.
- 77 The Council is taking proactive measures which are enabling the delivery of significant numbers of new affordable homes. The table below illustrates that the Council has been successful in enabling the development of new affordable housing in the district.

	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
Affordable rented homes completed	54	54	67
Shared and low cost home ownership homes completed	10	14	37
Starter home initiative	32		
Open market homebuy		18	17
Total number of affordable housing completed	96	86	121
Number delivered through s106 agreements	37	68	64
Number of homes that are wheelchair accessible	34	21	25

- 78** The affordable housing programme provides a broad mix of affordable housing to meet the needs of different groups. The programme provides a broad range of housing which reflects the needs illustrated in the Housing Strategy. The programme ensures that the majority of new affordable housing is for rent which is where the highest need falls. However, accommodation has also been developed to meet the needs of key workers and those requiring supported housing. The majority of developments are in the three main towns but the programme includes rural developments for example sites are being developed at Pease Pottage and Hurstpierpoint providing 36 and 20 new affordable homes respectively.
- 79** The Council is using its own financial resources to supplement the affordable housing programme. The Council has made a policy commitment to contribute £500,000 per year from 2005/06 to 2007/08 from its reserves to fund affordable housing developments. The funding is used to supplement other funding sources.
- 80** The planning system is being used effectively to support the provision of new affordable housing. The table above demonstrates that the Council is applying its affordable housing policy. The use of the supplementary planning guidance since 2001 (before the local Plan inquiry stage) means that developers are now familiar with the Council's policy and work well with the Council to ensure affordable housing is delivered. The Council prepares clear development briefs which set out the actual type of housing and tenure mix which is generally expected to be 75 per cent rented 25 per cent intermediate tenure.

- 81 The Council rigorously applies the affordable housing requirements set out in the adopted Local Plan. Planning applications have been rejected where developers have submitted schemes with fewer than 15 homes but where the site is large enough to accommodate enough dwellings to take the scheme over the affordable housing threshold. The SPG makes it clear that commuted sums will only be taken in exceptional circumstances where on-site provision would be inappropriate. An officer in planning has specific responsibility for monitoring compliance with section 106 agreements. A database has been established which is used to keep tracks on the planning requirements and to ensure that commuted sums are being utilised within the required time period. Although in practice priority is being given to housing when negotiating section 106 agreements there is no document which explicitly states that affordable housing is given a higher priority than other issues such as leisure facilities.
- 82 Housing and planning work well together to enable the delivery of affordable housing. There is close liaison through the Strategic Development Group which brings the two departments together with the three development housing associations. Housing needs staff play a full part in agreeing the specific tenure and house type mix for specific sites. This is important as it ensures that developments reflect the current housing needs of the area.
- 83 Affordable housing is developed to a high standard and is well integrated into new developments. The Council plays an important role in promoting good design. In 2005 it held an Architecture Award Scheme. Of particular note was Bolnore Village which won the large development category. The development on the edge of Haywards Heath incorporates a significant number of affordable homes. Affordable homes are well integrated into mixed tenure estates and the SPG requires that a maximum of ten affordable homes can be built together. As part of the new Development and Infrastructure SPD, the Council, in consultation with its preferred development partners has set new space standards and all new homes must meet the Eco Homes Very Good standard and be Secured by Design.
- 84 Delivery of the affordable housing programme is well managed through the use of a clear delivery plan. There is a clearly set out delivery plan which is maintained on a spreadsheet. This demonstrated that the Council is keeping close management of the programme. The plan shows all schemes, identifying the tenure mix. It identifies the level of Housing Corporation grant required and the source of funding for all schemes including where the housing association or the Council are contributing their own resources.
- 85 Little use has been made of rural exception sites. The Council is not making use of the planning system to enable small developments of affordable housing in rural settlements. Although several schemes were developed about ten years ago, there have been no new developments since 2000. This means that opportunities are not being maximised to enable local people, particularly newly emerging households to remain in their community when they need a home.

Prevention of homelessness

- 86** The Council demonstrates considerable strength in its approach to the prevention of homelessness. A focus on a housing options approach has had a significant impact on reducing the number of homeless people and the use of temporary accommodation. The housing benefits service makes a valuable contribution to prevention and the Council is supported by a strong multi-agency approach.
- 87** A focus on a housing options approach has had a significant impact on prevention of homelessness. The number of applications for housing from homeless applicants has decreased from 336 in 2003/04 to 144 in 2005/06. The number of applicants accepted as being homeless has reduced from 120 to 58 during the same period. The Council has increased the resources available to support its work in preventing homelessness. The Housing Needs Team includes a dedicated housing adviser and a housing options officer and all members of the team are trained and supported in providing housing options advice. General housing advice has been effective in the prevention of homelessness. The range of available information is described in the access and customer care section of this report. In 2005/06 the Council has recorded that advice and support prevented approximately 50 households becoming homeless.
- 88** People in housing need, including those faced with possible homelessness are helped to secure accommodation in the private rented sector. A rent in advance and deposit guarantee scheme has helped 49 households secure rented accommodation in 2005/06. The scheme is well established and has secured accommodation for approximately 500 residents since 1990. The average payment is between £700 and £800 representing a typical deposit guarantee of four to six weeks. The scheme is successful as it provides landlords with the confidence to let their properties. The Council keeps records of landlords they know have properties to let and maintains positive relations with these landlords. This has a positive impact on the overall supply of assured shorthold tenancies to those in housing need and in ensuring that good working relationships are maintained with private landlords.
- 89** Effective use is made of supported housing to prevent homelessness. A joint allocation panel with social services has been successful in preventing vulnerable people from becoming homeless. The scheme encourages appropriate individuals to go into supported housing to prevent homelessness. During 2005/06 32 households or individuals were prevented from becoming homeless through referral to supported housing projects. The Council has clear protocols with social services to ensure that all 16 and 17 year old applicants are jointly assessed by the two agencies. This is important in ensuring that the full support needs of the individual are taken into account. The Council and Downland Housing Association also run a joint panel which ensures that applicants with housing debts are not automatically excluded from being rehoused.

- 90 The housing benefits service makes a valuable contribution to prevention of homelessness. Performance in processing housing benefit applications has improved. In 2003/04 it took an average of 50 days to process a new claim; this has reduced to 29 days in 2005/06. Landlords have confidence that housing benefit payments will be made without unreasonable delay and this further encourages the availability of rented accommodation for those in the greatest housing need. Citizens Advice Service staff are trained to carry out verification of housing benefit applications which helps speed up the applications process.
- 91 Good use is made of discretionary housing payments to prevent homelessness. The Council is making use of available resources to make additional housing benefit payments where this will avoid a tenant losing their home. Forty three discretionary housing payments were made during 2005/06. There is liaison between housing benefit and housing needs staff to make most effective use of resources. Housing needs staff carry out an initial interview to collect the necessary information to allow housing benefit staff to decide whether a payment can be made. However, housing needs staff do not currently play a part in determining whether a payment is to be made.
- 92 The Council has been successful at reducing numbers in temporary accommodation. The numbers of families placed in temporary accommodation in 2005/06 showed a reduction of 12.1 per cent on the previous year. There were five people in bed and breakfast and 38 households in other temporary accommodation at 31 March 2006. The Council has met the Government's target to eliminate the use of bed and breakfast for families. Temporary accommodation is mainly provided by Downland Housing Association and is integrated into the mainstream rented housing stock. Under the terms of the transfer agreement the Council does not pay the association for the use of temporary accommodation.
- 93 People placed in temporary accommodation are provided with support. Through the Supporting People programme, all homeless households placed in temporary accommodation are provided with support to help access appropriate services such as benefits and to help achieve a smooth transition into sustainable permanent tenancies. Although there has not been a formal evaluation of the effectiveness of this scheme, indications are positive with there only having been one case where a household has been accepted as homeless for a second time (repeat homelessness) during 2005/06.
- 94 The Council is making good use of its nomination agreements with housing associations. Through the common housing register, the Council ensures that almost 100 per cent of those re-housed are nominated through the Council's housing allocation policy. This ensures that housing associations are working fully to support the Council's priorities and reduces the time that people in housing need have to wait to be re-housed.

- 95 The joint allocations policy ensures that suitable priority is given to reducing under occupation of rented accommodation. The policy ensures that transfer applicants who under occupy their current accommodation are given priority for re-housing. This led to 20 applicants being re-housed during 2005/06. The Council has found that this approach is a more cost effective means of reducing under occupation than making incentive payments to encourage people to move. However, the under occupation priority points scheme is not well publicised and therefore is not being used to its full potential.
- 96 Appropriate advice is made available for older and disabled people who may be considering a move to specialist and sheltered housing. The Council employs a supported housing enabling officer who provides advice and support to older and disabled people who may be considering a move. This advice is supported by an information leaflet which provides specific details of housing options for older people. Publicity campaigns to promote the availability of accommodation for older people have included a series of roadshows held during 2005.
- 97 There is not a systematic approach for checking the quality of advice. The Council does not carry out any formal quality check on the housing advice provided. The Council has chosen not to seek a recognised external accreditation for the service. There are currently no independent checks undertaken of the service although these are planned. This means that currently the Council cannot be sure that it is offering consistently high quality of housing advice to all its customers.
- 98 There has been poor take-up of family mediation. Although mediation services are available, in practice these are not being used. There are no recorded cases where family mediation prevented homelessness during the past two years. This means that steps to prevent relationship breakdown and family disputes which are significant factors in the cause of homelessness are not being maximised.

Private sector housing

- 99 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in terms of the Council's approach to private sector housing. A basic service exists for residents living in poor housing conditions. The Council does not have a clear strategic approach to managing empty homes and few empty homes have been returned to use. There is a lack of initiatives in the private sector to help achieve a balanced housing market and there has been insufficient promotion and no take up of house renovation loans. However, this is in the context of a relatively small private rented sector (7 per cent) and the fact that a very small proportion (0.9 per cent⁵) of the stock is unfit or in need of major repair. A home improvement agency provides good quality support for older and disabled clients and progress is now being made on undertaking a house condition survey. Positive work is undertaken to promote energy efficiency and reduce fuel poverty.

⁵ Source: House Condition Survey 2000.

- 100 A basic service exists for those living in poor housing conditions. The Council has not taken any formal enforcement action to ensure that house conditions are improved quickly (although informal action is taken). It does not operate any form of landlord accreditation scheme to promote good housing conditions. It does not currently have the information it needs to be able to measure how many vulnerable people live in accommodation which fails the decent homes standard (DHS). The last house condition survey was undertaken in 2000 and does not measure conditions against the DHS nor the Health and Housing Safety Rating system introduced in the Housing Act 2004. A 'houses in multiple occupation' (HMO) scheme has been introduced but there is limited capacity to carry out any inspection or enforcement action.
- 101 The Council does not have a clear strategic approach to managing empty homes. Few homes have been returned to use as a result of actions taken by the Council. The existing private sector renewal policy places priority on dealing with occupied properties. During 2005/06 eight properties were returned to use and in the previous two years only two properties were brought back into use through the Council's actions. This is despite the fact that 947 dwellings were recorded as being vacant in 2004/05. The Council has not been using renovation grants or loans to encourage landlords to return empty homes into use. It has explored this option but has concluded that it does not provide value for money. Activity has been limited to a small number of schemes where housing associations have used social housing grant to return properties to use. However, the Council does levy the maximum council tax on empty homes which acts as an incentive to occupy the property and it provides information and advice to owners of empty homes about options available for returning them to use. This is an area where there is not full co-ordination between the respective work of the housing needs, planning, housing benefit and private sector housing functions of the Council.
- 102 There has been insufficient promotion and no take-up of House Renovation loans. Although the Council's private sector housing renewal policy makes loans available, in practice this has not had any impact. Although the Council's policy is to offer interest-free loans of a maximum of £10,000 and a budget of £70,000 is available, there has been no take-up. There is little publicity of the availability of this form of support.
- 103 Assistance is provided to older and disabled people to improve their housing conditions. The Council delivers a large part of its housing renewal services through the home improvement agency. The agency works with clients to deliver the disabled facilities grant programme and to provide a handy-person scheme. The programme is adequately resourced, providing funding of £370,000 in 2006/07. In 2005/06 a total of 78 households were helped through the scheme. In addition 26 Home Assistance Grants were provided. All works were completed within the target timescale of six months and there is no waiting list. Effectiveness of the work is high with 97 per cent of respondents to post-work surveys expressing satisfaction and 94 per cent reporting that the work had enabled them to remain independently in their home. A current Supporting People review of home improvement agencies means that funding is limited to a year at a time but the Council aims to enter a longer-term funding agreement with the provider.

- 104** The Council works with private landlords to promote the availability of housing to meet housing needs. The Council has worked with the Southern Landlords association to produce the lettings guide for landlords. It has also produced information to advise owners of empty homes on actions they can take to let properties. The use of private sector leasing schemes has been explored but has been found to be an uneconomic way of providing temporary accommodation in the district. The rent deposit and guarantees scheme has been successful in promoting the private rented sector for people in housing need.
- 105** Positive work is undertaken to promote energy efficiency and reduce fuel poverty. The Council works with other agencies including West Sussex Energy efficiency Advice Centre and the Primary Care Trust to improve energy efficiency and thermal comfort. Poor thermal insulation and inadequate heating is a common reason for properties to fail the decent homes standard. The Council promotes the take-up of grants. During 2004/05, 218 Warmfront grants were provided to people on benefits for heating and insulation improvements. This work has been a major factor in reducing the number of unfit dwellings. In 2004/05, the last year that the indicator BVPI62 was recorded, the Council reported that 4.2 per cent of unfit homes were made fit.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 106** There is a mix of strengths and weaknesses in terms of value for money in relation to affordable housing. The Council have a good knowledge of their costs and what level of service they are providing for those costs. Reductions in costs of temporary accommodation are contributing to overall efficiencies and average grant requirements for new housing have reduced. However, cost benchmarking of housing services has yet to be used to its full potential in realising efficiencies.

How do costs compare?

- 107** The Council has a good understanding of its costs and the level of service being provided for the costs. This was a positive aspect of the recent corporate Use of Resources review undertaken by the Audit Commission which scored 3 (out of a possible 4). A range of work has been undertaken to understand how affordable housing costs compare with other councils. High-level comparisons of the numbers of affordable homes built per £100,000 of capital and revenue expenditure have been made with 15 other district councils in the same Family Group⁶. Findings indicate that Mid Sussex performs well in terms of units built in relation to capital expenditure and about average in terms of revenue expenditure.

⁶ Data was sourced from HIP returns and the Audit commission Value for money Profile tool and covered the years 2002/03 to 2004/05.

- 108 Limited use has so far been made of cost benchmarking exercises. The Council has participated in a cost comparison of guesthouse accommodation used by all local authorities in West Sussex. The exercise provided reassurance that costs are fairly consistent and it did not identify opportunities for cost savings. Very recently, the Council has collected and submitted costs on a wide range of affordable housing activities as part of a group of stock transfer councils. Making full use of comparisons with other councils will enable Mid Sussex to highlight possible different models for service delivery.

How is value for money managed?

- 109 The Council has a robust approach to reviewing its costs and reinvesting in its strategic priorities. The budget, medium term financial plan and corporate plan have been aligned to ensure that expenditure fully reflects priorities. Following service resources reviews across all areas of operation in 2004/05, savings of £511,000 were identified. Part of these savings were reinvested in affordable housing services including £75,000 released for new posts in the housing needs and enabling team.
- 110 There are a broad range of examples to demonstrate that services relating to affordable housing are becoming increasingly efficient. Reductions in the use of temporary accommodation have delivered savings of approximately £50,000 per year since 2002/03 and further savings of £20,000 are budgeted for 2006/07. Charges have recently been introduced for pre-planning advice which is budgeted to produce additional income of £27,000 in 2006/07. Improved performance in determining planning applications has resulted in the award of £557,000 Planning Delivery Grant. This has been reinvested to further strengthen the planning implementation team with a focus on improving the speed and quality of design on the major sites in the district.
- 111 Steps are taken to maximise the availability of resources for new housing. The three preferred RSL partners work closely with the Council and contribute their own resources to the development programme. This has enabled the average grant requirement per unit to reduce from £53,000 to £36,000 for the latest bidding round. The affordable housing policy ensures that developers must provide land for affordable housing that is fully serviced and free of charge. This ensures that affordable housing development costs are kept down.
- 112 The partnership work carried out with other councils is a strength in terms of delivering value for money. There is a wide range of examples of where partnerships have either reduced costs or enabled the Council to complete work which it would otherwise not have the capacity to do. In partnership with two neighbouring councils, Mid Sussex jointly funds a procurement adviser who has devised a procurement strategy and is helping to identify areas of joint work. Mid Sussex jointly procures housing benefit and council tax IT services with two other councils, this will have increasing benefits for housing services as the partnership is broadened to other areas. The joint funding of the home improvement agency has enabled the service to be put on a more stable footing. Joint procurement of the housing requirements study made good use of available resources.

- 113** Savings made within the housing service have not been reflected within the Annual Efficiency Statement. For example, although the service has secured efficiencies in the use of temporary accommodation, these have not been included within the Annual Efficiency Statement. This means that the full contribution that housing related services are making to the corporate efficiency agenda are not being fully recognised.

Summary

- 114** Overall, we have judged that the Council's approach to the delivery of affordable housing is good.
- 115** It is easy for people to obtain information about housing options both from the Council's offices and on its website. The Council has enabled the provision of a diverse range of affordable housing to meet the housing and support needs of different client groups. A broad range of partnerships and a strong multi-agency approach is supporting the Council in the delivery of its housing priorities. The Housing Strategy provides a clear framework for addressing affordable housing issues and it is based on a sound understanding of housing need. The Council is taking proactive measures which are enabling the delivery of significant numbers of new affordable homes, planning policy is being robustly applied to maximise provision of good quality, well integrated dwellings. A focus on a housing options approach has had a significant impact on reducing the number of homeless people and the use of temporary accommodation. Steps are taken to encourage the availability of accommodation in the private rented sector to meet the needs of homeless people. This includes a rent deposit scheme, use of discretionary housing payments and good use of publicity information. There is good quality support provided to older and disabled residents to enable them to stay in their own homes through the home improvement agency and positive work is undertaken to promote energy efficiency and reduce fuel poverty.
- 116** However, mechanisms have not been established for seeking customer feedback on all housing services, the quality of housing advice is not systematically checked and consultations with service users over housing strategies and policies is weak. The strategic approach to some aspects of the housing service including older peoples housing, rural housing, empty homes and social inclusion is underdeveloped. Information on housing conditions and the strategy for dealing with private sector housing are out of date.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 117 The Council has a strong track record of implementing change that has led to improvements in the provision of affordable housing services. Improvements are delivering noticeable benefits to service users. The Council has acted to tackle the weaknesses identified in the Corporate Performance Assessment carried out in 2003 and key priorities within the housing and homelessness strategies are being addressed. However, some targets set by the Council have not been met.
- 118 There have been service improvements which have a direct and noticeable benefit for service users. There is a very positive track record over the past three years in reducing homelessness and the use of temporary accommodation. There has been a reduction in homelessness of 65 per cent and a fall in the use of temporary accommodation of 43 per cent during the past three years. This has a positive impact on the quality of people's lives. Other targets set within the homelessness strategy have also been met. For example, the housing options approach has been developed and improvements have been delivered in the quality and range of advice and information available. There have been increases in the number of home visits made to potentially homeless people and an increase in the number of rent deposit payments.
- 119 The numbers of new affordable housing built has increased over the past three years. The number of affordable rented and low cost home ownership dwellings provided has increased from 64 in 2003/04 to 68 in 2004/05 and 104 in 2005/06⁷.
- 120 Action has been taken to address the weaknesses identified in the balancing housing markets assessment carried out in 2003. Of 13 separate weaknesses identified during the assessment progress has been made in all areas. The development of the housing strategy has addressed many of the weaknesses which related to delivering a long-term vision and aspirations have been translated into future plans and actions. An assessment has been carried out of the resources required to meet housing needs and capital resources have been allocated to affordable housing. Identified priorities are starting to be met with the number of new homes being completed increasing and the numbers of homeless people in temporary accommodation decreasing. The Council has addressed weaknesses in learning and performance management. However, there is more work to be done to address some weaknesses identified in the 2003 assessment, particularly in relation to clearly articulating proposals to address rural housing need and the take up of some private sector housing renovation funding initiatives remains low.

⁷ Excludes Starter Home Initiative and Open Market Homebuy

- 121** The Council has performed strongly in delivering its targets set out in its strategies and action plans. The Housing strategy Action Plan 2002 set out 30 separate targets. The Council has made good progress against almost all of these targets. For example, it has delivered on its commitment to provide an average of at least 60 subsidised homes a year, it has reviewed its planning policies, established a housing association forum, developed a key worker strategy, completed a housing needs assessment, eliminated the use of bed and breakfast accommodation for families and reviewed the allocations policy. Strong progress is continuing to be made on delivering the Housing Strategy Action Plan 2005-2009. The most recent performance report to the Performance and Scrutiny Committee demonstrated a positive direction of travel against the key priorities with 22 out of 25 action points having been either fully or partially achieved.
- 122** Although the direction of travel is almost all positive, there have been some areas of slippage in plans. For example, the target to complete the house condition survey by March 2006 was not achieved. An earlier target from the 2002 housing strategy to complete customer satisfaction surveys for housing register applicants was not achieved. There has been slippage on two key targets within the homelessness and advice action plan relating to prevention of homelessness through education of young people.
- 123** As illustrated in the previous section of this report, the Council is beginning to show a track record in improving value for money in terms of affordable housing provision. However, the lack of a focus on housing issues within the annual efficiency statement means that it is difficult to fully identify the extent of the track record in relation to affordable housing activities.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 124** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in terms of the approach to managing performance. Corporate plans articulate that affordable housing is a key priority and action plans are being implemented which will deliver improvement in many of the areas identified as weaknesses within this report. There are clear lines of authority within the organisation and internal communication is strong. The Council demonstrates that it is open to learning from others and that it is able to make tough decisions to support its priorities. However, there is a lack of a clear plan setting out how the private sector renewal policy will be reviewed. Some targets are not stretching and there is a lack of clear targets for improving value for money within the housing service.
- 125** Corporate plans clearly articulate that affordable housing is a key priority for the Council. Ambitions and priorities set out within the housing strategy are consistent with those in other key strategies including the corporate plan and the community strategy. The housing strategy clearly demonstrates how local actions will contribute to national and regional priorities.

- 126** Action plans relating to strategies are clear and progress in implementation is closely monitored. Action plans attached to the main strategies including the housing and homelessness strategies set out targets under each of the separate priority headings. Each action point is linked to a milestone, the lead officer responsible for delivery and identifies any other agencies involved in delivery. Plans also identify how targets link to wider strategies such as community safety or supporting People. This means that it is easy to understand the purpose of the target and measure compliance. There is clear accountability for completion of tasks.
- 127** There is a developing culture of performance management supported by new IT software. A 'golden thread' runs through from targets in the Corporate Plan, to the housing strategy, through to service plans and work plans for individual members of staff. Individual targets are monitored at different levels. Progress against corporate plan targets is reported to officers monthly and to Cabinet and Performance and Scrutiny Committee quarterly. The Housing Strategy Group monitors the overall housing strategy action plan every quarter and six-monthly reports are presented to Performance and Scrutiny. These reports are detailed and make it easy for councillors to check progress on commitments. The Head of Housing reports performance on targets to the portfolio holder on a monthly basis. These arrangements are all clearly set out within the housing strategy. Strong corporate support is provided with each Head of Service being allocated a corporate improvement team officer to work with them. New performance management software is becoming embedded within the organisation making it easier to continually monitor progress against action plans.
- 128** Performance management of budgets is effective. The medium term financial plan is aligned with the corporate plan and budget process. Individual and service budgets and plans link to the corporate budget and plans and budgets are reinforced through personal performance planning meetings and monthly monitoring meetings.
- 129** The organisation demonstrates clear leadership. New management structures have been introduced which provide clearer lines of communication and greater autonomy for heads of service. The appointment of two strategic directors and heads of service has improved leadership and direction. Communication between senior managers and staff are strong. The Chief Executive and strategic directors hold quarterly workshops with staff to discuss issues. Separate managers' forums update middle managers on key issues. Cross-departmental working such as that between housing and planning has ensured that a previous problem with 'silo working' has been overcome. Within housing services, there are monthly meetings between the head of service and two team leaders. In addition, at a divisional level, monthly meetings are held for all staff to pick up on corporate issues and review performance.

- 130** Appraisals for staff have been strengthened. Staff have a personal performance plan (PPP) which is carried out in April after the corporate plan has been approved. All staff have clear targets which are negotiated between themselves and their line manager. Training needs are prioritised and the budget is linked to the PPP. The records of these meetings set out clear personal objectives for the coming year with clear links through to the service's objectives and key corporate objectives. The plans identify the key management competencies required for their delivery.
- 131** Tough decisions are taken to support the affordable housing priority. Planning applications have been refused for housing developments where the applicant has tried to circumvent the threshold for affordable housing by developing fewer than 15 dwellings. On a broader scale, the approval of the area action plan for East Grinstead represents a contentious issue which the Council has demonstrated its ability to take forward.
- 132** Partner groups are involved in monitoring progress on strategies. The housing advice and homelessness service produce on an annual basis a performance report for housing services aimed at key partners and members of the public. This is a useful report for partners but it is not made widely accessible for service users other than being available on the website. Key external stakeholders are brought together through the local strategic partnership and the housing strategy group and have a role in monitoring progress in the implementation of plans.
- 133** The Council has developed plans which will address many of the weaknesses identified within this report. For example, there is a clear project implementation plan to develop a rural housing strategy. A project steering group is to be established by June 2006 and there is a clear timetable for consultation with parish councils and other stakeholders before a strategy is reported to Cabinet by February 2007. Similarly, a project implementation plan has also been developed for producing an older persons housing strategy. Some other areas where there are plans to tackle outstanding weaknesses are summarised below.
- A lower threshold for affordable housing on smaller sites will be introduced through revised planning policy.
 - A house condition survey is currently being commissioned.
 - New office accommodation is being actively pursued which would improve access to services.
- 134** A culture of learning from others is feeding into service improvements. A peer challenge was undertaken by another council. This highlighted a series of issues for improvement including the need to challenge the costs of the common housing register. Staff and members have also visited a number of Beacon Councils over the past year and have brought a range of new ideas that it is planning to replicate. These include improving the approach to tackling rural housing need and the strengthening of non-executive councillors involvement in affordable housing issues through the establishment of an officers and members group.

- 135 There are some areas for further improvement in relation to managing performance on affordable housing issue. Targets for affordable housing are not stretching. The Council's target of 80 units of affordable housing was exceeded by 24 in 2005/06. Although the target has been increased to 90 in 2006/07, given the expectation that the planning process will deliver a total of 637 homes per year and based on past years performance this target should be exceeded. The target to build five affordable homes in rural areas per year is also unchallenging and the development programme shows that this will be significantly exceeded.
- 136 Some plans for improvement are not supported by clear implementation plans. Although there is a target within the corporate plan and service plan to complete a review of the housing renewal assistance policy during 2006/07 there is no clear action plan to describe how this will be achieved. This increases the risk that the project will not be completed within target, nor is it clear what outcomes are expected from the review.
- 137 The Council is not systematically learning from complaints. Although customers are encouraged to make complaints and there is a process of reporting all complaints to the Standards Committee there is no evidence to show that this process is being used effectively to improve services.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 138 There are more strengths than weaknesses in the Council's capacity to improve affordable housing services. Staffing capacity has been strengthened in both the housing and development control sections and management capacity is being increased through training programmes. Human resources policies are having a positive impact on staff recruitment and retention. The broad range of partnerships helps to increase capacity. The financial resources are available to deliver the planned housing programme. However, there is limited capacity to implement improvements in relation to private sector housing and training of councillors on affordable housing has been a weaknesses.
- 139 Resources have been strengthened to deliver affordable housing priorities. The capacity of the housing needs team has been strengthened through the appointment of the new posts of housing options officer and housing policy officer. In planning, additional resources from Planning Delivery Grant have been used to strengthen the service in terms of the major development sites. This means that there is capacity both in the areas of reducing the need for new affordable housing through preventative work and through delivery of new homes through the planning process.
- 140 Financial resources are available to deliver a level of new affordable housing which exceeds the Council's targets. Social housing grant of £5.8 million has been allocated for 2006-2008. The Council is putting in its own resources of £500,000 per year to supplement this programme. In addition to this £1.25 million of commuted sums in lieu of onsite housing provision have been accumulated and are ring-fenced to the housing programme. Funding of £300,000 is also available from the county-wide Supporting People programme to deliver a low cost homeownership scheme for people with learning difficulties.

- 141** Human resources management is helping to build capacity within the organisation. A management development programme is building capacity among middle managers and staff are provided with a broad range of training opportunities. The Council has introduced new policies which are having a positive impact of recruitment and retention of staff for example flexible working is encouraged with staff able to work from home where this is appropriate. The Council has achieved Investors in People accreditation.
- 142** The broad range of partnerships helps to supplement capacity. The Council is more able to deliver improvements as the partnerships bring additional skills and resources. For example the partnership with a private company to take forward the Better Mid Sussex town centre revitalisation programme brings in skills and capacity that would not be available within the internal resources of a district council of this size. This project has the potential to improve the quality and to generate more affordable housing in the town centres. The Council demonstrates that it is fully open to enter into new partnerships where it will increase capacity. For example environmental health and planning services are exploring ways to work in partnership with neighbouring councils to increase capacity in relation to development control activity.
- 143** Management of services is being enhanced through the development of new IT services. The Council's partnership procurement of IT systems (CenSus) is delivering greater capacity within the organisations. New packages such as the implementation of data image processing will further supplement capacity. New online viewing of planning and housing benefit documents for example should reduce the need for residents to visit the Council's offices.
- 144** Training of councillors on affordable housing issues has been inadequate. Training events have largely been ad hoc and attendance has been low. Although there has been a programme of training on planning issues this is underdeveloped for wider affordable housing issues. Following identification of this issue during the peer review an event was held in October 2005 and this was supported by a fact sheet. The training however, did not make any connection with the contribution that private sector housing plays in improving housing conditions. Since the inspection a formal programme has been agreed, which included housing related subjects.
- 145** There is a lack of capacity to undertake action to enforce high standards within private sector housing. Capacity within the service to deliver improvements to the private rented sector is limited. The budget for private sector renewal grants and loans has not been increased for several years, even in line with inflation. This means that there are few resources available to fund improvements in private sector housing beyond the provision of disabled facilities grant. This budget faces even greater pressures with changes in legal eligibility for these grants to include families with disabled children. The fact that there were no formal enforcement actions taken to resolve unfitness in the private rented sector in 2005/06 is an indication of a reactive rather than a proactive approach to management. The impact of the Housing Act 2004 and the need to meet the Government targets on decent homes in the private sector is likely to place further pressure on resources.

Summary

- 146 Overall, the prospects for improvement are promising.
- 147 There is a very positive track record of delivering improvement. Weaknesses identified in the balancing housing markets assessment in 2003 have largely been addressed. Improvements are bringing discernable benefits to residents. Over the past three years the Council has been successful in reducing homelessness and the use of temporary accommodation and the numbers of affordable homes built has increased. Corporate plans articulate that affordable housing is a key priority and action plans are being implemented which will deliver improvement in many of the areas identified as weaknesses within this report.
- 148 Action plans relating to strategies are clear and progress in implementation is closely monitored. The organisation demonstrates clear leadership. New management structures have been introduced which provide clearer lines of communication and greater autonomy for heads of service. The Council demonstrates that it is open to learning from others and that it is able to make tough decisions to support its priorities.
- 149 Staffing capacity has been strengthened in both the housing and development control sections and management capacity is being increased through training programmes. Human resources policies are having a positive impact on staff recruitment and retention. Financial resources are available to deliver a level of new affordable housing including contributions from the Council's reserves.
- 150 However, there are some barriers to improvement. There have been some areas of slippage in meeting targets set within plans. Some targets are not stretching and there is a lack of clear targets for improving value for money within the housing service. The Council is not systematically learning from complaints. There is limited capacity to implement improvements in relation to private sector housing, particularly in relation to housing standards in private rented accommodation.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Best Value Performance Indicator	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06 (unaudited)	Comparisons with other Councils 2004/05		
				Best 25 per cent	Median	Worse 25 per cent
62 - unfit homes made fit	4.4	4.2	Indicator deleted	4.7	2.9	1.6
64 - vacant dwellings returned to use	1	1	8			
203 - percentage change in families in bed and breakfast	-26.2	-6.5	-12.1	-7	9	28
183a - number of weeks in B&B	7.36	2.59	5.76	1	3	5
183b - number of weeks in hostels	29.36	17.25	21.94	0	8	18
106 - percentage development on brownfield land	65	73	68	94	80	57

Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

151 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included the following.

- Housing Strategy: 2005-2009.
- Community Strategy: January 2004.
- Corporate Plan: 2005-2007.
- Homelessness Strategy: 2003-2008.
- Local Plan and Supplementary Planning Guidance.
- Housing Requirements study: 2004.
- Various advice leaflets.
- Findings from recent customer satisfaction surveys.
- Housing services equality impact assessments.
- Minutes of various council meetings.

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:
 - individual interviews with councillors, officers, staff and stakeholders;
 - focus group of councillors;
 - focus group of partner private landlords, RSLs and developers;
 - focus group of frontline staff; and
 - file reviews.

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)*
- 2 Planning policy ensures that affordable housing is built to a high standard
- 3 The Council plays an important role in promoting good design. In 2005 it held an Architecture Award Scheme. Of particular note was Bolnore Village which won the large development category. The development on the edge of Haywards Heath incorporates a significant number of affordable homes. Affordable homes are well integrated into mixed tenure estates and the SPG requires that a maximum of ten affordable homes can be built together. As part of the new Development and Infrastructure SPD, the Council, in consultation with its preferred development partners has set new space standards and all new homes must meet the Eco Homes Very Good standard and be Secured by Design.