

Affordable Housing

Hart 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.

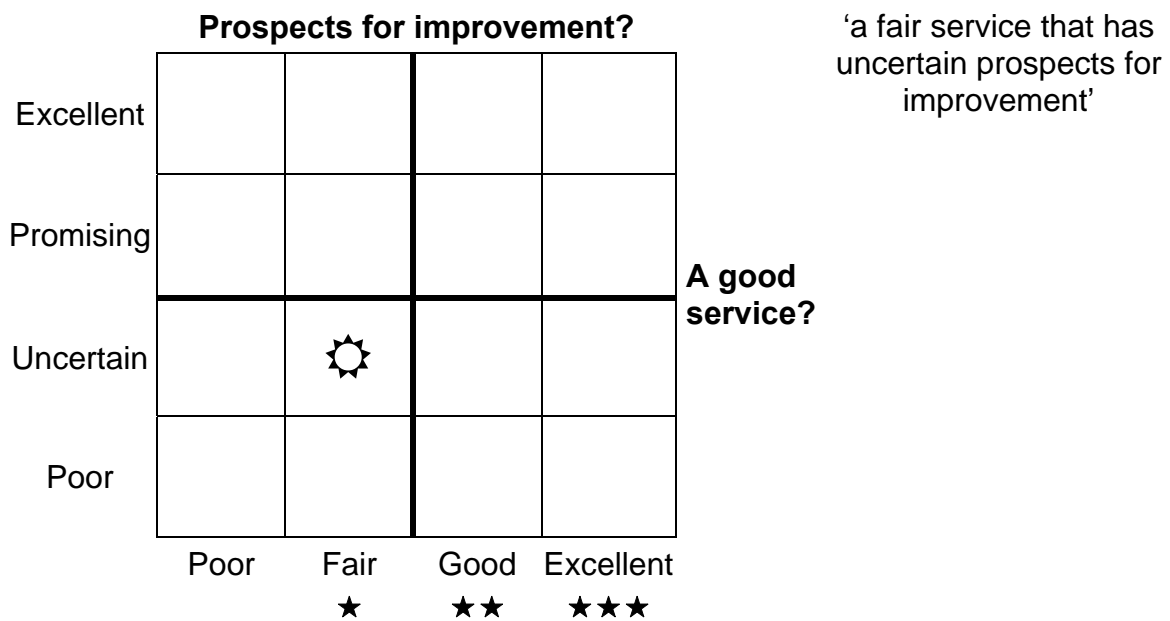
Summary

- 1 Hart District Council is one of 11 district councils in the county of Hampshire in the South East of England. The population is 86,700, of which 5.3 per cent are from minority ethnic communities, a proportion being from the gypsy and traveller community.
- 2 The district is an affluent one with a low level of unemployment. House prices in the district are high, averaging at £265,928 in 2005 compared to a regional average of £233,426. A housing needs survey in 2003 identified an annual need for 600 new affordable homes.
- 3 At the time of the inspection the Council was Conservative-led with 17 of the 35 seats. Following the May 2006 local elections the administration changed to the Coalition Political Group (comprised of Liberal Democrats, Community Campaign Hart and an Independent member).
- 4 The Council employs 319 permanent staff across all services and had a net revenue budget for 2005/06 of £10.4 million or £121 per head.
- 5 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. The Council's net revenue budget for housing for 2005/06 was £662,200.

Scoring the service

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

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

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.

- 7 The service is judged as fair because of the following positive features.
- The Council promotes the availability of affordable housing and housing options via leaflets, its website, the quarterly Hart newsletter and its accessible housing options service.
 - The Council is knowledgeable about housing need, the housing market and private sector housing conditions in the district, having conducted research in these areas. It has also started to develop individual housing needs surveys for the rural areas.
 - There is a range of initiatives in place to prevent homelessness, including a rent deposit scheme, access to mediation, a good working relationship with the Citizens Advice Bureaux (CAB) and funding provision to the Emmaus Hart Help project that works with young people in the prevention of homelessness.
 - There is funding provision for more vulnerable people to assist them to remain in their homes, through Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs), minor repair grants and funding to the 'Staying Put' home improvement agency that also provides a handyperson scheme.
 - The Council has delivered a high level of affordable homes in recent years, through rented and shared ownership accommodation. The homes that we saw were well designed and in keeping with the locality.
 - The Council works well with partners to deliver affordable homes, including housing associations, developers and the local parishes.
 - The Council has taken steps to improve its delivery of affordable homes through the inquiry into the First Alteration to the Local Plan, the draft Local Development Framework (LDF) and the development of developer's guidance.
- 8 However, there are some areas in need of improvement.
- The approach to diversity and equalities in delivering affordable housing is weak. The Council lacks strategies for key minority groups and has limited arrangements in place to ensure that those who may have difficulty accessing services are able to, particularly residents in the rural areas and older people.
 - The Council is not using satisfaction surveys to inform or improve future service delivery, nor does it monitor new resident satisfaction with their new homes.
 - A fully comprehensive suite of service standards has not been developed, and those that have are yet to be introduced and monitored.
 - Performance on complaints is weak, target times are not sufficiently met and there are low levels of customer satisfaction with the handling of complaints.
 - There has been limited service user consultation in the development and review of strategies, although this is starting to improve through the development of the LDF.

8 Affordable Housing | Scoring the service

- The Council has not sufficiently considered the impact that the reduction in funding to the CAB would have upon the provision of support and advice to the residents of Hart, particularly as the CAB is the main provider of this service within the district.
 - There is a weak strategic approach to improving the condition of private sector housing to help provide more housing and to assist people to stay in their current homes.
 - The Council cannot demonstrate that services represent value for money. There has been a very limited focus on cost comparisons and benchmarking.
- 9 The service is judged to have uncertain prospects for improvement because the following barriers exist.
- The Council's financial position is uncertain.
 - There are various capacity weaknesses within the Council, that include staff resources, managerial capacity and skills and knowledge.
 - As a result, there has been some slippage in the delivery of actions in strategies and action plans.
 - The Council has not addressed all of the weaknesses identified in the 2004 Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA).
 - Strategies and plans are not consistently robust. They do not routinely include SMART² targets or sufficient risk assessments, which prevent the Council from being clear on how it will measure achievement or assess potential risks.
 - Performance management is not effective. The Council has been slow in developing a Performance Management framework since the 2004 CPA and benchmarking and value for money are not key features for the Council.
 - There have been limited measurable outcomes for service users as a result of the CuSP³, and improvements to date have been mainly focused on building the Council's customer service infrastructure rather than improvements that service users would recognise.

² SMART - specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and time-bound.

³ Customer Satisfaction Programme - the Council's cross-cutting review of customer services in response to the Audit Commission's 2004 CPA.

10 The following areas are strengths for the Council.

- The Council has delivered a high level of affordable homes over the past three years, and while the desired balance of rented to shared ownership accommodation has not been achieved, affordable housing options have been expanded for home seekers.
- The homeless service has improved with a reduced level of homeless acceptances in 2005/06. In 2004/05 it was within the best 25 per cent performers in the areas of average number of weeks spent by homeless households in priority need in temporary accommodation, and the reduction in the number of families placed in temporary accommodation.
- The service areas of planning and housing benefit have made significant performance improvements, and the Council has accessed government funding to assist in this process.
- A clearer aligned framework is in place to deliver the Council's aims, through the development of the corporate plan, housing strategy and service plans.

Recommendations

- 11 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs⁴ and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the Council shares the findings of this report with tenants and councillors and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve access to services and standards of customer care by:

- *developing and publicising service standards which are specific to housing enabling services, such as housing advice, private sector grants and enforcement activity;*
- *making available comprehensive advice to home owners and older people seeking assistance with minor repairs, adaptations or improvements or to meeting the decent homes standard; and*
- *introducing and using consistent methods of service user satisfaction monitoring.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased customer satisfaction;
- improved opportunity for all service users to access support and advice; and
- increased ability to learn from service users and meet changing needs.

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

⁴ Low cost is defined as less than 1 per cent of the annual service cost, medium cost is between 1 and 5 per cent and high cost is over 5 per cent.

Recommendation

R2 Improve the Council's approach to private sector renewal by:

- *review the private sector renewal policy, to ensure that it supports the Council's focus on affordable housing and maximises support to frail, elderly and other vulnerable residents and provides value for money;*
- *using the flexibilities provided by the legislative changes in 2004, review the resources for housing renewal to ensure that those in greatest need receive assistance and that the Council meets its 'decent homes' target for at least 70 per cent of all vulnerable households to be in a 'decent home' by 2010 and to demonstrate continuous improvement; and*
- *develop a clear understanding of the extent and nature of empty homes in the district and implementing the strategy to bring them back into use.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased support to, and improved housing conditions for vulnerable residents allowing them to maintain their independence;
- improved budget management and improved value for money; and
- meeting the 'decent homes' standard for privately owned properties and the long-term improvements in the quality and use of the district's privately-owned housing stock.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. Key milestones for each of the above tasks should be identified by September 2006 and all recommendations should be implemented by April 2007.

Recommendation

R3 Strengthen the approach to service and improvement planning by:

- *reviewing and addressing outstanding weaknesses from the housing diagnostic report contained within the 2004 CPA report;*
- *ensuring that all strategies and plans address equality and diversity issues and reflect the needs of vulnerable groups;*
- *ensuring that all strategies and action plans are SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and time-bound) and that where targets are missed, appropriate remedial action is taken;*
- *ensuring effective management of performance by councillors and managers through regular monitoring of progress with plans and by active management of a comprehensive suite of performance measures which focus on outcomes; and*
- *routinely benchmarking the quality and costs involved in delivering affordable housing with comparable organisations.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased ability to identify areas for improvement and implement options for improvement;
- increased ability to deliver improvements of importance to all residents;
- improved accountability for service delivery;
- a better understanding of where value for money is being achieved; and
- more informed political and managerial responses to under-performance.

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

Recommendation

R4 *Strengthen the Council's capacity to improve delivery of housing services by:*

- *securing the financial resource for the housing service;*
- *introducing a robust value for money strategy for the housing service and delivery of affordable homes;*
- *addressing capacity issues, particularly in the private sector housing team to ensure that it can take forward all its key areas of work;*
- *identifying and introducing alternative ways of providing affordable housing other than building new homes; and*
- *ensuring that staff and members receive sufficient training to equip them within their role and to deliver the Council's corporate aims.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- continued high levels of affordable housing;
- value for money in the delivery of services; and
- improved health, better housing conditions for elderly, disabled and vulnerable people and less risk to the safety of occupiers of houses in multiple occupation.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. The first three points of the recommendation should be implemented by December 2006, and the latter two by March 2007.

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

Dates of inspection: 27 to 31 March 2006

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Report

Context

The locality

- 13 The district of Hart is in North East Hampshire, in the South East region of England. The M3 motorway as well as a series of main trunk roads pass through the centre of the district. The Southampton to London Waterloo rail network passes through the district and there are three mainline railway stations at Fleet, Hook and Winchfield, making the area a popular location for commuters.
- 14 Hart was formed in 1974 when Fleet Urban District and Hartley Wintney Rural District Councils were merged. It is one of 11 districts in Hampshire.
- 15 The district covers an area of 21,507 hectares (83 square miles) with approximately 90 per cent of it being open countryside. The district supports very contrasting communities: the urban areas are concentrated in the north east of the district in the communities of Yateley, Hawley and Blackwater (which function as part of the urban Blackwater Valley sub-region); the main settlements within the district are Fleet, Yateley and Blackwater in the north east; Fleet is the district's principal settlement and centre of administration; while the western and southern parts of the district are predominantly rural with much smaller towns and villages, including Hook which is a recently expanded village.
- 16 There are 32 conservation areas and the district has a varied and widespread architectural heritage with about 1,000 buildings listed as being of architectural or special interest, many of which are sited in the villages. Much of the district is also located within the Special Protection Area. This is a designated area under the European Commission Directive for the Conservation of Wild Birds.
- 17 The population of Hart has grown significantly since the early 1960s from 37,000 to 86,700 in 2004. The district has a small black and minority ethnic (BME) population of 5.63 per cent (compared to the South East region of 8.6 per cent), and a proportion of the BME population are from the gypsy and traveller community.
- 18 Hart is an affluent area. It is the least deprived district in the country,⁵ with low unemployment levels at 0.7 per cent and above average weekly wages. Employment is mainly within the service sectors and almost 60 per cent of the working population commute to work out of the area. It ranks third in the Quality of Life index, has high levels of educational attainment and good health.

⁵ ODPM Indices of Deprivation 2004

- 19 House prices are high in Hart. The average house price in 2005 was £265,928 against a regional average of £233,426⁶. House prices have risen 74.5 per cent in the last five years. As a result, many families can not afford to purchase properties or get onto the housing ladder. In 2003 a housing needs survey identified the need for an additional 600 new homes per year.

The Council

- 20 At the time of the inspection the Council had a Conservative-led cabinet. There were 35 councillors - Conservative (17), Liberal Democrats (12), Community Campaign Hart (3), Independents and non-aligned (3). Following the May 2006 local elections, the administration changed to the Coalition Political Group (comprised of Liberal Democrats, Community Campaign Hart and an Independent member).
- 21 There are nine portfolio holders that include one for health and housing.
- 22 In 2004 a management restructure was introduced of a Chief Executive, 3 Corporate Directors and 12 Heads of Service.
- 23 The Council employs 319 permanent staff. It had a net budget of £10.4 million for 2005/06, and an average spend of £121 per head of population (compared to the regional average of £133).
- 24 The Council's office is in the town of Fleet which, although 40 miles from central London is centred within a predominantly rural area.
- 25 In 2003 a Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA), carried out by the Audit Commission, rated the Council overall as 'fair'. However, a balancing housing markets diagnostic inspection carried out as part of the CPA found the delivery of additional affordable homes required a 'high need for improvement'.
- 26 In 2005 the Audit Commission carried out a Customer Access inspection of the Council and found that the service was poor, and had uncertain prospects for improvement.
- 27 A previous inspection of Hart's housing service in 2001 found a fair service that was unlikely to improve.

⁶ Land Registry sales May 2005

The service

- 28 The Council provides all elements of the housing services under inspection. This includes management of the housing register, homelessness, housing advice, private sector housing, enabling new affordable homes and preparation of the housing strategy. Prior to January 2006, homelessness, advice and the housing register were provided by Sentinel Housing Association (HA).⁷ The decision for the service to return in-house was taken upon the pending expiry of the three-year contract (due March 2006) and mutually agreed by both parties. The Council had agreed for the return of the service slightly earlier than March in order not to clash with the timing of the inspection.
- 29 The inspection covered a broad range of services which contribute to the delivery of affordable housing. It looked at how the Council works in partnership with others to deliver affordable housing and how well it understands the housing market. The inspection assessed how well the Council enables the provision of all types of affordable housing from new homes to the reoccupation of previously 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 homes and to make more of it available to those people in the greatest housing need.
- 30 A single key line of enquiry (KLOE) that covers all aspects of the provision of strategic housing services (including the delivery of affordable housing) was recently published after a period of consultation. In undertaking this inspection, the team have drawn on the relevant sections of the KLOEs for strategy and enabling, homelessness and private sector housing, which have also been used as the basis for the new strategic housing services KLOE. Elements of the Council's planning service were also included within the scope of the inspection
- 31 The areas considered within this inspection sit within various services of the Council:
- private sector housing in regulatory services;
 - planning policy and development control in the planning service; and
 - the remaining housing functions in the housing service.

⁷ Sentinel HA is the formation of Hart HA and Oakfern HA - both were initially formed as a result of Large Scale Voluntary Transfers, with Hart HA as a result of the transfer of stock from Hart District Council in 1994.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 32** The vision of the Community Strategy 2005/16, prepared by the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) is 'To improve, sustain and promote the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of communities in Hart District'. The strategy identifies five cross-cutting themed areas of priority in order to do:
- community safety;
 - affordable and safe housing;
 - environment;
 - transport; and
 - health and wellbeing.
- 33** The themes are carried forward to the 'Corporate Plan for 2006 and beyond', with seven objectives to the affordable housing theme. These seven objectives are also detailed in the Council's Housing Strategy for 2005/08 as follows.
- Maximising the supply and choice of new housing to meet local needs.
 - To ensure that appropriate and timely housing advice and support services are available for homeless people and those at risk of becoming homeless.
 - To ensure that appropriate housing and support services are available for people with specialist housing requirements.
 - To make the best use of all existing housing stock to meet the requirements of Hart District including a review of the housing register.
 - To improve the standards within the housing stock for all tenures.
 - To action the Council's equality and diversity commitment.
 - To ensure housing contributes to improving the local environment.

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

Access and customer care

- 34** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The Council provides an accessible service and there is a range of information for people seeking advice and assistance on housing options. Information and access to services is not so readily available for those residents who require information on home improvements, and in particular those that live in the rural areas. The services do not routinely use customer satisfaction feedback as a means of monitoring and improving services. There are weaknesses in the way in which the Council handles complaints.
- 35** There are reasonable access arrangements in place for people to seek housing advice and assistance. The main point of access is the Council's Civic Office in Fleet, which is open between 8.30am to 5.00pm Monday to Thursday (4.30pm on Fridays). Housing option officers provide the housing advice, housing register and homeless service at the Civic Office. They offer an appointment system between the hours of 9.00am to 12.00pm and 1.00pm to 4.00pm. A duty officer is available to deal with emergencies, and home visits are provided when required. There is an emergency out-of-hours telephone number, which is a mobile number and our test call to the service was responded to promptly. Non-appointment surgeries are provided by the planning service at Fleet (four days) and Hook Neighbourhood Centre (one day).
- 36** On-site we found that access arrangements were not adequately publicised by the Council. There were no notices outside of the Civic Office indicating opening hours or contact details for people that needed homeless advice outside of office hours. There is an electronic display board inside the office that displays these details. However, this was set back from the doors and not all callers would be able to see it from outside. On reporting this weakness to the Council during the inspection, it immediately responded and placed a notice on the office to display this information.
- 37** The Civic Office complies with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and is comfortable and welcoming. It has automatic opening doors, a low level counter and a hearing loop facility at reception, and access to language line. There are seating areas, private interview rooms and access to toilets (including a disabled person's toilet). Visitors have access to three IT terminals; one of which solely relates to planning and the GIS⁸ and two that provide access to the Council's website.

⁸ Geographical Information Systems

- 38 The website provides a range of information, but is not yet used to its maximum potential. The Council introduced the revised website in January 2006, with each service having control over the contents of its section. It provides information on housing options and the grant facilities for home improvement. A range of planning, housing benefit and housing register application forms can all be downloaded from the website. However, there are areas in need of improvement. For example, there is no automatic reference on the site to request a larger font size, and the route to activate this on the system is not straightforward. There are web links to the CAB and Shelter websites but no indication on the Council's website on how these agencies would be able to assist; and the only edition of the Hart News available on the website was the February 2006 edition.
- 39 There is a comprehensive range of information available to callers regarding their housing options. Recently reviewed leaflets on housing services of January 2006 are on display in the Civic Office and on the website. They provide information on homelessness advice, the rent deposit scheme and shared ownership. We were provided with the first issue of the Housing Option Newsletter published in 2005 (undated), which was a joint publication by the Council and Sentinel HA. It provides an overview on the housing register, previous level of points required for an offer of accommodation and details on the delivery of affordable homes (rented and shared ownership). It provides limited information on other housing options, for example the rent deposit scheme and mutual exchange opportunities. There have not been any further issues published, although one is planned for July 2006.
- 40 Service users are adequately sign-posted to alternative agencies for advice. There are leaflets available on domestic violence, housing benefit and the CAB. Fleet and District CAB is located next to the Civic Office and is clearly signposted to service users.
- 41 There is limited information regarding the financial opportunities available to home owners and residents. Copies of the 'Staying Put' home improvement agency leaflets are in the Civic Office, but we found no leaflets or information about Disabled Facility Grants or minor repair grants on display. There is information on the website, but the lack of readily available information at the Civic Office limits the opportunity for home owners to become informed of the choices open to them.

- 42 A broader range of contact methods for service users in the rural areas has yet to be established. We were informed that electronic access points are provided at Yateley CAB and South Warnborough (village shop and post office), as well as information points at Odiham Parish Offices and Hart neighbourhood centre - during January and May 2006 usage of the kiosk's were approximately 2,000 (Yateley CAB) and 3,100 (South Warnborough). There is some reliance on the promotion of services through traditional methods, for example by leaflets. The environmental health team have used a number of methods to promote their private sector housing services, for example information is circulated via a mobile police van in Hook, inserts are placed in parish council newsletters and there are energy efficiency roadshows. However, these are ad-hoc examples and they demonstrate that information is not being publicised to residents in a consistent way.
- 43 Council officers and members recognise the Council's services are not easily accessible to those residents who live outside of Fleet, and discussions are taking place about the potential for expanding the use of the recently opened Hart neighbourhood centre⁹ in Hook. As part of a community safety partnership the centre opened in September 2005 and provides access to various services including education, victim and financial support, and Sentinel HA officers. Officers are discussing the future introduction of housing surgeries at the centre, which would involve housing options and benefits. However, at present there is limited work in place to reach the communities who live within the rural areas of Hart, and this may prevent those who need access to the service from easily accessing it or being aware of what is available.
- 44 The Council has used its quarterly 'Hart News' newsletter to inform and consult residents on a range of affordable housing issues. The newsletter is delivered to all households in the district and editions within the last year have included articles on the South East Plan¹⁰ by the South East of England Regional Assembly (SEERA); housing opportunities through the Emmaus project¹¹ and shared ownership and keyworker housing projects; and an update on the inquiry into the recent planning refusal for the Queen Elizabeth's barracks site. The newsletter has also been used as a method of consultation to obtain feedback on; Hart's Corporate Plan; and its statement of community involvement on planning and the development of the LDF, which is due to replace the Local Plan. The forthcoming June edition is to have a planning theme which will include information on the IT-based planning system (available via the Council's website), access to the planning database and an update on the South East Plan.

⁹ A pilot project for Hampshire Council and the first of its kind in the country - managed by the voluntary sector with a focus on a living partnership (with agencies and the community), improved access to residents in the rural communities (western parishes) and a representation and consultation venue for the Hart community.

¹⁰ The South East Plan is the regional spatial strategy for planning and development for the South East region - a draft of which has been issued by the South East of England Regional Assembly (SEERA).

¹¹ The Emmaus project is based in Aldershot and provides short and medium-term accommodation to young homeless people.

- 45 The CuSP has focused on the corporate delivery of customer care. A new telephone system was introduced in January 2006 and there are plans for a customer relationship management (CRM) system to be introduced in May 2006. The telephone system has expanded the number of lines available for incoming and outgoing calls but it has yet to demonstrate an improvement in answering calls. The last available data was for the end of quarter three at December 2005 when 77 per cent were answered within the time scale of four rings. Corporate and housing service standards have been established, but are not yet being measured. These include corporate standards for telephone, letter and email responses, and housing specific standards in relation to the housing register, homelessness and rent deposit scheme. The introduction of the new CRM system will allow Council staff to monitor performance against the corporate standards, with the housing standards planned to undergo some public consultation on their adequacy by September 2006.
- 46 Satisfaction surveys are not used to improve services. Satisfaction surveys are in place for housing register applicants, housing options interviews and grant applicants. However, housing staff have not been actively requesting feedback due to the recent changes with the service coming back in-house. Nor does the Council make use of satisfaction data that its partners collect. For example it has not made use of the satisfaction data that is regularly collected by 'Staying Put' or from its three preferred development partner HAs that survey new residents after moving into their new home. This prevents the Council from ensuring that service users are satisfied with the range of services provided, as well as identifying weaknesses and methods for improvement to meet the needs of current and potential service users.
- 47 Performance in responding to complaints is weak. A corporate complaints system was introduced in January 2005, and the scrutiny committee receives quarterly reports that provide some analysis of complaints, including information on the service area, number of stages and response times. From January to December 2005 a total of 451 complaints were received by the Council - including 4 in housing, 19 in regulatory services (none of which related to private sector housing) and 51 in planning. Only 78 per cent were acknowledged within the target of 3 working days and 63 per cent were responded to within the specified staged timescales. In 2003/04 only 27 per cent of respondents were satisfied with complaints handling by the Council.

Diversity

- 48 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. The Council is at the very early stages of developing the diversity agenda and only reached level one of the Local Government Equality Standards in July 2005. There have been delays in delivering corporate and service area actions (identified through the equalities impact assessments) and training has not been consistently provided across the Council. Diversity information is not routinely captured across services and a comprehensive service user profile is absent. While there has been some development work done in the housing department such as the introduction of a translated strap-line on leaflets, this is not a consistent approach taken across the Council and the development of this area is on an ad-hoc basis rather than being corporately-led. There are limited outcomes for service users currently demonstrated in this area.
- 49 The Council's progress on the diversity agenda is in its infancy. A corporate equality group was set up to steer the Council to improve and integrate its approach to diversity through the services that it provides. In recognition of the corporate significance and commitment now being given to this area, the group is chaired by the Interim Chief Executive and in July 2005 the Council reached level one of the Equality Standards for Local Government (against a target date of March 2005). This is the first of five levels that covers 'commitment to a comprehensive equality policy'.
- 50 There have been delays in progressing some of the actions identified in the level one assessment. For example each service area was required to carry out an equalities impact assessment, and where appropriate identify actions to be addressed. The three actions identified in the housing equalities impact assessment (dated October 2005) have not been completed. These were to:
- consolidate and analyse monitoring data provided by Sentinel in respect of the management of the housing register and the homelessness service and all Registered Social Landlords in respect of the nominations and allocations process by November 2005;
 - review strategy (housing) and associated action plan in the light of information gained through analysis of monitoring data by January 2006; and
 - identify local or national groups who can be included in the Council's consultation on service quality and development by November 2005.
- 51 Of the four actions identified in the private sector housing equalities impact assessment, three are without timescales and the one with a timescale of November 2005 has not been completed - to identify local or national groups who can be included in the Council's consultation on service quality and development.

- 52** Overall there have been some delays in delivering corporate actions to drive forward the delivery of the equalities standard. The corporate equality group is tasked with monitoring progression against the action plan to achieve level two during 2005/06. However, due to other corporate commitments and holiday absence it did not meet for three months between November 2005 and February 2006. At the February meeting a decision was taken to 'park' work on achieving level two against other priorities the Council is addressing. We were provided with the level two action plan and there are a number of key actions that have not been delivered against schedule, including:
- corporate structure for overseeing monitoring and information systems by March 2006;
 - develop equality targets by December 2005; and
 - training by March 2006.
- 53** Training in equalities and diversity has not been consistently delivered across the Council. The initial equalities and diversity action plan outlining how the Council would achieve level four of the equalities standard by 2008 indicated that all staff and members would receive training to enable them to understand their role by September 2005. The action plan to achieve level two sets a further date of March 2006 to develop a programme of equality training. Attendance at equalities and diversity training in 2005 was very low among members (eight attended) and general staff (62 per cent attended), while 90 per cent of managers attended. The 2006/07 training programme does not include any specific training for equalities and diversity.
- 54** To develop its approach to diversity the Council obtained funding from the ODPM's¹² Capacity Building Fund, which it used to develop the equality impact assessments and further work is scheduled with the Audit Commission to strengthen this area.
- 55** The Council does not have a comprehensive profile in place of its service users and potential service users. The 2003 housing needs survey provided the Council with a sound basis of need and more recently the housing department has gathered monitoring data from Sentinel HA (in response to the equalities impact assessment). However, it has not yet carried out an analysis or developed the subsequent two actions indicated in the impact assessment. Neither does it systematically record and monitor the take up of services across all areas, for example in private sector housing and access to grant arrangements. This prevents the Council from establishing that it is delivering services tailored to the needs of all its service users, and from developing further service delivery to fill any identified gaps, in particular targeting potential service users who may not be able to easily access services.

¹² Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

- 56 There has been limited work to reach marginalised groups. The Council has not targeted groups or areas where minority groups are known to reside, for example the 'Staying Put' home improvement agency has not carried out any targeted work within the location of the large Nepalese community,¹³ and private sector housing initiatives have not been targeted in areas where there is a high proportion of older people or private sector properties. While there have been some events held at identified locations that have included 'Staying Put' promotions at Frimley Park hospital, Fleet library and the Hart Disability Awareness Day - this has not been done on a consistent basis for all services.
- 57 Key strategies are not in place to address the needs of specific groups. The Council does not have strategies for older people, young people and the BME community. While the housing strategy has included all these developments except an older person's strategy in its action plan, the absence of these strategies prevent the Council from ensuring that it is comprehensively considering the needs of these groups.
- 58 The Council has taken part in some partnership work to consider specific groups. It has jointly commissioned a housing needs survey of the gypsy and traveller community with other Hampshire authorities, with the results due in August 2006; it is working with Hampshire Supporting People to consider the housing needs of those with learning disabilities; and has liaised with Sentinel HA which has proceeded with a review of its sheltered housing leading on from an independent study by the Older Person's Consortium. The Council also plans to introduce a 'Sanctuary scheme' for victims of domestic violence which will provide financial support to improve security within their homes. However, these are in the very early stages and are not yet having an impact on the quality of housing provision to these specific groups.
- 59 The Council does not have a consistent approach to the use of strap-lines. The revised housing leaflets include a strap-line that promotes the availability of alternative formats, including Braille, large print and audio-tape. In liaison with Language Line the housing department identified eight languages of the main BME groups and the strap-line contains an indication in these languages that the document can be translated. In the absence of language line having a Nepalese strap-line it used the two closest regional variations. The strap-line is in French, German, Spanish, Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi, Cantonese and Mandarin. However, this strap-line is not used on corporate documents, for example the complaints and compliments leaflet. This not only shows an inconsistent approach in how strap-lines are used but may prevent members from minority groups from easily accessing the complaints process.

¹³ This is potentially one of the largest BME communities in the areas of Hart and Rushmoor - following the former location of the Ghurkha regiment in the Hart District

Strategic approach to housing

- 60 There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in the Council's strategic approach to housing. The Council's housing strategy achieved the fit for purpose rating from the Government Office South East (GOSE) in 2005. The housing strategy and draft LDF provide the framework to deliver affordable homes, and there is some positive partnership work in place to deliver these objectives. The Council has an understanding of the housing market and local needs, but is yet to analyse this information in depth and develop specific strategies for key areas of work, including private sector housing and specific groups, including older people to ensure that it is directing its services appropriately.

Understanding of the housing market

- 61 The Council has a well developed research base of local housing need. The housing needs survey undertaken in 2003 found an annual need of 600 new affordable homes, with a shortfall of 418 in the existing supply (through re-lets and new delivery) - and a total projection of 3,344 new affordable homes required by 2011. A housing needs update in 2005 found similar findings and the Council has programmed in a further full needs survey for 2007.
- 62 The 2003 Survey and 2005 Update considered various elements including future population projections, the housing market, house price database, private sector rents and household income details to gauge the element of affordability for housing. The main conclusions in 2003 were:
- there is a high level of concealed households that are not recorded on a register of housing need, with 80 per cent unable to afford the cheapest method of housing, and the demand for smaller affordable homes; and
 - there is an increasing older population, with a forecasted housing need in the rented and private sector of 1,474 homes within the following five years, and a need to promote DFGs and develop improved matching facilities for adapted properties.
- 63 The 2005 update found that the increase in the price of terraced houses and flats/maisonettes was significantly in excess of wage inflation. Since 2003 overall house inflation costs had increased by 20.7 per cent. With the price of properties generally purchased by first time buyers having increased by 7.8 per cent for flats/maisonettes and 16.2 per cent for terraced houses. While incomes in the district were assessed to have increased by 6.8 per cent from 2003.
- 64 The Council has taken some steps to address the high level of need for affordable housing, through its planned changes to the Local Plan. The response to the inquiry was received after the on-site inspection period and has given agreement for the changes, which will increase the level of affordable homes on development sites from 25 per cent to 40 per cent. It is also considering changing the threshold (the size of developments that this will apply to) and aims to create an equal split of affordable homes through rented and other subsidised means, for example shared ownership.

- 65 In December 2005 the Council received the housing market assessment it commissioned in mid-2005. The assessment was principally commissioned to inform the development of the LDF, and the Council propose to use it further to develop work across all tenures in the district and identify where joint working across administrative boundaries can assist to meet housing need. This represents a proactive approach, which will assist the Council in tackling housing demand and supply issues on a sub-regional basis with its neighbours.
- 66 As detailed in the diversity section, the Council is lacking key strategies for a number of minority groups that will have particular housing needs and requirements. In particular, it does not have an older persons strategy despite the housing needs survey highlighting the increasing population and needs to be addressed. Nor does it have a keyworker strategy, and it does not intend to complete one until 2008. The Council informed us that a lack of capacity and need to prioritise areas of work, for example achieving fit for purpose for the housing strategy has affected its ability to develop these strategies. However, the absence of these strategies prevent the Council from ensuring that it is adequately capturing the needs of specific groups and addressing them in its strategic approach. This is particularly relevant for the older population and those that require assistance to remain in their current homes (as will be explored later in the private sector housing section).
- 67 The Council has started to work with other partners to expand its service provision for some minority groups, that include:
- using the gypsy and traveller liaison officer as a main consultation avenue to engage the gypsy and traveller community in the development of the housing strategy, and more recently the joint commissioning of a gypsy and traveller housing needs survey with other Hampshire authorities. This work is due for completion in August 2006 and will provide a county-wide approach; and
 - work with Hampshire Supporting People on a draft housing strategy for people with learning disabilities across Hampshire which aims to develop the range of housing and support options available.
- 68 The Council has been responsive to identifying the needs of those in rural areas. In partnership with five other district councils and Hyde HA (HARAH),¹⁴ a rural housing enabler has been employed to focus on the housing needs of parishes with a population of less than 3,000. Housing needs surveys have been completed in two parishes and a further ten have recently been completed with a new questionnaire devised by a partnership including DEFRA,¹⁵ the Housing Corporation and a national group of rural enablers. The Council is one of the first in the country to use the questionnaire and the results are currently being analysed using DEFRA funding. An initial outcome from the surveys is that there is a demand for at least five schemes in the district to produce an extra 70 to 85 affordable homes, although these figures are based on provisional figures and will be verified by the full survey reports to be published in June 2006.

¹⁴ HARAH - Hampshire Alliance for Rural Affordable Housing

¹⁵ Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

- 69 The results of the recent urban capacity study have been received by the Council and are due to be reported to the LDF panel in late April. The results are currently being checked for accuracy before the study is publicly distributed and used for further consultation. Early findings of the study have found that few of the previously identified sites have been developed and most development has taken place on previously unidentified sites.
- 70 The Council has a broad understanding of the condition of the private sector housing stock. In 2004 it carried out a house condition survey that used an acceptable methodology of inspecting 1,000 properties of the total 34,400 private sector stock, which found:
- 25.5 per cent did not meet the Decent Homes Standard (with the main failure of thermal comfort at 18 per cent);
 - 36 per cent classified as not decent and occupied by a vulnerable resident (vulnerable meaning in receipt of a means tested benefit);
 - 2.5 per cent were considered to have a 'serious hazard' under the new Housing and Health Safety Rating System (HHSRS);
 - 0.2 per cent would be classified as houses in multiple occupation (HMOs); and
 - 1.7 per cent were vacant.
- 71 This information provided Hart with a baseline of information regarding the condition of current stock, and generally found the stock was in a good condition. It also provided some indication of the level of properties that will require targeting; under the new requirements of the 2004 Housing Act due for implementation in April 2006 of mandatory HMO licensing and the new HHSRS; and the level required to raise the already in place ODPM target to increase the level of DHS in the private sector. However, the Council has not yet used this information to establish how it will target and improve the condition of the private sector stock, and currently does not have a private sector housing strategy to co-ordinate and drive forward these improvements.

Quality of strategies and approach to meeting needs

- 72 The delivery of affordable housing is a priority in the Council's strategic documents. It is one of the themed areas for delivery in the Corporate Plan, Community Strategy and Housing Strategy. The aim of the Council to deliver and improve this area is clear within these documents.

- 73 The Council's housing strategy 2005/08 was awarded 'fit for purpose' by GOSE in August 2005, which was later than many other district councils achieved the standard. The strategy was developed with assistance from GOSE and several versions were drafted and changes made to reflect the comments and contributions received from stakeholder consultation. Member involvement was mainly through the portfolio holder, although the Housing Forum was used as a major consultation source with departments, members and parishes. Specific input was also sought, for example from the rural housing enabler and via the traveller and gypsy liaison officer. The strategy sets out how it intends to meet the needs identified in the 2003 housing needs survey and clearly sets out the Council's priorities and links to national, regional and local agendas. The strategy has yet to take into account the recently completed housing market assessment, although an annual review of the strategy is planned for August 2006.
- 74 The Council acknowledges that a number of supporting documents to the overall housing strategy are missing, including strategies for older people, young people, BME groups and key workers. The Council's principal focus in 2004 and 2005 was to get the housing strategy right and achieve fit for purpose, which it has done. The development of three of the missing strategies is now timetabled, but the completion dates are quite distant and will only be completed close to the Housing Strategy having run its three-year course. For example the BME strategy (due to be produced in January 2008) and the keyworkers strategy (due in July 2008 - although this may be revised following a meeting with the zone agent for key worker provision). The strategy does not indicate when an older people's strategy will be developed, and this is perhaps one of the most crucial requirements given the increasing population of older people in the district.
- 75 The Council is not consistently using information gathered through alternative streams on minority groups to inform service delivery. For example a review of housing and care needs of older people in Rushmoor and Hart was carried out in December 2004 (commissioned by the Older Persons Consortium). The review made some stark findings that included a large and growing population of older people that would require an increased amount of support and assistance, and in particular a predominance of rented accommodation that does not respond to the needs of the growing older population that are owner occupiers. While Sentinel HA is in the process of reviewing its sheltered stock (in terms of facilities, location and future use), it is not clear how the Council has used this information to inform the services that it provides to the older community, particularly through the development of affordable homes and the more immediate provision of grant support through private sector housing.
- 76 Similarly the LSP held a youth conference in March 2005 that involved 50 young people that divided into themed groups to discuss matters that affected them. The LSP considered that the event was very positive and relayed outcomes of the conference to the Council. The housing department has considered the feedback and plan to use it as a reference point for future work, but has not yet used the consultation feedback to inform current service delivery.

- 77 The Council has a comprehensive homelessness strategy, and has recently carried out an interim review of the strategy. This is at draft stage and is due to be considered by the homelessness forum in May 2006. The initial strategy of 2003/08 demonstrated an understanding of the local causes of homelessness and set out some specific measurable outcomes to tackle the high numbers of homelessness due to parental evictions, loss of assured short-hold tenancies in the private sector, eviction by family and friends and relationship breakdown. While the performance of the service has improved (which will be explored in the later prevention of homelessness section) it has not monitored or measured whether it has met the challenges in reducing the key issues of homelessness as highlighted in the strategy. The review of the strategy has implemented an updated action plan, with some focus on the outstanding issues that the Council considers it has not yet delivered. These include provision for young people, engaging with service users, and maximising permanent re-housing opportunities (through nomination arrangements).
- 78 The private sector renewal strategy is out-of-date. It is an undated document but refers to data that has since been superseded by more recent data, including the 2005 housing needs survey update and the 2004 house condition survey. The strategy indicates that it should have been reviewed within one year, but clearly this has not been the case. It is, therefore inadequate to drive the delivery requirements for the private sector, both in terms of improving the condition of stock and addressing the needs of private sector residents, and in particular the more vulnerable who may require access to grant facilities and assistance.
- 79 Partnerships with the parishes work well. Meetings are held with parish chairs and other representatives twice a year at the parish planning forum. The monitoring officer is due to speak at their next meeting in October. The Council also has links with the Hart Association of Parish and Town Councils which meet quarterly, and use this as a method to engage with the Parish Council's. The Council does not currently have a rural housing strategy although it is timetabled within the housing strategy for development by December 2006. The rural housing enabler acts as the main contact point with the parishes in identifying need and areas for potential development and this is being developed (as will be detailed under the Enabling section of the report).

- 80 The Council lacks some basic tools to assist in its delivery of affordable housing. It does not have an overarching affordable housing policy, supplementary planning guidance (due to delays in finalising changes to the Local Plan) or a model section 106 document.¹⁶ The planning service is taking the lead to develop a model section 106 agreement, and is considering the use of model agreements in other authorities as a basis for one for Hart. A community assets officer has been in place since autumn 2005 that has responsibility to ensure that expenditure of Section 106 contributions is undertaken efficiently and complements the Council's corporate priorities. The absence of these tools does not provide a clear and structured framework for developers when submitting planning applications, nor guidance for officers when negotiating with applicants. The Council has recently introduced new development guidance for affordable housing, which is clearly written in plain language and is consistent with the changes being proposed for the Local Plan. This does not have the same weight as supplementary planning guidance, but it is a useful document which has filled a gap. Partners welcomed this development. However, it is too early to establish the impact that this has had upon the delivery of affordable homes.
- 81 There are forums in place to discuss key issues that affect various stakeholders and these are the main methods used to consult stakeholders on strategy development, for example the annual housing forum, homelessness forum, supported housing forum. The Council meets with the three preferred partners on a quarterly basis (previously this was every two months and altered in response to the requests of the preferred partners), and consulted with all active HAs regarding the development guidance. In January 2006 a housing management forum was created by the Council to bring all HAs together to discuss specific housing issues and share good practice. Key issues are discussed at the organised forums and the main area of concern discussed at the recent annual developer's forum was the Thames Basin Heath's Special Protection Area¹⁷ (SPA). As a result, the Council will be establishing an agent's forum to meet three times a year to discuss common issues.
- 82 The annual housing forum provides a mechanism for consultation and feedback. All stakeholders are invited to attend and at the last forum themed groups took place covering planning policy, private sector housing, choice-based lettings and homelessness. Officers are currently working on feeding back to stakeholders how these comments and actions will be delivered, and the forum is also intended to be a forum for updates on the developments and delivery of strategies, for example the housing strategy.

¹⁶ Section 106 agreements - section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act

¹⁷ Special Protection Areas (SPAs) are designated under the European Commission Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds (1979). Under this directive, the UK government must designate SPAs to conserve the habitat of certain rare or vulnerable birds (listed in the directive) and regularly occurring migrating birds. It has to protect SPAs from any pollution, disturbance or deterioration. There are 73 SPAs in England out of a total 216 in the UK.

- 83 The Council is actively engaged in various partnerships across the district, county and sub-region. For example it has taken an active role in providing feedback to Hampshire County Council on the five-year strategy for Supporting People and has a high level of attendance at the district core group meetings. This has led to its involvement in the development of specific services to meet needs, including Elvetham Heath (mother and baby scheme) and Simmonds Court (scheme for single adults with support needs). It is working with Waverley Borough Council in the development of a choice-based lettings system that is proposed for implementation in April 2007. Partners say the Council works well with them and it has an open and participative style.
- 84 The Council is working very closely with neighbouring authorities that are affected by the Thames Basin Heath SPA. This emerged as a major planning issue in February 2006 when English Nature changed its policy on the size of the buffer zone around the SPA from 2km to 5 km. Less than a quarter of the district is outside of the 5km zone - this is the south west corner which is not appropriate for housing development due to its lack of facilities, amenities and infrastructure in the immediate area. It also contains the historic village of Odiham. The lack of appropriate infrastructure is seen as a major obstacle which will need to be overcome if the district is to support more private and affordable housing, as English Nature will object to any scheme for additional housing (from one extra residential property upwards) unless a detailed assessment of the implications of the SPA has been carried out and measures proposed which alleviate recreational pressures on the SPA.
- 85 The Council has taken a series of actions in response to the constraints of the SPA. It has met with the planning inspectorate to ensure a common understanding of the issues, and is working with similarly affected local authorities to raise concern with English Nature, GOSE and SEERA. It has raised awareness of the SPA with members and the developers' forum through seminars and briefings, and more recently an explanatory note was placed on the website under the planning policy section. However, the impact of the SPA on delivering affordable homes is still a major issue which the Council needs to resolve, probably in partnership with others.
- 86 Relationships with the LSP have improved in recent years, from what was a low base. The Council went through a period where there was little engagement with the LSP during 2003/04, and with limited funding the LSP struggled to develop the Community Strategy. In the last year there has been more joint work with the LSP, for example developing the Corporate Plan, opening the Hart Neighbourhood Centre and providing community safety and cohesion services to the rural area of Hook and through the voluntary sector.

- 87 There has been a weakness in consulting service users in the past although this appears to be changing through the development of the LDF. The Council's statement of community involvement sets out consultation standards for both the LDF preparation and the assessment of planning applications. Hart News has been used as the main vehicle for informing and consulting with residents in the district on these developments. Resident feedback was sought on the statement of community involvement through the April 2005 edition, and an issues and options questionnaire on the LDF core strategy and development control policies was included in the February 2006 edition (the results of which are currently being analysed). Residents also had the opportunity of expressing their views online via the Council's website. The Council is also in the process of implementing its consultation strategy that will build on carrying out consultation in a consistent manner across the Council, with a key theme of sharing feedback across the Council.
- 88 Internal communication across different sections within the Council is starting to improve. The return of the housing advice, register and homeless service to the Council in January has improved internal liaison on the prevention of homelessness, and closer working relationships are being formed with officers who deal with private sector housing, which include the development of protocols and referral guidance. Managers within the housing and planning sections are starting to meet more frequently to discuss common themes and this has already proved beneficial in the development of the developer's guidance. However, these are recent initiatives and there is a need to further develop communication and a joint approach to delivering affordable homes.

Making the best use of existing housing

Prevention of homelessness

- 89 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. Through the provision of housing advice and the rent deposit scheme the Council has reduced the level of homelessness, and the placement of households in temporary accommodation. The return of the service in-house has improved internal communication between departments, and there is partnership work in place to provide support and assistance to those service users that require it.
- 90 The Council provides a range of housing advice that indicates a positive impact on the prevention of homelessness. Those presenting themselves as threatened with homelessness are interviewed by a housing options officer and the various options are explored. A home visit is always carried out in circumstances where the person is being threatened with homelessness through a parental or family/friend eviction, and where appropriate mediation is used to try and prevent homelessness, for example from Hampshire Youth Bureau. The number of people on the housing register has increased from 816 in 2002/03 to 1,141 at December 2005. There has been a reduction in the level of acceptances against the level of housing advice provided from: 93 acceptances against 285 advice sessions (in 2003/04) to 27 acceptances against 398 advice sessions (in 2005/06).

- 91 There have been further improvements in the time taken to carry out homeless investigations against the Government's 33-day target. This has reduced from 25.98 days (2003/04) to an average of 11.5 days (2005/06). This means that homeless applicants are being provided with a quicker service in determining their future housing requirements.
- 92 The Council actively encourages use of its rent deposit scheme. The scheme will pay up to one month's rent or a £1,000 deposit, and one month's rent in advance. Applicants are also encouraged to repay the deposit through affordable levels starting at £5.00 per week which provides an element of recycling funds for new users of the service. The homelessness prevention officer has been developing links with private sector landlords and letting agents, and in 2005/06 some 56 households were prevented from becoming homeless through the scheme. As well as preventing homelessness, the scheme also offers an element of choice to service users, as they have some discretion on the location of where they choose to live, taking account of schools and family ties.
- 93 Property conditions for the rent deposit scheme are not inspected before they are accepted on to the scheme. The Council plan to consider pre-inspections being carried out by environmental health officers, but at present the condition is not known prior to acceptance. This prevents the Council from ensuring that the standard of the property is suitable for the applicant's needs as well as meeting necessary legal requirements.
- 94 The homelessness prevention officer has also started to expand work with other agencies. A notification process has been put in place for HAs to inform the housing option team when tenants are facing eviction - although this has yet to be embedded across all the HAs. Further education-related initiatives are also under consideration, to complement the work done by the Emmaus project in the 'Homeless education liaison project'. This is a project part funded by the Council which involves visits to schools to talk about homelessness. The outcomes of these initiatives are not currently being assessed.
- 95 The Council is not yet consistently recording the new BVPI213 introduced in 2005/06 to measure prevention of homelessness through housing advice work. In 2005/06 some 141 households were prevented from becoming homeless by casework intervention, although this has not been set off against the population of Hart to provide the performance data required.
- 96 On a more positive note the Council achieved the ODPM 2010 target to halve its use of temporary accommodation four years in advance of 2010. Along with five other near neighbouring authorities the Housing Directorate of the ODPM congratulated the Council for this achievement, and its reduction to 25 households in temporary accommodation (March 2006). This has reduced significantly when compared to figures in 2003/04 and 2005/06 of 62 households in temporary accommodation.

- 97 The reduction in the need to use temporary accommodation at Heathlands Court (the main source of temporary accommodation for Hart that is managed by Sentinel HA) has also caused the Council to consider its future use of Heathlands Court. Three crash-pads¹⁸ were introduced in 2004 at Heathlands Court to avoid the necessity to place homeless people into bed and breakfast. While on-site there were nine vacancies (out of 19 self-contained flats) in Heathlands Court, and at the same time the Council had been required to place a number of people in bed and breakfast, due to the full occupation of the crash-pads.
- 98 The average length of stay at Heathlands Court is long. During 2005/06 the figure was distorted due to a number of families that had particularly extensive periods of stay. This was as a result of rehousing difficulties for one family with high former rent arrears, and a number of families where the Council discharged its duty after investigation. The all inclusive length of stay in Heathlands Court at December 2005 was 41.8 weeks, and without the extensive periods by the families detailed 37.6 weeks (2005/06).
- 99 The Council is not actively promoting incentives for tenants who under-occupy their homes to move to smaller accommodation. A tenant incentive scheme is currently provided by Sentinel HA which gives a £1,000 allowance upon vacation to tenants under-occupying two bed or larger properties. However, Sentinel HA was in the process of reviewing its literature and there was no leaflet available on this scheme. The Council were not aware of how successful it has been. Such schemes often make better use of existing accommodation by making larger accommodation available for larger households.
- 100 There is some partnership work in place to prevent homelessness. The relationship with the Fleet and District CAB works well and in recent months a rent arrears referral scheme has commenced. Sentinel HA tenants in rent arrears are referred to the CAB in an attempt to tackle rent arrears at an early stage to prevent future homelessness. However, while the CAB has a court desk at the county court there are no clearly established working arrangements on how the housing options team make use of this service.
- 101 The Council has not sufficiently considered the impact that reduced funding to the CAB would have upon service provision, in particular dealing with referrals from the Council. The Council initially proposed to reduce funding by £37,000 in 2006/07, although this has recently been amended to £17,000. While recent discussions between the housing department and the CAB have established that the CAB has identified alternative sources to cover the £20,000 funding gap. The Council did not consider in advance the impact that the funding reduction would have, particularly as there are no other independent advice agencies within Hart which provide this level of support and advice.

¹⁸ Accommodation with immediate access to necessary household equipment, including furniture.

- 102** The Council works well with other agencies to identify support needs for those threatened with homelessness. Sentinel HA provides 35 floating support placements for Hart residents, and there are a further 61 placements by Emmaus and Life projects that cover Hart and Rushmoor residents. In December 2005 a single referral form was introduced to make the referral process more straightforward and involves the participation of the service user. Housing option officers attend the two monthly assessment panels for 16 to 24 and over 25 year olds. The panels have a multi-agency approach from health, housing, support providers and community safety and consider cases that require additional support to access and sustain housing.
- 103** Levels of communication between the housing options and housing benefits teams have improved since the service returned in-house. There is a dedicated housing benefit assessment officer who deals specifically with cases threatened with homelessness and weekly meetings take place between housing option officers and housing benefit officers to monitor case progression. Meetings at a strategic level are not in place between the departments, and while fast-track arrangements have been used in the past the Council did not consider that fast-track arrangements were currently required because the housing benefit service has improved in recent months.

Private sector housing

- 104** Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. There has been limited strategic development of private sector housing through working with landlords or residents, in order to improve the condition of private sector stock. The Council provides financial assistance through 'Staying Put', DFGs and minor repair grants. However, it has not carried out an analysis to determine whether this level is sufficient, and this is particularly poor considering that it does not consistently promote what is available or target publicity at the most vulnerable, particularly those living in rural areas.
- 105** There has been a lack of strategic focus on private sector housing. The function of private sector housing has been located within the environmental health section of the regulatory services division since mid-2005. As a result of some capacity issues, the service has focused on operational environmental health delivery. As a short-term measure the strategic and operational functions are to be divided between the two principal officers to provide more of a strategic focus.
- 106** Work with private sector landlords has been restricted to the provision of information rather than proactively improving the condition of homes or making more homes available. In partnership with Southern Private Landlords,¹⁹ a landlord's forum has taken place for the last two years and been used to inform landlords of the forthcoming regulatory changes under the 2004 Housing Act. In addition the private sector landlord's newsletter has provided information. However, neither of these initiatives has been used to assist in monitoring and/or improving the condition of housing in the private sector.

¹⁹ A body that represents landlords across the South of England

- 107 The service has started to consider how it will address the new 2004 Housing Act requirements due for implementation in April 2006. Environmental health officers attended the ODPM training on the new HHSRS and intend to use the service user data that it does have, including those that have accessed the facilities of 'Staying Put', DFGs and the Council's care warden scheme to identify vulnerable residents/households. A programme of joint visits has been established with Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service to identify high risk HMOs at a rate of 40 visits per year (based on an estimated 50 to 60 within Hart).
- 108 Financial assistance and support is provided by the Council for private sector residents. Jointly with Rushmoor Borough Council provision is made for the 'Staying Put' home improvement agency delivered by Hyde HA. Hart funds £20,000 of the scheme (specifically for Hart residents), and jointly £43,000 is funded through Supporting People (administered by Hampshire County Council). 'Staying Put' has delivered low and high level intervention work that ranges from welfare benefit checks, improved security needs, a handy person scheme and access and assistance to improvement grants, for example DFGs.
- 109 The Council can not be confident that the level of funding provided through DFGs and minor repair grant facilities sufficiently meets the needs of the community. A bid has been submitted to Cabinet to increase the provision of DFGs from £250,000 to £350,000 in 2006/07. This is in response to 2005/06 expenditure exhausting current budget provision. And there are proposals to raise the individual minor repair grant figure to £5,000 from £2,000 (from a £50,000 total budget). This is due to the increasing need for service users to fund the additional cost over and beyond £2,000. While these improvements are positive they are reactive and the Council has not analysed the potential true figure required to meet demand, particularly in response to the increasing older population within Hart projected by various surveys and the current lack of publicity on the provision of grant facilities (as referred to in the earlier Access and customer care section).
- 110 The Council promotes fuel efficiency. It has worked with other partners to raise the profile of fuel efficiency that has included Solent Energy Efficiency Advice Centre having a stall at the Civic Office and some promotion in the rural areas, referring people to Warm Front if not eligible for Council grants and providing energy efficiency roadshows in various locations. Awareness of fuel efficiency has also been improved due to the increase in fuel costs and this has seen the number of requests for home energy efficiency packs rise from 30 (2004/05) to 184 (2005/06).

Enabling the provision of new housing

- 111** Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. The Council has a good track record of delivering more new homes in recent years, and has also taken steps to address the imbalance to provide more affordable homes, and an improved level of rented homes. Additional funding for the housing service is guaranteed for several years, and the Council has developed a number of guidance frameworks to assist in the future delivery of affordable homes. However, there are some threats posed to the Council that could prevent it from delivering its target for affordable homes. These include the extensive SPA and uncertainty over the future development of several larger sites earmarked for housing development in the district.
- 112** The Council has delivered an improved level of affordable homes in recent years. Table 2 sets out the level of affordable homes delivered in the last three years which demonstrates that the Council has delivered new homes in excess of the 317 required by the county structural plan and an increased level of affordable homes. It has only achieved 25 per cent affordable homes on one scheme, despite this being the overall target in the current Local Plan, and a high proportion of the affordable homes delivered over the last three years have been shared ownership (237 out of a total 364). However, the vast majority of shared ownership homes have been sold. There are clear targets set for the future delivery of affordable homes in the 2005/08 housing strategy of 80 affordable homes per year at a target rate of 40 rented, 40 shared ownership including 10 on rural exception sites (although the regional strategy aims for a 65 rent: 35 shared ownership ratio).

Table 1 Delivery of affordable homes

| | House completions (annual target 317²⁰) | Affordable home completions | Rented | Shared ownership |
|---------|---|--|---------------|-----------------------------|
| 2003/04 | 567 | 78 | 33 | 45 |
| 2004/05 | 642 | 183 | 37 | 146 |
| 2005/06 | 557 projected | 103 | 34 | 69 |
| 2006/07 | 348 projected | TBC | 44 | 36 |

Hart District Council

²⁰ The annual target for house completions as set in the county structural plans is 317 per annum (this includes market sale and affordable homes).

- 113 The largest new housing development in the district proposed for the Queen Elizabeth barracks site may have redressed this imbalance through a higher ratio of rented to shared ownership homes at 65 per cent to 35. However, planning permission was recently refused by the Council because of the overall size of the development and its environmental impact. There was significant public opposition to the development with more than 900 people attending the special planning committee. The development proposed to deliver 30 per cent affordable homes on a development site of 1,300. The matter is now scheduled for a public inquiry in April 2007 although discussions are continuing with the developer.
- 114 The Council has taken steps to increase the delivery of affordable homes on sites. It has been awaiting the outcome of its proposed alteration to the Local Plan to increase the level of affordable homes on developments to 40 per cent (rather than the current 25 per cent).
- 115 The draft LDF includes a proposal to reduce the annual housing supply figure to just 200 new homes. This is as a result of SEERA and the regional spatial strategy wanting more of the new housing in the region to be focused on urban centres like Reading and Basingstoke. Officers are in the process of considering the options to this proposal and will be presenting them to members for discussion.
- 116 As referred to in paragraphs 83 and 84 the Council is working closely with other districts regarding the impact of the SPA on developing sites and delivering affordable homes. It has met with the planning inspectorate to ensure a common understanding of the issues, and has raised awareness of the SPA with members and the developer's forum. However, the impact of the SPA on delivering affordable homes is still a major issue and one that threatens the ability of the Council to continue its delivery of affordable homes.
- 117 The Council consider that there are sufficient identified sites available to provide land and development opportunities for the next few years. In particular the Housing Corporation has agreed its final Approved Development Plan for 2006/08, with £4,755,000 targeted to deliver 82 homes in Hart across six sites through Hart's three preferred partners of Hyde, Sentinel and Thames Valley HA.
- 118 Funding for the housing service has been guaranteed by the Council. For the last three years the Council has ring-fenced right to buy receipts for the housing service. This has seen an improved level of revenue investment in housing from £170,000 in 2001/02 to £304,000 in 2005/06. This is guaranteed until 2009/10 and provides future provision for the delivery of affordable housing.

- 119** The Council has not been as proactive as some other councils in steering the requirements for development. There is no special planning guidance in place (although the developers' guidance has partly filled this gap since its introduction) and it has not proactively identified sites and the capacity for them, or produced detailed design guidance for individual sites in the Local Plan. This task is left to the developers to initiate. It does not have a model section 106 in place, and while there is some inter-departmental work to develop a model section 106 the absence of one does not provide a framework for agreeing development bids. This leaves the Council open to negotiations by individual developers, which can potentially extend the timescales for progression as well as cost. The Council has not developed any schemes without grant assistance, nor has it been able to facilitate or promote joint projects in rural areas by two or more neighbouring parishes.
- 120** There have been some improvements in the availability of guidance for developers. In December 2005 the development guidance was introduced by the housing service following queries from external parties, including HAs and developers. Its principals are now used as part of the planning process with links to regional, county and local plans. It provides a clear definition of affordable housing and guidance on the Councils objectives on unit size, layout and tenure mix. HAs and planners commented favourably on the guidance but the Council is not currently measuring feedback on its impact, as it has been awaiting the response to the First Alterations to the Local Plan before the guidance is formally adopted.
- 121** The development of rural exception sites has not been as productive as in earlier years, although there are signs this is improving with more schemes coming forward. This in an area where the Council is keen to improve and Council members and officers now meet with parish councillors at a twice yearly parish planning forum. Through working with the parishes and supporting them in the development of parish plans, the Council aims to adopt the parish plans as supplementary planning documents that will form part of the LDF. Out of the 18 parishes, 15 are actively developing parish plans which are at various stages of the process with at least two parishes at the final stages and to be adopted in the coming year.
- 122** Together with the work of the rural housing enabler who identifies possible development sites and undertakes needs surveys, the Council is seeking to develop more trust and improve the relationship between the planning authority and the parishes. In previous years there have been five completed schemes on rural exception sites. The last one was built at Eversley (ten homes for rent) despite its initial rejection by members, a decision that was overturned on appeal. Further planning approval was recently obtained for a scheme at South Warnborough (five homes for rent and three for shared ownership). This has bought the Council very close to developing affordable housing on rural exception sites at a rate of ten per annum, and to be informed by the rural housing needs surveys.

- 123** The relationship between members and planning officers is positive, with officers having delegated powers to deal with approximately 90 per cent of applications. Parish councils also have a key role in this process, as their objection to an officer's recommendation will automatically result in the application going to committee. The consideration of applications by members has widened and there is more of a focus on the design aspects of development applications, rather than just density levels as previously was the case.
- 124** Efforts are being made to improve inter departmental relationships in the delivery of affordable homes. A housing representative attends most weekly meetings of the development forum (which discusses all housing applications) and more recently officers within housing and the planning department have started to work more closely on common areas of interest. Managers from each department now meet about every two months to keep each other abreast of issues, and have worked together on the production of the development guidance and further work is intended on the development of the approach to section 106s. This is a relatively recent innovation but it should bring the departments closer together in their approach to service delivery.
- 125** Homes are generally well designed and in keeping with the locality. We visited a number of new developments of affordable housing enabled by the Council. The affordable homes, both for rent and shared ownership, were indistinguishable in terms of overall appearance to those homes developed for private sale. It was evident that similar materials and finishes had been used and efforts had been made to 'pepper-pot' the affordable homes, so that they were not concentrated in one area. The only exception to this was a shared ownership development in Hook, which was situated at the entrance to the development and in close proximity to an electrical substation and a pylon.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 126** This is an area of significant weakness for the Council. The Council does not have a framework in place to evaluate and deliver value for money. It is not aware of the cost breakdown for particular areas of service, and the cost comparison data that it does have is dated and purely based on cost, rather than any qualitative or performance-related value. The Council is not a member of any benchmarking groups. These findings reinforce those found by the auditor in the Audit Commission's Annual Audit and Inspection Letter in March 2006, that have previously been brought to the attention of the Council as areas of weakness.

How do costs compare?

- 127** The Council has carried out very limited work on cost comparisons. Other than overall service costs the Council is not aware of specific service provision in terms of activities, initiatives or outcomes. For example, the delivery of the housing advice and homelessness prevention service, and the success of initiatives in terms of financial or qualitative outcomes. Neither is the Council a member of any benchmarking groups. This prevents the Council from being clear about the areas which are delivering value for money, and those that are not, particularly when compared with its peers operating in a similar environment.
- 128** It has cost comparison data for 2003/04 for its family group²¹ and LSVT benchmarking data in the South East that shows it has low cost services. However, this information is quite dated and has not been used to evaluate service cost against performance and efficiency.

How is value for money managed?

- 129** The Council does not have a structured approach or framework in place to assess and achieve value for money. It continues to use traditional methods of procurement by competitive tendering. Value for money does not feature as a key role in assessing and delivering services. In February 2006 the Council scored very low in the Audit Commission's assessment on its use of resources. Out of a possible score of four (four being the highest) in the five areas of financial reporting; management; standing; internal control; and value for money it scored one in all areas apart from internal control which scored a two.²² The overall score of the Council on its use of resources was one for 'inadequate performance'.
- 130** The Council has achieved some savings and attracted additional funding through partnership work, joint commissioning and sharing ideas and methodologies. However, these have been achieved on an ad-hoc basis rather than through strategic planning. They include the following.
- £8,000 through joint procurement of the 2004 private sector house condition survey with other Hampshire authorities.
 - £10,000 in the housing market assessment through the use of the same data capture work already used in the Blackwater Valley area assessment;
 - Joint funding of £100,000 from the ODPM for the joint commissioning of the future choice-based lettings scheme with Guildford, Rushmoor and Waverley Councils.
 - Initial £9,000 projected savings on the joint commissioning of housing software with Rushmoor BC for the housing register and homelessness service. It is the same software that will deliver the choice-based lettings Scheme from April 2007 - and longer-term reduction on annual maintenance by £7,000.

²¹ Fourteen councils of comparative size and population to Hart District Council.

²² A score of one denotes 'inadequate performance' and a score of two denotes 'adequate performance'.

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- Joint funding of the rural housing enabler with five district council's and Hyde HA.
- Joint funding with Sentinel HA in the recent recruitment of an Occupational Therapist to focus on the proactive identification and match of client needs to Sentinel Has empty homes.

131 There are initiatives in place that officers consider achieve savings. However, the level of these savings, financially or resource wise, for example, officer time is not something that the Council has evaluated. These include the rent deposit scheme which has assisted in the prevention of homelessness, and environmental health training provided internally and externally by officers. The external charges (albeit at a reduced rate) cover the cost of internal staff training.

Summary

- 132** Overall we consider that the Council's approach to the provision of affordable housing is fair. The Council has a strategic framework in place to deliver affordable homes. It has comprehensive housing needs data, although key strategies for minority groups are absent. It works well with partners on a local and sub-regional basis to deliver its strategies. In recent years it has delivered a high level of affordable homes, and it has taken steps in an attempt to overcome some of the barriers to enable more housing in the future.
- 133** Its approach to homelessness prevention is positive, and an accessible and responsive service is provided. However, there are significant weaknesses in its engagement with the private sector, which lacks a strategic approach, inadequate use of stock condition data and very limited publicity.
- 134** The Council's management of diversity is weak. It has not sufficiently developed its approach to ensure that services are being tailored to meet the needs of the community. There is financial provision in place for some vulnerable residents, including DFGs, minor repair grants and the 'Staying Put' home improvement agency and these work well and improve the condition of people's homes and ability to remain within their homes. However, the Council has not assessed the level of need against the level of provision, to ensure that the service is adequate.
- 135** Similarly, the Council's approach to value for money is weak. It does not know the cost of specific services, or how the cost and performance compare with other similar organisations.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 136** The Council's track record in delivering affordable homes is mixed. It has delivered many of the planned actions arising from the CPA balancing housing markets diagnostic and the 2005/08 housing strategy. Performance in delivering affordable homes and the prevention of homelessness has been positive, although the Council has not measured its success against the outputs detailed in the original homelessness strategy. The planning and housing benefit services have improved significantly. The Council has been weak in monitoring new resident satisfaction with their homes. The Council's CuSP is not yet delivering measurable outcomes to the residents of Hart. It is at the stage of building the infrastructure to assist the Council in monitoring and measuring outcomes for residents. The Council can not demonstrate a track record of delivering value for money
- 137** Progress against the 2004 CPA balancing housing markets diagnostic is mixed. The Council has improved the strategic approach in the following areas, which strengthens its ability to deliver affordable homes:
- strategies and service plans are more aligned through the introduction of the 'fit for purpose' Housing Strategy and Corporate Plan 2006; and
 - the LDF has progressed to draft stage, and provides a clearer strategic role in delivering affordable homes (subsequent to the Local Plan), and the First Alteration to the Local Plan has progressed the Council's aim to achieve 40 per cent affordable homes on a development site and lower the threshold level for developers.
- 138** However, the following areas remain outstanding, or have since lapsed and require further attention.
- Key strategies are missing for key workers, minority and hard-to-reach groups.
 - The private sector renewal strategy has not been updated to take into account up-to-date stock condition information and current need.
 - The Council has not introduced supplementary planning guidance, although it has partly filled the gap by publishing the developers' guidance.
 - Capacity issues have remained within the housing section, and this has prevented various areas being progressed.
 - There has been limited intervention in private sector housing (other than the rent deposit scheme), and proactive work with landlords or estate agents to assist in addressing homelessness.
 - Performance management has not yet been sufficiently refined to demonstrate a consistent track record of improvements.

- 139** Progress on delivery the housing strategy action plan is similar. Many of the actions have been delivered, although there has been some slippage in the delivery of some or attaining targets that have been set. For example:
- complete a review of the homeless strategy and action plan by September 2005 - an interim review was completed in January 2006. The draft review is yet to be considered by the homelessness forum and a full review is planned for 2006;
 - identify the main causes of homelessness locally and how these can be addressed by February 2006 - target moved to April 2006 following update of homelessness strategy;
 - identify the housing and homelessness issues for young people by April 2006 - further date has been set for December 2006; and
 - hold a landlords' forum to consult private landlords about ways to improve standards within privately rented properties by September 2005 - the forum was held in November 2005 jointly with Southern Private Landlords Association as a more convenient date (although the outcomes are unclear in terms of the consultation).
- 140** The Council has delivered a high level of affordable homes over the past three years, and while the balance of rented against shared ownership has not achieved the desired outcome; the Council has improved the affordable housing opportunities for residents. In 2003/04 the Council was within the best 25 per cent performers for delivering affordable homes per 1,000 (based on HIP²³ returns).
- 141** There have been improvements in the prevention of homelessness. The profile of housing and homelessness has increased within the Council and among members as a result of the government agenda to reduce homeless levels. The Council has accepted fewer applications in 2005/06 (27) than previous years despite the increase in the provision of housing advice sessions and a growing housing register. The Council has also achieved the ODPM's target to halve the use of temporary accommodation four years ahead of the 2010 target.
- 142** Performance in 2004/05 for BV183b (average number of weeks spent by homeless households in priority need in temporary accommodation) and BV203 (reduction in the number of families placed in temporary accommodation) were all in the best 25 per cent of performers. Overall performance is not yet known for 2005/06, although the Council is aware that a number of long-term families in temporary accommodation (as referred to in the prevention of homelessness section) will have distorted its performance on BV183b.

²³ Housing Investment Programme

- 143** Performance in delivering the homeless service has been positive (as referred to earlier in terms of the direction of travel for performance indicators). But the Council has not demonstrated that it has achieved all of the outputs within the 2003/08 homeless strategy. While items on the original action plan for the 2003/08 strategy have been signed off as 'complete', as the action plan targets were not SMART it is difficult to establish overall performance. While the strategy had quite specific targets detailed within it, for example, to assist 25 families in the private sector and to assist five women fleeing domestic violence to remain at home or go into bed and breakfast. These have not formed part of the action plan or been measured or monitored, so it is difficult to assess whether the strategy has had the overall desired affect intended.
- 144** Housing services are now provided from one central location. The return of the housing register, advice and homelessness service in-house in January 2006 means that housing services, including housing benefit and housing strategy are delivered from the one location. There are further plans in place to have officers physically situated closer together, and while we were on-site work to relocate the housing options team with a housing benefit assessor on the ground floor of the Civic Office was underway. Officers are already working closer together on case work and although this is not yet measured in terms of outcomes for service users, the benefits of being able to discuss and resolve cases with colleagues was one of the major pluses that staff informed us of during focus groups and meetings. The return of the homeless service from Sentinel HA has also been with minimal disruption to service users.
- 145** The Council has accessed grant funding from central government, and as a result a number of housing-related services, including planning and housing benefits have improved their performance. Both of these areas have an impact on the delivery of affordable housing.
- 146** Performance of the planning service has significantly improved. It has introduced more robust and thorough working methods, and publicity to improve service delivery. This included being more critical of sub-standard plans and the introduction of delegated powers, which enable officers to deal with almost 90 per cent of applications by delegated authority. It introduced website-based services for submitting planning applications in December 2005. It has moved from being in the bottom 25 per cent performers for processing major planning applications in 13 weeks in 2002/03 to the top 50 per cent performers in 2004/05, and has come out of being a planning standards authority (that was previously attributed to its poor performance).
- 147** Progress has been made in delivering improvements in the housing benefit service. The 2004 inspection carried out by the Benefit Fraud Inspectorate (BFI) found that the service was poor. In September 2005 the BFI improvement team found that over 65 per cent of the recommendations of the inspection had been delivered. At March 2006 there were improvements in the following - reduction of a correspondence backlog from 2,000 (April 2005) to 100 (March 2006); new claim turnaround of 25.7 days; change of circumstances turnaround 6.6 days; and 96 per cent of new cases assessed within 14 days.

- 148 There are limited measurable outcomes to demonstrate track record as a result of the CuSP. While there have been some noticeable improvements for service users - the programme is at an early stage. It is focused on building the infrastructure for the Council to improve service delivery rather than delivering measured outcomes. These findings also reflect the findings of the March 2006 Annual Audit and Inspection Letter which stated: *'The Council is not yet able to demonstrate that these new improvements have resulted in significant and sustained service improvement'*. However, some initial access arrangements have been improved as a result of the programme, that include: the new website (January 2006); on line payments for housing benefit overpayments, council tax and parking; and a new telephone system with additional staffing resources (January 2006). The latter has improved the line capacity and resulted in the ability for callers to get through to the switch-board which was a previous area of complaint. There is further capacity for the system to provide performance reports for service areas and extensions. The reporting mechanisms are in the process of being refined for this purpose.
- 149 There has been limited customer involvement in the delivery of the CuSP. The Council has been responsive to findings sought through surveys, for example the high level of dissatisfaction with the telephone system found in the access survey in January 2005 and to previous Audit Commission inspections, in particular the Customer Access inspection in 2005 that found the Council delivered a poor service, with uncertain prospects for improvement. However, service users have not yet been actively involved in the delivery and implementation of the required improvements.
- 150 The Council has been weak in assessing satisfaction of new residents with their new homes. This has been left to the HA partners or private sector developers to undertake their own surveys. While we were informed by partners that this is something they actively do, the Council has only recently requested this information and currently has no information on whether the quality, design, location of new homes is what people want. This prevents them from improving the future delivery of affordable homes in response to new resident feedback.
- 151 The track record in delivering value for money is an area of weakness. While the Council can demonstrate that it provides low cost services, this is not sufficient to demonstrate the services represent good quality and a good use of resources.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 152** Weaknesses significantly outweigh strengths in this area. The Council has strengthened its focus and key aims for service delivery through the introduction of its Corporate Plan, and plans and strategies are generally aligned with one another. However, the Council does not have the full range of mechanisms in place to assist it in delivering its aims. The Council has been slow in developing its approach to performance management, and it remains under-developed. The housing section has attempted to improve its approach to managing performance, through an improved housing strategy and monitoring of the action plan. However, there has been a lack of benchmarking and development of performance indicators, and plans are not consistently SMART. This prevents the Council from sufficiently measuring outcomes and the impact of its plans.
- 153** There has been some strengthening in the strategic approach of the Council. Its corporate aims and ambition are now clearer through the introduction of the Corporate Plan in 2006. The plan sets out the Council's ambition to deliver excellence and the five themed areas of the Council, one being the delivery of affordable homes. The plan was developed following the former new Leader taking up his seat in May 2005 and it provides a clear focus on the priorities of the Council. Members and officers that we met were clear on the aims of the Council and the need to prioritise the areas that the Council had chosen to be excellent in rather than trying to achieve everything, and following local elections in May 2006 the new leader of the Council has given a commitment to continue this work.
- 154** There are a number of plans in place which address affordable housing issues and guide the day-to-day management of housing services. These include:
- the housing strategy 2005/08 and related action plan;
 - the homelessness strategy 2003/08, strategy review in 2006 and related action plan; and
 - service plans for housing, regulatory and planning service for 2006/07 (that include a SWOT²⁴ analysis, how the four Cs of best value²⁵ have overall been applied to the service plan, related local and key performance indicators, progress on the previous year's action plan and resource provision for the service).
- 155** However, there are some key strategies that are missing or not sufficiently up-to-date, including:
- an out-of-date private sector renewal strategy, and an associated absent empty homes strategy; and
 - absent strategies for key minority groups.

²⁴ SWOT - strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

²⁵ Four Cs - to compare, consult, compete and challenge service provision and the way in which the organisation provides services in order to meet the requirements of best value.

- 156 The quality of strategies and plans vary. The housing strategy action plan is an improvement on former plans, but they still do not consistently incorporate SMART targets. Many targets relate to the need for further strategies or the development of areas before service users will benefit from the action. For example:
- both the housing and homelessness strategy (review) include an action to identify the housing and homelessness issues for young people and improve the provision and housing options. However, neither strategy has a target that indicates how the success of these actions will be measured; and
 - both the housing strategy and regulatory services plan for 2006/09 strategy include the action to implement a HHSRS by April 2006. There is no specific target as to how the success of this action will be measured, in particular the level of properties that will be targeted in the implementation, and there is no reference to the findings of the 2004 house condition survey of 2.5 per cent (or 870 dwellings) that may fail the system.
- 157 Similarly, the inclusion of risk management varies between strategies and action plans. The action plan for the housing strategy details a potential risk against actions, although they are not rated or prioritised. The action plan for the homelessness strategy (review) does not include any reference to risk. Whereas the most recently developed service plans for 2006/07 have a comprehensive assessment of key risks that include the level, likelihood and impact.
- 158 There is a framework in place for monitoring strategies and service plans however, as already referred to in previous sections actions have not always been delivered on time. For example, the housing strategy action plan is monitored monthly by the housing improvement plan group, a group of officers from across the Council who were also preparing for the inspection. The previous section on track record outlined some of the actions that have not been achieved within timeframe. There is currently no external representative on this group and although the Council is considering the extension to include a HA and health representative, the group has lacked external challenge during its time.
- 159 Performance management is an area of significant weakness for the Council. While the Council recognise that this is an area for improvement it has been considerably slow in progressing its performance management framework since the 2004 CPA. For example:
- it has made a conscious effort to introduce member challenge within the Council on performance, with the leader of the opposition as the chair of the scrutiny panel and the independent member is on the cabinet. However, there is limited evidence to support that these panels have made a difference to performance and outcomes for service users;

- a new performance and development review process was introduced in March 2006, with an aim to strengthen individual objective setting that is linked to the corporate objectives of the Council. However, this has only just been introduced and the impact of the system will only be seen upon review of the objectives (that were in the process of being set during the on-site inspection period);
 - a performance board has only just been established, and had its initial meeting just before the on-site period of the inspection; and
 - a further paper is to be submitted to cabinet in May on the way forward for performance reporting and management that will include an alignment of performance indicators to the five themes of the Corporate Plan. This will result in all performance indicators impacting on the delivery of affordable homes being reported and monitored under one heading.
- 160** Therefore, the Council's performance management framework is not yet sufficiently in place, or robust enough to challenge performance. These include that the reports to scrutiny have only contained exception reporting, there has been no themed groups of performance indicators, comments from portfolio holders or recommended actions; and there has been limited development of local performance indicators, and current local housing performance indicators mainly focus on homelessness and the Careline. Therefore while the Council may have improved its strategic framework through having more focused strategies and plans, it does not yet have the mechanisms in place to manage and deliver them due to the weaknesses in the performance management framework.
- 161** Similarly, the Council has been open to learning from its peers, but its experiences have not yet been translated into performance outcomes and service delivery improvements. It attends the Hampshire policy and performance review network and has worked closely with Hampshire County Council that has a similar performance management framework that it is aiming to adopt. The profile of performance monitoring is also being raised internally through the display of key performance indicators on internal notice boards. However, the Council has lacked drive and been slow to improve its approach to performance management, and while it is now starting to implement changes there is no significant impact as a result. Furthermore, the pace of change is uncertain, especially when considering how long it has taken the Council to get to this stage, when many of its peers were at this level some years ago.
- 162** Communication generally works well within the Council. The Chief Executive's weekly briefing to staff provides an informative update of activities and progress on major projects in different departments across the Council. The staff we met felt well informed about the direction of the Council and their involvement and inclusion in its progression.

- 163 Benchmarking is limited and not used effectively by the Council. The services associated with delivering affordable housing are not members of any benchmarking clubs. The housing service has started to collect data from the ODPM website on its family group to compare performance. However, this information has not yet been used to develop or target areas of weakness. The absence of meaningful benchmarking data and consistent comparisons with other providers prevents the Council from establishing that it is achieving efficiency and value for money in the delivery of its services.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 164 Weaknesses outweigh strengths in this area. The capacity of the housing service has improved following the return of the housing advice, register and homeless service, and increased investment by the Council. However, the Council is currently in a very vulnerable financial situation with poor financial management, monitoring and expenditure. This impacts on the Council's ability to support and drive through the capacity improvements required to deliver the affordable housing service. There is also a need to implement a number of improvements to build the capacity of the service - these include a new housing IT service, recruitment of staff and consistent training for officers and members.
- 165 The Council's managerial leadership has undergone a number of changes. Prior to the permanent Chief Executive who resigned in January 2006, there were two interim placements. During a period of maternity leave and since the resignation of the Chief Executive, the post was covered by the two Corporate Directors on a rotating basis. One of the Corporate Directors is now serving as the interim Chief Executive for six months, and the post is to be advertised for permanently in the Summer 2006. The vacant Corporate Director's post has not been recruited to and currently 3 out of 12 of the heads of service are covered by interim consultants (regulatory services, revenues and benefits and finance). This has provided an element of instability within the Council and its corporate capacity to drive and sustain improvements.
- 166 There has been a corporate commitment to improve capacity and performance within the Council, although unlike the previous section these have taken time to implement and are somewhat behind the rest of the sector. A leadership development programme for heads of service was developed in 2005 that concentrated on the strategic direction of the Council, and this is now being rolled out to third tier managers. A management manual is in the process of being developed that will cover all aspects of management. Staff were having their objectives set for the 2006/07 year while we were on-site, under the new performance and development review process. Officers considered that the improvements seen within the planning service attributed to staff investment and a cultural shift within the Council that focused on target setting and performance.

- 167** There is limited capacity within the Council. As mentioned in previous sections there have been various objectives that the Council has not delivered, and we were often informed that this was due to capacity issues and other areas taking priority. For example, corporate and service area commitment to delivering the equalities and diversity action plan and equalities impact assessments, the development of strategies for key minority groups and a strategic approach to private sector housing. Although plans identify the need to address most of these outstanding requirements, it is not certain that the Council has the overall capacity to deliver and sustain them. For example, the Council proposes to make one of the two principal officers within regulatory services responsible for the strategic direction of the service that will cover private sector housing. However, the team itself will remain limited in numbers with only one environmental health officer working solely on private sector housing, while a technical officer is undergoing training. This restricts the team to deliver both operational (statutorily required activities) and additional proactive work within the field of private sector housing. The limits in the Council's capacity makes it one of a reactive nature, rather than being proactive to challenges and service improvements.
- 168** Training is not consistently provided and received by members and officers. Officers receive a range of training and have been able to raise their training needs as part of the performance and review process, with some undertaking externally recognised training. However, there are some key service areas where training has been very weak. For example attendance at equalities and diversity training was low among members (eight attended) and general staff (62 per cent attended); there has been some reluctance for members to attend planning training, and although this provision is voluntary there have been some members that sit on the planning committee who have not received training; and there has been no specific value for money training other than budgetary training for managers. These are key areas of performance and the absence of training suggests that members and officers are not sufficiently knowledgeable to deliver the requirements to improve performance in these areas, and to challenge or make tough decisions particularly in relation to planning decisions that could result in a slow planning process and inefficiencies.

- 169** There has been some reliance on consultants to deliver specific and major projects. This includes project and programme managing the CuSP, the first phase of the LDF (although the consultants are currently in the first of a three year contract), the first changes to the Local Plan and some work on major planning applications such as Dilley Lane, Clarks Farm and the Queen Elizabeth barracks site (including ecology, legal and the section 106 framework). While the use of consultants does enable the Council to bring in areas of expertise when required, and officers are involved to various degrees in the development of the projects.²⁶ The use of consultants means that the Council's own staff do not gain the skills and knowledge of dealing and managing large and complex projects, and again it prevents the Council from developing and sustaining capacity within these areas. Coupled with the lack of training for members in planning this affects the Council's ability to deal with larger based projects and may impact on decision making on difficult planning issues.
- 170** The profile and capacity of the housing service has increased since the last inspection. It now has its own service under a Head of Housing, and the return of the housing advice, register and homeless service has further increased the profile among members and officers. To accommodate these changes the Council has increased the budget for housing from £344,100 (2005/06) to £433,500 (2006/07). The return of the service has also started to see improved levels of communication between the housing section and closely related services, for example environmental health, housing benefit and planning.
- 171** There have been some difficulties in recruiting staff. One of the concerns raised by current staff was the high cost in property prices within the district of Hart that prevent candidates from considering Hart as a place to live and work. The Council is currently under-taking a corporate pay and grade review. Benchmarking has found a few anomalies with pay in comparison to other local authorities. The Council plans to use this to inform the review process that will be implemented in January 2007. In response to the return of the homeless service an additional full-time post was created in the team, although only one candidate applied for the post in autumn 2005. The post has been filled on a temporary basis but not with the full range of duties covered. The recruitment process will commence again in spring 2006, and if recruited to will provide more opportunity for the strategy and development team to focus on key areas for development. Particularly as the capacity of the housing section has previously prevented the delivery of certain projects, for example review of the homelessness strategy.
- 172** Sickness absence levels for the Council have been below government sector averages. In 2005/06 they were 7.5 days (up to December 2005), and in 2004/05 they were 7.7 days against the average of 9.6 days. Staff that we met were generally satisfied with their jobs and felt able to contribute to the direction of the Council, and had an understanding of the Council's vision.

²⁶ For example, an officer has taken the role of project manager for each project of the CuSP, and is supported by the consultant who is the programme director.

- 173** Further customer-focused improvements are underway. A corporate contact centre is to be introduced in May 2006, with a CRM system. This will initially be piloted in the waste service to correspond with the challenging changes to the refuse collection service (that will change to an alternate week domestic and recycling collection service from October 2006). With a view to expanding the service to further service areas in 2006/07, following a review of the pilot and need to re-engineer the planned service areas for the CRM system. The CRM system is also envisaged to provide the Council with the framework required to monitor the corporate standards that are to be formally introduced in April 2006.
- 174** There are developments proposed and underway for the delivery of joint services. The relocation of the housing service onto the ground floor of the Civic Office in April 2006 with a designated Housing Benefit Officer is aimed at delivering a more coherent service to the public. Discussions are taking place regarding the future use of the Hart neighbourhood centre for housing surgeries, in order to provide services more locally in Hook.
- 175** Responsibility for delivering affordable homes is coherent at portfolio holder level. The portfolio holder for housing is also the portfolio holder for the private sector and housing benefit services. Officers were positive about her knowledge and involvement in these areas, and felt supported by her in their roles to deliver the service. Currently, there is not member involvement in the joint meetings between housing and the planning services, although there is a desire to address this after the May 2006 elections.
- 176** Financial management within the Council is very poor. There is a lack of financial tools, procedures and monitoring to deliver a comprehensive financial management service. The current financial IT management system does not have a commitment tool, nor is there a commitment register to record and monitor committed expenditure. The Council's financial accounts for 2004/05 were approved more than nine months after the July 2005 deadline. And while the IT system needs to be replaced by October 2006 (due to the expiry of its licence) the procurement process did not get underway until after the on-site inspection work had been completed.
- 177** The Council's financial position is unstable. Its revenue reserves have reduced over the past two years from £1.9 million at the end of March 2005, to an estimated £1.131 million at the end of March 2006 and projected £665,000 at March 2007.²⁷ If the projections are correct this means that the Council's reserves will be at a bare minimum in March 2007 - a level that poses considerable financial risk. Due to the unreliability of the Council's financial systems the full extent of the Council's position will not be known until further work has been carried out. The interim head of service for finance is leading on this work, and we were further informed at the beginning of June 2006 that the accounts for 2004/05 and 2005/06 would be presented to the staff and general purposes committee on the 27 June 2006. The accounts have subsequently been approved.

²⁷ Report to Cabinet on the 6 April 2006 - Projections made on the assumption that £323,000 of salaries are capitalised in the 2004/05 accounts and accepted by the Council's external auditor.

- 178 The impact of the Council's financial position on its ability to deliver the housing and affordable homes service is unclear. As earlier indicated there has been additional funding committed to housing for 2006/07, following the return of the housing advice, register and homeless service. Given the current financial climate of the Council it is by no means certain that these resource commitments will be honoured, and this will inevitably have an impact on the capacity of the housing section to deliver the affordable housing service. There have already been two freezes imposed on new or uncommitted items in 2006, in January and March 2006 due to concerns on the financial status of the Council. This has not affected the delivery of any statutory services or the cancellation of committed orders, but it does reflect the Council's difficulties.
- 179 Current and future IT capacity is mixed. Current developments with the CRM system assist in putting in place the infrastructure for the Council to provide comprehensive customer contact. The Council has made use of external funding of £138,000 from the department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and is introducing a document image processing (DIP) and workflow system in the revenues and benefits service in May 2006. It has been purchased with the opportunity to expand its use to other service areas, under a corporate licence. Investment into the planning service's IT has helped to improve performance, however, as mentioned earlier there are some significant weaknesses in existing IT, for example in the finance service where procurement for a new system has not yet started.
- 180 The housing IT system for the register and homeless service is to be replaced. It needs to be replaced by July 2006 and while the Council has positively worked with Rushmoor Council in the joint procurement of the system and made financial savings (referred to under the section on Value for money). There is much to do to accommodate the new system, for example data cleansing. Funding approval for the system was only approved by the Cabinet in April 2006, and the system has to be replaced by July 2006.
- 181 The Council aims to work effectively with partners and other agencies to improve areas of weakness. It worked positively with the Audit Commission in the development of its housing strategy, and this contributed to the achievement of 'fit for purpose' rating. There is further work planned with the Audit Commission to develop the Council's approach to diversity and increasing its Equality Standards level.
- 182 There are joint working arrangements and partnerships in place that provide local and regional benefits. The Council has worked with neighbouring authorities on the development of a choice-based lettings scheme, its response to English Nature on the SPA and training with Rushmoor on the LDF. Much of this work is still ongoing and aims to develop and drive the capacity of Hart and its partners in delivering affordable homes. The Council is currently working with Basingstoke and Deane Borough Council to develop joint delivery of building control, although the target date of April 2006 for implementation has slipped and a new timeframe has not yet been established. It also plans to hold a joint training event in June 2006 that will be open to the district council's on the registration of planning applications to drive consistent standards across the county.

Summary

- 183** We have judged that the Council has uncertain prospects for improvement. While there are some real strengths in the Council's track record of delivering affordable homes during the past three years and improved performance in the homeless, planning and housing benefit service, the Council has been slow to implement improvements, recommendations from earlier inspections and to deliver many of its own objectives. This has in part been affected by the lack of capacity within the housing and regulatory services sections in terms of numbers of staff, managerial stability and skills and experience.
- 184** Although there are clear indications that the Council is beginning to address its weaknesses, the financial position, the lack of effective performance management arrangements and challenges in the capacity of the organisation mean that there are uncertain prospects for improvement.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

- 1 There are a number of statutory performance indicators which are relevant to the issue of affordable housing. Details of performance are shown below.

| Best value performance indicator (BVPI) | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06²⁸ | Best 25 per cent of council's (2004/05) |
|---|----------------|----------------|-----------------------------|--|
| BVPI 62 - Percentage of unfit private sector dwellings made fit or demolished as a direct result of action by the local authority | 1.33% | 0.30% | Deleted | 4.69% |
| BVPI 64 - Number of private sector dwellings that are returned into occupation or demolished as a direct result of Council intervention | 0% | 0% | 0% | NA |
| BVPI 106 - New homes on previously developed land | 22.7% | 44% | TBC | 94% |
| BVPI 183a - Average length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation | 5 weeks | 6 weeks | TBC | 1 week |
| BVPI 183b - Average length of stay in hostel accommodation | 41 weeks | 0 weeks | TBC | 0 weeks |
| BVPI 203 - Percentage change in the average number of families place in temporary accommodation under homelessness legislation compared to previous years | NA | -10.34% | TBC | - 6.94% |
| BVPI 213 - Number of households who considered | | | (141 cases) | Introduced in 2005/06. |

²⁸ Performance at quarter 3 of 2005/06

| Best value performance indicator (BVPI) | 2003/04 | 2004/05 | 2005/06²⁸ | Best 25 per cent of council's (2004/05) |
|---|----------------|----------------|-----------------------------|--|
| themselves as homeless and for whom housing advice casework intervention resolved their situation | | | | |
| BV214 - Proportion of repeat households accepted as statutorily homeless within a two-year period | | | TBC | Introduced in 2005/06. |
| BVPI 109a - Planning applications: major applications determined within 13 weeks | 58% | 57.69% | 69% | 68.9% |

Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included the following.
 - The Council's Affordable Housing Self-Assessment
 - The Community Strategy for Hart 2005/16
 - Corporate Plan 2006 and Beyond
 - Housing Needs Strategy 2005/08 and action plan
 - Homelessness Strategy 2003/08 and review 2006 and action plan
 - Housing Needs Survey 2003 and 2005 (update)
 - Home Energy Conservation Strategy
 - Private Sector Housing Renewal Policy (undated but before 2004)
 - House Condition Survey 2004
 - Local Plan 1996/2006
 - Best Value Performance Plan 2005/06
 - Corporate and housing service standards
 - Equalities and diversity reports
 - Performance reports
 - Service plans

Appendix 3 – Interviews

- 1 We interviewed a wide range of people involved in the delivery of affordable housing in Hart. This included councillors and officers, staff involved in housing strategy, planning and private sector housing. We also met with some external partners including representatives from Hampshire County Council, registered social landlords, housing developers, and Fleet and District Citizens' Advice Bureau.
- 2 We also visited a number of completed affordable housing sites.