

# **Strategic Housing Services**

**East Lindsey 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](http://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.

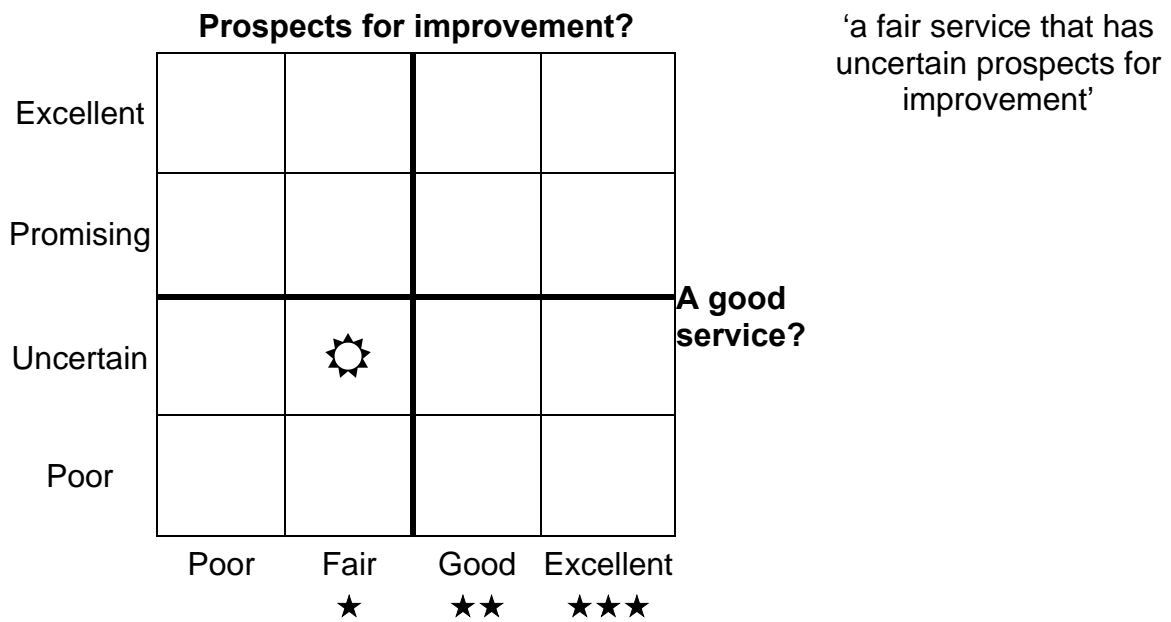
## Summary

- 1 East Lindsey District Council is in Lincolnshire. The population of the district is 130,500 rising to 240,000 in the peak holiday season. The district is largely rural, with only 8 communities having a population of over 3,000; the largest, Skegness, has a population of less than 18,000. The main centres of population are the towns of Louth, Mablethorpe, Skegness, Horncastle, Spilsby and Manby.
- 2 Figures from the 2001 census show that less than two per cent of the district's population are from minority ethnic communities.
- 3 The Council is under no overall control. The largest group being the '95 group' with 24 of the 60 seats. There is an Executive Board, an Overview Committee, two Scrutiny Committees and seven Area Committees.
- 4 The Council employs 560 staff across all services, plus 150 seasonal staff.
- 5 Estimated revenue expenditure on strategic housing service in 2005/06 was £2.7 million and capital expenditure on grants and affordable housing £1.75 million.
- 6 The inspection of the strategic housing service covered the housing services which have remained with the Council since the transfer of its housing stock in 1999; these include strategy and enabling, homelessness and housing needs and private sector housing. The inspection also covered the cross-cutting issues of access and customer care, diversity and value for money and prospects for improvement.

## Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed East Lindsey 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 chart<sup>1</sup>**



Source: Audit Commission

<sup>1</sup> 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.

8 We assessed the service as being fair because:

- ELDC is successfully enabling significant numbers of affordable homes to be built, in partnership with social landlords and a range of other options are provided to assist people to access affordable housing;
- there is a good range of service information provided for customers and both paper and web based information is of good quality and user friendly; Customer Service Centres provide a welcoming and generally well-equipped environment for customers;
- Disabled Facilities Grants are enabling an increased number of residents to remain in their homes, living more independently with a better quality of life;
- the Council has an effective approach to improving and promoting energy efficiency; and
- effective use has been made of Supporting People funding to provide floating support for a range of vulnerable residents and a supportive approach is provided for victims of domestic violence.

9 However:

- the Council's approach to diversity is underdeveloped, it is not fulfilling its community leadership role to effectively promote community cohesion, ensuring that its strategic housing services are provided without discrimination and meeting the needs of diverse groups;
- a number of practices in the housing advice and homelessness service are not sufficiently customer-focused and do not support the Council's aim of homelessness prevention;
- service standards do not cover all housing services, customer feedback is not sought across the service and complaints are not effectively handled;
- there are weaknesses in the Council's approach to improving conditions in the private sector and its strategy for dealing with empty homes is unclear; and
- ELDC's approach to value for money is new and is not embedded across the service; costs are not known for all parts of the service and value for money is not routinely considered as part service decisions and performance monitoring.

10 We assessed the Council's prospects for improvement as uncertain because:

- it has a reasonable track record of making service improvements in strategic housing services over the last three years, many of which directly benefit more vulnerable customers;
- it has a clear service plan and housing strategy, developed using robust processes, which together outline a clear direction for the service;
- a clear performance framework is in place, which enables the Council to effectively track progress in priority areas, identify any problems in performance as they occur and to agree timely action to address them;
- key priorities are being supported with appropriate resources, for example, through the Housing Capital Grant Programme and the Disabled Facilities Grant budget; and
- significant investment has been and continues to be made in increasing the Council's management and leadership capacity.

11 However:

- there has been slow progress in the Council's action on diversity, a track record of service improvements is not evident in some areas of private sector housing. Choice for housing applicants and development of a common housing register have not been progressed;
- there are weaknesses and inconsistencies in operational performance management and benchmarking is underdeveloped;
- it is not yet fully making the most of IT to improve operational and performance management and to reduce duplication of work;
- customer feedback is not effectively co-ordinated and there are weaknesses in the way the Council captures, applies and shares learning;
- there are still some issues of staff capacity and management capacity; and
- it is not yet clear that the current value for money strategy and monitoring framework will effectively drive improvements.

## Recommendations

- 12 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>2</sup> 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 Strengthen the approach to diversity by:*

- *carrying out equality impact assessments for all housing services and following these up with appropriate action;*
- *ensuring that activity and performance recording and customer surveys include the collection and analysis of appropriate diversity information;*
- *developing a clear approach and procedures for dealing with race and other hate crime and harassment, supported by staff training and appropriate publicity;*
- *carrying out research, as planned, into the needs of hard to reach groups, such as gypsies and travellers, about whom the Council has limited information and using this to inform future housing services; and*
- *providing comprehensive diversity training for councillors and staff that is reinforced by clear individual action plans to ensure a full understanding of the issues is embedded across the organisation.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- demonstration of community leadership and the ability to demonstrate that services are being provided equitably, sensitively and without discrimination;
- a better understanding of the barriers which may prevent some groups from accessing services;
- compliance with legislation and good practice; and
- development of services and housing that meet the needs of all sectors of the community and staff who are better equipped to respond to diverse needs.

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

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

**Recommendation**

*R2 Strengthening customer focus and the use of customer feedback by:*

- *developing clear service standards for private sector housing functions in consultation with service users and stakeholders;*
- *establishing clear and co-ordinated systems to gather regular feedback from customers across all housing services and using this to inform future service development;*
- *addressing confidentiality and access issues in the customer service centres; and*
- *fully implementing and embedding the new complaints procedures, ensuring complaints are handled appropriately, learning is effectively captured and used and that customer information about complaints and how they are used is clearly displayed at all customer service centres.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- an improved understanding of customer views about services;
- services which are more clearly tailored to meet customer needs;
- improved facilities for customers at the service centres; and
- improved handling of customer complaints, increased customer satisfaction and more effective use of this and other feedback to improve services.

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

**Recommendation**

*R3 Strengthen the homelessness, housing advice and needs service by:*

- *reviewing and amending procedures and practices for the assessment of homeless applications to address issues highlighted in this report;*
- *ensuring full and correct recording of decisions and prevention;*
- *ensuring that housing advice is offered to all homeless applicants, irrespective of whether the Council accepts a duty towards the applicant;*
- *introducing effective quality assurance processes;*
- *improving support provided to applicants using the rent assist scheme; and*
- *ensuring that a prompt service is provided through the 'Safe at Home' scheme, based on clear risk assessments, to prioritise necessary action.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more effective prevention of homelessness through appropriate advice and assistance that takes account of the vulnerability of applicants;
- consistent and appropriate performance reporting and application of good practice; and
- increased customer satisfaction and more effective resolution of housing needs, particularly for more vulnerable customers.

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

#### ***Recommendation***

*R4 Clarify the strategic approach to private sector housing and address identified service weaknesses and lack of customer focus by:*

- *developing a clear strategy for improving standards in the private sector, including appropriate arrangements for the use and prioritisation of action on HMOs, home renewal grants and greater clarity regarding bringing empty properties back into use;*
- *developing and implementing an effective, risk assessed inspection programme for houses in multiple occupation, including arrangements for appropriate follow-up action; and*
- *introducing clear customer service standards and effective arrangements for obtaining customer feedback about private sector housing services.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- a more focused approach to private sector housing, targeting housing in the poorest conditions with the most vulnerable residents; and
- development of a more customer focussed service with clear service standards.

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

**Recommendation**

*R5 Improve the approach towards value for money:*

- *systematically collecting and analysing the costs of delivering services, including the disaggregation of costs of central support services, identifying how service efficiency can be improved and making necessary changes to achieve this;*
- *comparing the cost and quality of services with others, ensuring that customer views about value for money and quality are taken into account;*
- *clarifying the value for money strategy, including key principles the Council intends to follow to achieve efficiency gains; and*
- *ensuring that staff are effectively briefed on the Council's value for money strategy, setting clear efficiency targets in all service areas and tracking progress against these.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- more effective and efficient use of resources;
- the delivery of demonstratively effective, value for money services which provide a balance of cost and quality; and
- embedding of the principles of value for money across the organisation and ensuring that it is an integral consideration in all policy and service decisions.

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

**Recommendation**

*R6 Strengthen performance management by:*

- *ensuring that existing IT systems are used to their full potential to enable effective performance management and reporting; and*
- *setting clear performance indicators and associated targets in those service areas where they do not currently exist, taking account of customer priorities and the performance of comparable providers.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- an increased ability to identify and tackle weak performance;
- release of resources to provide and improved services;
- a clearer focus on performance relating to customer service; and
- more efficient measurement of progress against priorities.

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

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

Dates of inspection: 8 to 12 May 2006

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# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 14 East Lindsey District Council is in Lincolnshire. The population of the district is 130,500 rising to 240,000 in the peak holiday season.
- 15 The district is largely rural; 91 per cent of communities have a population of fewer than 1,000 and only 8 communities have a population of over 3,000. The main centres of population are in the towns of Louth, Mablethorpe, Skegness, Horncastle, Spilsby and Manby; the largest of these, Skegness, has a population of less than 18,000<sup>3</sup>.
- 16 Less than 2 per cent of the district's population are from minority ethnic communities.
- 17 There are areas of deprivation in the district; East Lindsey is in the bottom 25 per cent of district councils based on the Government's Index of Multiple Deprivation and a significant proportion of residents live in wards in the worst 10 per cent nationally. There are high levels of seasonal employment and a high proportion of households reliant on benefits and low incomes.

### The Council

- 18 The Council is currently under no overall control. The largest party is the '95 group', which hold 24 of the 60 seats.
- 19 Decision-making structures include an Executive Board, made up of the Leader and eight other councillors appointed by the Council, an Overview Committee and two Scrutiny Committees. There are also seven area committees.
- 20 East Lindsey District Council employs 560 staff (plus 150 seasonal staff).
- 21 Estimated revenue expenditure on strategic housing service in 2005/06 was £2.7 million and capital expenditure on grants and affordable housing totalled £1.75 million.

### The service

- 22 The inspection of the strategic housing service covered the housing services which have remained with the Council since the transfer of its housing stock in 1999 to Linx Homes, now New Linx, part of the Eastern Shires Housing Group. The inspection covered strategy and enabling, homelessness and housing needs and private sector housing. It also included the cross-cutting issues of access and customer care, diversity and value for money and prospects for improvement.

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<sup>3</sup> Based on 2001 Census information.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

#### Aims and objectives

- 23 East Lindsey District Council's five key aims include explicit reference to housing, one of the aims being to 'promote and develop decent and affordable housing'.
- 24 The Corporate Strategy 2004/07 refers to two housing related objectives:
- to prevent homelessness and address the lack of affordable housing; and
  - to improve the quality and accessibility of housing.
- These objectives are also reflected in the Local Strategic Partnership's Community Strategy 2005/08 and are set out in greater detail in the Housing Strategy 2005/10.
- 25 The Housing Service Plan for 2006/07 explains in more detail how these objectives will be achieved:
- maximising the development of affordable housing in the district;
  - providing high quality housing advice;
  - providing housing support for vulnerable people in the district;
  - providing disabled facilities grants for those who have difficulty accessing their own home and using the facilities in it;
  - providing a range of means tested housing grants to address disrepair and improve energy efficiency; and
  - where necessary, enforcing standards in the private sector.

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

### Access and customer care

- 26 Strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. There is a clear corporate commitment to access and customer care and its decisions on this are informed by customer consultation. Customer service centres (CSCs) are welcoming and well equipped and customer calls are handled in an efficient and friendly manner. Published information is of good quality and is user friendly. The website is also used effectively to provide information and access to services. However, complaints are not handled well, interviewing facilities at service centres need to be improved and there are some gaps in service standards.
- 27 There is a clear corporate commitment to providing customer-focused and accessible services. ELDC has invested in a new telephony system to improve call handling, in upgrading its customer service centres and in an improved website. An Access Policy has been developed which publicises how the Council intends to address issues such as physical access to buildings and the production of user friendly information; this enables service users and stakeholders to challenge the Council should it fail to live up to its promises.
- 28 The Council has clearly recognised the context in which it operates – a large area with a dispersed population, where incomes are relatively low, the population is ageing and where the transport network is poor. It is demonstrating a clear customer focus by providing services at a range of locations and making them accessible through a variety of methods. Options are being developed in the light of feedback from residents about office accessibility, opening hours and telephone use, together with research into current and potential use of electronic means of communication. Providing a range of options helps to ensure that all residents can access services at times and in ways that are convenient to them.
- 29 Customers receive a prompt response to telephone calls with staff responding in a polite and helpful manner. ELDC has identified that customers prefer or are most likely to contact it by telephone and has acquired a new telephony system to support this. It regularly monitors call answering; daily performance reports are produced for the customer services manager covering average answer times, abandoned calls, peaks and troughs and issues resolved at the first contact. The target time for answering calls is not ambitious (20 seconds) but the average time taken to answer the main publicised number in 2005/06 was an impressive 4.9 seconds, well within the corporate service standard. The level of abandoned calls is also low (2.4 per cent for 2005/06). This performance suggests that there are appropriate staffing levels in place. There is also evidence that ELDC increases staffing to cope with increases in calls due to specific initiatives or mail-outs. It has a target of dealing with 40 per cent of calls at first point of contact (although this is not currently publicised to customers) and achieved that target in 2005/06. Answering a significant proportion of enquiries at the first point of contact is likely to result in high levels of customer satisfaction and releases other staff to deal with more specialised enquiries.

- 30 Telephone contact arrangements have some weaknesses, for example, although out of hours numbers are displayed on the website and at all service centres, signs at the Skegness office is not visible when external gates are shut. The main out of hours contact number can be accessed through a lo-call facility, however we experienced difficulties contacting the service this way on several occasions. Customers who need services out of hours are already likely to be in a stressful situation; problems with contacting the service will add unnecessary stress.
- 31 ELDC's customer service centres vary in quality; all offer a good range of information, are clean and welcoming and have toilet facilities for the public. The improved offices provide well-equipped and pleasant waiting areas plus free access to the Council's website. There is ramped or level access and automatic doors for easy entry and, as well as other comfortable seating, there are higher chairs in reception for customers with mobility problems. Play equipment for children is provided but it is not always available in the waiting areas.
- 32 However, some service centres do not have these facilities and do not comply with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). For example, the office at Horncastle does not have automatic doors and counters and leaflet racks are too high for wheelchair users; directional signposting to offices could be also be improved. The Council has recognised these weaknesses and is implementing a programme of work to ensure that it meets the necessary standard for all of its buildings; this includes the construction of a replacement, multi-agency office at Mablethorpe. The Council has been slow in implementing plans to do so and decisions are still to be made regarding some of the offices, meaning that some customers will continue to have difficulty accessing these offices for some time.
- 33 The environment in which customers are interviewed varies. For example, whilst the interview rooms at Tedder Hall are spacious and well laid out, with discrete security, they are not adequately sound proofed and detailed conversation from adjoining rooms can be heard clearly which is clearly not appropriate given sensitive and confidential nature of housing interviews. Interview rooms at Spilsby and Horncastle are small and not easily accessible for wheelchair users or adults with pushchairs. Both of these features may deter some customers from seeking advice in these offices or make them feel more uncomfortable doing so.
- 34 Opening hours are relatively traditional (9am to 4pm or 5pm) and the Council does not offer weekend or evening opening, which is not customer focussed. A recent survey showed that 69 per cent of customers found the hours suitable, 9 per cent of respondents found them unsuitable – most of latter wanting longer hours on weekdays rather than weekend opening. The Council plans to carry out more consultation on this issue during 2006/07 as the numbers responding to the original survey were small; any changes will require additional resources and ELDC wants to establish that there is a clear demand for this service. It has already decided that the new Mablethorpe Office will open for extended hours.

- 35 It is positive that regular housing advice surgeries are offered at various CSCs across the district. The times for these are clearly displayed on website where you can also view a map clearly showing location of each CSC. Customers can not get much direct housing information from frontline customer service staff, who only deal with general enquiries and issue application forms. However, the staff are helpful and can make appointments for housing advice interviews or offer the use of the telephone in the office to enable the customer to speak directly to an advisor, which means they do not have to make a return visit.
- 36 Written information for customers is of good quality. There is a wide range of leaflets covering homelessness and advice services, housing grants and information for landlords. Leaflets are attractive and written in plain language, which makes them accessible to customers. They are also clearly numbered and dated, which helps to ensure that up-to-date information is displayed. Housing information is periodically covered in the Council's newspaper, which is delivered to all homes in the district, ensuring that all residents receive essential information, irrespective of whether they visit a customer service centre.
- 37 The Council makes adequate arrangements to ensure that information is accessible to a range of users, although there are some gaps in this provision. The majority of written information is available in range of formats and we were able to obtain taped versions and some in large print immediately. Information is not routinely offered in Braille, a decision is based on advice from local agencies on the demand for this format; ELDC has access to this facility if required. There are signs on display in all CSCs offering interpretation and translation services and the provision of hearing loops, ensuring that customers with hearing impairments or who do not speak or read English also have access to information.
- 38 Some, though by no means all leaflets have straplines offering the leaflet in other languages, the range of languages varies and the straplines do not say what the leaflet is about to enable readers to decide whether or not they require it, which is a weakness. Leaflets have very similar covers, which may make it more difficult for some customers to easily select the one they want. There are also some gaps in information provided, for example, there is no information on racial or homophobic attacks displayed at the service centres and information about domestic violence services is not prominently displayed. This may lead visitors who wish to report incidents with the impression that no appropriate service is provided or that the Council does not take these issues seriously.
- 39 ELDC is making effective use of its website to provide information and access to some services. The website is easy to navigate and users can download a range of documents, including service leaflets and application forms. There is a read aloud function and the facility to increase the font size for people with sight impairments. There are links to a basic website giving information about housing and related subjects to people who do not read English plus a housing options website for people with learning difficulties, giving information in a pictorial or video format, thus ensuring that all users can benefit from access to the site.

- 40 ELDC is taking customer views into account in the development of electronic communication. It has carried out some consultation with Parish Councils, Town Councils and customers regarding use of electronic means of communication; questionnaires were sent to a random number of households in the district, the form was available on the website and the survey was publicised in the local press. Feedback suggested that take up of this method of communication has been slow in some places. However views on the website were positive. The responses from young people were low and this may still be a method of communication and access to services which ELDC could exploit further.
- 41 The Council makes it clear what general level of service customers can expect, which is positive. There are corporate service standards in place, which cover response to letters (response within ten working days), telephones (answer within 20 seconds) and emails (response within 24 hours). The charter also covers conduct of staff and their handling of enquiries (including interpretation, appropriate respect for the customers' needs and culture) but it does not refer to home visits, implying an assumption that customers will contact or visit ELDC.
- 42 It is a weakness that the Council has not involved customers in developing these standards or published performance against them. It has recently produced a short survey form which asks customers what they think of standards and they think they are reasonable, which is positive, but at time of our inspection, feedback from this exercise was too limited to draw any conclusions from it.
- 43 In addition to the corporate charter, there is a housing service charter that includes targets regarding homelessness, housing advice and housing register applications. These standards are displayed on the website, in customer service centres and in temporary accommodation, which is positive. However, the housing charter does not include any reference to private sector services such as grant applications and surveys. Absence of service standards in these areas means that customers are not clear about the service level to expect; this hampers their ability to effectively challenge the service that they receive.
- 44 Involvement of users in shaping services is underdeveloped and the Council does not yet have an effective framework for capturing and using customer feedback, although this is an area where ELDC is improving. There are positive examples where consultation has occurred and where there is evidence of ELDC responding by making changes to services. For example, ELDC carried out some research in 2005/06 into customer views about services received at various offices; the survey revealed high levels of satisfaction with a range of issues including the location and accessibility of CSCs. ELDC's response to issues raised in this survey included putting higher chairs in reception areas for people with mobility difficulties and improving signage at the Louth office. The housing service surveyed residents as part of its strategy consultation process. One survey tested awareness of housing services; this showed limited awareness amongst residents about the housing services that the Council provides and that the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) would be first port of call for advice for many people if they had difficulties in paying their rent or mortgage or had other housing problems. This prompted work to develop publicity on ELDC services and to work with the CAB to promote literature and contact information.

- 45 There are several areas within the housing service where customer feedback is not routinely sought and where service users are not actively involved in service development. For example, little work has been carried out to obtain views of those using the housing grants service. Where satisfaction surveys have been carried out, there is limited or no previous information available against which improvements in satisfaction can be measured. There is also no evidence of customer involvement in developing methods of consultation which will ensure that individuals are consulted in a way that suits them and that ensures that harder to reach groups are effectively involved. Failing to gather this information hampers the Council's ability to identify opportunities for service improvement and to ensure that services are meeting customer needs.
- 46 ELDC does not deal with complaints effectively or in line with its own procedures and the new complaints procedure is not yet effectively publicised. This is particularly disappointing given that complaints handling was an issue picked up during the CPA inspection. We examined a number of complaints and found examples where the response was made outside the target time and also some complaints which were responded to inappropriately. Customers are not asked how they would like to see the complaint resolved, acknowledgement letters are not routinely logged on the system as being sent and it is not always clear from the paperwork how the complaint has been resolved. ELDC also does not currently seek feedback from customers about the way their complaint has been handled, although this is planned. The new policy makes it clear that customers can make a complaint in a variety of ways, including verbally and via the website, but new leaflets explaining the revised process were not obviously available at most of the customer service centres.
- 47 There are some positive features of ELDC's approach to complaints. For example, there is now central co-ordination of complaints and we found evidence of active tracking and of outstanding complaints being chased. New monitoring arrangements also provide for complaints to be analysed by theme, which will enable more effective use of complaints. The new procedure, which also covers compliments and suggestions, is supported by guidance for staff, managers and councillors, which is a helpful way to ensure it is widely understood.
- 48 ELDC is not consistently learning from complaints. Whilst there are some examples, which indicate that acts to remedy the cause of complaints, for instance, by providing additional training for customer services staff following one complaint, there are also examples where it has not recognised the relevant issues and has not done anything to prevent a similar complaint occurring in the future. Failing to learn from complaints can lead to future service failures, increase customer dissatisfaction and deflects staff time from service provision.

## Diversity

- 49 This is an area of significant weakness for the Authority. It has not met all legislative requirements and progress has been slow in developing a corporate approach to the issue. It cannot demonstrate that its services are provided fairly and free from discrimination and it has not effectively involved service users in developing services to meet needs. There are examples which show that the ELDC has responded to meet diverse needs and it is actively working with partners to identify the needs of a variety of client groups. It has made good use of Supporting People funding to provide services for a range of vulnerable clients and has a supportive approach to women who have experience domestic violence. Reasonable provision is made for customers for whom English is not a first language or who have physical or sensory disabilities to enable them to access services, but there are also gaps in this provision.
- 50 Until very recently there has been weak corporate commitment to diversity. Some progress has been made since the issue was identified as an area of weakness in the 2004 CPA; there is now explicit reference to diversity in the Council's values, the Executive Board includes a diversity champion; support is being provided by a diversity consultant and the Council is participating in a group working to develop good practice across the county. However, the lack of progress on the issue to date indicates that diversity has not been a corporate priority and ELDC is not fulfilling its leadership role in ensuring the promotion of community cohesion and elimination of discrimination.
- 51 The Council has been late in meeting a number of legal requirements, for example, the Race Equality Scheme (RES), which should have been in place by 2002, was agreed in 2004. The RES is not written in plain English and the related action plans are not SMART; the scheme has only recently been reviewed and equalities impact assessments have not been undertaken, although this should have been done by March 2005. The Council has not used the RES as a tool to drive action on race equality.
- 52 ELDC has only recently achieved level one of the local government equalities standard, by agreeing a new equality and diversity policy in April 2006 and by establishing a corporate steering group to oversee its implementation. The previous policy was poorly written and did not guide readers as to how they could take action if they felt discriminated against. The housing service has a separate equalities policy statement, but this is limited in scope and there is no clear action plan to guide implementation of the key points. The lack of a clear and comprehensive policy means that officers and members have not had a clear reference point to guide their decisions and service development. It is too early to judge how effectively the new policy is being applied.
- 53 Clear equalities impact assessments, which would help the Council to understand what still needs to be done, have not yet been carried out. Housing team leaders have recently received training on this topic but no assessments have been completed. This means that the housing service has not yet fully examined what barriers there may be to people using its services and it has not fully considered the needs of East Lindsey's diverse communities.

- 54 ELDC has a patchy understanding of the diverse community it serves; this indicates that ELDC does not have a clear and consistent focus on meeting needs of all sectors of the community.
- 55 Where the Council is aware of the needs of more vulnerable groups, it is able to demonstrate that it has responded to meet these needs, for instance, older people with disabilities and greater care needs. The Council has enabled the development of extra care schemes in the district through its Local Authority Social Housing Grant programme and, more recently, has significantly increased investment in Disabled Facilities Grants, in response to identified need, which help many older residents to continue to live independently. However, there remain some gaps in ELDC's approach; for example, it has not yet got a clear hospital discharge protocol in place to assist in re-housing vulnerable residents back into the community.
- 56 ELDC is actively engaged in a range of practitioner groups and some user groups which it is using to inform its future plans and services for vulnerable clients, although these do not cover all potential client needs. Many of these groups were consultees in the development of the Council's housing strategy, the supplement of which includes summary information about known needs and priorities for action for range of groups. The strategy also highlights where ELDC has identified the need for further research. ELDC has contributed to the development of a county-wide young peoples' housing strategy (currently at draft stage), which goes some way to identifying the needs of young people and outlining further work necessary. Some work has also been carried out to map the needs of those with learning disabilities, results showing the need for one and two bedroomed independent and supported units in sustainable locations and for more user-friendly information. Early work is also underway to explore suitable provision for offenders; work with Lincoln prison and the probation service has resulted in the development of a prison leavers' application form and a working protocol, both intended to assist the re-housing process.
- 57 ELDC makes reasonable provision for customers with physical and sensory disabilities within its own buildings, although there are some clear gaps. All CSCs have hearing loops and improved offices have ramped or level access, automatic doors and low level counters. However, the Council has been slow to address the requirements of the DDA and some CSCs are difficult to access. ELDC is now implementing a costed action plan to meet the requirements, carrying out a range of work to its premises, including the main offices used to access the housing service. A disability housing register has just been established, with the intention of enabling applicants to be more effectively matched with adapted properties. This is too new to evaluate, but its usefulness will be compromised by the lack of robust information that the Council holds on adapted stock in the district.
- 58 There are some groups about which ELDC has very limited knowledge, for example, it has no real understanding of housing and service needs of gypsies and travellers. This has been recognised and the Council as a member of the Lincolnshire Housing Forum is participating in the development of a countywide approach, including a needs assessment. The work, which is its very early stages, is partly funded through the Regional Housing Board.

- 59 ELDC has been late in reviewing the needs of black and minority ethnic groups and has not yet developed appropriate arrangements, in partnership with other agencies, for responding to race hate crimes. These are as likely to occur in areas with a small BME population as in more mixed areas; the lack of clear support and publicity about the Council's stance on this issue is a clear weakness. Over the last 18 months, two surveys for black and minority ethnic and migrant workers have been carried out covering access to housing and services but although attempts were made to obtain a good response, liaising with places of worship, households, businesses and the Racial Equality Council, the surveys provided a limited response. ELDC is aware that further work is needed in this area, particularly given the potential for changes in the population's composition.
- 60 On a practical level, the Council makes reasonable provision for customers for whom English is not a first language. For example, there are posters in all offices outlining the availability of translations or interpretation facilities and a range of the service leaflets can be provided in other languages – although these are not immediately available (expected waiting time is three to five days). Procedures for translating documents and for using tele-interpretation services are provided on the Council's intranet, ensuring that staff can provide instant help to customers.
- 61 ELDC is unable to clearly demonstrate that housing services are provided fairly and without discrimination. Within the housing service some diversity information is collected, for example, the ethnicity of homelessness applicants is recorded. However, there is very limited recording in other areas, for example, regarding grant applications. Where recording does take place, there is no evidence of this information being analysed, reported or used to shape the services. This hampers the Council's ability to develop a good understanding of the trends in service use, of who does and does not access its services, whether there is any disproportionate use of enforcement measures and whether it is discriminating in its decisions on housing or grant applications. It also limits its ability to shape services round local context and the needs of the community.
- 62 ELDC has been slow to equip staff and councillors to respond appropriately to issues of diversity, although housing staff are better equipped than most. Corporately there has been limited training for staff and councillors and training has not been mandatory; this reflects the lack of priority and general awareness of the issues and the Council's progress to date. Housing staff, however, have received diversity awareness training as have frontline customer services staff, which is positive. Housing support staff have also had more detailed training on the needs of a range of vulnerable customers, which has assisted them in responding appropriately to a variety of needs. Over the last year housing project work and team meetings have been used to examine a range of diversity issues in more detail; within the housing support team there are some clear outcomes from this work but evidence of clear outcomes in other housing services is limited.

- 63 ELDC has made good use of supporting people funding to provide housing support to a range of vulnerable residents, including a small project in partnership with Longhurst Housing Association for teenage parents. The floating support scheme offers support to up to 155 residents from a range of vulnerable client groups, helping them live independently in the community. The floating support seen during inspection is of a high quality; the service is provided by skilled and professional staff and is highly valued by service users we spoke to. It is also positive that there are a wide range of referral routes for floating support including self referral. Based on the success of the programme the Council has increased resources for floating support from 3 to 11 staff.
- 64 The Council's approach to people fleeing domestic violence is supportive and positive. Its policy is clear and does not place the onus on individuals to prove violence has occurred. The policy is supported by practical arrangements such as the 'Safe at Home' scheme, which enables victims to remain at home by providing extra security measures rather than requiring them to seek emergency accommodation and claim homelessness. This has obvious benefits for the individual, meaning they do not have the upheaval of losing their home as well as trauma of the domestic violence.
- 65 However, there are some weaknesses in the implementation of the scheme, for example, some unreasonable delays in fitting security measures, no use of a safe room, the fact that floating housing support is not routinely offered and the lack of clear risk assessments to determine appropriate action. These detract from the other positive features of the scheme.
- 66 There has been limited input into service development by service users from diverse groups and very limited attempts to encourage and facilitate this. Some examples exist, such as involvement of a physical disability user group in making suggestions for future new development, but even this is at very early stage, whilst the development programme has been running for several years. There has also been some service user involvement through homelessness focus group, where customer views on proposed service standards were discussed and through a recent survey of those who have used the Council's services following domestic violence. However, these examples are relatively isolated and there are some obvious gaps, for example, there has been no user input into DFG service. This is illustrative of an organisation in which user involvement and consideration of diversity are not yet an integral part of all activities.
- 67 Engagement with partners to develop work on equality and diversity is a relatively recent feature and is underdeveloped. There are some examples of outcomes which benefit service users from this joint working, for example, the development of pictorial service leaflets for people with learning disabilities, but these are relatively isolated examples and have only recently been implemented.
- 68 More recently, the Council has identified areas of best practice elsewhere and has actively sought out useful examples and adapted them for its own use, for example, working with Sheffield City Council to develop a cultural awareness handbook for staff and members.

## Strategy and enabling

- 69 This is an area of strength for the Council. There is a clear housing strategy which has been supported by appropriate resources and which has delivered significant numbers of affordable homes. ELDC has clear information on housing needs, including those of a range of vulnerable groups, although there are some gaps. Good use is made of the planning system to deliver affordable housing and guidance is clear about priority areas for development and the appropriate mix of social housing with other homes. The Council has consolidated its RSL partnerships and is achieving value for money in its enabling. There is effective monitoring of the development programme and other strategy objectives. Weaknesses lie in some areas of need assessments for vulnerable groups and in customer involvement in the delivery of the strategy.
- 70 ELDC has a clear housing strategy in place that has been assessed as 'Fit for Purpose' by the regional government office. The strategy provides a clear overview of the housing situation in the district and shows a good understanding of local needs. It makes explicit links with other Council strategies and priorities and with relevant county, regional and national strategies. Having a good quality strategy ensures that housing services have a framework to operate within and gives partners a clear understanding of the Council's intended direction.
- 71 There has been effective and wide ranging consultation with the community, stakeholders and partners during the development of the housing strategy. The Council acknowledges that some consultation could have usefully taken place earlier in the process and will address this when the strategy is next reviewed.
- 72 ELDC has actively promoted its housing strategy. Once produced, the strategy was circulated to a wide range of partners and stakeholders. It was also issued to local libraries and summaries were provided to doctors' surgeries and post offices with requests to make them easily accessible to the public. The strategy was publicised through the local press and is available on the Council's website. Wide publicity helps to ensure that the Council's aims and priorities are understood; this can also help facilitate achievement of its housing objectives.
- 73 ELDC has good baseline data on housing stock condition and housing needs and is currently updating this. The survey work for the new housing needs assessment had just been completed at the time of our inspection, with draft results due in June 2006. Prior to the current assessment, a housing needs survey was carried out in 1999 which was updated in 2003. Having clear housing needs data provides a sound base on which to develop the strategy and helps to ensure that proposed solutions are sustainable, meeting both immediate needs and the housing aspirations of new households.
- 74 As well as the district wide survey, a number of parish needs surveys have been carried out to establish needs in specific locations areas and to support plans for development. For example, the ten-unit LASHG funded scheme completed in Eastville in 2004 was developed following a local housing needs study, carried out by the Rural Housing Enabler (RHE), supplemented by housing register information. This assisted in developing plans for the scheme and consultation with the Housing Association, parish council and the local community.

- 75 ELDC uses regularly updated information from its housing register and about the housing market to inform planning and development decisions. It demonstrates clear awareness of fact it is working in a rapidly changing housing market; regular housing monitoring reports include information on changes in property prices and rental costs and comparisons with county, regional and national figures. Until a few years ago, the local market did not require large scale intervention to ensure the provision of sufficient affordable housing. However, house prices have increased substantially in the last few years and Right to Buy sales from the transferred housing stock continue to eat into the supply of social rented housing. Keeping abreast of changes in supply and demand helps to ensure that the Council's strategy remains responsive to changing conditions.
- 76 Housing needs of more vulnerable groups are also assessed, though there are some weaknesses in this, which ELDC acknowledges. It is engaged with a range of stakeholder and user groups for a number of key need groups. Information obtained from them has been fed into the housing strategy, which includes a special needs supplement. This outlines current assessments of the housing needs of specific groups, the relative priority these have been given in county and regional strategies, what ELDC is currently doing and what it plans to do. Actions, which in some cases include additional needs assessments research, are given clear time deadlines. ELDC is also actively engaged with other housing organisations and councils in the county to draw up strategies for specific groups, for example the countywide homelessness strategy and the young people's housing strategy, which is currently at draft stage.
- 77 ELDC is aware that it does not have a good understanding of some groups. It has recently embarked on a project with neighbouring authorities to explore the housing needs of gypsies and travellers and to develop joint solutions to meet these needs. It is also aware of the high levels of homelessness presentations from problematic drug and alcohol users but also that further research is needed regarding these groups and HIV/AIDS sufferers, for whom there is currently no specialist provision in the district.
- 78 ELDC's housing strategy and approach to enabling has been successful in delivering significant affordable housing in the district. Between 1999 and 2006, 638 affordable housing units have been provided through the Local Authority Social Housing Grant (LASHG programme), rising to 712 when Housing Corporation ADP/AHP grant funding is taken into account. ELDC, together with its RSL partners, has secured a good level of funding from the national affordable housing programme (AHP) for 2006/08 receiving an allocation of £5,982,762 compared with £3,913,594 for 2004/06, which will enable the development of a higher number of much needed affordable homes.
- 79 ELDC's development programme has included appropriate provision for a number of vulnerable client groups (182 units since 2000/01). There is also a target within the housing strategy that a minimum of 5 per cent of the overall programme will be used to provide housing suitable for wheelchair users.

- 80 There is a clear corporate commitment to affordable housing and ELDC is providing significant resources to support the programme. It has agreed a Housing Capital Programme (HCP) of £4 million for four years, following on from its sizable LASHG programme. To help to deliver this, it has agreed a new partnership arrangement with Eastern Shires Housing Group, which will result in the development of 200 affordable homes. In addition, the Council contributes approximately £5,000 per year to support the rural housing enabler project (out of the total annual cost of around £35,000). The enabler carries out a valuable liaison role between all parties involved in rural development proposals, ensuring that community concerns are considered along with development priorities.
- 81 On the whole, ELDC has a 'joined up' corporate approach to housing, although there is still room for improvement. Officers and members demonstrate a clear understanding of the links between economic and social development and affordable housing and the effect of affordable housing on the Council's wider ambitions. Planning and housing are combined responsibilities of a single portfolio holder at councillor level, which helps to ensure a co-ordinated approach to development, and there is evidence of good co-operation between housing and planning officers with both being involved in the programme delivery group at which progress is monitored and issues discussed. Both ELDC and partners identify that improvements in this area can still be made, but acknowledge that co-ordination has improved, helping to minimise delays and abortive work.
- 82 Good use is made of the planning system to deliver affordable housing, helping to maximise the availability of affordable housing for those in need. Supplementary planning guidance is in place and in 2005 this was revised to increase the percentage requirement for affordable housing on new developments from 15 per cent to 30 per cent in towns and the main villages. The requirements are related to clear and regularly updated information drawn from the housing register; this will be reviewed in light of the new housing needs survey data.
- 83 The strategy and planning guidance provide clear information about the priority for development in the larger settlements and also the circumstances in which it will be considered elsewhere. The guidance also clearly outlines ELDC's preference for pepper-potting, ensuring that new social housing is mixed with other tenures so as to minimise potential exclusion and stigmatisation.
- 84 ELDC is securing quality in the design of new homes through the requirement to produce concept statements at pre-planning application stage. The new partnership agreement with Eastern Shires also requires new homes to be developed above Scheme Development Standards, for example, by inclusion of additional energy efficiency measures. There are good examples in schemes of modern and innovative energy efficiency features. Such as the use of photo-voltaic cells, high insulation specifications and glazing to maximise solar gain. ELDC has also facilitated liaison between RSLs and contractors who have produced a high standard of work on social housing schemes. Ensuring these standards provides quality housing that is easier and more economical to heat.

- 85 However, it is a weakness that there are no clear development briefs relating to design, for example for energy efficiency and for meeting the needs of customers with physical disabilities. Affordable housing developed by New Linx Homes under the LASHG programme was delivered to the Lifetime Homes<sup>4</sup> standard but, at the time of our inspection, ELDC had not agreed a clear specification for this aspect of design for the new Housing Capital Programme work. The issue was discussed at the latest programme delivery group (PDG); this followed the visit of the physical disabilities focus group to a new build scheme. Approximate cost estimates have been drawn up for a list of features which the group suggested and the PDG is considering the feasibility of including some of the features in future developments, particularly where there may be long-term savings.
- 86 ELDC is ensuring that a mix of options are used to meet the need for affordable housing. The HCP will include a mix of rented and shared ownership homes. The Council has been relatively late in using this option but has now responded to local market changes which have taken full home ownership out of the reach of many households. It has established a shared ownership register to capture interest and publicises the option through a clear leaflet, posters in estate and lettings agents and on the Council's website. Now that Eastern Shires have the funding allocation for the area for Homebuy, it is going to operate the register in future. ELDC is also assisting access into the private sector through the rent assist scheme, through which applicants are signposted to private lettings and helped to secure the letting with initial rent payments; this scheme is explained in greater detail later in the report.
- 87 There is effective monitoring of the development programme. Relevant housing and planning staff, members from the Council and local RSLs meet regularly at the programme delivery group to track broad progress with the programme and to discuss future work. A smaller group also meets to discuss practical issues related to individual schemes. Regular reports are also provided to ELDC's planning and housing portfolio holder regarding progress against affordable housing targets. The partnership agreement with ESHA itself includes clear monitoring and payment arrangements which relate to key milestones and delivery performance. Progress with the rent assist scheme is also monitored and reported, as are other empty properties brought back into use. The operation of the rent assist scheme and its links with the Council's empty property strategy is referred to in more detail in the next section.
- 88 ELDC is actively working at a county and regional level on housing issues, helping to ensure needs and aspirations of people of East Lindsey can be used to influence regional housing decisions and has improved in this area in recent year. There is evidence of effective partnership working, for example, to obtain funding in the county for homelessness research and the development of this and other strategies. It is also active in joint working in rural enabling through the East Midlands Rural Affairs Forum, successfully lobbying for limits on the share of homes that can be purchased by residents in the shared ownership programme, which means that these properties remain affordable for future residents.

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<sup>4</sup> Lifetime Homes

- 89 The Council does not effectively involve customers or future customers in aspects of its strategy and enabling role. Whilst residents' views were sought on the overall strategy, which is positive, ELDC and its partners do not have robust arrangements to gather and use customer views to influence plans for new developments. Individual RSLs do seek feedback from new tenants immediately after they move in but this information is not collated or shared; no arrangements exist to follow up this feedback some time after the resident has moved in. Actively seeking the views of new and prospective customers would help the Council and its partners ensure that future developments better meet the needs and preferences of customers, for example, in relation to the design of homes or the suitability of particular features such as heating controls.

### **Private sector housing**

- 90 There is a mix of strengths and weaknesses in this area. ELDC has set some clear priorities which it has addressed, devoting additional resources to fund extra disabled facilities grants and in using clearance and redevelopment to deal with poor private sector stock at Mablethorpe. It has successfully provided advice and grants to enable a substantial number of residents to improve the energy efficiency of their homes. It is yet to use its full range of powers to effectively improve private sector housing; houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) are not effectively risk assessed to prioritise attention, its inspection programme is incomplete and work on housing renewal grants has been curtailed. Progress in bringing long-term vacant properties back into use is limited, although the Rent Assist scheme has helped ensure reletting of private rented stock.
- 91 Information on private sector stock condition is reasonable. The need to update stock condition data, last gathered in 2001/02, has been recognised and acted on; fieldwork for a new survey had just been completed at the time of our inspection. The new survey takes account of new Health and Housing Safety Rating System requirements and should provide ELDC with adequate information to assess the current position regarding Decent Homes in the private sector and to plan, cost and prioritise future work. ELDC carries out an annual check of RSL progress against the DHS. A combination of the age of the stock in the district and recent investment means that all RSL stock should reach the DHS by 2010.
- 92 ELDC's information to residents, owners and landlords about its private sector housing work is very mixed. For example, there is a good range of leaflets about available grants, which outline the support available to residents. This information, together with policy details and application forms, is available on the Council's website. There have been occasional articles in the Council's newspaper, *'The Messenger'*, about forthcoming legislation and direct mail outs to owners and landlords have been used to highlight issues such as help to bring empty homes back into use and licensing of HMOs. There has also been extensive publicity about energy efficiency advice and grants. There are some gaps in information provided, for example, leaflets about housing renewal grants are not currently available to customers.

- 93 However, there are no clear, published service standards for private sector housing services which, for example, explain how quickly grant applications will be assessed or how long applicants can expect to wait for surveys to be completed. This information is also omitted from correspondence with applicants. There are also no customer focussed codes of conduct to which contractors on the Council's select list are expected to adhere to. Service users therefore do not know the level of service to expect and cannot effectively complain if they receive a substandard service. The lack of standards also makes it more difficult for the Council to demonstrate where and how it is improving services over time.
- 94 ELDC approach to raising standards in the private sector is mixed in its effectiveness. There is a five-year cyclical programme of inspections of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), of which there are approximately 700 in the district. Annual targets set for these inspections are being met. However, the usefulness of this programme is compromised by the fact that ELDC has recently discovered that approximately 200 known HMOs have not been included in the programme. In addition, latest inspection details for these properties are not easily accessible; this hampers the Council's ability to effectively address the situation, for example, by prioritising inspections to properties which have not been inspected for a long time or which represent a higher risk.
- 95 The Council does not currently have a robust approach to prioritising HMO inspections and the current cycle is not based on clear risk assessments. This means that properties, which may be unsafe and/or contain serious hazards for residents may remain un-inspected for some time, potentially putting residents at risk. Although the recent stock condition survey may cover some HMOs, this will not provide sufficiently detailed information for ELDC to effectively oversee standards and it will need to be supplemented by the inspections planned as part of the new licensing arrangements.
- 96 ELDC has made reasonable preparations for the new licensing requirements and has contacted owners of HMOs which it believes fall under the new requirements. The Council has been working with neighbouring authorities in the county to develop its approach. The licensing sub-group has agreed a framework for setting fees, agreed the basis of the application form, agreed licence conditions and developed fire safety standards with the Fire and Rescue Service. Preparations have also been made for use of the new Housing Health and Safety Ratings System, with staff having attended appropriate training and initial surveying forms having been agreed.
- 97 The Council has not actively promoted high standards in the private rented sector through a voluntary licensing or accreditation system. Its Rent Assist scheme, designed to assist prospective tenants to access the private sector, does involve property inspections and support will not be provided to rent properties which are of a poor standard, which is positive. However, the lack of a wider accreditation scheme means that the Council has not sent a clear message to landlords about the standards of management and maintenance it expects.

- 98 There are some examples of where ELDC has addressed significant problems in private sector housing. For example, it is currently in the later stages of regeneration work at Thorpe Sands, Mablethorpe. This followed clearance action in the late 1990s of poor quality private sector 'chalet' accommodation. The project has resulted in transformation of the area and provision of additional social housing, low cost homeownership and special needs accommodation. It also includes the site of the new multi-agency Mablethorpe Office.
- 99 ELDC has met its own targets for improving conditions in the private sector, by a combination of enforcement action and grant aid. However, there are several weaknesses in the service. There has been limited investment in housing renewal grants even though the most recent data available suggests relatively high levels of unfitness. The surveying for grants has been curtailed; 58 renewal grants were made during the year but the waiting list has been closed and the leaflet explaining grants withdrawn. At the end of March 2006, 146 surveys for renewal grants were outstanding. ELDC has taken reasonable steps to notify some service users, writing to existing applicants about the situation. However, they have been given no indication about when the survey will be carried out and their application assessed and potential applicants are only informed about the closure of the list when they enquire; this indicates an approach geared towards administrative rather than customer convenience.
- 100 ELDC has a mixed record in involving service users in developing its private sector work. There has been some consultation with the Private Landlord Forum, for example about the implementation of the 2004 Housing Act measures. Landlords have been consulted about ELDC's Rent Assist scheme and owners of empty properties have been surveyed about grant arrangements and the Council's overall approach to bringing empty properties back into use. However, no customer feedback is obtained for example, from those landlords with whom the Council may have worked and so avoided enforcement action or from grant applicants. Consultation with service users about the Housing Renewal Policy was also very limited. The Council is missing valuable opportunities to use valuable feedback to improve its services.
- 101 ELDC's equipment and adaptations service is generally good and has improved significantly. The Council has devoted substantial additional resources to meet the demand and has successfully achieved the planned spend for the year and eliminated its survey backlog, through a combination of internal and outsourced survey work. Expenditure on Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs) has increased substantially over recent years (rising from £286,358 in 2001/02 to £958,368 in 2005/06. Part of the funding for DFGs (£461,000 over the period 2005/07) is being derived from increases in Council Tax charges on second homes. The waiting times for surveys (from the time the Council receives the occupational therapist's assessment) has also been cut, from 12 to 2 months and the target for grants in 2005/06 (200) has been met. The increased expenditure and reduced waiting time for surveys has enabled the Council to carry out adaptations to more homes, helping many vulnerable residents to remain in their homes and maintain a level of independence, at relatively low cost (compared with the alternative of residential care) and significantly improving their quality of life.

- 102 Completed DFG work we viewed was of a good quality. ELDC demonstrates a customer focus by offering a choice of fittings and finishes to residents for grant aided work, for example, for tiling and decoration. Customers can choose to upgrade some items at an extra cost or have their own fittings fixed. There is also evidence of ELDC sourcing equipment to meet specific needs, for example, showers with appropriate controls for customers with sight impairments.
- 103 However, ELDC does not effectively involve service users in shaping or improving the service. It cannot be sure how satisfied customers are with the service and does not systematically use customer feedback. Service users are asked to indicate whether they are satisfied with the work on a slip confirming that the work is finished and surveyors obtain some views informally when inspecting completed work. However, this information is not captured, analysed or used and no more thorough assessment of customer views is obtained, for example, about the early stages of the process or on information provided and choice offered. A survey of service users was carried out in 2002/03 but it is not clear how this was used to influence the service. Customer questionnaires have not been routinely used since and service user groups have not been involved in reviewing the service, published information or the processes used.
- 104 There is also no formal requirement to visit grant recipients after a period of time to ensure that the work carried out is meeting their needs. ELDC staff write to the County Council to ask occupational therapists (OTs) to assess this but, to date, the response has been very limited and ELDC has no other arrangements in place to address this. By not obtaining feedback on the whole process, the Council is missing the opportunity to learn and to improve the service in line with customer needs and preferences, a process that might also highlight more efficient and responsive ways of working and guide future working arrangements with the County Council.
- 105 ELDC cannot effectively plan future DFG expenditure or work as the County Council is unable to provide it with estimates of the number or nature of applications for OT assessments which are in the pipeline, nor of likely waiting times. There is no service level agreement in place and whilst ELDC records cases which it refers to the County it does not routinely track how long these take to be assessed. ELDC is alert to changing levels of OT referrals to ensure that it can effectively carry out its role in the process when it receives them.
- 106 ELDC cannot be sure that it is giving reasonable priority to those in need. The County Council only provides the most basic priority assessment, indicating if work particularly is urgent, otherwise applicants are dealt with in date order. Changes have been made in ELDC's processes to ensure that tenants' of the transferred housing stock are dealt with on the same basis as other applicants, which is positive, but the very basic system of prioritisation means that the most vulnerable customers may not always be dealt with quickest. There is no evidence of ELDC seeking to address either this or the issue of OT assessments and information about waiting lists at a senior level with the County Council.

- 107** ELDC is currently considering proposals to take part in a newly established Home Improvement Agency which is intended to operate countywide and would handle all DFG applications. The scheme is being extended district by district and will not be in position to take on ELDC cases until March 2007. ELDC currently has significantly larger DFG programme than other districts and is rightly considering the potential value for money issues involved in the proposed arrangements.
- 108** ELDC's record of bringing empty properties back into use is mixed and its strategy unclear. The current empty property strategy was agreed in 2004, however, it outlines a range of possible approaches rather than setting a clear direction. ELDCs has recognised that it needs to clarify its approach and that one of its main tools, the use of empty property grants, has been ineffective in bringing properties back into use. At the time of our inspection, a draft report had been prepared for the Executive Board; it includes proposals to raise the grant level and amend payback options, to more effectively target properties for action and consideration of the use of Management Orders and Compulsory Purchase Orders – two measures not currently used.
- 109** In practice, there has been some action to address the issue of empty homes, with positive results. Performance information highlights that 152 empty properties have been brought back into use over the last year (against a target of 115). These are generally short-term vacant properties brought 'back into use' through the Rent Assist scheme, and may well have been let without the use of the scheme and does not address the issue of longer-term or problem properties. It is a weakness that the Council does not follow up lets made through this scheme to test whether or not its assists in keeping the property in use over a period of time or whether the impact is short-term.
- 110** Some work has been carried out to identify homes which have been empty for a longer period of time and which, despite the current buoyant local housing market, do not appear likely to come back into use quickly. ELDC estimates that around 624 homes have been empty for over six months and are not second homes or recently sold properties; it also knows that the majority of these are in the district's main centres of population. Owners of these properties have been contacted and the options available discussed with them. Around 300 of the owners responded stating that their properties were either on the market, sold or let and so would be brought back into use without Council. Those owners who expressed interest in the empty property grants have needed substantial grant assisted work which is out of scope of current policy and does not necessarily represent value for money for the Council. The views of others, who for a variety of reasons did not want to take advantage of possible assistance from the Council, have been taken into account in drafting new proposals for action.
- 111** ELDC is aware that there are no major issues of empty homes in the social rented sector. There are few difficult to let properties and where RSLs have identified problematic property types, such as small sheltered units, ELDC has successfully worked with the RSLs to build more appropriate schemes.

- 112 However, ELDC is not making the most of information held corporately to assist its action on empty homes in the private sector. For example, there is no routine exchange of information between the Council Tax and Housing departments about properties which have been empty for a certain period of time, although this information can be obtained on request and is relatively easy to obtain. Information on these properties, together with appropriate advice and support for the owners could be used to better target the rent assist scheme and assist in bringing longer-term empty homes back into use.
- 113 ELDC is taking effective action to raise the energy efficiency of housing in all sectors. It has an affordable warmth strategy, written in 2002 and updated with a progress report in 2005. This update included some simplification of objectives and the setting of new targets. ELDC has a dedicated Energy Efficiency Officer and has secured funding to support two additional staff who together operate the Lincolnshire Energy Advice Centre. The EAC uses a mobile unit to ensure that advice and assistance can reach all parts of the district. Good use has also been made of the local press plus the Council's own paper 'The Messenger' to promote measures householders can take and the assistance, financial and otherwise, that ELDC or the EAC can provide and presentations have been made to a range of organisations, such as parish councils, to help promote the message of energy efficiency. The Council has exceeded its own targets for energy efficiency advice to customers and energy efficiency grants in 2005/06.
- 114 Performance monitoring arrangements for private sector housing work are mixed. There are clear arrangements in place to track expenditure against the budget and for monitoring the completion of surveys, which is positive. The numbers of DFGs completed is a key performance indicator in ELDC's monitoring framework. Regular reports are made to the management team and if monthly targets are not met, exception reports are produced showing trends, key issues, action already taken and action to be taken, showing who is responsible and giving clear deadlines for action. These measures help to ensure that the Council performs well on key priorities and that appropriate action is taken if performance slips.
- 115 However, there are gaps in the monitoring framework. ELDC cannot easily provide information on the overall time applicants have to wait for DFG work because the county cannot provide information on early stages in the process and ELDC only tracks time from the initial enquiry it receives to the point of survey. It has only recently started tracking the time taken from survey to completion of work and has only just started to provide customers with information about how long this is likely to take. No benchmarking work has been carried out regarding private sector work.

- 116** There are no clear target response times for surveys or follow up to initial service requests or applications for grants and no performance reporting on this. There are also some limitations in the IT system which necessitate the duplication of information on spreadsheets and so hamper effective operational performance management. However, we did find examples of exception reports being used to ensure follow-up action is taken in response to service requests and of officers actively chasing cases referred to other parties involved in the process, to ensure grant applications and related works are dealt with as promptly as possible. The lack of effective methods for testing customer satisfaction is also a clear gap in performance management arrangements.

### **Homelessness, housing advice and housing needs**

- 117** There is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area but some of the weaknesses have a real impact on vulnerable customers, which makes them more significant. Access to the housing advice and homelessness service is easy and information generally clear and comprehensive. The Council has invested in a range of options to meet housing needs and prevent homelessness, it has clear referral arrangements with other advice agencies and has a supportive approach towards those fleeing domestic violence. However, aspects of homeless case handling are flawed; they do not assist in preventing homelessness and add unnecessarily to the stress experienced by service users. The appeals process is not operated effectively and whilst the housing register is administered efficiently, there are gaps in customer information, choice is not promoted and nomination arrangements effectively limit options for homeless households.
- 118** ELDC makes it easy for customers to access the homelessness and housing advice service. In addition to normal office and telephone access outlined earlier in the report, there are specific housing advice surgeries provided at the customer service centres (CSCs), which offer advice by appointment. If customers attend a CSC without an appointment and there are no housing advice staff available to see them in person, they can access advice through telephones to the main office; home visits can also be arranged if a customer cannot attend the CSC. An 'out-of-hours' homelessness service is also provided; however, we were not always able to contact the service. The Council does carry out random checks by calling the number but has since revised its arrangements to make them more robust.
- 119** ELDC ensures that customers are aware of the standard of service they can expect. There are clear, published service standards in place; ELDC's corporate charter outlines general response times and the housing charter adds more detail for homelessness and housing advice, such as arrangements for interviews, provision of information and assistance in completing forms. The Council has challenging targets for assessing homeless applications (13 days) and this target is currently being exceeded (8 days). This means that the time people have to wait to find out if they will be accepted as homeless and offered accommodation is minimised. However, this performance information needs to be seen in the context of some practices, detailed below, which mean that some applications are, in effect, deferred until a second interview.

- 120 There is a good range of housing advice leaflets available to customers; these include details of the 'Safe at Home' and rent assist schemes, advice about mortgage problems, harassment and illegal eviction, options for young people, shared ownership and finding private rented accommodation. The range and circulation of the leaflets has been increased following a survey which identified that many residents were unaware of the housing advice services that the Council offered.
- 121 Where advice is provided by ELDC, customers are provided with clear letters after the advice session setting out what was discussed and what will happen next. However, communication with people making homeless applications is not written in plain English and some letters are very difficult to understand. Housing advisors tell us that they phone the customer to explain what the letters mean, but there is no evidence of this on file. In any case this would not assist customers who refer back to the information or discuss it with friends or relatives.
- 122 It is clear that ELDC has moved from a more reactive approach towards a preventative service and that it invests in a range of options to prevent homelessness. These include a rent assist scheme, housing advice, specialist advice from the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and Shelter, a 'Safe at Home' scheme and mediation. All have been used successfully in a range of cases and reflect a number of strengths in the service:
- ELDC's housing advice service has been awarded the Quality Mark from the Legal Services Commission;
  - ELDC ensures that housing advice staff are appropriately supported and trained in their role. There is a clear procedure manual and Shelter factsheets available for housing advice officers and regular training is provided;
  - there are clear protocols in place for referrals to external agencies, such as the CAB for specialist advice that is beyond the capacity of housing advice team and staff are able to signpost customers effectively to other agencies;
  - the rent assist scheme, which was reviewed in 2003, has had a positive impact and has helped 162 customers to find private sector accommodation in 2005/06. The Scheme involves advance payment of rent to the landlord (which is later paid back to ELDC by the tenant) and a paper bond scheme. All properties used are inspected by the Council to ensure that they are safe and are in a reasonable state of repair;
  - the 'Safe at Home' scheme, run in partnership with the police and women's aid services, aims to prevent homelessness for people who have suffered domestic violence. It allows customers to remain in their homes by making the home secure against an ex-partner; and
  - feedback from a small sample of service users indicates high levels of satisfaction with the housing advice service.

- 123 The Council's stated aim is to prevent homelessness and it is clearly addressing this at both a strategic and a practical level, however, there are weaknesses in its approach and aspects of case handling which do not support this aim:
- housing advice is not routinely offered to homeless applicants where ELDC has no duty to house the applicant. In these cases, appropriate and timely advice could help avoid the household from becoming homeless; ELDC could then appropriately record whether or not homelessness had been prevented;
  - in some cases, ELDC is actively discouraging customers from making a homeless application and recording this as homeless prevention work. For example we observed a housing advice session where the customer with two dependent children was discouraged from making an application even though she only had nine working days to quit her home and would have to return to complete homeless application after that time;
  - outcomes of referrals to the CAB and Shelter are not recorded, which means that the Council cannot accurately track the quality of the advice given or numbers of homeless preventions, nor can it check how useful the advice is proving to be to the customer;
  - ELDC does not operate an accredited landlords scheme to run alongside the rent assist scheme. There is limited information about the landlords on the list given to prospective tenants; there is also limited support given to help people threatened with homelessness to find landlords willing to accept the rent assist scheme. This is a particular issue if landlords will not readily accept customers on benefits or who have children;
  - ELDC is not actively using legislation, for example, the Protection from Eviction Act 1977 to protect tenants from harassment or to send a clear message to landlords about the standards it expects which, in turn, may help prevent future homelessness; and
  - delays in the payment of housing benefit has caused difficulties, both contributing to homelessness and affecting the rent assist scheme.
- 124 ELDCs approach to homelessness also demonstrates a lack of customer focus in some cases. Whilst we reviewed a number of cases where appropriate investigations and correct decisions were made, the Council's approach towards applicants threatened with homelessness is not good practice and does not consider the negative impact on vulnerable service users of being forced through the full legal process of eviction. Housing advice staff are all clear that is the policy of the Council to not consider someone within 28 days of being homeless until a bailiffs warrant has been successfully applied for. We saw one case where a woman with three children was not accepted as homeless because the bailiff's warrant had not been applied for. The case was shown as closed and a decision of 'not homeless' (within 28 days) recorded even though it was only a matter of time before this family would have to be accepted. There was no evidence on file of how ELDC had worked with the family to source alternative accommodation or offer support. The likely consequence of this is that she will now have a County Court Judgement against her affecting her capacity to get credit.

- 125 In addition, the mental health exceptions policy, designed to take account of the needs of individuals in particularly vulnerable circumstances, is not consistently applied leading to unfair decisions being made and assistance with housing not being offered where it should be.
- 126 ELDC also does not offer adequate assistance to homeless households regarding storage of furniture. For example, in a case we reviewed, the applicant was not offered any assistance with furniture storage even though it was clear she would lose her possessions if she went into temporary or emergency accommodation and would later have to replace this furniture, despite financial hardship. This approach adds to problems rather than assisting service users at a time when they are vulnerable and is particularly incongruous as ELDC widely promotes a furniture recycling scheme and housing support staff spend some of their time trying to find furniture for households with whom they are working.
- 127 There are a number of flaws in the recording of homelessness information. The homeless files do not consistently include evidence of referrals of vulnerable families with children to Social Services where homeless applications are refused and no record is made on the files of floating support allocated to vulnerable people. In addition, ELDC is not effectively recording the reasons why housing advice and homelessness decisions are made and a clear audit trail to support the decisions made is not kept; ELDC may therefore be unable to defend decisions effectively, if challenged.
- 128 ELDC is not using its appeals system effectively and customer literature about appeals is unclear. In our desktop review, we found an example of a complaint which should have triggered an appeal; this did not occur and the applicant was incorrectly told that he did not have the right to appeal. The Council failed to offer this applicant any redress through the complaints process and the complaint was considered by the officer who had made the original decision about the appeal.
- 129 The Council has ensured that temporary and emergency accommodation used for homeless households is of a good standard and that stays in bed and breakfast are kept to a minimum. Private sector homes are rented to provide shared temporary accommodation as an alternative to bed and breakfast, providing more suitable accommodation for families as well as contributing to a key government objective. The houses used are of a high standard, well equipped and with good quality furnishings; all residents we spoke to were satisfied with the accommodation. ELDC still uses some bed and breakfast for emergency re-housing; the example we saw was also of good quality. All such accommodation is regularly checked by the Council; it keeps in regular contact with all people accepted as homeless and housed in temporary accommodation, they are also allocated a support worker who assists them with access to health and social services, debt and welfare advice, which is positive. Those households staying in bed and breakfast do not do so for any significant length of time. ELDC had a target of a maximum of 4 weeks average stay for 2005/06; the actual average length of stay was 2.9 weeks, compared with 4.3 weeks in 2004/05.

- 130** There are some flaws with the use of temporary accommodation. For example:
- there are no file logs of incidents at the shared accommodation even though the procedure states that this should occur; and
  - the residents at the shared units are subject to intrusive behaviour and overly restrictive rules which are inappropriately displayed in the houses and which detracts from the good quality of the accommodation. There are examples of insensitive communication with residents about these rules.
- 131** The Council is working effectively with partners to offer support to vulnerable people, either to prevent homelessness, sustain them in their tenancies or to support them should they become homeless. For instance, Council policy sets out a positive stance towards women fleeing domestic violence; it makes it clear that officers should never ask the applicant to prove that physical violence has occurred. We saw evidence of supportive practice towards these applicants and the Council provided practical solutions to assist them, for example, the 'Safe at Home' scheme.
- 132** There are some weaknesses in the 'Safe at Home' scheme, which detract from its effectiveness. For example:
- service users are not told of the levels of service that they could receive, some find the process too slow and a number of clients had to wait to have security work completed. In two cases women had to move back to the property before the work was done so leaving them in a vulnerable situation; and
  - there are no routine risk assessments on former partners to assess victims support needs or the need for additional security; one woman we visited felt particularly vulnerable as her ex-partner had recently been released from a secure mental health unit; she said she had not been offered support.
- 133** Service performance monitoring arrangements are mixed. Ethnicity and vulnerability information about customers of homeless and housing advice services is collected but is not yet used effectively. ELDC is missing the opportunity to review who does and does not use its services and to use this information to shape future service development. Also there is limited examination of trends, for example, of the types of housing advice needed, particularly specialist advice offered by Shelter and the CAB; this information would help ELDC to evaluate staff training needs and the extent to which such advice could effectively be provided in-house. In addition, as referred to earlier in this section, homelessness prevention is not always recorded appropriately.
- 134** Service user involvement in the homelessness and housing advice service is underdeveloped and this is recognised by the Council. The Council has had a focus group intended to help develop the service, which included a review of the standards for the service, which is positive. Customer feedback surveys have also been used for the advice service and for residents of temporary accommodation, but it is not clear how this information has been used.

### Housing needs

- 135** A number of aspects of the housing register service are not customer focused. Information to customers is limited; they are not kept up-to-date with the number of points they have or their place in the register. In addition, applicants do not get detailed information about available housing and turnover in order that they can make informed choices about their future housing; there are plans to develop this information. The guide to the housing register is confusing in places and not written in plain English; an example of poorly explained information is the eligibility criteria and what constitutes unacceptable behaviour. Limited and unchallenging service standard are in place (14 days) for the housing register and these were not developed with customers. Lack of clear information means that applicants may be unaware of the implications of their choices on how quickly or where they may be housed; it can also create customer dissatisfaction.
- 136** The Council regularly reviews its housing register to ensure that only people who are actively seeking housing are on it, which is positive. An annual review letter is sent to each applicant to keep the register up-to-date. The IT system for the housing register automatically awards points and categories to ensure consistent scoring. Staff have easy access to policies and advice on the IT system to guide them in making decisions. A well administered and up-to-date register helps to ensure that nominations to housing associations can be made efficiently and that accurate data is used to inform planning and development decisions.
- 137** It is not immediately clear why more points are awarded for some medical conditions than others and there is no fully independent appeal system in place for applicants to challenge points awarded, which is a weakness. If an applicant wishes to appeal the award of medical points, the reviewer would be advised by someone, who has assessed the points awarded in the first place.
- 138** Clear nominations agreements are in place with RSLs and nominations to the stock transfer landlord, New Linx Homes, are monitored. In 2005/06, ELDC nominations were 68 per cent of new lettings (against a target of 70 per cent). However, the nominations agreement with New Linx Homes allows the association to refuse nominations for homeless households in order to maintain 'balanced communities'. As there is no guarantee that people from the housing register will provide any greater 'balance' than homeless households, this directly discriminates against homeless people and creates further difficulties for the Council in terms of housing homeless households.
- 139** ELDC has not yet actively sought to promote greater choice for applicants through choice based lettings schemes in the district nor sought to develop a common register, although both are now under discussion. Both of these can be used to more effectively meet the housing needs and preferences of applicants by simplifying application processes and matching of applicants with homes.

## Is the service delivering value for money?

- 140** Weaknesses slightly outweigh strengths in this area. Cost analysis and comparison work is underdeveloped and knowledge of costs varies across the housing service. Homeless and housing advice services compare favourably with other authorities in terms of cost and performance, but there are question marks over how this is assessed. There is evidence of value for money being achieved in its enabling functions. The Council has been slow to establish a clear framework through which it can effectively manage value for money but is now in a better position to do this. A framework is now in place but value for money principles and practices are not fully embedded across the service. Customers are not involved in evaluating whether services represent value for money.

### How do costs compare?

- 141** ELDC has limited information available about how its costs compare both with its own costs over time and with others. Information it holds about such comparisons also varies tremendously across the service with, for example, more known about housing advice and homelessness than about private sector housing functions.
- 142** There are a number of areas where the costs of the service are not known and/or ELDC has carried out no comparisons with others. For example, whilst additional surveying capacity for grant work has been obtained through a competitive process to secure reasonable costs, ELDC does not know how these costs compare with those of providing the service in-house, because staffing costs for this are difficult to disaggregate. The cost of grant work has also been rising and although ELDC is aware that this is replicated in other districts, it has not analysed the costs in detail and so cannot be sure of the reasons for this. It also does not know how costs for the handyman service or enforcement casework in private sector housing compare. The lack of clear customer feedback arrangements in these areas also limits the extent to which the Council can judge whether or not these services represent value for money.
- 143** In addition, whilst DFG work is subjected to competitive quotes or tenders; this may not always secure value for money and is administratively cumbersome, particularly when there are large numbers of applications. This has been recognised by ELDC and it is currently liaising with current contractors to establish a schedule of rates for the most common work which will give greater certainty of pricing over the next year and should have positive impact on the overall time taken to process applications. Also, in looking at options for joining in countywide Home Improvement Agency, the Council is clearly aware of cost issues and is actively seeking to ensure that the proposals represent value for money for both the Council and its customers.

- 144 The housing service has had some cost and performance analysis work carried out by HouseMark, an independent benchmarking organisation, which places ELDC's homelessness and housing advice services amongst the best 25 per cent of organisations; the comparisons are made with similar and Lincolnshire authorities and the best performing authorities nationally. These results have to be treated with some caution, given the issues around the way the Authority records its preventative and homelessness assessment indicators, referred to earlier in the report. The HouseMark work carried out for the Authority also shows that housing advice and homelessness services are provided at a relatively low cost.
- 145 The Council can demonstrate that its housing enabling work is securing new housing at very competitive costs. The new partnership with ESHA is providing new homes at an average grant of £20,000, this compares favourably with Housing Corporation grant levels being paid in the East Midlands (£38,000 per unit). The partnership arrangement also includes provision of 'added value' items such as local employment opportunities and enhanced energy efficiency measures. An example of this is the employment of building apprentices on a scheme in Spilsby. Further work is underway to identify other potential 'added value' items, for example, self-build projects as part of larger developments.
- 146 Competitive costings have also been achieved for section 106 developments. ELDC used to invite bids for all such developments; in late 2005 RSLs were invited to include bids for a longer-term partnership, citing 'added value' items which they could contribute, in particular, those which linked with the Council's corporate priorities. Boston Mayflower and Flagship are now the Council's preferred partners under an agreement which seeks to secure section 106 development without grant input and which provides a minimum of 50 per cent rented units. ELDC estimates that allocations in the Local Plan up to 2012 could present section 106 opportunities in excess of 600 units of land.
- 147 ELDC's budgets and costs are not sufficiently disaggregated and central and support costs that are recharged to housing are not clear. This means that the housing service cannot effectively challenge recharges and areas for potential efficiency savings cannot easily be identified. The Council is aware of this and work has begun to address this but there are no clear outcomes yet.

## How is value for money managed?

- 148** A corporate value for money strategy had only just been agreed prior to our inspection and, whilst this is a positive step, the strategy is inevitably not yet fully embedded. A toolkit is being developed to assist staff to fully and consistently implement the strategy, but this was not in place at the time of our inspection.
- 149** The strategy itself provides a general overview of the Council's planning and performance framework and how value for money will be incorporated in this, rather than outlining how value for money will be achieved (some of which is covered in the associated procurement strategy). The value for money strategy is supported by both Council-wide and service-based value for money and efficiency statements. These provide a clear framework which will enable each service to demonstrate how effectively it is managing value for money. The statements cover how the service compares with similar and best performing Councils, spend and performance profiles with analysis, annual efficiency gains made and anticipated compared to previous years plus plans for the coming period, fees and charges and use of capital resources. Key themes have been agreed to enable service areas to set out achievements and plans in a consistent manner. However, the housing service statement does not clearly identify key areas for attention or how it intends to improve value for money.
- 150** In some housing services consideration has been given as to whether the service represents value for money, which is positive, but this assessment is not a routine activity carried out alongside service performance monitoring and it is not clear how value for money considerations take resident and service user views into account. For example, reducing the use of bed and breakfast provides savings and the alternative is valued by service users, but the shared temporary accommodation is of a very high cost to someone not in receipt of Housing Benefit and may act as a deterrent to someone in employment seeking emergency accommodation. Also, practices which mean customers have to make repeat visits to the Council to make homelessness applications, of which we saw examples, is not value for money for either the Council or the service user. In addition, the Council is not able to see whether its funding to the CAB and Shelter for specialist housing advice is providing value for money for itself or its service users; outcomes of referrals are not recorded, which means that ELDC cannot track the quality of the advice given or the number of households for whom homelessness is prevented.
- 151** There are clear and effective budget monitoring arrangements in place and the Council has a sound medium-term budget strategy which supports delivery of the Council's priorities. Its financial software enables effective monitoring of capital and revenue budgets, including commitments and finance officers meet with service managers regularly to assist them in managing their budgets. Reports on expenditure are made regularly to both the management team and executive board and all service managers required to report monthly on capital and revenue expenditure through the performance management framework.

- 152 A corporate procurement strategy for 2005/08 has been agreed which will assist the Council in securing improved value for money. There are some areas of procurement where the Council has already been able to secure value for money. For example, the processes for selecting preferred partners to provide affordable housing were competitive and have secured commitments to provide housing at very competitive rates together with elements of 'added value', such as local employment opportunities. Another example is the selection of firms to assist with grant survey work, which was subjected to competition.
- 153 However, some work is still carried out in ways which do not show a focus on value for money. For example, quotes or tenders for grant work are requested on an individual basis; this is administratively cumbersome and does not necessarily achieve competitive prices. The Council has recognised this and is in the advanced stages of agreeing procurement based on a schedule of rates. Monitoring of contractors has also recently been improved, which will help to ensure that they provide a quality service within required timescales.
- 154 There is evidence that the Council has reviewed some central services which are used by the housing service, with a view to identifying more efficient and effective service provision. For example, legal services which were previously provided in-house, are now provided in conjunction with a neighbouring Council. This is a positive step, but it is not clear whether this is part of a systematic review of central services or an isolated reaction to a specific service issue.
- 155 The Council has a good record in using its own resources to address priorities and attracting external funding to support priority housing services such as homelessness, new homes and grants to adapt the homes of residents with disabilities. Funding has been sought from a variety of sources, including central government, and has been achieved through work with partners such as neighbouring authorities and housing associations. Over the last three years the following resources have been secured.
- £221,021 for the energy advice centre service, from the Energy Savings Trust.
  - £109,830 for homeless prevention, from ODPM Priority Needs funding.
  - £1,100,821 for housing support and temporary accommodation from Supporting People funding.
- And, for the coming two years:
- £355,000 Decent Homes funding from the government office; and
  - £23,000 Homeless Innovation funding (as a share of a joint bid by authorities in the county from ODPM).
- 156 This funding is in addition to substantial funding secured for the district from the Housing Corporation for affordable housing, which totals almost £6 million for 2006/08, as compared with around £4 million for 2004/06.

## Summary

- 157 There is a good range of quality information provided for customers which is user friendly. Customer service centres provide a welcoming and generally well equipped environment for customers. But service standards do not cover all housing services, customer feedback is not sought across all of the service and complaints are not consistently handled well.
- 158 The Council's approach to diversity is underdeveloped and the housing service cannot clearly demonstrate that services are provided fairly and without discrimination. However, the housing support scheme provides valuable support to vulnerable residents, there is a supportive approach for victims of domestic violence and increased resources have improved the disabled facilities service.
- 159 ELDC is successfully enabling significant numbers of affordable homes to be built, working well with partners. It successfully promotes a number of housing options and invests in homelessness prevention but some practices in the homelessness and housing advice services are not customer-focused and do not support the aim of prevention. There are also weaknesses in the Council's approach to improving housing conditions in the private sector.

## What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 160 ELDC as a whole is undergoing a period of significant change and, following a Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004 which rated the Council as 'weak', it has invested time, attention and resources into transforming the culture of the organisation and into establishing a more robust foundation for future service improvements. It is appropriate that it has prioritised this work. We recognise the progress made in the Council's overall corporate approach and that there is evidence of Council services improving as a result.
- 161 However, it is also evident that some of the new approaches are not yet embedded across the organisation, including within the housing service and, in many respects, the changes have not yet resulted in clear outcomes for customers. Within the strategic housing service in particular, improvements are not evident across the whole service. In some areas, important weaknesses that directly affect more vulnerable members of the community have not been recognised or addressed. Also the collection and use of information such as benchmarking and customer feedback, which is necessary to direct and inform service improvement, is underdeveloped.

### What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 162 ELDC's track record is mixed, with a number of service improvements having been made, but a lack of progress in diversity and in aspects of private sector housing services. Performance is improving against the Council's own service targets but the service cannot demonstrate a clear and sustained track record of improving value for money.
- 163 ELDC's strategic housing service has made a range of service improvements over the last few years which customers, including more vulnerable customers, would notice. These include:
- reduction in the use of bed and breakfast for homeless households and the introduction of quality leased properties for temporary accommodation;
  - introduction and expansion of an extensive floating housing support scheme which provides support for vulnerable residents;
  - improved performance in the use of Disabled Facilities Grants, reducing the time taken to survey properties and increasing funding to meet need;
  - improved facilities and environment at customer service centres and improving call handling services;
  - introduction of a housing options service to prevent homelessness, including revision and expansion of the Rent Assist Scheme; and
  - development of services to support individuals who have experienced domestic violence, including the 'Safe at Home' scheme.

- 164** At the same time, ELDC has continued to develop its enabling role, producing an improved housing strategy that has been assessed as 'Fit for Purpose' by the Government Office and securing increased funding with its partner RSLs from the Housing Corporation's Approved Housing Programme. Planning applications are now dealt with more promptly and liaison between housing and planning has improved, resulting in a better service for partner RSLs and other developers.
- 165** However, there are weaknesses in the Council's track record and areas where progress has been limited. For example, action on diversity at both a strategic and operational level has been inadequate; a weak area highlighted in the earlier CPA inspection. ELDC has also been slow to implement effective arrangements for complaints handling; another area highlighted in a previous inspection.
- 166** Performance in raising housing standards in the private sector has also been mixed. ELDC slightly exceeded its own targets in 2005/06 for improving conditions in the private sector through grants or enforcement but housing renewal grant work has been curtailed, inspection work of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) has not been comprehensive and there has been limited progress in raising standards of maintenance and management in the HMO stock. The Council has not developed an accredited landlord scheme and has not effectively addressed issues of harassment in the private rented sector.
- 167** ELDC has been slow to encourage choice-based lettings in the social rented sector and there has been limited consideration of a common housing register in the district. It has also not reviewed nomination agreements with social landlords, which effectively limit access to housing for homeless households.
- 168** The Council's recent track record against its own targets is good. In some areas ELDC has amended the indicators that it uses and has introduced new ones and so it is not possible to compare performance over time. In the seven areas where indicators have remained the same, performance in 2005/06 compared with 2004/05 has improved in four, remained stable in one and deteriorated very slightly in two. These latter two relate to customer satisfaction and recorded satisfaction levels in those areas where it is measured are still high.
- 169** The housing service cannot demonstrate a clear and sustained record of improving value for money. There are some examples where improvements have been made and current plans which indicate that other efficiency gains may be made but, at present clear outcomes are relatively isolated examples.

### **How well does the service manage performance?**

- 170** Planning processes are clear and service plans are SMART<sup>5</sup> and robust. The corporate performance framework provides clear information to enable members and managers to identify and address issues but at an operational level there are weaknesses in performance monitoring and management and benchmarking is underdeveloped. Leadership within the organisation supports and encourages continuous improvement but learning is not fully embedded.
- 171** There is a robust process in place for service planning. Service teams, including frontline staff, were involved in developing the housing service plan; managers then submitted the plan for consideration at a service challenge day, where they were open to challenge from councillors, chief officers and other service managers. The Council has also introduced a process to ensure a consistent corporate format for service plans and that plans are co-ordinated. Having a robust planning process helps to ensure that plans are sufficiently stretching but also achievable.
- 172** The housing service plan is clear and outlines aims and priorities for the future. It links actions with corporate priorities and notes relevant performance indicators for each action. The plan also assigns clear responsibilities and timescales for action, identifies intended impact, resources required and the risk attached to the activity. Further detail of resources is included, plus a brief analysis of the risk should the intended resources not become available. Where reference is made to impact, this is considered in terms of efficiency and effectiveness of the service. Clear and comprehensive plans help to ensure that priorities are clearly understood and the appropriate resources are committed, which mean that the plans and intended outcomes are more likely to be achieved.
- 173** However, there are some weaknesses in the housing service plan in so far as it does not address some of issues that we have identified, for example, in aspects of the homelessness and housing advice service, which particularly affect the Council's more vulnerable customers. Priorities are also not based on a robust assessment of service user and resident priorities.
- 174** There are clear arrangements and a culture in place to support continuous improvement. There is visible leadership, for example, the Chief Executive and managers have been involved in 'back to the floor' exercises. A range of sessions, entitled 'being valued, feeling proud' have been used to clearly communicate the vision and values of the organisation and key priorities. However, clear and effective leadership is less evident in some areas; for example, the lack of progress with diversity is at least partly reflective of the priority afforded to the issue by leaders within the organisation.

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<sup>5</sup> SMART - Specific, measurable, achievable, resourced and timebound.

- 175** ELDC has demonstrated a commitment to improvement in establishing a new organisational development team to help facilitate continuous improvement across all departments. The team is using a range of techniques including service 'health checks' and process reviews, to encourage and support staff to find and implement solutions and service improvements. Although the team has not yet been involved in the housing service, the Council's allocation of resources to the team is evidence of its wider commitment to continuous service improvement.
- 176** The Council clearly has ambitions to improve and some documents, for example, the new value for money strategy, explicitly state an ambition to be amongst the best performers, which is positive; although this ambition could be more clearly stated in other corporate documents. The housing service plan includes targets which, if achieved, would demonstrate clear improvements in performance and would take it to a level comparable with better local authority performers.
- 177** Performance management arrangements at a corporate level are proving effective. A new framework has been introduced to address weaknesses identified in the CPA inspection. There is a range of key indicators in place, against which performance is monitored on a regular, monthly basis by the Council's management team. For each indicator and target a tolerance level has been set. If performance falls outside of this tolerance level, this triggers further attention; exception reports have to be produced outlining action taken and proposed, with clear responsibilities assigned and time targets set. Implementation of this framework has assisted the Council to focus attention on key issues and to drive improvements in performance. Further refinement of the framework is underway, with the aim of ensuring that decision makers have a clear and combined view of financial and operational information.
- 178** However, at an operational level performance monitoring and management is inconsistent and is underdeveloped. In some areas, IT systems have not been used to their full potential or are not adequate to support operational performance monitoring and staff supplement the systems with their own spreadsheets or other monitoring arrangements. This involves some duplication of effort and data entry and is not an efficient and effective use of time. In other areas, activity and performance information is not actively used to spot trends or identify where delays may be occurring. Clear targets are not set, for example, for response to grant requests or surveys and until recently, actual performance has not been monitored to establish the level of service being provided to service users.
- 179** Benchmarking is also underdeveloped. Whilst there are some examples where this has occurred and ELDC has sought information from some of the best performers. There is little evidence to demonstrate that ELDC's housing service has systematically used comparative information to identify potential for service improvement and/or efficiency gains. For housing advice and homelessness services, some detailed benchmarking work has been carried out by consultants on behalf of the Council, although it is not clear how this information has been used other than to illustrate the current position. Benchmarking for strategy and enabling work is in its very early stages; ELDC is working with neighbouring authorities to establish issues where this would be feasible and useful. Within the private sector housing service, no benchmarking work is evident.

- 180 Performance monitoring lacks a customer focus. Monitoring for some services, for example housing support, includes testing and reviewing customer satisfaction. However, this is not the case across all housing services and in many areas this means that the Council does not have the comprehensive data or indicators against which to track improvements, for example, it does not track customer satisfaction with the disabled facilities grants process and work. It is also missing opportunities to identify and address where the service is not meeting customer needs, for example, aspects of the 'Safe at Home' scheme outlined earlier in the report. There is also very limited service user involvement in performance monitoring and management, for example in agreeing targets and reviewing progress.
- 181 It is not yet clear that performance management arrangements will drive improvements in value for money. Existing financial performance monitoring arrangements are sound, for example, spend against relevant budgets is regularly reviewed as part of the monthly performance monitoring arrangements and financial reports assist managers by showing spend and commitments. However, it is not yet clear how value for money reporting fits into this framework.
- 182 Learning is not yet systematic and embedded across the service. ELDC does not have a long record of being outward looking, although this is clearly changing. We found some examples of staff exploring good practice elsewhere, including that of the best performers, and sharing ideas with other organisations, for example regarding strategy consultation and development of services for those who have experienced domestic violence. The Council has also used peer reviews to learn from others and as been able to tap into DCLG (previously ODPM) funding and support following its CPA result. We also found some examples of learning from own experience, for example, in the use of concept statements for new build schemes and rolling out of some IT solutions after trialling in one or more service area. However, there are no clear mechanisms in place to ensure that learning is effectively captured, applied and shared across the service, which means that it may be missing opportunities to improve services and to avoid repetition of service failures.

### **Does the service have the capacity to improve?**

- 183 ELDC has appropriate skills, tools and finances to deliver improvements although there are still some gaps and, while it is still undergoing a significant period of change, it is too early to judge how effectively some of these are being applied. Significant investment is being made in training and development of councillors, managers and other staff. Investment has also been made in IT to support the delivery of services to customers, although there is scope for more effective use of IT to support remote working and more effective performance management. Financial resources are adequate to support service improvement and are clearly used to address priority areas. Staff sickness and absence levels plus issues of staff turnover in some sections is also hampering the ability of the Council to improve at the pace it would like.

- 184** At member level, ELDC has introduced a portfolio holder system and has used this effectively in the field of housing by combining housing and planning responsibilities to ensure a more co-ordinated approach. A range of member development needs have been identified and there has been significant investment in training, for example, through the IDeA leadership college. Peer members from better performing authorities have also been involved in a mentoring role; this is helping to improve the capacity of members to provide more effective leadership and scrutiny and progress in this area has been acknowledged in the recent Audit Commission progress assessment.
- 185** ELDC has made appropriate investment in its IT and interactive technology capability to improve customer access and communication with partners but some existing systems are not used to their full potential and handheld technology is not widely used to enable more remote working; this could be particularly useful given the large geographical area of the district. ELDC has introduced new software for the homelessness and housing advice service including document image processing and a workflow system. IT investments have also been made in corporate telephony and various IT solutions to facilitate more effective use of staff time and remote working are gradually being rolled out across the Council. Housing support staff have PDAs<sup>6</sup> but wider use of handheld technology is underdeveloped within the housing service, for example, for surveying work. Some existing systems are not used effectively, particularly to assist in day to day performance monitoring; this results in duplication of work and data not being readily available to identify trends in activity and performance, which hampers the Council's ability to identify weaknesses and improve services.
- 186** There is evidence of effective financial and human resources (HR) planning to ensure that the Council has appropriate resources and skills to achieve its objectives. The management restructure and new recruitment to key posts demonstrates that the Council is taking positive steps to improve its capacity. There is a clear framework in place to capture staff training needs and budget provision for corporate training has been increased for 2006/07. Results from the 2005 staff survey show that housing staff are positive about the training opportunities that the Council provides to enable them to carry out their roles effectively. However, we found some areas where policies were being misapplied or misinterpreted, suggesting a need for additional training to embed knowledge more effectively and for quality assurance processes to be improved, to ensure consistent and appropriate services are provided to customers.
- 187** There is an ongoing management development programme in place to develop capacity, a manager forum and workshops for more technical HR updates to assist managers to deal with such issues as staff performance and capability, which is positive. A staff appraisal system is in place and personal development plans are linked to individual plans to service plans. Within the housing service these are monitored through a framework of one-to-ones. Although HR oversee the appraisals to ensure that they take place, it is a weakness that there is no quality assurance process to ensure that the appraisals cover the issues intended and effectively link individual objectives to overall corporate priorities.

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<sup>6</sup> PDA - Personal Data Assistant

## 52 Strategic Housing Services | What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 188** Absence and sickness levels are relatively high and higher than the Authority's own target for 2005/06, which is a weakness and detrimentally affects its ability to deliver and improve services. A new absence management policy has been introduced to assist ELDC to address the issue and new referral arrangements have been agreed, in partnership with neighbouring councils, to speed up occupational health assessments, but the impact of these measures is not yet evident. There are examples of staff performance issues being tackled but a capability policy is not yet in place although one has been drafted and is currently subject to union consultation. Staff vacancies and turnover in some parts of the housing service are also hampering service development, but action is being taken to address this and it may prove to be a relatively short-term problem.
- 189** Results of the staff survey carried out in 2005, suggest that staff are still uncertain about aspects of the change process currently underway, indicating that there could be greater clarity about priorities and objectives, more consistency in decision making and that reasons for change could be better explained. Failure to address these concerns are likely to hamper the service's further improvement.
- 190** There are adequate financial resources to support future improvements. The Council has a good record of obtaining external funding to supplement its own and to help it achieve its priority objectives, examples of these are detailed earlier in the report. There are also clear examples which demonstrate that the Council moves its own resources to address priorities, such as the use of second homes council tax income to support a larger Disabled Facilities Grant programme. Modern methods of procurement have been used in other service areas but have only really been used in the housing service in relation to new development.

## Summary

- 191** ELDC's track record of improvements is mixed. There are clear improvements which benefit vulnerable residents. Planning processes are clear and service plans are SMART. The corporate performance management framework has been enhanced and is being used to drive service improvements and leaders within the organisation encourage service improvement and this supported by investment in training and IT. Financial resources are adequate and generally well directed.
- 192** However, progress in areas of private sector housing and diversity has been limited and the housing service cannot demonstrate a sustained track record in value for money improvements. There are weaknesses in performance management at a service level, benchmarking is underdeveloped and the use of IT is not maximised across the service. Learning, including effective use of customer feedback, is not fully embedded and staff capacity is hampered by absence levels and turnover in some parts of the service.

## Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

**Table 1 Best value performance indicators**

<b>Performance indicator</b>	<b>East Lindsey 2003/04</b>	<b>East Lindsey 2004/05</b>	<b>East Lindsey 2005/06 (unaudited)</b>	<b>National districts 2004/05 Top quartile (and average)</b>
BVPI 64 Number of private sector vacant dwellings returned into occupation or demolished during year as direct result of action by the Authority	6	115	163	25 (19.83)
BVPI 183a Average length of stay in bed and breakfast	8.5	4.3 wks	2.9 wks	1 (4)
BVPI 183b Average length of stay in hostel	13.8	0 wks	0 wks	0 (13)
BVPI 202 Number of people sleeping rough	New in 2004	New in 2004	7	N/A
BVPI 203 Change in families with dependent children or a pregnant woman placed in temporary accommodation	New in 2004/05	21%	60%	-9.4% (12.87)

<b>Performance indicator</b>	<b>East Lindsey 2003/04</b>	<b>East Lindsey 2004/05</b>	<b>East Lindsey 2005/06 (unaudited)</b>	<b>National districts 2004/05 Top quartile (and average)</b>
BVPI 213 Proportion of households accepted as statutorily homeless by the same Authority within the last two years	New in 2005/06	New in 2005/06	4%	N/A
BVPI 214 Number of homeless cases prevented	New in 2005/06	New in 2005/06	268	N/A

## Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
  - East Lindsey District Council's pre-inspection self-assessment
  - Housing Strategy 2005-10 plus the strategy supplements;
  - Housing Unit Service Plan 2006/07;
  - Value for Money and Efficiency Improvement Strategy;
  - Housing Service Value for Money and Efficiency Statement 2006/07;
  - People Strategy 2005/07; and
  - Affordable Warmth Strategy and update.

## Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
  - visits to leased properties and bed and breakfast establishments used as temporary accommodation for homeless households and for teenage parents;
  - file checks on aids and adaptations and housing renewal grants;
  - file checks on customer complaints;
  - phone surveys of partner RSLs;
  - visits to customer service centres at Manby Park, Louth, Spilsby, Horncastle, Mablethorpe and Skegness;
  - shadowing housing advice and housing support staff;
  - visits to 'Safe at Home' scheme service users; and
  - visits to residents who have had disabled adaptations carried out in their home.