

COVER REPORT: Strategic Housing Service Re-inspection
Copeland Borough Council March 2010

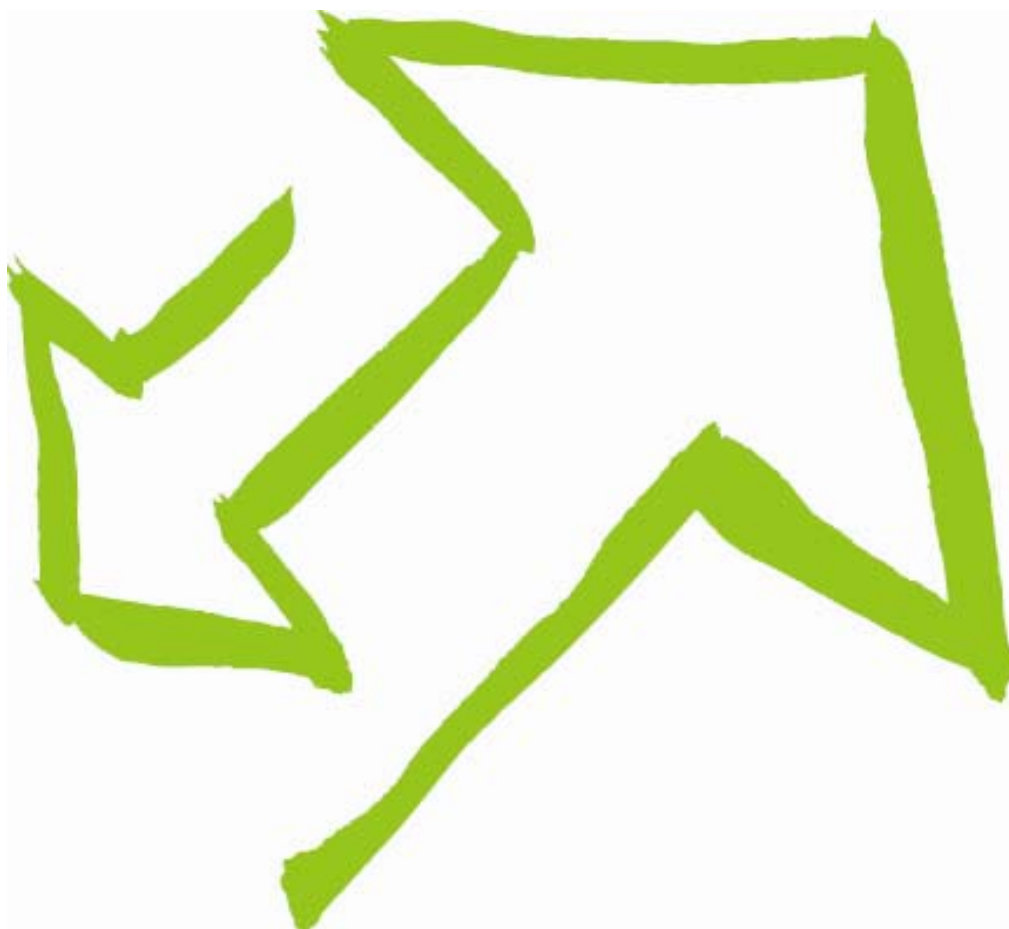
Report Author: Audit Commission

Summary: To consider a report from the Audit Commission. To be presented by the Housing Services Manager.

Strategic Housing Service Re-inspection

Copeland Borough Council

March 2010



Contents

Local Authority Housing Inspections	3
Summary	4
Scoring the service	5
Recommendations	7
Report	11
How good is the service?	13
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	34
Appendix 1 – Progress on recommendations from previous inspection	44
Appendix 2 – Performance indicators	48
Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken	50

Local Authority Housing Inspections

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

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

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

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

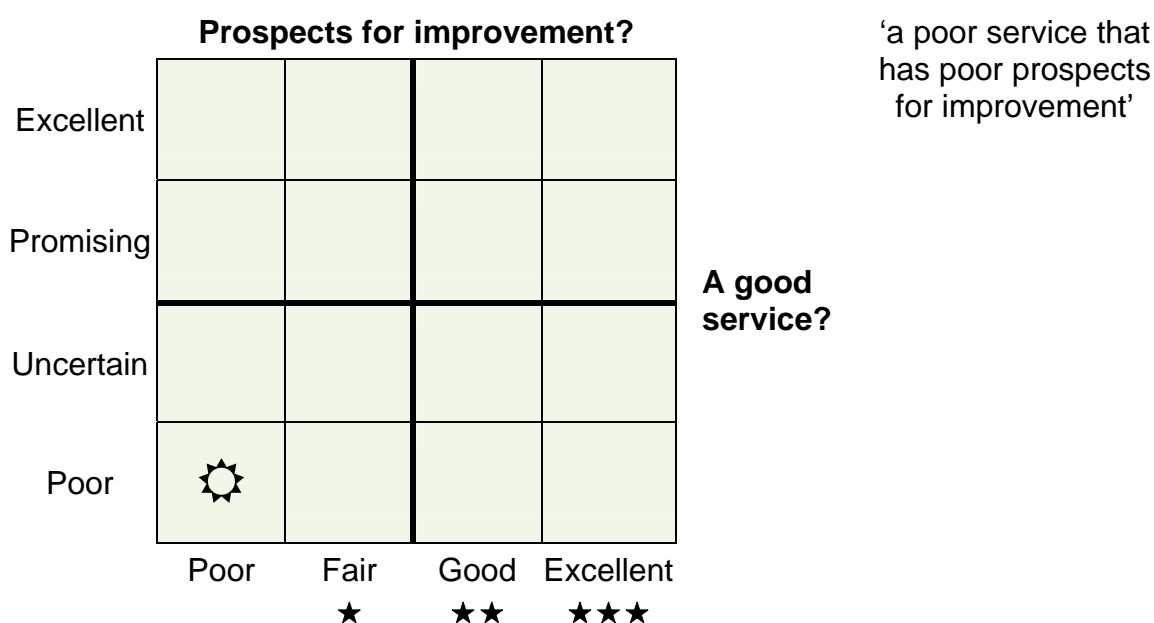
Summary

- 1 Copeland Borough Council is providing a poor strategic housing service with poor prospects for improvement.
- 2 There are a number of weaknesses in the service's customer focus. This includes consultation practices, some weaker aspects to telephone access, the implementation and monitoring of service standards and understanding and responding to diverse needs. Corporate leadership on equality and diversity is weak and this is reflected in limited outcomes in this area. The Council still has a weak understanding of its housing markets and significant gaps in the range and quality of its housing plans. Despite a new home improvement assistance policy, the Council has yet to effectively target the conditions identified in its stock condition survey, through regulation of the private rented sector or action to bring empty homes into use. Better relationships with housing associations have yet to be consistently reflected in improved service outcomes. The delivery of new homes is not meeting housing needs. The approach to value for money is not well structured, principles are not embedded and there is limited awareness of how costs and outcomes compare.
- 3 Provision to help customers access services has improved since the last inspection. There is better working between corporate teams and with external partners. Some front-line services have improved significantly and have delivered positive outcomes for service users; these include homelessness, help for disabled people in obtaining adaptations to their homes, although there can be long waiting times for some customers, and the procedure for supporting applicants through the making of a planning application. The service can demonstrate improvements in value for money in some areas although several opportunities to improve have been missed.
- 4 The Council has been slow to address some key areas of customer focus and equality and diversity. It has not set out a structured approach to meeting rural housing needs, there are some key gaps in its high level plans and draft plans are not always robust. The service lacks a comprehensive suite of performance indicators (PIs) and targets to support effective performance management and there is limited evidence of learning from best practice. Reduced Government funding for home improvements, a reducing reliance on the Home Improvement Agency and a failure to develop arrangements with neighbouring councils to jointly deliver some services increases the risk that the service will not have the capacity to operate effectively in a number of areas.
- 5 The Council has increased its investment in the service since the last inspection. It will have a better understanding of how to address housing needs through the Local Development Framework (LDF) when survey information it has commissioned is fully analysed. New software has contributed to improved performance management but there are still weaknesses in this area. Recruitment has increased the knowledge and skills in senior management positions and the Council has demonstrated strong leadership in some key areas although not consistently. New arrangements including improved external partnerships are helping the strategic development of the service.

Scoring the service

- 6 We have assessed Copeland Borough Council as providing a 'poor', no -star service that has poor prospects for improvement. Our judgements are based on the evidence obtained during the inspection and are outlined below.

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 7 We found the service to be poor because it has a range of weaknesses including:
- underdeveloped customer focus in key areas such as access by telephone, service standards, customer involvement in shaping services and a lack of a comprehensive understanding of the needs of some diverse groups;
 - limited understanding of housing markets, housing needs and significant gaps in the range and quality of high level Copeland specific strategic plans;
 - failure to effectively target home assistance loans/interventions in line with stock condition findings;
 - a weak approach to regulating the private rented sector;
 - ineffective approaches to deal with empty homes;

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

- weak outcomes from partnership arrangements with housing associations, especially regarding long re-let times and a failure to deal with under-occupation;
- poor delivery of affordable housing, especially in rural areas; and
- slow development of the corporate value for money framework and weak self-awareness of value for money at service level.

8 However, there are some areas of strength including:

- effective management and learning from complaints and an improved range of and more widely distributed information about services;
- strong homelessness prevention has led to positive outcomes for many service users;
- a new home renewal policy and quicker processing times to help vulnerable people; and
- some examples of improvements in value for money resulting in efficiency savings and improved services.

9 There are a number of weaknesses which must be overcome to improve the prospects for improvement. These include:

- there are not comprehensive proposals in place for new high levels plans, some of the draft plans lack clarity and are neither outcome focused nor SMART¹;
- slow progress and a failure to effectively manage some initiatives in a number of key areas including diversity, value for money and some aspects of customer focus;
- although the Council is working with other Cumbrian district councils to address the housing needs of gypsies and travellers or residents living in rural locations, plans are not fully formed;
- limited evidence of learning from best practice;
- the service has not adopted a strong suite of PIs to adequately monitor improvements, and targets are not ambitious; and
- some opportunities to increase capacity have not been taken.

10 There are a number of strengths, including:

- increased investment in the service has enabled performance in some key areas to improve;
- corporate performance management arrangements have improved;
- stronger and more experienced leadership and the integration of housing, planning, economic development and sustainability services into one strategic division which has brought housing into the mainstream of policy and planning and allowed it to benefit from resources in this area; and
- improved partnership working with internal and external partners will increase the capacity to deliver positive outcomes for residents.

¹ SMART - Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Resourced and Time-bound

Recommendations

- 11** To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs¹ 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 service users, partners and councillors; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve the focus on customers by:

- improving telephone access to the service and developing e-enabled service access initiatives;
- extending the range of service standards to all aspects of the strategic housing services and ensuring they are effectively promoted, monitored and that underperformance is addressed; and
- following through on plans to understand the services' customer profile and fully involving customers in shaping services in line with their needs and aspirations.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- better informed customers and more accountable services;
- better staff awareness of customer needs; and
- removal of the barriers to service access for customers, especially vulnerable people.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by December 2010.

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

Recommendation

R2 Improve the focus on equality and diversity by:

- improving corporate leadership on equality and diversity issues;
- carrying out more robust Equality Impact Assessments which are thoroughly responded to; and
- training staff to understand and respond to the needs of diverse communities.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- removal of the barriers to service access for customers, especially vulnerable people.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by September 2010.

Recommendation

R3 Improve the strategic approach to housing services by:

- developing strategic plans with key milestones to address the housing needs of specific diverse groups including gypsies and travellers, migrant workers, older persons and young people;
- setting out a comprehensive programme of rural housing needs surveys and potential development sites in partnership with parish councils and the LDNPA;
- adopting and implementing an overarching housing strategy for Copeland which is reviewed annually and sets a clear direction for the service;
- adopting and implementing a comprehensive strategy for private sector housing (which addresses empty homes, energy efficiency, Park Homes, regulation, home renewal assistance targeted on stock condition findings and supporting vulnerable people to live independently); and
- ensuring that the LDF process results in more detailed standards for the type, size and design of new build housing which reflects housing needs as evidenced by robust surveys.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- housing services which better meet local need and aspirations and dovetail with other local initiatives and priorities;
- compliance with legislation and other government policy requirements; and
- increased capacity for planning and performance management.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by December 2010.

Recommendations

Recommendation

R4 Improve partnership working by:

- working more effectively with housing associations to improve outcomes for residents, particularly in the areas of faster re-letting times and under-occupation;
- reviewing the current working arrangements with the Home Improvement Agency to identify whether their services could be used to support more people and provide an opportunity for service development in weaker areas; and
- entering into discussions with neighbouring councils, where appropriate developing the potential for shared service delivery.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased capacity for learning and planning; and
- increased capacity to develop a wider range of services and improve existing approaches.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by December 2010.

Recommendation

R5 Improve performance management arrangements by:

- establishing a comprehensive suite of PIs and targets for the strategic housing service and ensuring that they are appropriately monitored and that underperformance is robustly reported and addressed; and
- adopting a more robust approach to learning.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- higher profile for housing within the Council;
- better understanding of how well services are meeting corporate and customer aspirations and improved capacity to respond to areas of underperformance; and
- greater awareness of best practice that can be translated into better service outcomes for customers.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by July 2010.

Recommendation

R6 Improve the approach to value for money by:

- benchmarking service costs and quality with other councils, reporting the findings and using the data to review how value for money can be improved; and
- identifying opportunities to improve procurement within services.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- an improved understanding of the balance of cost and quality in securing value for money in service delivery; and
- better information for decision makers.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by September 2010.

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

Dates of Inspection: 19 to 23 October 2009.

Report

Context

The locality

- 13 The borough of Copeland is situated on the west coast of Cumbria; it is largely rural, with over two thirds inside the Lake District National Park. Most of its 70,300 population live in the narrow 35 mile coastal strip in the four main population centres of Whitehaven, Egremont, Cleator Moor and Millom.
- 14 Some 96.6 per cent of the population describe themselves as White British, and 1.9 per cent of mixed or black and minority ethnic origin. Over-60 year olds account for 23.5 per cent of the population and, since 1991, the over-80 age group increased by 43 per cent.
- 15 There are pockets both of affluence and deprivation in the borough. The decline of former industries has meant that unemployment at 3.5 per cent, although close to the national average, has grown by 30 per cent in the last two years. The main employer is Sellafield Nuclear Reprocessing Plant which accounts for an estimated 50 per cent of employment directly and indirectly. West Cumbria is home to over 60 per cent of the country's nuclear waste industry and its long-term future is under debate - the consequences of which for West Cumbria could be significant.

The Council

- 16 Copeland Borough Council has 51 councillors; 30 are currently Labour, 18 Conservative and three Independent. It has a leader and single party cabinet model, with one senior councillor acting as deputy leader, and all eight cabinet members with assigned portfolios. There is a cross party scrutiny function and a number of committees to deal with planning, audit and other council business.
- 17 The Council's net current revenue budget for 2009/10 is £14.4 million and its capital budget is £7.8, million, of which £4.4 (57 per cent) is funded from external contributions and grants. The Council's requirement to support its capital programme is approximately £3.3 million and this is funded wholly from capital reserves. The total (gross) annual turnover of the Council is around £50 million.

The service

- 18 The Council transferred its housing stock in 2004 to Copeland Homes, which is part of the Home Group and the largest registered housing association in the area. The associations are on schedule to meet the Decent Homes target by December 2010 (Copeland Homes has been given dispensation by the Homes and Communities Agency to defer the completion of its improvement programme to 2013 for some of its stock which is in poor condition).

- 19 There were 2,500 households on the combined housing waiting list in 2008/09; the total housing association lettings amounted to just 436 in that period with only 27 resulting from Council nominations. The numbers on waiting lists have more than doubled since 2008.
- 20 There are just over 26,000 privately owned homes in the borough, 67 per cent of which meet the requirements of the Decent Homes Standard¹. Rates of disrepair and thermal comfort are below national averages; under the Housing Health and Safety Rating System, 12 per cent of the stock is subject to Category One hazards and 33 per cent of vulnerable households do not live in decent homes. Dwellings exhibiting Category One hazards are proportionately more concentrated in Distington (22 per cent), Frizington (20 per cent), Egremont (18 per cent) and West Lakes (24 per cent). The average energy efficiency rating² for the district is 50 (which is below the national average of 53) and 20 per cent of dwellings have a rating below 35. Almost 4,500 private sector households (18.5 per cent) are in fuel poverty which is higher in the Distington (20 per cent) and West Lakes (23 per cent) areas. The minimum cost to repair and improve non-decent housing is estimated at £57 million.
- 21 The Council reports that 574 dwellings have been vacant in excess of six months. The private rented sector in Copeland represents just over 5 per cent of the total private housing stock.
- 22 The Council's Home Renewal Assistance Policy identifies the following households as priorities for assistance: vulnerable households (ie those on benefits), older persons, families with one child under 16 and first time buyers.
- 23 The Council's investment plans for 2009/2010 include the following.
- | | |
|---|------------|
| • Home Repair Assistance | £35,000 |
| • Renovation Grants (pre 2009 policy) | £1,090,000 |
| • Renewal Assistance (post 2009 policy) | £687,716 |
| • Empty Properties | £19, 438 |
| • Disabled Facilities Grants | £882,799 |
| • Basket Road Improvements (design consultancy) | £2,127 |
| • Basket Road Improvements (capital scheme) | £460,000 |
| • Retention for Trusteel remedial Works | £58,384 |
- 24 The average cost of a house in Copeland in 2009 was £123,000. This figure is well below the average for England and Wales (£185,000) and below the average for the North West. Copeland now has an income to house price ratio of 4.24 and, in 2006, it was identified as the most affordable district in England.
- 25 The Strategic Housing Service sits within the Development Strategy and Development Operations Departments. Staff are situated in the main Council offices in Whitehaven and the service can be accessed at each of the area offices. There is a fortnightly housing surgery in Millom.

¹ House Condition Survey 2007

² Using the Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) which rates the energy efficiency of a dwelling on a scale between 0-100 (with 100 being the most energy efficient)

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 26** The Cumbria Community Strategy 2008 to 2028 sets out five key aims and housing falls under the 'World Class Environmental Quality' aim: 'Energetic communities will be helped to flourish by providing decent, high quality and affordable homes for everyone in places where people want to live and work'. The Cumbria local strategic partnership (LSP) has established local area agreement (LAA) housing targets for each year in the period 2008-11, but no Copeland-specific targets are set. These LAA targets support the delivery of the LSP's housing aims.
- Net additional homes provided: 1706 in each of the three years.
 - Number of affordable homes delivered (gross): 260 year one, 300 year two, 350 year three.
 - Tackling Fuel Poverty – percentage of people receiving income based benefits living in homes with a low energy efficiency rating: no target – to be established.
 - Supporting People's service users who have moved on in a planned way from temporary living arrangements. Targets: 368 year one, 375 year two, 383 year three.
 - Average length of waiting time for major adaptations supplied via disabled facilities grant from assessment by occupational therapist to work beginning – target: target - 42 weeks and 39 weeks (stretched), 42 weeks (unstretched), 34 weeks (stretched), 42 weeks (unstretched) 29 weeks (stretched).
- 27** The Council's Corporate Plan 2007 to 2012 sets out its vision: 'Leading the transformation of West Cumbria to a prosperous future'. This is to be achieved through a series of activities, collected under three themes.
- Effective Leadership.
 - Achieving Transformation.
 - Promoting Prosperity (its Quality Housing objective is situated within the Promoting Prosperity theme).

There are a number of key housing related actions in the plan including:

- implementation of the Whitehaven Regeneration Programme;
- influencing home energy conservation plans and tackling fuel poverty;
- working in partnership with Registered Social Landlords to ensure the Decent Homes target is reached by 2010;
- reviewing the service provided by the Home Improvement Agency;
- ensuring the balance of housing stock to meet local needs;

- providing a good housing advice service particularly to vulnerable people, while looking to reduce the level of homelessness; and
- improving support to people with disabilities and older people to live independently.

28 The Council's Corporate Improvement Plan 2009/10 sets some targets for housing.

- Establishing the current housing need in the borough by September 2009 and agree a strategic housing plan to help meet these needs by September 2009.
- Bringing 60 private sector properties up to a decent standard by April 2010 with the use of home renewal financial assistance.
- Working with partners to help achieve the decent homes standard for social housing.

29 Current annual targets for new housing delivery in Copeland are:

- Structure Plan (1991): 190 homes per year;
- Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) (2003-2021): 230 homes outside of the national park (total of 4140); and
- the Cumbria Housing Strategy 2006 to 2011: 16 affordable homes per year.

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

Access and customer care

- 30** The previous inspection revealed more weaknesses than strengths in this area. We found that access to services was generally not well provided for. There was limited information available in leaflet form and the website was not effective. A weak culture of customer care was evident in its underdeveloped provision for translation, limited use of service standards or customer satisfaction data, an absence of customer consultation about policy issues and weaknesses in the management of complaints.
- 31** In this reinspection, we found that weaknesses still outweigh strengths. Better provision has been put in place to help customers access services and information and the management of complaints is much improved. However, customer feedback is not used effectively, telephone and on-line access to the service is not well managed and service standards are underdeveloped.
- 32** The service is not consistently customer focussed. Housing staff have received customer care training and front office reception staff benefit from ongoing training. However, customer profiling activity is not effective and has led to few outcomes for customers. Some key weaknesses identified in the previous report have not been addressed. For example, the Council does not routinely provide private interview facilities, mystery shopping is not used in a structured way as a means to improve services and no formal assessment is made of the quality of advice given by third sector agencies. Again, an inconsistent customer focus increases the risk of services not meeting customer needs.

How good is the service?

33 There are some difficulties facing customers who wish to access services.

- The Council does not know the number of requests for services made on-line and its range of e-enabled services is limited.
- Services provided by external agencies¹ are still not effectively monitored.
- a fortnightly housing surgery in Millom was launched in 2008, but there are no other outreach points in place (for example, in prisons or long stay hospitals). Customers are offered interviews at their preferred locations, but this is not well advertised.

Difficulties remain for customers seeking access to housing assistance and advice.

34 Customers are not adequately involved in helping to develop services. They were not consulted on the development of the new Access to Services Strategy and the Council does not know that the current arrangements meet the needs of customers because it has not routinely asked them. Customers have not been consulted on service standards or new plans such as the Homelessness Strategy. Customer feedback processes have been introduced in some service areas, but there are gaps and monitoring and reporting is ineffective. This range of weaknesses limits the Council's ability to develop services that reflect the needs and aspirations of customers.

35 Existing service standards are neither consistently challenging nor comprehensive and their implementation and use is inconsistent.² The 'corporate' service standards are limited because they apply only to contact with 'Copeland Direct' and refer only to the speed of telephone answering and to responses to those who visit reception, emails and letters. No records are kept of how long personal callers have to wait before being seen at area offices or how well their query was dealt with. The Council has not performed well against the 'corporate' service standards. Where service standards are in place for the strategic housing services, they are not being monitored. The service is therefore not yet able to demonstrate that its customers receive an acceptable quality of service and, without an indication of service standards, customers cannot make informed decisions.

36 Access to services are not always effectively managed. The service does not measure the number of calls received, abandoned and the time taken to answer calls made directly to officers. Only 79 per cent of phone calls made to the contact centre were answered within target, the quality of response, the number of calls that are dealt with successfully first time and the number of calls referred on is not measured. Research shows that around 90 per cent of callers to reception are seen within the target time of five minutes but of those who had to be referred on to another member of staff showed longer waiting times with nearly a fifth waiting more than 10 minutes. Around 95 per cent of callers said they had been dealt with in a professional manner, an improvement on previous years. However, 10 per cent of people who said they sent emails received no reply. People who make contact with the service will therefore not always receive a strong response.

¹ Such as Shelter, the Citizens' Advice Bureau, the Carlisle Law Centre and the Home Improvement Agency

² Not yet in place for regulation and development control

37 There are some positive aspects to the provision made for helping customers make contact with the service.

- A new customer relationship management system and an Access to Services Strategy provides a better strategic platform but there are limited outcomes from this to date.
- The main offices¹ are Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) compliant and have the 'hearing loop' system available. The Council are members of language line. Access points for face-to-face contact are generally inviting and well equipped and front line reception staff have received training on aspects of the service.
- In response to customer research, the Council has established a call centre approach which has led to improvements in customer satisfaction with services such as telephone answering.

These developments will make it easier for customers to contact the Council and obtain advice and services.

38 Information for customers has improved and is now a strong area. There is a useful Directory of Services which gives the address, services offered and contact details of all key partners and agencies. The web site is accessible, contains a better range of information about key services than in the previous inspection and provides useful links to other housing sites. The services are periodically advertised in the Council's newsletter 'Copeland Matters'. A new suite of leaflets for both the housing options and housing renewal services has been developed. They are generally well laid out, easy to understand and available in a variety of formats, but they do not advise customers of the standard of service that they can expect. The Council is extending the number of outlets where its information can be found. This will help all customers identify and access the services which offer potential solutions to their housing problems.

39 Complaints are now effectively managed. A corporate complaints procedure was implemented electronically in April 2009 using new performance management software. The service is easily accessed via the website which clearly sets out appropriate service standards² and procedures. The Council performs well against these standards and shows a willingness to apologise when appropriate and offer compensation (although this is not set against a compensation policy). All complaints are recorded regardless of whether they are dealt with through the formal complaints procedure and this improves the chances of the Council collecting opportunities for learning. Complaints and outcomes are reported to the Corporate Management Team, the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Strategic Housing Panel. There are a number of examples which demonstrate that the Council has learnt from complaints³ and improved its services.

¹ At Whitehaven, Cleator Moor, Millom and Moresby

² Acknowledge initial complaint within three working days; respond in full within ten days. Second stage complaint - respond within ten working days.

³ This includes billing arrangements, the use of mediation in landlord tenant disputes and to pursue homelessness decisions and housing options in tandem.

How good is the service?

Diversity

- 40 The previous inspection revealed more weaknesses than strengths in this area. We found that the Council neither understood the diverse needs of its customers nor considered the impact on diverse groups of its housing work. Equality and diversity (E&D) issues were not robustly addressed in procurement processes and the impact of diversity training was not analysed in terms of outcomes. Some strategic work had been done to ensure legislative compliance.
- 41 Weaknesses considerably outweigh strengths in this area. This inspection revealed that corporate leadership is not effectively driving the E&D agenda and so there are low levels of achievement in a number of key areas. In particular, equality impact assessments (EIAs) are not robust. The service does not yet fully understand its customer profile and what their needs are and so tailored outcomes have been limited. Partnership working has improved but outcomes are also currently limited.
- 42 The quality of corporate leadership on E&D is weak. For example:
- we would expect most public sector organisations to have reached, as a minimum, level three of the Equality Standard for Local Government. The Council has attained only Level Two and, while there is a commitment to reach the 'Achieving' level of the new Equality Framework for Local Government by December 2010, it is still at the 'developing' stage;
 - the Council has put limited dedicated capacity in place to drive the E&D agenda. A Corporate Equality and Diversity Group has been established but they have had a disappointing impact in steering improvements in this area (their remit covers EIAs, training, and future proposals);
 - some of the Council's buildings are not compliant with the requirements of the disability discrimination act (DDA), although all housing services are provided in compliant buildings;
 - while diversity issues have been included in tendering processes and contracts include E&D requirements, their delivery isn't checked;
 - there has been some training for staff but it is delivered through an IT programme and training is not mandatory for Councillors. No analysis has been made of the effectiveness of training or how it has influenced staff behaviour; and
 - the workforce does not reflect the diversity of the community it serves because people with a disability and people from a BME background are underrepresented in the workforce generally and in senior positions.

Without effective leadership and commitment to E&D, front line services will not be fully supportive of the E&D needs of customers.

- 43 Progress in completing EIAs is limited. Staff are given training on completing these assessments and a corporate template supports consistency. However, the quality of completed work to date is not strong and does not cover all service areas. EIAs have been completed for Private Sector Housing and Housing Options; although it involved consulting a range of advocacy groups, they are not robust. For example, the Private Sector Housing EIA failed to identify the potential impact on vulnerable residents following the decision to take the administration of most disabled facilities grants (DFGs) from the Home Improvement Agency (HIA). Resources have yet to be identified in service plans to address those barriers which have been identified. Without a strong approach to EIAs, the Council will not effectively address the barriers to services facing its diverse communities.
- 44 There is improved partnership working but few outcomes have been delivered. The service has not entered into joint protocols with agencies to ensure that vulnerable people facing crisis are appropriately supported, for example, rapid hospital discharge arrangements or people with mental health problems facing homelessness. Partnership working has the potential to improve the Council's awareness of diversity issues in its policy making although this is not being fully realised at the present time.
- 45 Specialist support to help vulnerable people access home improvements is not consistently available. Vulnerable residents can elect to use the Home Improvement Agency (HIA) to help them apply for grants or loans and for appointing and supervising a contractor under the Council's home improvement policy. However, the Council no longer allows the HIA to administer DFGs on its behalf (unless the DFG is provided alongside a home improvement grant). There is a handyperson service which is managed by Age Concern and funded by the Supporting People programme. The Council does not monitor the quality of the service although both the Council and the HIA report that it has not always performed well. This means that while some people are helped to gain access to home improvements, the specialist skills of the HIA are not available to some of the most vulnerable people in Copeland.
- 46 The Council does not yet understand the diverse needs of its customers or the diversity of service users. Copeland has only recently started to collect details on the diversity of service users. Presently, therefore, it is not aware if any of these groups are under-represented in the take up of services; importantly, it is unaware if any particular group is over represented in making complaints. Neither the Council nor the service has a clear understanding of its customer profile and there are very few examples of how services have been tailored to address specific needs. One notable exception is the new housing renewal policy which now targets some diverse groups. A lack of comprehensive awareness of customer needs means that the Council does not have a solid basis on which to build its service plans.

How good is the service?

- 47 Generally, the range and quality of outcomes for diverse service users is poor. In addition to the examples given throughout the report, it is a significant failure that there is currently no provision for gypsies and travellers in Copeland - despite a count in July 2007 recording 107 caravans on unauthorised encampments and police records showing up to 50 having been dealt with by them since 2004). All temporary accommodation is not DDA compliant which means that disabled people do not have equality of access to this resource. While positive outcomes are not yet evident for all diverse groups, progress is being made in helping some customers overcome their housing needs.
- 48 There is some assistance for vulnerable people to improve their homes. The HIA has a caseworker service which assesses eligibility for benefits, gaining more than £20,000 for clients last year, looks to source charitable funding to 'top up' funding shortfalls sourcing over £12,000 last year and makes referrals to other agencies for support. The agency also provides county-wide services for the County Council, for example, arranging low level adaptations such as handrails and offers free technical advice on home improvements. Satisfaction with the service generally exceeds its 95 per cent target. This agency support will help to remove the barriers facing some vulnerable people who need assistance to improve their homes.

Strategic approach to housing

- 49 The previous inspection found more weaknesses than strengths in this area. There were significant gaps in the Council's knowledge of its housing market and it had relied too heavily on sub regional strategy making, without translating this work into clear plans for the borough. Overall, it had a poor record of working corporately or with partners to achieve strategic housing objectives.
- 50 Weaknesses considerably outweigh strengths in this area. We found that the Council continues to have a poor evidence base to help it understand its housing markets although it is in the process of addressing many of these gaps. The range and quality of its strategic plans are weak and often lack a focus on Copeland. However, it is now working more effectively in external partnerships and has improved corporate working between the various teams supporting the service.
- 51 Overall, the service currently has a weak understanding of its housing markets.
- While the recent stock condition survey does provide robust evidence, the service continues to miss the opportunity to use this information to target its support (discussed in a later section).
 - Housing needs are not fully understood. The Cumbria-wide 2009 Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) had not been fully completed by the time of our inspection as findings were still being consulted on. Following this consultation, the Council expects to set affordable housing targets for each market area by January 2010. However, currently the draft SHMA does not provide a sound basis for developing these targets since the assessment lacks robust housing needs research (which the Council is planning to commission in 2010).
 - The supply of land to meet these needs is also not yet clear. A Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment was underway at the time of the inspection and was expected to be completed in November (2009).

- No strategic viability assessment had been undertaken to help the Council identify an appropriate requirement for affordable housing on a particular development (although plans are in place to commission this work).
- The Council does not understand fully the extent of rural housing needs and the identification of potential land to address this issue. The Cumbria Rural Housing Trust (commissioned by the Lake District National Park Authority (LDNPA) has completed nine needs surveys in rural settlements within the Copeland area of the National Park. However, this represents just 9 out of 26 parishes which have been surveyed.
- A gypsy and traveller accommodation assessment was commissioned in 2008 on a county-wide basis which identified the need for one residential and five transit pitches in Copeland. However, there is considerable scepticism amongst officers and councillors over its findings and, although no policy decision has been made, senior managers are favouring more research (current action and future plans to address this issue are discussed under the 'judgement two' section of this report).
- The Council does not have a full understanding of the housing needs of some diverse groups including migrant workers, older persons and young persons (although strategies are being developed for the latter two groups).
- The Council acknowledges that the Supporting People programme is historically underdeveloped. In particular, the range and extent of support needs is not fully known (the district councils in Cumbria are supporting the Commissioning Body's decision to commission a comprehensive needs analysis by the end of 2009).

These shortfalls in its evidence base mean that the Council does not currently have a solid foundation on which to build its strategic housing plans or to negotiate with developers.

52 There are significant weaknesses and gaps in a number of the Council's plans.

- The Corporate Plan 2007-12 and the Delivery Plan for 2009/10 set some high level targets for housing, but fail to identify forward looking targets in key areas such as new homes, empty homes, regulation, energy efficiency and supporting vulnerable people;
- The Cumbria Housing Strategy 2006 to 2011 does not set SMART targets for each district council. It sets only one specific target for Copeland of 16 new affordable homes per annum (80 in total) – and this is well short of the structure plan and RSS requirements. It does not provide a clear description of how Copeland will address its housing challenges and there is currently no housing strategy in place for Copeland;
- There is currently no overarching private sector housing strategy. This means that the Council has not set out a strategic framework for approaching key issues such as empty homes, regulating the private rented sector, energy efficiency, addressing Park Homes or supporting vulnerable people in the sector;

How good is the service?

- The Copeland Local Plan 2006 does not provide a robust set of 'tools' to allow officers to negotiate with developers to meet housing needs. It fails to set clear and challenging targets; for example, 'most housing sites will be developed within the range of 30 - 50 dwellings per hectare' and there is no threshold/quota system for affordable housing or house size. It is not prescriptive in terms of meeting the needs of the elderly or people with disabilities and does not lend itself well to further supplementary guidance. No specific urban allocation for affordable housing is made in the plan. Of concern is the policy which states that 'the (local Plan) will help maintain general standards of safety, privacy and open space. Exceptions may be made in special circumstances, for example, social/low cost housing or purpose built housing for elderly people or town centre locations'; and
- The Council's Fuel Poverty Strategy 2009-11 sets out a range of initiatives which need to be undertaken and an action plan to address them - but the plan is not SMART and contains resources and target dates for only the first of four sections. There are no outcome targets set. It is not clear from reading the strategy what the Council's approach to improving this issue will be.

The Council is therefore failing to set a clear direction for its strategic housing services and this compromises its ability to direct resources to local priorities.

- 53 The Council has improved its working with external sub regional partnerships. For example, its representation on the West Cumbria Vision Board (which oversees the programme for Housing Market Renewal in South Whitehaven) is helping to drive the investment of £1.95 million in the regeneration of the Woodhouse estate. It is a member of the Cumbria Housing Executive which consists of councillors from the seven Cumbrian district councils and the Lake District National Park authority; the Executive is supported by a Cumbria-wide officer group in which it is also represented. This body is represented on the emerging co-ordinating Group for the Single Conversation in Cumbria and has jointly commissioned county-wide needs surveys and manages the delivery of the county-wide housing strategy. The Housing Portfolio holder is the Councils representative on the Cumbria Strategic Partnership. The Housing Services Manager and Housing Portfolio holder sit on the Supporting People Commissioning Body. Both the Homes and Communities Agency and key partners report that the Council is now taking a more active role in these partnerships.
- 54 There is improved corporate working between some of the strategic and operational elements of the service. This is facilitated through the co-location of the housing, planning policy and housing strategy teams and a monthly meeting between Development Operations and Strategy managers which focuses on service improvements and potential housing developments. This closer working relationship is delivering positive outcomes, for example, in the identification of and response to gaps in the current understanding of housing markets and a more coordinated approach to the housing market renewal activity on the main housing estate in Whitehaven. Specialist joint sessions are also held to help the teams have a better understanding of how to address key challenges; for example, to explore the housing implications of the nuclear agenda in Copeland.

55 There are some strong plans in place.

- In 2008 the service undertook a review of homelessness and adopted the Homelessness Strategy 2008 to 2013. This is based on sound research and sets out an approach which is in line with good practice (for example, it emphasises a prevention model and introduces a housing options methodology and the use of the housing options and homelessness prevention toolkit); and
- The Copeland Regeneration Plan 2009 sets out the priority developments and projects the Council will be working on and informs the priorities for resources in 2009/10.

These plans will help to set a clear direction and focus for the service areas they address.

Making the best use of existing housing

56 We found more weaknesses than strengths in this area in the previous inspection. The Council was not targeting the use of home renewal grants and did not have a functioning regulation team. It was also unable to demonstrate that it was reducing homelessness by tackling the problem early, managing the quality and extent of housing advice being provided and effectively managing the supply, quality or speed of move-on from temporary accommodation. The homelessness assessment process was being handled effectively.

57 This inspection identifies that weaknesses continue to outweigh strengths in this area. There have been significant improvements in the homelessness service following its move to a more preventative model with positive outcomes for many people. It has reduced the use of temporary accommodation and the homelessness assessment process is handled effectively. A new home renewal policy ensures that assistance is available for vulnerable people, but the Council has missed an opportunity to target the assistance to maximise its impact. Although there is quicker processing of grants to provide assistance so that people can live independently in their homes, the service does not yet have assurance that overall turn-around times are acceptable. The regulation of the private rented sector is weak and the Council is not effectively addressing empty homes or Park Homes. Better working relationships with housing associations has led to some positive outcomes, although they do not yet result in better performance or improved outcomes in many key areas.

Homelessness

- 58** A new approach to homelessness is having positive outcomes for people facing housing crisis. The housing team was restructured following the previous inspection to provide a focus on prevention and housing options and has developed a range of prevention tools to assist customers. Around 80 percent of officer time is now spent on prevention work. These tools include the continued use of the rent deposit scheme and mediation service and new initiatives such as support for Credit Unions, the adoption of a policy for using the Homelessness Prevention Fund and a Preventing Repossessions Plan. There is an out of hours service in place for 365 days of the year to link people to emergency housing where required. In the first six months of the new approach, the housing options service prevented 85 cases of homelessness and helped 83 households find alternative accommodation. Its prevention work is also reducing the number of people accepted as homeless; in 2008/09 a full homelessness duty was accepted for 54 households compared with 83 in 2007/08. Many people have been helped to find housing solutions as a result of this service.
- 59** The Council is using temporary accommodation more effectively. By the end of 2008, it had met the Government target of reducing the number of households in temporary accommodation by 50 per cent from the 2004 baseline date. The time that people spend in temporary accommodation has reduced by almost 50 per cent in the last three years although figures have begun to rise in the current year. Temporary accommodation, leased from Copeland Homes, is regularly inspected and the accommodation we looked at was satisfactory. The reduction in temporary accommodation means that more people are being helped more quickly into permanent accommodation which improves their life chances.
- 60** The continued use of bed and breakfast can be a problem for some customers. Bed and breakfast accommodation is only used as a last resort (however at the time of the inspection a family and two single people were in such accommodation). However, the service has insufficient bed and breakfast accommodation to call upon in Whitehaven and so placements in Millom often result in clients being some distance from their preferred location. Temporary accommodation, particularly bed and breakfast, restricts the ability of people to make long term plans and may cause them to lose social and support networks.
- 61** The strategic approach to homelessness is much improved. The Homelessness Strategy 2008-2013 has all the features expected in a modern preventative approach. An action plan emerged from the review of the Homeless Strategy in 2008 with over 40 appropriate actions and this monitored by the Strategic Housing Panel. Since November 2008, the Council has convened two homelessness forums and converted them to a Homelessness Strategy Steering Group. The Council is represented on a multi-agency young people's panel to address problems and link with agencies to provide support when needed. A project plan is in place to address issues like carrying out proactive prevention and education work with young people. A better strategic approach has helped more clients in crisis and improved relationships between the Council and third sector agencies.

- 62 There is stronger provision of housing advice in the district. It is now easier to contact homelessness officers than was the case at the time of the previous inspection and an effective out-of-hours service is available. Homelessness officers are well trained and a series of leaflets on homelessness have been produced which are informative and attractively presented. Since September 2008, the Council has signed service level agreements with the Citizens Advice Bureau (for complex debt problems where people are facing repossession), the Cumbria Alcohol and Drug Advisory Service and the Carlisle Law Centre (including the establishment of an advice desk at Whitehaven County Court). These partnerships and the information available are helping people to identify solutions to a range of problems which impact on their access to housing.
- 63 The service is not fully aware of the impact of housing advice and other housing services in the area. It is monitoring some aspects of the quality of the services provided by these agencies but this is not comprehensive in terms of impact or service quality. Consequently, the Council cannot be sure that they are providing value for money or meeting the needs and aspirations of customers.
- 64 Case management continues to follow good practice and legislative requirements. Casework is reviewed and 'signed-off' by the line manager. We found case files to contain all relevant information and the necessary checks had been made on each application. Decisions were made on applications within timescale and detailed file notes kept. Letters to applicants contained all relevant information. Just 14 homelessness reviews have been requested in the last three years. This helps to ensure that customers are dealt with consistently, fairly and to an appropriate quality of service.
- 65 The homelessness service is generally customer focused. It has completed a service level agreement with the Housing Benefit service. There have been significant reductions in processing times for housing benefit claims over the last three years¹. A discretionary housing payments panel has been set up and a procedure developed to assist staff in dealing with applications. Tenancy support services are provided by other agencies for vulnerable people such as 16 and 17 year olds and accommodation needs for this group is met with two hostels for young people in Whitehaven. Customer satisfaction surveys have recently been introduced to help the team identify where the service is not meeting expectations and results are generally encouraging. Staff have access to training and are supported by a homelessness manual. Partners report that services have improved (although they comment that they still some way to go) and officers are easy to contact.

¹ new claims have reduced from 44.2 days in 2006/07 to 18.5 days in the current year and changes in circumstances claims have reduced from 19.9 days to 7.9 days in current year.

How good is the service?

Private sector housing

- 66** The new home renewal policy adopted in 2008 provides some degree of targeted assistance but misses a significant opportunity to maximise impact. It provides a satisfactory range of support for vulnerable residents in the form of financial assistance which comprises a combination of grant and interest free loan that can be reclaimed upon the sale of the property. There is also assistance available to encourage the return to use of longer-term empty homes.¹ However, the house condition survey clearly identifies areas where poor housing conditions are clustered in the borough and the Council is not currently targeting these areas; the policy is reactive, relying on applications being made by residents across the borough rather than targeting known poor conditions. While many of the households who live in these areas will be applicants for this assistance, by failing to take a pro-active approach, the policy is not focusing scarce resources on the worst housing conditions and the highest levels of deprivation and is missing the opportunity to effectively structure the regeneration of these areas.
- 67** The approach to improving the energy efficiency of the stock is weak. References have previously been made to the weaknesses in the Council's Fuel Poverty Strategy 2009-11. There is no targeting of support in areas with concentrations of low energy efficiency ratings and low income. Partnership working with energy advice agencies is not effective and the Council is not maximising the potential for drawing in additional support and funding into the area. Consequently, outcomes have been poor; the Home Energy Conservation Act report 2008 shows a 19 per cent energy efficiency improvement (since 1996) against an overall target of 30 per cent. Failure to reduce energy consumption in homes with poor energy efficiency ratings risk people falling into fuel poverty, wastes resources and has an adverse long-term effect on the environment and resources.
- 68** Disabled people are not receiving a consistently good disabled facilities grant (DFG) service. While it is positive that officers from Copeland's housing team meet every month with the County Council Occupational Therapists (OTs) to discuss individual cases, the OTs do not prioritise their assessments. The LAA 'stretch targets' do not include the time taken for an OT to make an assessment and the OTs do not report their 'turn around' time to the Council, so the true 'end to end' time experienced by customers is not known. The inspection team were given anecdotal evidence that the time taken between initial contact with the OT and the receipt of their assessment can be up to 12 months and we saw a case file where the referral from the OT was received in April 2007, but the application form was not sent to the client until 2009. Delays in this service will prolong the period before disabled people are able to live independently and with dignity.

¹ The policy targets homes which contain at least one Category 1 hazard and which are owner occupied by households who are economically vulnerable, are elderly, contain families with children or are first time buyers of properties which have been empty over six months.

- 69** The service does not take appropriate action to ensure that conditions in the private rented sector meet current standards. It has now met its statutory duty to license qualifying Houses in Multiple Occupation. Other than this licensing function, the regulation service is entirely reactive with no risk-based, proactive inspection programme in place. There is currently no strategy in place for regulating the private rented sector, supported by an enforcement policy (the Council's view is that there is no spare capacity within the team to adopt a proactive regulatory approach). Where it needs to take informal action in response to a request for service, the responsibility lies between the Housing and Environmental Health teams and this introduces a high risk that service quality will be affected because the SLA between the two teams does not set any service standards. There are limited performance management arrangements and procedures in place to support consistency and quality in service delivery. The effect of the current approach is that some people may be facing high risks to their health and safety in a sector which is known to provide some of the worst housing conditions - the stock condition survey shows that only 38 per cent of vulnerable households live in decent homes in the private-rented sector compared with 66.6 per cent across private sector housing as a whole.
- 70** The Council has made little progress in dealing with empty homes. The service has not yet established a strategic approach which ensures that all empty properties are identified and categorised according to clear criteria which determines and prioritises the action taken. This service has not been clearly resourced, and consequently, in all previous years the Council has reported that no empty homes have been returned to use. In the current year it has approved two cases of financial assistance to first time buyers of long term empty homes. It is estimated that there are up to 700 empty homes in the district with over 550 being vacant for at least six months; the Council's failure to address this issue has a detrimental effect on the environment in which people live, places additional pressure on the housing market and extends the time that households are unable to find housing solutions.
- 71** The Council is not dealing effectively with residential Park Homes. The number of Park Homes in the district is not known because the service has not routinely assessed conditions on the sites. The national picture is that vulnerable people are traditionally over-represented on these sites and that some of the older structures can have very low thermal efficiency which is a major health hazard for occupiers.
- 72** The Council is improving its relationship with private sector landlords, but this is at an early stage and it is too early to assess its impact. It has recently established a Landlord Forum which has met twice. The meetings have focused both on information and policy development (for example, a discussion on what they might want from an accreditation scheme and seeking their comments on a draft enforcement policy). Well informed landlords can help the Council develop its services and improves the prospects of a vibrant and well managed rented sector.

How good is the service?

- 73** More people are being helped to improve their homes. A summary of the new assistance is clearly set out and widely promoted. This, together with increased resources in the housing team, is beginning to reverse the annual decrease in the number of approved applications and the significant under-spends in the budget that have been occurred over the last three years. In 2008/09 the service approved 55 assisted renovations and the target for the current year is to approve 75 (45 applications for the new home renewal grants had been approved in the first six months). Customer feedback for housing renewal assistance confirms high levels of satisfaction with the service. Preserving the existing housing stock reduces the impact on health and life chances from poor housing and relieves pressure on housing markets and services such as homelessness.
- 74** There are indications of improvements in the DFG service in those areas over which the Council has direct control.
- The service is working to a Cumbria-wide Local Area Agreement 'stretch target' of reducing the time between receiving the assessment from the County Council's OT service to approval of a DFG to 29 weeks. During 2007/08 Copeland took an average of 33 weeks, falling to 22.68 weeks in 2008/09 and just over 15 weeks in the current year.
 - There is no waiting list for DFGs and, in 2008/09, 57 applications were completed compared with 38 in 2006/07.
 - Interest free loans up to £5,000 are now available where a 'maximum' DFG is insufficient to fund the required work.

The extent to which these improvements are having positive outcomes for customers is not clear, however, because the Council does not effectively monitor the end-to-end experience of customers using the service.

Working with housing associations

- 75** The Council has strengthened its relationships with housing associations. It has now held the first inclusive registered providers (RP) forum and all parties are beginning to focus on performance monitoring and the strategic development of the partnerships. There are improved relationships between the Council and the main social housing provider (Copeland Homes). The portfolio holder continues to be a member of the Copeland Homes Board and formal liaison exists between senior management in both organisations through a quarterly meeting. This has seen a number of key outcomes including the forum, endorsement of the Home Group housing register and adoption of its allocations scheme.

- 76** Because the Council is starting from a low base in terms of its working relationships with housing associations, this partnership has yet to result in better performance and service outcomes in many key areas.
- There is no transparent criterion in place which determines how affordable housing on a scheme is allocated to a particular housing association.
 - There is no Choice-based Lettings Scheme in place (discussed later in this report);
 - A protocol is in place by which the housing associations notify the Housing Options team of cases where a tenant in Copeland is facing potential eviction. However, the timing of this notification (immediately before seeking a possession warrant) is too late for the team to influence the eviction.
 - There is no comprehensive information in place which gives residents a clear idea of waiting times for social housing in Copeland.
 - Housing associations are not letting their properties quickly. Letting times for the three associations range between 30 days to 102 days. They are not gathering information or analysing reasons for refusal.
 - There are no transfer incentive schemes in place to encourage tenants who are under-occupying their homes to move to smaller and more appropriate housing, freeing up much needed larger accommodation for those who need it. (Plans to address this and the previous bullet point are addressed in the second section of this report).
- 77** The condition of housing association stock is improving and all three organisations are predicting full compliance with the Decent Homes Standard in time to meet the Government's target in 2010 (with the exception of an extension granted to Copeland Homes for just over 500 properties which will be addressed by 2013).

Enabling the provision of more housing.

- 78** We found more weaknesses than strengths in this area in the previous inspection. The Council had only relatively recently placed any emphasis on building affordable homes and was failing to work effectively in partnership to enable new housing provision. Plans were in place for selectively reducing the social rented stock and replacing it with mid market properties for sale.
- 79** In this inspection, we found that weaknesses continue to outweigh strengths. The lack of emphasis on enabling new affordable homes is being reversed but this is from a very low base. It is not well placed to deliver a robust enabling role and this means that it will continue to miss opportunities for new housing delivery. Written guidance for developers is weak although the service is providing developers with good support through pre-application discussions and planning applications are dealt with quickly. A good start has been made to regenerating an area of poor housing but slow re-let times and failure to deal with under-occupation in social housing can act as a barrier and extend waiting times.

How good is the service?

- 80** The delivery of new homes is not meeting housing needs. The Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS) sets an annual target of 230 new homes and an annual average of 235 new dwellings have been delivered in the last five years. However, there were no new affordable housing completions between 2000-2008 and just 22 in 2008/09, nor has the Council accepted 'commuted sums' in lieu of affordable housing being provided on a development site in the last five years. It is anticipated that there will be 28 affordable housing completions this year. While this position is beginning to improve, albeit from a very low base, this lack of delivery means that many people will face difficulties in accessing affordable housing in Copeland.
- 81** The Council is not well placed to meet housing needs through the delivery of new homes. It does not have dedicated capacity to undertake the enabling role. The lack of robust evidence to help it defend requirements for a specified proportion of affordable housing and an appropriate range of statutorily adopted policies, impacts on the Council's ability to negotiate effectively with developers. This is exacerbated because the service is not using the information which is available such as an analysis of housing waiting lists. Therefore, it cannot be sure that new housing is meeting the current and future needs of all residents in Copeland in terms of tenure, size and type of properties. Officers have lacked confidence and experience and so there are limited examples of where the Council has tried to support delivery of new housing in the recession. It has not been seeking to maximise its impact on important issues such as negotiating for new homes to be built to 'above basic standard' levels of energy efficiency and there is no policy for lifetime and wheelchair adapted homes. The service currently lacks clear procedures and documentation to support the section 106/planning gain role and there is a lack of clarity over the way that the priority accorded to section 106 requirements from different agencies is assessed. The Council has therefore missed many opportunities to enable affordable housing on developments.
- 82** The Council is still not working effectively in partnership with other agencies to deliver new housing. In the previous inspection we identified that it has not established formal relationships with developing housing associations or the regulator for the sector. This has been partly addressed (and is dealt with in a later paragraph in this section). However, we also reported that it had failed to establish close working relationships with bodies such as parish councils, the National Park or the Cumbria Rural Housing Trust and this remains the case. This will continue to limit its ability to exploit opportunities for housing supply.
- 83** The quality of support provided to developers is mixed. There is limited guidance available to developers. Plans for the early production of a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) on design, character and quality of new housing as part of the Local Development Framework have been abandoned and there is no section 106 and planning gain SPD. However, developers are supported in making planning applications through a pre-application process which is tailored to the nature of the proposed development and the needs of the developer. The Council has revised its forms to make them easier to use and a validation checklist helps ensure that requirements are met. The Council has appointed the North of England Civic Trust to influence good design and inform the development control process. This helps ensure that planning applications are successful.

- 84** The development control service is performing well against national indicators and targets. The Council has recently revised the scheme of delegations for planning decisions which has increased delegated decisions from 70 per cent to 82 per cent. This has helped it achieve above average performance in dealing with major and minor applications.¹ Investment in councillor training has made the Planning Panel much more understanding of and focused on their role. The Council is doing much better regarding brownfield development; in 2007/08, 49 per cent of developments were completed on brownfield sites (the Regional Spatial Strategy sets a reduced target of 50 per cent and the Structure Plan a target of 70 per cent). In 2008/09, 80 per cent of development was on brownfield land. In 2008/09, the service was in the best performing 25 per cent of councils when measured against a Quality of Planning Service checklist (BV205). This is helping to ensure that decisions on applications are quickly made, avoiding delays in the delivery of new housing.
- 85** Copeland has made a good start to housing market renewal (HMR) but outcomes have yet to be delivered. The South Whitehaven HMR, has seen the developer (Home Housing Group) engaging well with the community on the estate to formulate its regeneration plans. The HMR has demolished over 112 flats already with another 70 in the pipeline (these flats suffered low demand often with less than 50 per cent occupancy). The next phase of the project will include the construction of 30 bungalows beginning in November 2009 and the refurbishment of over 100 properties between December 2009 and November 2011. As well as dealing with issues of low demand, the project will also address the need for older-person accommodation. The developer is also working up proposals with a private developer whereby some land it owns on the fringe of the estate will be transferred to them in return for some profit sharing and a better integration and mix of tenures. The pathfinder pilot for the whole of South Whitehaven has meant that the HMR area has been able to benefit from this investment (such as extra wardens). Rationalisation of the largest housing association's stock will help to deliver the right type of housing to meet needs.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 86** The previous inspection revealed more weaknesses than strengths in this area. The Council did not know its service level costs in housing nor did it have a good understanding of the relationship between quality, performance and cost with 'short termism' preventing it 'investing to save'. Procurement was ineffective and plans for shared services to improve value for money had not come to fruition.
- 87** We found that weaknesses continue to outweigh strengths in this area. The Council has yet to fully understand its costs, how they relate to service quality and how this compares with other service providers. A value for money culture is not yet fully embedded, but there are a number of examples which show that services have been improved for similar or lower cost. It has performed well against efficiency targets, but has mixed success in drawing in external funding to support services.

¹ The Government target for dealing with major applications is that at least 60 per cent should be determined within 13 weeks (Copeland achieved 84.2 per cent) and that at least 60 per cent of minor applications should be determined within eight weeks (Copeland achieved 84.4 per cent)

How good is the service?

How do costs compare?

88 The Council has made little progress in understanding its costs and how they compare. In the previous inspection we reported that the Council does not have an understanding of its service level costs and had done no benchmarking of costs and performance in the housing service. The Council now has access to benchmarking information from CIPFA¹ statistical service and from SPARSE² and the housing options service has joined the 'Housemark' benchmarking model. However, this has, as yet, produced limited outcomes. Consequently, it is continuing to miss opportunities to provide better quality and more cost efficient services and the lack of a clear analysis of cost, performance and quality issues also means it has been unable to talk to its customers about value for money in the services it provides.

How is value for money managed?

89 Leadership on value for money has been of mixed quality. There are positive aspects.

- The Council appointed a procurement officer in 2008 to deliver the Procurement Strategy and lend support and expertise to all procurement activity. A savings target of £30,000 on Council supplies and services has been set for 2009/10.
- the six Cumbria districts have joined together with the County Council to form a joint procurement initiative (EPiC) and Copeland will channel all purchases of goods, services and works through a portal to enable spend analysis. Progress has been slow, but joint procurement is in place for energy, car hire, stationary and office supplies.
- A Medium Term Financial Strategy was agreed in 2008 and sets the service and budget planning context for a three year period. Service plans set targets for efficiency and identifies where these savings will come from.

90 However, overall, leadership has not been as effective.

- The Council has not driven the need to benchmark services to provide a better understanding of the relationship between service cost and quality.
- No performance indicators have been developed around service costs and value for money.
- Service users have not been involved in any value for money exercises.

This means that, while there are examples of improving leadership, it has not been successful in ensuring that a value for money culture is fully embedded within the organisation, and this increases the risk of missed opportunities.

¹ Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants

² Sparsity Partnership for Authorities Delivering Rural Services

- 91 A number of opportunities to improve value for money within the strategic housing services have been missed. For example, the 'regular' procurement of similar equipment under the DFG programme has not been matched with procurement savings derived from this bulk purchase. Inefficient work practices between the HIA and the housing team increase cost, reduce options and can cause delays. The charging of an administrative fee on all assistance administered in-house and then recycling this fee back into the capital programme has the same outcome. The service has not yet explored options for shared service delivery. As we reported in the last inspection, cost and process benchmarking would indicate more effective service delivery and generation of savings.
- 92 The Council has had mixed success in leveraging in additional funding to support strategic housing services. The South Whitehaven Housing Market Renewal programme 2006 to 2008 was awarded £465,000 (to which the Council allocated an additional £500,000 of its Housing Improvement Programme) and in the period 2008/11 it attracted a further £1.95 million capital funding. Through working jointly with all Cumbrian Authorities on the Equality Framework for Local Government, external grant funding to appoint two equality project officers has been obtained. Strong performance in the planning service has yielded a Planning Delivery Grant from the Government of approximately £120,000 each year. The Council has also drawn in funding from the DCLG to establish a Homelessness Prevention Fund (£36,000 - the last of a four-year series of payments) and to make discretionary housing payments (£11,000). It has also received £28,000 this year as a 'one-off' preventing repossessions fund and £10,000 as another 'one-off' recession help payment. However, it has not been as successful as other high performing councils in drawing in funding in other areas. This is particularly evident in the area of energy efficiency where councils have been able to tap into a wide range of funding sources from energy suppliers, energy efficiency funding agencies and the Government itself. Better funding sourcing will help the Council deliver better services to a wider range of customers.
- 93 Budget setting processes are helping to drive value for money. Generally, budget reductions have been reached in a manner consistent with council priorities. Service managers are required to justify staffing and other related costs put forward in the budget round. Although there is an emphasis on costs, budgets can increase if a clear need which dovetails with council priorities can be shown. The impact of savings on overall council priorities is also considered. An independent Resource Planning Working Group ensures that resources are allocated to council priorities. This helps to ensure that investment is aligned with priority.

How good is the service?

94 The Council has been effective in achieving efficiency savings. Between 2005 to 2008, it achieved efficiency savings of £1,342,500 against its target of £423,300. In 2009 the Council has been able to continue to deliver controlled savings in housing services and has also delivered service improvements. For example:

- the 'spend to save' prevention initiatives have led to a reduction in homelessness admissions and an increase in homelessness preventions. As a result, bed and breakfast costs have been reduced; the outturn net expenditure in 2008/09 was 25 per cent lower than in 2007/08. Consequently, the gross budget allocation has reduced from £45,562 in 2007/08 to £31,992 in 2009/10. In the current year, the service was able to offer up an efficiency saving of £20,000 in this budget which has been used to increase housing resources;
- arrangements for payment of assistance under the Homelessness Prevention Fund, involving a decision panel, ensure that this assistance is effectively and properly targeted. These 'spend to save' payments are made as either a grant or a loan dependent on the reason and circumstances – which enables the Council to maximise the number of people who benefit from the fund;
- the new Housing Assistance Policy introduced a repayable interest free loan. Where the cost of disabled facilities grant (DFG) works are in excess of £5000, a local land charge will be placed on the premises and the grant repayable if the premises is sold within a 10 year period. This allows the assistance budget to be re-cycled and enables more people to receive support for the same initial outlay. Satisfactory arrangements are in place to reduce the risk of overpayment and impropriety in the housing renewal process;
- the Council has been relatively successful in encouraging housing associations to contribute to the cost of providing adaptations in their stock. This contribution is different for each association and ranges from one that pays for all works under £1000 and pays a contribution of £10,000 where the cost of work is over £30,000 to one that pays for all work under £2,000 and makes a contribution where it is above this figure based on a sliding scale formula;
- some efficiency savings have been made without reductions in services such as the closing of council cash counters and the introduction of paypoint, the careful refilling of only essential vacancies and the renegotiation of support contracts (for example, the £11,000 per year savings from support and maintenance of the customer relationship management system);
- the new Enforcement Officer post in the development control team is self financed through service income which means that the Planning Delivery Grant from Government can be fully utilised to support the LDF process; and
- Copeland Homes and the Council have a VAT shelter arrangement around the capital programme. This delivers substantial savings for Copeland Homes who in turn can use the money for service improvements.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 95** The previous inspection identified more weaknesses than strengths in this area. Corporate improvement trends were below average and performance in housing had been static over the previous three years. The Council had not given housing sufficient priority since the stock transfer and there was no evidence of delivery against housing, private sector or homelessness strategies or against recommendations made in reviews. In the wider council, however, there was some evidence of attempts to improve processes and systems.
- 96** In this inspection we found that weaknesses outweigh strengths. The evidence the service needs to fully understand the housing markets, the delivery of affordable housing, the adoption of strategic plans and the approach to empty homes and regulation remain weak. The delivery of high level plans has not been consistently good and outcomes for customers in the cross-cutting areas of access and value for money are inconsistent with diversity being a particularly weak area. However, increased investment has enabled the appointment of more staff and this has led to a better homelessness service, delivery of a new home renewal policy and quicker processing times for home improvements assistance.
- 97** The response to the recommendations emerging from the previous inspection has not been strong. However, of the 21 key recommendations made following the previous inspection, progress has been poor (more information on this point is contained in Appendix 1).
- Four recommendations have been achieved in full.
 - Six recommendations are not yet fully achieved but are developing strongly.
 - Six recommendations are still developing but progress is not strong.
 - Five recommendations have witnessed very limited progress.
- 98** Delivery against plans, both Council-wide and service specific is mixed, but less positive in housing.
- Outturn performance for 2008/09 against the Corporate Plan objectives shows satisfactory levels of achievement: Achieving Transformation objective: 90 per cent complete; Effective Leadership objective: 82 per cent complete and Promoting Prosperity objective: 89 per cent complete (however, none of the targets for housing have been met).
 - Of the 16 National Indicators with comparative data in the Corporate Improvement Plan, 11 have improved in the first quarter compared to the same time last year.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- The Strategic Housing Improvement Plan sets out 56 key actions, 38 of which are completed (68 per cent) with 17 ongoing (32 per cent).
 - The Homelessness Strategy delivery plan contains 43 tasks for completion by 2013; to date, 21 actions have been delivered since adoption in August 2008 and a further 13 are due to be completed by March 2010.
- 99** However, the programme of service reviews scheduled to take place during 2009/10 did not take place. Work was carried out on developing then piloting a methodology in the first half of 2009, but was then 'parked' because of the need to make increased cuts from 2011/12 and discussions with the North West Improvement and Efficiency Partnership over the Corporate Improvement Programme (Choosing to Change) included a workstream for the service reviews.
- 100** Despite some corporate improvements, customer focus in housing is underdeveloped. For example, service standards and customer feedback processes have been set for many areas, but not in planning or housing regulation and they are not being monitored. Better information is now available for some service users although this is not the case for development control. There have been improvements in the way that the Council manages and learns from complaints. Telephone access to the service has improved but is still below industry standard.
- 101** The Council has been slow to address weaknesses in its approach to equality and diversity (E&D). Leadership is not effectively driving the E&D agenda which has resulted in generally weak EIAs and limited progress against the Equality Framework for Local Government. It has yet to tailor services around an understanding of its customer's needs. There is currently no provision for gypsies and travellers despite known needs. There are still no high level plans in place for addressing the housing needs of vulnerable groups such as migrant workers, older and younger persons.
- 102** The Council's track record on value for money is mixed. It is able to demonstrate significant efficiency savings, but lacks the comparative evidence on cost and service quality to robustly establish whether its services are delivering value for money. Nonetheless, reduced use of bed and breakfast and the introduction of home loans since the last inspection has improved value.
- 103** While there have been improvements in some front-line services, they have not been consistent and the Council has been ineffective in addressing some significant weaknesses.
- The homelessness service is the area where most improvements have been made. By the end of 2008, the Council had achieved the Government target of reducing the number of households in temporary accommodation by 50 per cent from the baseline in 2004. The service has moved its emphasis successfully to prevention and introduced a number of prevention tools including better provision for advice, the introduction of initiatives such as a homelessness prevention fund and the preventing repossessions plan. However, the reduction in the number of units of temporary accommodation had led to higher reliance on bed and breakfast;

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- The private sector housing service has improved outcomes for some people through quicker processing times for DFGs in those areas administered directly by the service and a new home renewal policy which is helping some of the most vulnerable people in Copeland improve and adapt their homes. However, the strategic approach to home renewal, regulation and empty homes is weak with limited outcomes. The approach to energy efficiency is weak and traditional partnerships with key agencies, proactive projects and targeted funding schemes are not in place. The regulation service is not tracking key service quality issues such as the time taken to respond to service requests and the time taken between each key stage in the regulation process. No targets are set against which performance can be assessed.
- The condition of social housing is on track to meet the Decent Homes Standard within Government targets, but slow re-letting times and failure to deal with under-occupation adds to the pressure on housing markets.
- The development control service is performing well against national PIs and tailors pre-application support to meet the needs of developers. However, although improving, the delivery of new affordable housing is poor and the service lacks the evidence it needs to negotiate effectively with developers over important issues like affordable housing through planning gain, and the type, size and tenure of housing required. Although developing, the Council has not yet been a significant force in engaging with parish councils and driving forward a programme of needs surveys.

104 One of the key messages emerging from the previous inspection was that the Council had not resourced this service area; its post-inspection response was to invest an additional (and annual) £250,000 which has resulted in a new strategic housing team of 11.3 full time equivalent staff by the end of October 2008. A Strategic Housing Service Improvement Plan was adopted to address the recommendations and the service is now overseen and supported by the monthly Strategic Housing Panel where councillors receive progress reports from officers on improvement plans. This panel is a springboard for policy development. This response has enabled the service to deliver some of the improvements detailed in the previous report.

How well does the service manage performance?

105 Previously we found more weaknesses than strengths in this area. Generally, there was limited leadership being exercised and planning and corporate performance management systems in housing were weak. The Council could not demonstrate learning from good practice. However, the Council's self awareness about weaknesses was considered a driver for improvement and the corporate performance management system was improving.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 106** In this inspection we found that weaknesses continue to outweigh strengths. There are plans in place to address some, but not all of the weaknesses we have identified. However, a significant proportion of the draft and adopted plans we have seen are not strong and often lack clear direction with action plans which are not SMART or outcome focussed. Performance management arrangements have improved, but the lack of clear targets and a robust suite of performance indicators (PIs) have meant that weaker areas of performance have not been responded to. Learning from high performers is underdeveloped with no plans in place to address this. There are some strong examples of leadership, but this is counterbalanced by some areas where poor leadership has led to weak services. There are strong indications that the Council will improve its understanding of the local housing markets in the near future and this should help produce a robust Core Strategy from which officers can negotiate effectively with developers on planning gain.
- 107** The approach to meeting rural housing needs lacks a robust framework. There are signs that the rural housing agenda is beginning to develop through meetings with parish councils and the emerging locality working model. However, there is no clear programme for completing rural needs surveys and identifying development sites. Although the Council did identify its intention, before the end of 2009, to write to each town and parish council to confirm its commitment to needs surveys, this is not set out in any action plan.
- 108** The service cannot demonstrate that it is consistently learning from best practice. There are isolated examples of learning such as the revision of some homelessness practices and procedures in line with recommendations received from a 'critical friend' inspection and recommendations for improved practices by the county-wide development control officer group. However, a learning culture is not embedded and this is demonstrated in weak approaches to benchmarking and awareness of best practice across many service areas.
- 109** Gaps in high level strategic housing plans are not comprehensively being responded to. The draft Copeland-specific strategic housing plan contains very few outcome-focussed, SMART targets and there are few which measure the quality of the service (most actions are about completing administrative work/surveys). The delivery of new housing strategies for older and younger people has been delayed. There are no current proposals to develop strategic plans for addressing empty homes and migrant workers. The draft private sector housing strategy gives very limited information about how it will address conditions and the draft action plan is not SMART with very few outcome-based targets. These gaps will result in a lack of direction for the service and risk a failure to provide support for some vulnerable people.
- 110** There are some significant gaps in performance management arrangements. These include:
- the Council has no clear plans to address the lack of targets for some areas of the service. For example, the Cumbria LSP has established a range of targets for the period 2008 to 2011, but these are generally county-wide. The Homelessness Strategy Delivery Plan does contain targets for most actions, but they are not always outcome focused and so will be difficult to monitor. There are no targets in place for the regulation of the private sector;

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- although a greater emphasis is placed on improving performance, service managers have not developed a strong suite of PIs to help them effectively track performance and progress. Service Plans have few outcome-focussed targets in place, they are sometimes overly-complicated and confusing and resource implications are unclear with no dates set for achievement. Performance is not known in some key areas such as end-to-end times for DFGs and service standards; and
- corporate management ,including the Executive, receive reports which are focused on high level information such as the LAA national indicators. Therefore, they have not reacted effectively to poor performance in some service areas which are not covered by these indicators, such as empty homes, regulation and energy efficiency.

The lack of targets and PIs has meant that performance management arrangements have not been fully effective in dealing with low performance outcomes.

- 111** The approach to risk management is not robust, but plans are in place to improve. The risk register does not comprehensively identify the risks to meeting housing need or how those risks identified will be addressed. In a recent review, risks to meeting housing need did not emerge as corporate priorities for control from either the corporate management team or councillor sessions. Improvement plans involve working with a consultant to revise the Council's risk management procedures and create a new strategic risk register.
- 112** There is evidence of improving leadership since the last inspection but this has yet to lead to consistently strong outcomes for service users. The Portfolio holder argued strongly for improved investment in housing services following the previous inspection - despite his efforts, he had not previously been able to persuade the Council to invest in the service. He is also involved in a number of key partnerships and county wide groups which raises the profile of the service. There is now clear corporate support for the service and its profile is maintained on the corporate agenda through senior management, the portfolio holder and the Strategic Housing Panel. The Council has also recruited to new senior posts within the service and their influence is beginning to emerge in forward planning. However, this development in leadership is relatively recent and so it has not been able to address the weaknesses we identified in the first section of this report. Strategic partners take the view that housing has now become a much higher priority for the Council and that it is looking to develop a comprehensive housing partnership in Copeland.
- 113** The Council recognises that it needs to improve its direct engagement with a range of agencies as highlighted by the plans for a third sector/Council liaison arrangement. The Executive has recently signed up to the voluntary COMPACT which aims to improve the quality of support to the third sector and the quality of services the third sector provides in Cumbria. An action plan is in development to ensure effective formal engagement and delivery and is planned to be 2010/11 service plans.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 114** There is no formally adopted commitment yet in place to implement choice-based lettings (CBL). District Councils in Cumbria are moving towards a county-wide scheme with a go-live date in October 2010. Reports to the Executive and the Strategic Housing Panel have led to an agreement 'in principle' subject to the scheme satisfying a number of criteria which councillors have set and a further report which sets out the position against these criteria has increased their level of confidence in the scheme. Officers anticipate reporting to the Executive in December or January 2010 with a full recommendation to join, but councillors told us that a decision is not thought to be likely at this point.
- 115** The current weak basis for negotiating with developers will be addressed through the emerging Local Development Framework (LDF). The Council is building its understanding of housing markets through the completion of viability assessments, a brownfield assessment of existing and potential employment and housing sites, a housing needs survey and the completion of the Strategic Housing Market Area Assessment and the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment. Plans to improve its knowledge of Gypsy and Traveller and rural housing needs are less clear. The Council has discussed the LDF work programme with the Government Office North West and agreed revised dates for the key Local Development Scheme milestones; the submission of the Core Strategy is to be January/February 2011 with adoption in the winter of 2011. However, there is a risk that this revised timeline will not be met. The proposed needs survey will need to report in July 2010 leaving just over six months for all the additional evidence required for the Core Strategy to be gathered, reported, fully consulted upon and analysed. The Core Strategy will set clear thresholds and requirements for the type, size and quantity of affordable housing on development sites.
- 116** Improved performance management arrangements have given the service a better focus on service delivery.
- The whole strategic housing service is overseen and supported by the councillor-led Strategic Housing Panel which has met every month since the spring of 2008.
 - The introduction of corporate performance management software provides service managers with improved ability to monitor and report on progress. It provides quarterly information to senior managers and the Executive which includes comparison with previous years (but not with quartiles).
 - Better budget monitoring arrangements are ensured through quarterly revenue and capital reports to the Executive. A housing-specific capital programme monitoring group provides a greater focus in this area.
 - Managers have been discussing how to implement the monitoring of service standards and have a plan to introduce this before March 2010.
 - Officers are developing proposals to report on housing association performance through the Strategic Housing Panel/committee cycle in future with an annual report beginning next spring. The main housing association has initiated a plan for dealing with re-let times, involving a project team on which the Council will be represented, to improve performance. Proposals are also in place to address under-occupation. The draft housing plans sets out an aspiration for a comprehensive Copeland Housing Partnership by September 2010.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 117** The annual performance appraisal system is now generally effective. Directors know exactly how their service will be assessed, teams have been encouraged to develop quarterly work programmes which fit within the service improvement plans and full appraisals are held annually, with an interim appraisal every six months, which links the activity of individuals to service plans and in turn to wider corporate plans. However, we found that clear individual targets were not always in place and so, in some cases, appraisal is based on team targets rather than targets for each team member.
- 118** Plans for better access to services and increasing the focus on customers will improve the experience of service users.
- The Council is engaging with the County Council to scope and plan for joint front desk customer service arrangements in local service centres in Millom and Cleator Moor by April 2010. The Customer Services Team has plans to develop formal Customer Service Delivery Agreements with service departments by March 2010.
 - By March 2010 at least 20 services will be available on line (for self service access) and analysis of unnecessary contacts is ongoing which will be used to inform service development.
 - Copeland BC is one of the six Cumbria district Councils that have formed the Cumbria-wide Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Strategy Group. Its action plan includes the submission of an Innovation Fund bid to the Homes and Communities Agency and the identification of land for site provision. Further research and consultation to supplement the findings of the 2008 Cumbria GTAA is to be undertaken. The development of a Copeland-specific plan for site provision will be based upon the additional information arising from the further research.
 - Weaknesses in customer profiling are being addressed through an initiative using recently purchased software. This will better inform an understanding of the take up of services from a diverse range of customers and how those services can be improved to meet their needs. It will be complimented by the Supporting People Commissioning Body undertaking research to map housing support needs which will report in March 2010.
 - Following the appointment of the new Training Advisor, plans are in place to roll-out customer care training across the Council.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 119** The previous inspection identified more weaknesses than strengths in this area. Staffing structures and arrangements were not supporting a functioning housing service and this was exacerbated by missed opportunities through joined up working within external partners. Weaknesses in housing's financial management and procurement systems and failure to maximise inward investment impacted on the Council's ability to maximise resources. Some areas of strength were developing, however, including investment in training, tighter control over issues such as risk management and strategic IT development.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 120** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses in this area. The Council has invested in additional resources into the service and a restructure in organisational arrangements, better corporate working practices and external partnerships provides a sound platform for improving services. Recruitment to senior positions has increased expertise. Pipeline land allocations and planning permissions suggest that the area has the capacity to meet housing needs through new developments. However, the inconsistent approach to value for money and the likely reduction in Government funding for the home renewal programme raises some capacity risks to continuous improvement.
- 121** The Council can demonstrate that resources have been targeted to areas where they are most needed in line with priorities. Following the previous inspection report, resources were specifically targeted to support the strategic housing function; the revenue budget was increased (annually) by £250,000 whilst £500,000 of capital receipts were earmarked to support renovation grants. The need to deliver the LDF saw additional resources being successfully argued for. The Housing Improvement Action Plan commits delivery resources needed to continue improving the strategic housing function and outcomes. The strategic housing team has grown by 300 per cent since the last inspection. Staff expressed concern about limited opportunities for professional advancement and, in response the Council has tripled the training budget.
- 122** A review of organisational arrangements means that the service is better placed to deliver service improvements. A restructure of the development directorate in the spring of 2008 led to an integration of strategic housing, planning policy and LDF, economic development, sustainability, climate change and locality working to form the Development Strategy Division. Importantly, the current lack of a designated 'Enabling Officer' will be addressed by reviewing the responsibilities allocated to the Housing Policy and Research Officer. This restructure brought housing into the mainstream of the Council's development and housing policy planning services, allowing it to benefit from the resources and expertise of the planning policy function.
- 123** There is more experienced leadership of the service. The Council has recruited a number of new senior managers including two Directors and the Head of Housing who bring a range of experience in development control, regeneration and housing services. The appointment of a Sustainability Officer will improve the capacity to address its weak approach to improving energy efficiency. The Portfolio Holder continues to add to his already considerable experience in local government and within the housing service and the Strategic Housing Panel of councillors is a skilled group that has experience in various aspects of the strategic housing service. These developments bring to the service a much needed range of skills and experience to help improve services and management capacity.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 124** There are ambitions to develop some shared services with neighbouring councils, but comprehensive plans are not yet in place. All Cumbrian authorities agreed a shared services strategy in June 2008 and Copeland Council has developed its own shared services strategy. However, it does not provide a clear direction or plan for taking this forward. The main partnership working for shared services is progressing, albeit slowly, via the Cumbria Improvement and Efficiency Partnership. The priority service blocks for sharing have been agreed and the Council is currently pursuing shared services for Revenues and Benefits and for Internal Audit with Allerdale and Carlisle councils. There are no clear plans for other aspects of the strategic housing service. It has therefore missed an opportunity to improve delivery in those service areas restricted by low capacity (for example, a proactive approach to regulation and empty homes).
- 125** Better partnership working has increased capacity. The service is now working more effectively with its external partners. This includes sub-regional working such as representation on West Cumbria Vision Board, the Cumbria Housing Executive and the Cumbria Strategic Partnership. It has developed service level agreements (SLAs) with external advice agencies to support more consistent service delivery. More effective working with housing associations is not yet producing positive outcomes across all areas but there are some successes - for example, the Council supported two housing association bids to the HCA for social housing grant for new-build developments in 2009 and has not done so for many years. Good relationships continue with other local authorities and these have increased capacity and reduced costs on projects such as shared needs surveys and planning to provide for gypsies and travellers. There is improved corporate working between some of the strategic and operational elements of the service. Effective partnership working increases skill levels and resources.
- 126** There are indications that new housing completions will continue to rise. The Furness and West Cumbria Housing Market Renewal Programme for 2008 to 2011 provides the major thrust of housing-led regeneration in South Whitehaven by the Home Housing Group with £1.95 million funding from government via West Lakes Renaissance. In 2008/09 the first two phases of demolition were completed and detailed planning consent has been obtained for the first phase of 37 new build homes to start on site in 2009. In 2010/2011 there will be further new build phases. The Council has demonstrated that there is an adequate supply of permissions and allocated land for at least the next five years to satisfy the RSS target¹. Between 2009 to 2013 the Home Housing Group have plans for 119 new affordable dwellings. The Council is in the process of developing its strategic asset management plan for the next five years which has the potential to highlight land that could be used for affordable housing.

¹ On March 2009, there were outstanding planning permissions for 1334 units in the pipeline and land allocations for another 776 units compared with the RSS need for 1150 units.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 127** The Council is improving its approach to value for money. It is working with the Northern Housing Consortium which is putting in place arrangements for a county-wide procurement deal for DFGs. This will increase resources for the council once it is in place. The establishment of the councillor-led 'Searching for Best Value Group' underlines its ambitions in seeking value for money. The appointment of the Procurement Officer will help the service identify opportunities for savings. These initiatives should lead to increased investment in the service.
- 128** The Council is not working effectively with some of its partners. For example, the Council no longer requires the HIA to administer DFGs on its behalf which means that their specialist skills are not available to some of the most vulnerable people in Copeland. There are also inefficient work practices between the HIA and the Council which involve some double-handling. During the period when the private sector renewal team lacked capacity, it did not work effectively with the HIA to ensure that the renewal service was maintained and this led to significant underspends. Joint working with County Council OTs is yet to produce assurance that customers receive a good DFG service and better relationships with housing associations has not delivered the range of outcomes that are often considered normal practice. The Council is missing an opportunity for the HIA to undertake more work, releasing the Council's team to develop other service areas.
- 129** There are a number challenges in the coming years and a high risk that future resources for home renewal are likely to reduce. Copeland's allocation from the regional housing 'pot' fell 28 per cent in 2009/10 and it is estimated by officers to fall again for 2010/11. Capacity within the OT service also looks set to diminish. Although some money will be become available through the achievement of DFG stretch targets (£1.5 million for all district councils in Cumbria), the Council needs to decide if it will deploy its own resources to address these challenges. Lower investment in home improvements will have a detrimental effect on the health and life chances of residents and will increase pressure on other housing services.
- 130** Sickness absence was in the worst performing 25 per cent of councils in 2007/08. This level decreased from an average of 13.1 days per employee (9.6 days for the housing service) to 11.2 days in the following year but has increased again in the current year. Absenteeism hinders the Council in delivering services and increases pressure on staff.

Appendix 1 – Progress on recommendations from previous inspection

Recommendation 2007	Progress to date
<p>R1 Improve the strategic approach to housing by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing borough-specific plans to implement sub-regional strategies and meet local need; • improving relationships with partner organisation to help achieve strategic housing objectives, including new provision; • implementing systems and structures to ensure the Council is carrying out its statutory duties in the private sector under the 2004 Housing Act; • updating grant policies and procedures to strategically target the use of housing grants to meet housing and wider regeneration objectives; • taking a client role in the delivery of housing advice provision in the borough; and • developing systems and structures to move towards a proactive homelessness prevention approach and to minimise the use of temporary accommodation. 	<p>In development - weak progress</p> <p>In development - weak progress</p> <p>In development - weak progress</p> <p>In development - strong progress</p> <p>In development - strong progress</p> <p>In development - strong progress</p>

Appendix 1 – Progress on recommendations from previous inspection

Recommendation 2007	Progress to date
<p>R2 Review how the housing service operates in the context of corporate systems and priorities, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ensuring corporate systems for dealing with key management issues, such as budget setting and financial management, service planning and appraisals are adhered to in each service area and that robust monitoring and management takes places at the corporate centre to prevent non-compliance; reviewing the housing team's structure and resources and developing a permanent establishment capable of meeting the Council's statutory requirements, developing and implementing housing strategies to meet local requirements and delivering services to an acceptable standard, in line with these recommendations; improving relationships between departments to exploit opportunities for joined up working and make best use of expertise outside the housing team to deliver housing objectives; and reporting regularly to the executive and corporate team on performance against the housing improvement /service plan and against a full suite of performance and cost indicators in housing until the service is reinspected. 	<p>In development - strong progress</p> <p>Fully achieved</p> <p>In development - weak progress</p> <p>In development - weak progress</p>

Appendix 1 – Progress on recommendations from previous inspection

Recommendation 2007	Progress to date
<p>R3 Ensure the new corporate access strategy is robust enough to manage access to housing services and to develop a strategic, corporate approach to customer care by addressing key issues, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing a fully interactive corporate website; • developing a clear, corporate approach to translation which clearly meets local needs; • developing a consistent corporate approach to the management of complaints, including reporting to councillors about learning from them; • developing and displaying a comprehensive range of housing leaflets; • developing clear service standards in housing, which are well publicised and against which performance is managed; and • developing transactional customer satisfaction surveys following key housing processes and reporting to councillors about learning from them. 	<p>In development - weak progress</p> <p>Fully achieved</p> <p>Fully achieved</p> <p>Fully achieved</p> <p>In development - strong progress</p> <p>In development - strong progress</p>
<p>R4 Further develop and implement existing equality and diversity policies, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing and maintaining a thorough corporate understanding of the profile and needs of local people through liaison with representative community organisations and robust research; • carrying out and acting on the findings of equality impact assessments in housing; and • incorporating full consideration of equality and diversity issues in all procurement decision making and contract management. 	<p>Very limited progress</p> <p>Very limited progress</p> <p>Very limited progress</p>

Appendix 1 – Progress on recommendations from previous inspection

Recommendation 2007	Progress to date
<p>R5 Improve value for money and performance management by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• tracking, benchmarking and reporting to staff and councillors on corporate and service costs, alongside a full range of housing performance indicators and using the data to review how services are delivered; and• implementing effective procurement of all commissioned services and products, including establishing a robust client role in ongoing contract management.	<p>Very limited progress</p> <p>Very limited progress</p>

Appendix 2 – Performance indicators

PI	2007/08	2008/09	2008/09
	Actual	Actual	Target
BV2a Equality Standard for Local Government	2	2	3
Working Days Lost Due to Sickness Absence	13.10	11.20	10.00
Percentage of Employees with a Disability	4.91%	3.30%	5.00%
Ethnic Minority representation in the workforce - employees	.8%	.5%	1.0%
No of private sector vacant dwellings that are returned into occupation or demolished	0	0	0
Length of stay in temporary accommodation (B&B)	2	4	1
Length of stay in temporary accommodation (Hostel)	.00	.00	.00
Number of people sleeping rough	0	0	0
Speed of processing - new HB/CTB claims	28.1	23.2	26.0
Speed of processing - changes of circumstances for HB/CTB claims	15.2	10.3	10.0
New homes built on previously developed land	47.40%	56.80%	50.00%
Planning appeals allowed	28.6%	60.0%	30.0%
Processing of planning applications: Major applications	70%	84.20%	65.00%
Processing of planning applications: Minor applications	77.59%	84.40%	70.00%
Processing of planning applications: Other applications	99.29%	94.40%	85.00%
Net additional homes provided	104	14	230
Number of affordable homes delivered (gross)	0	18	40
Number of households living in temporary accommodation	-	4	8
Supply of ready to develop housing sites	-	109.4%	100.0%

Appendix 2 – Performance indicators

PI	2007/08	2008/09	2008/09
	Actual	Actual	Target
Previously developed land that has been vacant or derelict for more than five years	-	8.06%	5.00%
Tackling fuel poverty – % of people receiving income based benefits living in homes with a low energy efficiency rating: (i) Low energy efficiency	-	10%	
Tackling fuel poverty – % of people receiving income based benefits living in homes with a low energy efficiency rating: (ii) High energy efficiency	-	23%	

Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 Before going on site and during our visit, we reviewed documents as requested on our standard document request list and a number of additional documents which the Council and stakeholders felt would be helpful in reaching our judgements.
- 2 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 the quality of the service. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about how the strategic housing service works, in practice. These included partner focus groups, file checks, visits to various neighbourhoods and housing schemes, mystery shopping of key service access points and shadowing of staff.
- 3 We met and interviewed a range of people involved in delivering the service and carrying out related corporate functions. We also interviewed the portfolio holder for housing.

The Audit Commission

The Audit Commission is an independent watchdog, driving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in local public services to deliver better outcomes for everyone.

Our work across local government, health, housing, community safety and fire and rescue services means that we have a unique perspective. We promote value for money for taxpayers, auditing the £200 billion spent by 11,000 local public bodies.

As a force for improvement, we work in partnership to assess local public services and make practical recommendations for promoting a better quality of life for local people.

Copies of this report

If you require further copies of this report, or a copy in large print, in Braille, on tape, or in a language other than English, please call 0844 798 7070.

© Audit Commission 2010

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

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

Tel: 0844 798 1212, Fax: 0844 798 2945, Textphone (minicom): 0844 798 2946

www.audit-commission.gov.uk
