

Housing Strategy and Enabling, Private Sector Housing, Homelessness and Housing Advice

Rochford District Council

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

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

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

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Introduction

- 1 This review was commissioned by Rochford District Council (the Council) as part of the services provided under section 35 of the Audit Commission Act 1998.
- 2 The scope of the work was agreed following a series of meetings between the senior management of the Council's housing department and the Audit Commission.
- 3 In order to carry out the review, the inspector conducted a desktop review of documents provided by the Council, conducted a number of interviews with staff and managers from the Council, contacted outside stakeholders and undertook some reality checks designed to test how users might experience the service.
- 4 Judgements have been made about the services included within the scope, but have not been scored in the manner adopted by the Audit Commission during inspections. In order to assist the Council, suggestions for improvement or areas where there may be concerns have been highlighted during the report.
- 5 This report will not be published, although the Council may wish to share it with its partners.

Scope and objectives

- 6 Following the recent options appraisal exercise, and given the small size of the stock, it is likely that the housing service will be transferring to a registered social landlord (RSL), with the aim being to achieve transfer by early 2007 at the latest. In terms of this exercise, it was agreed that the focus would be on private sector housing and housing strategy, housing advice and homelessness: integral to all of these elements is that of user focus. The specific objectives are as follows.
 - Private sector housing and housing strategy – at the time of the last inspection, Rochford was criticised for not having the information available or the building blocks in place to produce an effective housing strategy, and was thus failing in its key strategic role in the district. As has been noted, however, the strategy has now been deemed to be fit for purpose.
 - Given the pressures that remain locally in terms of accessing housing, and the likely transfer of the housing stock in the future, the need for the Council to have a strategy that reflects local need and enables the Council to take the lead in determining and influencing housing provision, this remains a critical area for the Council. With this in mind the inspector will seek to explore with the Council and its partners what is being done to increase the supply of affordable housing; the role the Council plays in its relationship with key RSLs as well as other partner agencies; the development of section 106 sites and agreements and the ways in which the Council is meeting other need, such as that of the population with special needs and the provision of temporary accommodation.

- In addition, the inspector will look at how the information that informs the housing needs survey is being kept updated and what is done to ensure that the housing strategy remains a live document that properly informs the activity of the Council in moving into a greater strategic role. In addition, the inspector will want to consider what has been done to update work with, and knowledge of, private sector housing provision in Rochford, concentrating on elements that were highlighted within the previous report, as well as drawing linkages to the work that is being done around empty homes.
 - Housing advice and homelessness, and the development of a landlord's forum: while it is acknowledged that there have been developments in the housing advice and homelessness field there remain challenges, such as the reduction in the use of temporary accommodation and the work that the Council is doing to address prevention work in dealing with homelessness and homeless presentations. The homeless strategy was under development when the previous inspection took place and we would wish to see what stage it is currently at, as well as establishing with partners how they view the work that the Council has been carrying out. Housing needs surveys have been carried out which indicate that hidden homelessness has been an issue, and we would wish to see how this is being addressed, as well as work carried out to assess what, if any, impact homelessness prevention has been having for applicants for housing advice.
- 7 The formally agreed scope of the study was modified while the inspector was on site. Originally, the inspector was to have considered how the provision of housing for older people is managed, whether this provision adequately meets needs and work that has been done to reconfigure or decommission sheltered blocks. However, the Council concluded that in the light of other research they had commissioned and of work in progress to address the issues found, the Audit Commission inspector should omit this area of study.
- 8 The study provides:
- a view about how the private sector and housing strategies can be used to inform the work that the council is doing and seeks to deliver in the future;
 - pointers for improvement and sign post to organisations with positive practices in this respect;
 - a diagnosis of the effectiveness of the services current practices in relation to responding to a diverse range of service users; and
 - a view, where appropriate, of the services' direction of travel in these areas.

Background

- 9 Rochford DC is a non-metropolitan district council in south east Essex, with a population of about 80,000: less than 1 per cent of the population comes from black and minority ethnic communities, and approximately 17 per cent of the population is over 65. The housing (housing management and strategy) service was last inspected in 2003, when the service was found to be fair but with poor prospects for improvement. At that time, neither the housing strategy nor the business plan had been judged to be fit for purpose.
- 10 Rochford was rated as a weak council under the Comprehensive Performance Assessment and since then there has been considerable work carried out with the Council to facilitate improvement.
- 11 The district council has 39 seats, with the Conservative Party being the largest single group with 32 seats; Liberal Democrats have 4, Labour 1, Independents 1 and the Rochford Residents Party 1.
- 12 Rochford is relatively affluent. Eighty-six per cent of the population are owner occupiers, as compared to a national average of 71 per cent. The unemployment rate is low at just 1 per cent, and there are low levels of deprivation. The housing strategy indicates, however, that there are numbers of concealed households who are unable to afford high local house prices but are not approaching the Council for assistance.
- 13 Many of the criticisms of the last housing report have been addressed, and the service's strategy and business plan have both now been judged to be fit for purpose.

Findings

- 14 A table of findings has been prepared, showing the strengths of the service under each heading, followed by the improvement areas. Incorporated in the table are summary judgements in relation to each service area, followed by a series of recommendations.
- 15 The findings and recommendations are as follows.

Table 1 Strengths and areas for improvement

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
<p>Access to services and customer care</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rochford reception area remodelled, and now presents a welcoming environment with seating area, a range of leaflets and information and pleasant interview rooms. • Additional DDA facilities provided at Rayleigh. • Website is welcoming and reasonably intuitive. • Service standards in place for planning, homelessness and housing advice. • Prompt and pleasant response to mystery shopping housing enquiry – application form posted same day. • Plans in place for customer satisfaction survey of applicants. • Customer satisfaction monitoring better developed for homelessness and private sector than for applicants. • Housing strategy available in other languages and formats. • Strategic and landlord roles separated. • Accompanied viewings and follow-up post tenancy visits are the norm. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No published service standards for private sector services means that customers are not able to judge the quality of service received against realistic expectations. • Lack of interactive housing services on the website and those that do exist, for example rent payment are hard to find. • Not easy for people to get clear, consistent information and advice on their housing options. Calls passed between register/homelessness/private sector depending upon nature of enquiry/degree of overlap. For example, mystery shopping request for list of private letting agents – register section advised not available, but homelessness section have one. • No comprehensive information pack available to those seeking help with housing. • Monitoring of customer satisfaction is inconsistent and not always systematic, for example no monitoring post allocation other than for homeless families. • Officers unable to indicate anything that had changed as a result of customer feedback.

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Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rayleigh office receptionist welcoming and helpful – gave a leaflet on grants and signposted CAB for more detailed assistance with housing problems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethnicity information is not consistently collected across all services and is not being used to ensure fair access to services. • Rayleigh office staff not able/willing to quote individuals contact names in respect of grants availability or possibilities for low cost ownership. ‘Speak to anyone in housing’.
Judgements	<p>The Council has acted upon a number of the recommendations of the previous report, as a result of which access to services has been improved by changes to the physical environment. The functional separation of strategic and landlord services has largely been made but there is more to do to present a more holistic service to people seeking help with housing in order to ensure that frontline staff can present the full range of options.</p>	
Recommendations	<p>Provide a more holistic and comprehensive housing options service:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop a culture and environment that will improve the seamlessness of provision of housing options, advice and information; • provide training and shadowing opportunities for staff that will develop their ability to advise and assist customers across the related services of housing register, homelessness, housing advice and private sector housing; • consider the impact of the stock transfer on allocations and if retention is proposed, bring forward structural changes that will mimic the future separation of responsibility for the allocations policy, nominations and lettings; and • prepare a comprehensive housing options information pack for customers with up to date leaflets which publicise methods for preventing homelessness, schemes to enable people to remain in their own home and details of access to shared and low cost ownership, social and privately rented housing. 	

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
	<p>Develop a more consistent, systematic and comprehensive approach to customer satisfaction monitoring that enables the council to respond to thematic as well as individual issues. Develop and publish service standards for private sector services. Make use of post tenancy visits and telephone surveys to gain feedback, rather than relying solely on postal surveys which often have a poor response rate. Provide feedback for customers that indicates clearly where their comments have led to changes in service.</p> <p>Consistently collect and analyse ethnicity information across all services in order to be able to demonstrate that the Council gives fair access to all. Compare results with the population profile of the district and investigate further any indications that some parts of the community are under represented in access to services. Use the information to ensure services are strategically planned and delivered appropriately.</p>	

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
<p>Strategy and enabling, housing needs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New district housing needs survey and market appraisal completed October 2004, jointly commissioned with the other districts in the sub-region – each brought their survey to the same level with a consistent approach and data now is truly comparative across the sub-region. • From these a sub-regional report was produced drawing all district surveys together, which has informed the sub-regional housing strategy. • In future, sub-region agreement for annual update. • RDC active participants in sub-regional housing forum – ensuring influence. • Housing strategy demonstrates links to national, regional and local priorities and indicates relationship to other internal and external strategies. • Five strategic housing priorities set in HS, each with a set of activities defined to support the priority. • Current housing strategy to be updated by June 2006 in light of new housing needs and market analysis. • Stock option appraisal complete – (stock transfer plans in progress). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sub-regional housing strategy identifies need for additional 3,000 homes annually across the TGSE sub-region. • Housing strategy identifies oversupply of sheltered housing but shortage of general needs housing. • House price/income indicators from new needs analysis show 67 per cent of concealed households can't afford to rent, 70 per cent can't afford to buy. • The 2004 needs survey identified a total affordable housing need of 393 units annually. Based on projected supply of 102 re-lets of existing stock this results in an outstanding net total need of 291 units annually. • Reducing number of voids year-on-year, eg 128 in 2003/04 plus 32 nominations made to RSLs – limited ability to respond to needs without development. • Limited number of new land or brownfield sites available for development. • Majority of concealed households are not applying to be on the housing register. • Limited influence by stakeholders in current housing strategy. Consultation only by postal method, with poor response.

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RDC’s replacement local plan in place (pending new local development documents) recognises need for additional affordable housing of various types. Sets out the Council’s planning policy framework against which all planning applications are decided. • Replacement local plan indicates that in accordance with PPG3, authorities must negotiate with developers for the inclusion of an element of affordable housing provision on larger sites, either through provision on the site, or through a contribution so that houses can be provided elsewhere in the district where a need has been identified. • Various initiatives in place to make best use of housing stock – transfer incentive to downsize, cash incentive for private sector purchase – a number of vacancies generated as a result. • Land transfer working party is helping to identify any remaining pockets of land capable of being developed. • The Council has produced a local development scheme setting out the timetable for production of the LDF. • Development of the housing section of the LDF will provide an opportunity for the council’s new housing strategy and needs analysis to inform the content. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The delivery of affordable housing has not been a high corporate priority to date. The housing strategy is the only corporate document that places a high priority on the need to provide additional affordable housing through section 106 planning negotiations or with funding from the Housing Corporation/ Regional Housing Board. Other corporate documents, for example the BVPP, make only short reference to affordable housing. • In new residential development schemes of more than 25 dwellings or residential sites of 1 hectare or more, the local planning authority expects not less than 15 per cent of the new dwellings to be provided as affordable housing to meet local needs. This target percentage is very low and even then only applies to larger sites. • Planning policy sets no thresholds for smaller sites which are able to be developed with no affordable housing contribution at all.

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LP indicates a need for 4,600 homes to be developed between 2001 and 2021, which will mean that some larger land sites will inevitably have to be released from green belt for housing land, representing an opportunity for affordable housing. • One commuted sum received - £180,000. • Successful ADP round 2003 to 2006 secured £3.65 million from HC for affordable housing. • Total of 89 affordable homes completed or nearing completion in the period 2003 to 2006 including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • supported housing schemes developed in line with Essex’s SP strategy; • additional units of accommodation for extra care (30), DV (5), LD (6) and expansion of intermediate care provision, for example ‘step-up step-down’ also, 22 rented (Hardwick House) and 27 (Reads Nursery) plus two units for move on; and • shared ownership homes delivered through S106. • RDC has also contributed land free of charge for affordable housing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Thames Gateway growth area has few implications in terms of housing in the Rochford district and cannot therefore be used as a driver for the provision of additional affordable housing. Only a small part of the district around Southend airport is included and no housing land is affected by the designation. The Council sees Thames Gateway as an opportunity but mainly in respect of green space and tourism aspects. • View of housing inspector that the replacement local plan suggests a higher emphasis on the protection of green belt and the natural and built environment than on the provision of additional housing. • List of RDC publications significantly affecting the preparation of the Rochford district replacement local plan does not include the housing strategy (but does include a document on playing pitches). • Previous planning policy resisted the notion of rural exemption sites, but there is a new policy in the replacement local plan which allows them where local communities provide background justification. No sites have yet come forward to benefit from the new policy. • Completions achieved fall far short of identified need.

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • VFM achieved with £375,000 capital funding which delivered six purchased units and five existing from Springboard HA for use as TA Nomination rights for 5 GN units secured just outside border as result of joint bidding with an HA and Castle Point BC. • In past, RDC has contributed capital funding to the development of affordable housing, for example current year £150,000 (bidding in progress best bid so far will deliver four units) – but £0 for 2006/07. • ADP bidding round in progress for 2006 to 2008. RDC has supported six bids to a value of £3,031,436 which, if approved, will deliver 68 homes over the two years. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nomination agreements in place but not monitored for compliance – RDC cannot be sure it is receiving full entitlement. • Forty-three units of key worker accommodation developed (S106) at the former Park School site – but without clear needs analysis to justify it – officers had to generate demand by approaching schools, hospitals etc. • The Council provides limited guidance to developers about what it is seeking through S106 developments. • Responsibility for negotiation of S106 agreements lies with development control officers who have no ongoing interest in the outcome. • Enabling officer not sufficiently engaged with planning in terms of driving the requirements for S106 and ensuring that what is delivered meets the needs in terms of numbers, size, type etc. • In practice developers have offered the minimum contribution of affordable housing and there has been little, if any, defence or challenge presented by the Council. • No proactive target set for new build/ acquisition programme.

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HS action plan generally SMART but some outcomes have inadequate tools for measurement. • Replacement local plan, saying ‘the local planning authority will require the use of the upper floors of shops and other commercial premises as self-contained living accommodation, except in cases where the accommodation would provide a poor living environment for various reasons’. How has this policy translated into reality? • ‘Living over the shop’ policy in the LP, which promotes more use of commercial buildings within town centres for residential use of the upper floors, has not translated into reality. Responsibility for delivery not allocated to individual officers. • There is a standard communication from planning to housing in the event of a major planning application, asking for comments but there is doubt as to whether this is sent to, or received by, the most appropriate officer and this opportunity for comment has not been well used. • Limited use of rural enabler.

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
<p>Judgements</p>	<p>The delivery of affordable housing has not been a high corporate priority to date. The Council defines ‘affordable housing’ as housing that is provided, with subsidy, for local people who are unable to resolve their housing needs in the private sector because of the relationship between housing costs and incomes. Despite clear evidence that high numbers of households fall into this category, the Council has not maximised opportunities to deliver additional affordable housing, for example the targets and thresholds in the current local plan are not challenging in relation to these levels of housing need.</p> <p>The housing and planning departments have not worked closely together in developing understanding of the housing market, as a result of which their respective policies are not well joined up or coherent. For example, the review and replacement of the local plan was a missed opportunity for the Council to revisit the thresholds.</p> <p>Renewable energy and energy efficiency is a growing agenda item for both housing and planning – this is another area where joint working has the potential to deliver better results.</p> <p>The current local plan is unlikely to deliver much affordable housing and the LDF is the next major opportunity to reshape the market in the future.</p> <p>The number of concealed households in housing need who are nevertheless not coming forward to register with the Council indicates that the Council is not seen as providing a range of alternative options, but simply as a provider of rented housing which is commonly known to be in short supply. Possibly for the same reason, individuals in housing need are not approaching their local councillors for assistance and thus the issues are not immediately apparent to the elected membership.</p> <p>There has been some work to consider the issues of low demand sheltered housing, as a result of which the Council has recognised that only approximately half its schemes are viable for ongoing sheltered use.</p>	

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
<p>Recommendations</p>	<p>From the elected membership, appoint a ‘champion’ for housing. Undertake a programme of training and awareness-raising for members to break down negative perceptions of affordable housing and to ensure members are aware of the high needs for housing which are currently hidden. Provide stronger community leadership by working with housing associations, developers and other stakeholders to provide a clearer message to local communities about the need for affordable housing.</p> <p>Maximise the opportunity presented by the development of the housing section of the LDF by;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using the Council’s new housing strategy and needs analysis to inform the content - specifying housing requirements, including affordable housing for each site, for example the minimum density, types of housing and number of bedrooms needed; • ensuring that housing is in a position to match the key dates and milestones set out in the local development scheme in order to have the maximum influence; and • working with planning colleagues to propose a large increase to the percentage of affordable housing required on development sites and a reduction of current site size thresholds. <p>Consider whether the development control officers should continue to have responsibility for negotiation of S106 agreements or whether housing, with a greater vested interest in maximising the output, should take the lead role.</p> <p>Improve the advice and guidance given to developers about what the Council will require in terms of S106 agreements by working with planning to develop design briefs for developers and RSL’s to design schemes which meet the Council’s overall strategic housing objectives. Ensure these briefs are followed.</p> <p>Research why concealed households are not joining the housing register and use this information to help shape the structure and delivery of the more holistic housing options service recommended earlier.</p> <p>Consider how excess sheltered housing schemes might serve the needs of other housing needs groups by redesignation and/or remodelling.</p>	

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
<p>Private sector housing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historic lack of capacity for private sector function addressed and full team put in place during 2005. • RDC grant aids the Rochford and Rayleigh Citizens Advice Bureau which provides advice to local residents including debt counselling and advice on housing matters. • Average SAP rating for private sector stock 62.9 – above national average. • Register of empty properties in place. • Benchmarking group set up with other districts and County OTs to agree target times for different elements of the DFG process and to track ‘real time’ waiting experience of clients. Baseline data established, beginning to see trends. • PS renewal and DFG budget targeted to those in greatest need using financial checks and vulnerability criteria. • Partnerships with external stakeholders to promote energy efficiency. • Preparation for HHSRS – staff trained on the rating and enforcement system. • Plans to work with other districts on worked examples to ensure consistency of approach. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private sector housing strategy out-of-date. • Last private sector house condition survey done in 2002 – as a result, the Council does not have an accurate current baseline upon which to base strategy and resource allocation for the future. For example, no ability to link stock condition to vulnerability of occupiers. • 2002 survey found 2.7 per cent unfitness. • Target (in PS strategy) to complete empty homes strategy by April 2005 but this is still work in progress and draft document quite early in development. Requests for adaptations, both in Council homes and the private sector, remain at a high level, placing pressure on budgets and staff resources. • No HMO inspection/risk management regime in place – work in progress to identify HMO’s • Draft PS action plan generally SMART but some outcomes inadequately measured. • Some mismatch between draft PS housing strategy 2004/05 and action plan, for example page 17 lists proposals to speed up grant processing times and to establish performance indicators for grant delivery – but these are not reflected in the action plan, nor indeed previously highlighted as a problem in the strategy itself.

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using government ready reckoner – believe just 0.1 per cent behind 2006 target of 65 per cent of vulnerable households in decent homes in private sector – but tentative estimate due to lack of confidence on 2002 data. • In response to RRO, RDC published new policy on financial assistance July 2003. • Progress against the HECA target of reducing energy consumption robustly monitored and additional officer resource recently appointed to improve capacity in this area. • Twenty-seven procedures identified to be updated in preparation for new and strengthened powers under the Housing Act 2004, work in progress. • HIA in place to deliver grant works, jointly funded by RDC, together with Supporting People and social care. • Gardening and handyperson service in place. • Turnaround times for grant approval improving and significantly better than the six months allowed. • Positive examples of grant cases seen – high-quality of work and residents ability to live independently markedly improved. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities afforded by the RRO to target actions and resources to areas of most need have not been maximised, for example no use of equity release or of loans which would provide better value for money by recycling funds. • Grants only for owner occupiers – current policy gives no ability to intervene on behalf of private tenants by assisting landlords to bring properties up to standard. • Only 12 per cent reduction in energy achieved since 1996 – against government target of 30 per cent within 15 years. • The links between the numbers of long-term empty properties and the lack of affordable housing are being made, but not yet processed and integrated into service delivery. For example, grants with conditions requiring nomination rights/realistic rents are not made available to landlords. • Reduced budget for DFG’s next year – anticipated £75,816 against bid of £108,000. • Contract with HIA not sufficiently robust to drive improved performance.

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clients who received disabled facilities grants would have liked more proactive contact from the Home Improvement Agency during the process to prepare them for likely dates etc. The clients said they had to ring in from time to time in order to be updated.
Judgements	<p>Capacity issues have been a barrier to progress in private sector housing but this has now been addressed and the team is at full strength. The housing, health and safety rating system is about to replace the fitness standard and new licensing arrangements are required for certain categories of houses in multiple occupation. The Council is gearing up for both these requirements.</p> <p>The current private sector stock condition survey information is not sufficiently robust to give a confident basis for future decision making and resource allocation. New requirements to increase the proportion of vulnerable households in decent homes to 70 per cent by 2010 and to 75 per cent by 2020, requires some baseline data not currently possessed by the Council and a new stock condition survey has become urgent. Until this baseline information and needs data is available it will not be possible to develop a comprehensive private sector housing strategy but there is research work that can be undertaken in the meantime to develop supporting strategies, such as an empty homes strategy and HMO strategy.</p> <p>The Council uses some powers of intervention in the private housing sector but it is not making full use of the RRO, for example not using equity release or loans as an alternative to grants.</p>	

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
Recommendations	<p>As a matter of urgency, undertake a private sector stock condition survey, in order to provide up to date information to underpin and justify the development of a new housing strategy for the private sector.</p> <p>Improve understanding of the reasons behind the numbers of private sector empty homes and develop clear policies and initiatives for offering owners ways of bringing empty homes back into use. Include research on ‘over the shop’ opportunities as part of planned research on reasons for empty homes.</p> <p>Take greater advantage of opportunities afforded by the RRO to target actions and resources to areas need not currently addressed, for example the use of loans would provide better value for money by recycling funds and could be extended to private sector landlords in return for nomination rights for a period – thus providing more assistance to those in housing need.</p> <p>Strengthen internal working processes and relationships with planning officers in respect of their contribution to delivery of private sector energy targets.</p> <p>To reduce delays in obtaining individual quotes for disabled adaptation work, tender common items of work against a schedule of rates and put term contract(s) in place.</p> <p>Improve the regularity of contact with DFG applicants to keep them advised of the progress of their application.</p>	

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
<p>Homelessness and housing advice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homelessness strategy demonstrates links to national, regional and local priorities and indicates relationship to other internal and external strategies. • No statutory duty to produce revised strategy until 2008 and no changes to legislation expected imminently. However, environment is changing (for example levels of homelessness/ causes) and target to halve TA use by 2010 is as important to ODPM as decent homes. RDC have taken decision to review strategy early to be completed by July 2006. • Consultation with stakeholders has commenced in respect of review of the homeless strategy, including young people and mental health forums to date. • Ninety-eight per cent of decisions now made on homelessness applications within 33 day target, compared with 40 per cent in 2004/05. • Cross-boundary activities to achieve uniformity of approach to homelessness across neighbouring Essex authorities. • Receives £19,000 in homelessness prevention grant from ODPM. • Council supports CAB to provide complementary advice/prevention. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategy indicates RDC has had difficulty in meeting the duties placed on it under homelessness legislation, particularly the restrictions on the use of bed and breakfast accommodation. • Particular challenges highlighted in the strategy: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An urgent need to find alternatives to bed and breakfast accommodation. • Shortage of low cost housing, to either buy or rent, restricts the options people have to resolve their housing problems. • A shortage of social housing lettings available generally and in particular to homeless people. • A lack of suitable accommodation, particularly on an emergency basis for particular groups including young people, dangerous offenders and those with substance misuse problems. • The review of homelessness decisions takes too long. • There is insufficient consultation with people who use the homelessness and housing advice services. • There is insufficient information on the true extent of rough sleeping in the district.

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant activity made in homelessness prevention – including advertising housing advice services, mediation, building relationships with landlords and agents. • Two new posts in team in last two years to assist prevention. • The Council works with private landlords to help ensure that the housing benefit system operates effectively and to secure some tenancies for homeless people. • Close liaison with the housing benefits section to maximise discretionary housing benefit payments. Full value for money being gained from discretionary housing benefit – grant fully spent and 39 households helped in 2005/06 to date. • Rent deposit scheme has assisted 10 families to avoid homelessness since April 2005. • Further ten families prevented from becoming homeless due to other intervention. • Sanctuary scheme for victims of domestic violence developed in conjunction with community safety and Castle Point BC. • Some conversion work completed on hostel to make units self contained and work in progress to convert remaining units. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Council’s interview facilities need improvement. • The improvements that have been carried out to the first floor of the Council’s hostel need extending to the rest of the building. • The floating support scheme needs expanding. • The time taken to decide homelessness applications needs to move to top quartile performance. • The above are reflected in plans but - strategy action plan is in a different style/format to the housing one. Not as SMART, for example less measurable targets/ actions and not prioritised. • Service plans (SAPs) (continuous improvement and others) contain no milestones and lack of outcome measures. • Rent in advance and damage deposit only returnable at end of tenancy so not available to be recycled. • No protocol with HAs in respect of impact of their arrears policies on homelessness. • Three units of TA with Swan HA now void and underutilised – representing poor VFM.

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing use of temporary accommodation – down from 63 households June 2005 to 31 mid-January 2006. • Average number of weeks in B&B reducing and figures mainly relate to historic applications. • Likely to achieve ODPM 2010 target to reduce TA by half – realistic expectation to reduce baseline no of TA units from 64 at end of December 2004 to 30 by the end of March 2006 and 10 by 2010. • Service plan in place (continuous improvement) comprising new initiatives to take the service forward. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity issues have restricted ability to maintain regular contact visits with households in temporary accommodation. Monitoring of these relies on a book system – no notes on the client files. • Approximately 15 households in the Council's own stock as temporary accommodation, which is suitable for their needs yet not made permanent pending reaching the top of the list by accumulation of points.
Judgements	<p>Homelessness applications are reducing and the number of households for whom a full duty was owed has declined from a peak at 68 in 2003/04 but in 2004/05 was down to 46. This is in line with a national trend and this, together with the prevention work now being undertaken by the Council, has successfully reduced the use of B&B and the need for temporary accommodation is also in decline.</p> <p>The homelessness strategy action plan hopes to achieve 100 per cent of homelessness reviews within statutory time limits by April 2006. Part of the problem is setting up convenient dates for the people involved and part relates to the need for preparation of a detailed report.</p>	
Recommendations	<p>Develop a standard reporting format and style for homelessness reviews and ensure that applications have a checklist that mirrors this in order to make it easy to complete when necessary. Set up dates in advance and cancel them if there are no cases to consider.</p> <p>Produce more information for users for example service standards in leaflet form, explanation of the priority groups – see recommendation under 'access to services and customer care'.</p>	

Service area	Strengths	Areas for improvement
General	<p>There is a lack of clarity about how service plans fit with strategy action plans/BVPP/community plan/corporate plan and a clearer cascade from corporate priorities downwards would be beneficial. There is currently no corporate style for action planning and this would help to address the clarity issues. Greater attention is needed to ensure that outcomes are measured rather than process and that priorities within and between plans are clear.</p> <p>Diversity/ethnicity monitoring is an example where data is being collected but not well used and is therefore not driving strategic decision making. There are a number of similar examples where performance is being observed rather than managed. Once the Council’s internal performance management framework is fully developed, this might usefully be extended this to cover agencies delivering services on behalf of the Council, for example the Home Improvement Agency.</p>	