

How is South Somerset District Council performing?

Inspection of Strategic Housing Services

33 During 2008, we assessed the Council's housing service as 'fair' (one star) with uncertain prospects for improvement. We concluded the following.

- The service has made some positive achievements in the delivery of new affordable housing including rural housing and works effectively with Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners to make best use of their homes. The service has achieved some success in preventing homelessness and has improved planning performance although there is more to be done. The service works well in partnership to reduce costs and deliver positive outcomes for local people. It has a good understanding of stock condition and provides a reasonable range of advice and assistance for homeowners.
- Customer access can be difficult and the service is not consistently customer-focused. The service does not currently have a comprehensive understanding of overall housing need and while in some areas it has a good understanding of its diverse communities this too is limited, although there are plans in place to address this. The Council has not maximised the opportunities for development in rural areas and targets for affordable housing provision are not consistently met. Empty homes and Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) are not dealt with effectively and although some aspects of the delivery of disabled adaptations are good in some cases it takes too long for people's needs to be met. There are significant weaknesses in the quality of the Council's strategies. In addition, service quality is not always consistent with costs and the management of value for money is mixed.
- The Council has shown that it is ambitious for the service. The service benefits from strong political leadership and an effective portfolio holder. The service has a positive approach to partnership working and shows openness to learning from others and from external challenge.
- Some positive achievements and improvements have been made in areas such as the delivery of affordable housing, homelessness and planning. However, the track record of improvement in areas such as private sector housing and the cross-cutting areas of equality and diversity, access and value for money is mixed. Some actions in key plans have not been delivered on time.
- There are weaknesses in the service's approach to performance management and performance reporting and its future plans. It is uncertain whether the Council will be able to deliver a sufficient supply of housing in the future both through best use of existing housing and developing new housing. There is no significant growth in future budgets and service capacity has been reduced by long-term vacancies and sickness (although this is now improving) and some skills gaps as well as a lack of integration across strategic housing services.

34 The Council has responded to our assessment by producing an improvement plan, which it is in the process of implementing.