

Supporting People Inspection Report

June 2006



Supporting People

Essex County Council

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Contents

Supporting People Inspections	4
Summary	5
Scoring the service	6
Recommendations	10
Report	13
Context	13
How good is the programme?	16
What has the programme aimed to achieve?	16
Is the programme meeting the needs of the community and users?	17
What are the prospects for improvement to the service?	36
Appendix 1 – Performance indicators	41
Demographic information	41
Performance information	43
Supporting People data	43
Social services performance indicators	50
Best value performance indicators	51
Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed	55
Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken	56

Supporting People 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. Supporting People inspections are carried out with the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP).

Supporting People is the Government's long-term policy to enable local authorities to plan, commission and provide housing related support services which help vulnerable people live independently.

The Supporting People programme brings together significant funding streams including transitional housing benefit (THB), which has paid for the support costs associated with housing during the implementation phase; the Housing Corporation's supported housing management grant (SHMG) and the probation accommodation grant scheme (PAGS) into a single pot to be administered by 150 administering local authorities (ALA). Unitary and metropolitan authorities and counties are designated as an administering authority with the county taking the lead in most cases for the districts in their area.

Administering local authorities work in partnership, with districts where this is relevant, to agree Supporting People strategies and delivery mechanisms for housing related support services with housing, Social Services, health and the probation service providers. Negotiation and consultation is also required with service users, all housing and support service providers, other statutory service providers, the private sector and voluntary organisations to plan and commission support services to meet identified needs.

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) has published a number of consultation papers on the developing programme and a work plan setting out what local authorities and their partners will need to achieve in order to deliver the programme effectively. All the relevant papers for Supporting People can be found on the Supporting People k-web that can be accessed through the Supporting People website: www.spkweb.org.uk

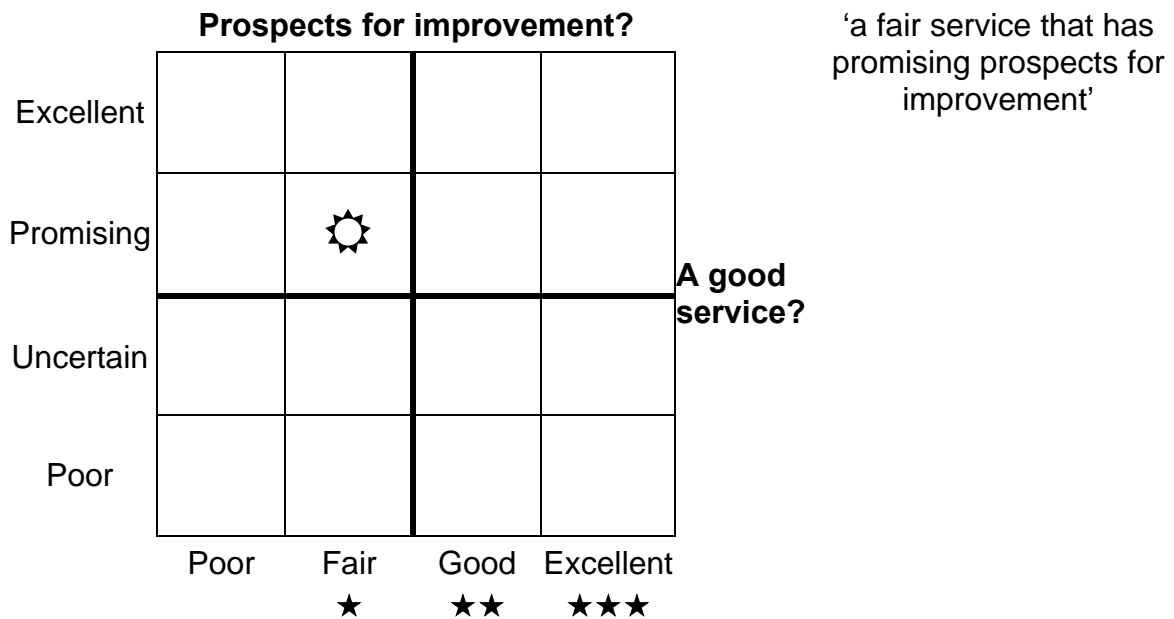
Summary

- 1 Essex County Council is situated in the eastern region of England. The population is 1,318,400 of which 2.9 per cent are from black and minority ethnic community groups.
- 2 The Council is led by a Conservative administration and uses the leader and cabinet model of governance. There are a total of 75 councillors; the Conservatives hold 52 seats, Labour 13, Liberal Democrats 8 and Independents 2.
- 3 The Council has a revenue budget of £1,241 million for 2004/05. It employs approximately 31,400 staff across all services.
- 4 Essex County Council acts as the administering authority for the Supporting People programme in its area. The Council works in partnership with ten primary care trusts (PCTs) together with the Essex Probation Area in commissioning Supporting People services.
- 5 The total amount of Supporting People funding available in 2005/06 is £30.144 million. The Council also receives £893,000 in administration grant towards its role as the administering authority. The highest cost service is £920.67 per person per week providing housing-related support to people with a learning difficulty. The lowest cost service is 11 pence per person per week providing housing-related support to older people in the form of an alarm service.
- 6 Essex County Council was inspected during the third year of the Supporting People programme. This report, therefore, reflects the current context for the Council as it continues to deliver the programme and focuses on determining the effectiveness of current service delivery, the value for money presented by the contracted services and the outcomes for vulnerable people.

Scoring the service

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

Figure 1 Scoring chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

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

- 8 We have scored the Council's management of the Supporting People programme as a fair, one-star programme because of the following.
- Some new services have been developed to meet the needs of vulnerable people, for example, people fleeing domestic violence, frail elderly and young people leaving care.
 - Service user involvement in the service review programme and development of the five-year strategy has been effective.
 - There is a range of good quality information on Supporting People services for providers and service users.
 - Some progress is being made in challenging high and ineligible costs through the service review process.
 - The approach to value for money (VFM) at a strategic level within the Supporting People programme is developing.
 - There are, on the whole, good relationships with the providers as well as effective involvement in the regional Supporting People group.
 - Capacity in the Supporting People team has been increased and the team have a service plan which is SMART.²
 - The Supporting People programme has led to better outcomes for some people in Essex since its introduction in April 2003.

² Specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timebound.

- 9 However, we found a number of weaknesses that need to be addressed. These include the following.
- Service users have not been routinely involved in the strategic governance of the programme and there has been no Supporting People service user involvement strategy.
 - Governance structures have not been operating in the most effective way to drive and develop the programme.
 - There has been a lack of proper engagement by all partners at all levels within the governance structures.
 - The team has not fully utilised the skills of partners, particularly in service reviews.
 - The five-year strategy is overly long and lacks detail around financial and value for money issues.
 - Financial monitoring and reporting is cumbersome and laborious.
 - The quality and consistency of the reviews and monitoring of progress has been inadequate.
 - Alternative approaches to procurement have not yet been fully considered or implemented and more detailed benchmarking has not yet progressed.
 - The Council corporately has only achieved level one of the local government equality standard and only 45 per cent of the county council buildings open to the public have public areas that are suitable for and accessible to people with disabilities. There are no supported housing services specifically designed for or targeted at people from the BME community.
- 10 We have judged that the Supporting People programme has promising prospects for improvement. This is because of the following.
- Corporately, the Authority has a track record of delivering improvement with further improvement plans about to be implemented including a new performance framework.
 - The Supporting People team has developed some new services and improvements to services and savings have been made through the service review process.
 - The value improvement project sponsored by ODPM is making progress and will help to improve the value for money of services.
 - The Council is actively engaged in seeking to strengthen the partnership arrangements for the programme's delivery across the county and can demonstrate positive outcomes from this in some areas.
 - Support from senior managers and councillors is positive.
 - The Council have agreed to address the IT issues but it will take time to embed new systems.

- 11 However, we identified the following weaknesses in relation to the prospects for improvement.
- It will take time for the performance management systems to become fully embedded and part of the culture.
 - The Supporting People programme is not clearly linked into other partners' strategies.
 - Progress on some activities in the Supporting People service plan 2004/07 has been slow and there has been limited proactive management and reporting on plans.

Recommendations

- 12 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs³ 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 customers, service providers and councillors, and addresses all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve the governance of the programme by:

- reviewing current structures, membership and reporting mechanisms and ensuring greater participation by all partners and stakeholders, including service users and providers;*
- reviewing terms of reference of all groups; and*
- reviewing frequency and sequencing of meetings of the various groups.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- greater involvement of all partners in the programme;
- better coordination of the development of the programme; and
- improvement in service user and provider ability to influence decision-making.

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

³ 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 performance management of the programme by:

- *completing the data validation exercise and improving the financial management of the programme and producing a consistent suite of financial reports for both the commissioning body and the core strategy group;*
- *introducing a new IT system with appropriate training for staff and providers;*
- *aligning and/or rationalising all tasks in the various action plans/service plan directly with key objectives within the five-year strategy and the new corporate plan;*
- *completing the development of a small number of outcome measures that can be used to demonstrate the contribution that the programme is making to service users and to the achievement of Council priorities as well as those shared with health and probation; and*
- *developing mechanisms to ensure that key issues, and exceptions not covered by key performance indicators, are reported to the Supporting People governing groups and the Council as administering authority.*

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- the Council and the commissioning body will have a robust framework in place that will enable them to monitor progress against shared targets and act swiftly to take remedial action if this becomes necessary.

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

Recommendation

R3 Improve the value for money offered by services by:

- *developing an approach to a value for money assessment that takes into account service cost, quality and outcomes for service users and ensuring its application to all services.*

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- services for vulnerable people will be able to demonstrate how they achieve value for money;
- the quality of the services provided will be important in an assessment as well as cost; and
- outcomes for service users will be part of an assessment.

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

12 Supporting People | Recommendations

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

Dates of inspection: 16 to 20 January 2006

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Report

Context

The locality

- 14 Essex is a large and diverse county of 3,469 square kilometres, which is located in the east of England. Regionally it is part of East Anglia, and it borders outer London boroughs to the south-west. There are three main urban areas (Basildon, Chelmsford and Colchester) which have populations of 150,000 or more, and there are a large number of smaller towns and villages within the county. In addition there is a strip of almost continuous development stretching along the north bank of the Thames from Shoeburyness in the east to Thurrock in the west.
- 15 There are a total of 12 district and borough councils within the county. At local government reorganisation in April 1998, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock became unitary authorities.
- 16 According to the 2001 Census, the population of the area is 1,318,400 living in 544,000 households, 2.9 per cent of the population are from minority ethnic groups, lower than the national average.
- 17 Unemployment stands at 1.6 per cent, lower than both regional and national averages while average pay is above average. Overall, deprivation is generally low but areas of urban and rural deprivation exist for example in Basildon and Jaywick.
- 18 There are strong economic, physical and population growth pressures in Essex:
 - the population grew by 5.1 per cent between 1991 and 2001;
 - the Thames Gateway and M11/Stansted growth areas in the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister communities plan;
 - an additional 131,000 homes by 2020;
 - above regional average traffic volumes and heavy lorries;
 - Haven Gateway east coast ports expansion; and
 - expansion of Stansted airport – approved and future.

The Council

- 19 The Council comprises 75 councillors with the Conservative party in control with 52 seats. Currently a leader and cabinet comprising members from the majority party govern the business of the Council.
- 20 The Council's overall revenue budget for the year 2004/05 was £1,241 million, with £138 million for capital expenditure. The Council received a rating of 'good' for its initial Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) assessment in November 2002 and four stars out of four in December 2005.

- 21 The Council's overall aim, as set out in its corporate plan 'The Essex Approach' and updated in 2003, is to 'make Essex a better place to live and work'. It included seven 'pledges for improvement' (the last two being added in 2003):
- get Essex moving again, tackling road congestion and improving public transport;
 - keep council tax as low as possible;
 - make it easier for teachers to teach;
 - give the elderly the support they need to stay in their own homes;
 - resist national plans for excessive new housing in Essex;
 - improve the environment; and
 - raise standards and extend opportunities for our children and young people.
- 22 The Council has reviewed its priorities and at the time of our inspection, was about to launch a revised corporate plan with four new strategic objectives, which are:
- ensuring service improvement;
 - guaranteeing value for money;
 - strengthening community leadership;
 - enhancing Essex's reputation; and
 - a key priority of listening to our customers, and giving them choice and control.

The programme

- 23 The Council acts as the administering local authority (ALA) for the development and delivery of the Supporting People programme in its area.
- 24 The Supporting People programme is designed to meet the housing-related support needs of vulnerable people, including homeless people, older people with support needs, people with a learning difficulty, people with mental health problems, those with substance misuse problems, refugees, travellers and ex-offenders.
- 25 The total amount of Supporting People grant available to the Council in 2005/06 is £30.144 million, plus an underspend of £1.841 million carried forward from the previous year. The Supporting People grant for 2005/06 is less than that received in 2004/05, which was £31.742 million. In addition, the Council received an administration grant of £893,000 to fulfil its role as the administering authority and has added an additional £26,000 to this amount.

- 26 There are 125 different providers, with 167 contracts providing 838 Supporting People services in Essex. There are 22,816 supported accommodation places and 1,573 units of floating support. At the time of our inspection, the highest cost Supporting People service was £920.67 per week for a learning difficulties scheme. The lowest cost service was 11 pence per person per week for a community alarm service for older people.

How good is the programme?

What has the programme aimed to achieve?

- 27 Essex County Council acts as the administering local authority (ALA) for the Supporting People programme in the area.
- 28 The vision of the five year Supporting People strategy is:
- 'To provide practical, housing-related support that helps vulnerable people to establish a life in which they are safe, can access services and meet their responsibilities.'*
- 29 As a result, people will have a better opportunity to sustain an independent life.
- 30 The Council has identified five key objectives in the strategy. These are:
- ensure value for money from support services;
 - respond to the differing needs of communities across the County;
 - improve the quality of services;
 - co-ordinate assessments and referrals to services; and
 - develop new 'spend to save' strategies.
- 31 Along with the work priorities for the year, the strategy has identified four client groups that are priorities for new service development and six client groups to be provided for by resources found from remodelling existing services. The four priority groups for new developments are homeless people, people with chaotic lifestyles, vulnerable young people and frail elderly in existing older people services. The other six groups for services provided through remodelling are: vulnerable older people, people with long-term care/support needs, BME groups, travellers and gypsies, people with HIV and Aids and people at risk of domestic violence.

Is the programme meeting the needs of the community and users?

32 The assessment was based on the following key issues:

- governance;
- delivery arrangements;
- service reviews;
- value for money;
- user involvement;
- access to services and information;
- diversity; and
- outcomes for service users.

Governance

33 This is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. Governance structures are in place but have not been operating in the most effective way to drive and develop the programme. There has been a lack of proper engagement by all partners at all levels within the governance structures.

34 The ODPM has set out the following structural arrangements for the governance, development and delivery of the Supporting People programme.

- Accountable Officer and the Supporting People team – drive the whole process.
- Inclusive forum – consults with service providers and service users.
- Core strategy group – proposes strategic direction, service review procedures and timetables and work needed to secure the effective and efficient delivery and development of the programme.
- Commissioning body – agrees strategic direction, compliance with grant conditions, outcomes of service reviews and monitors the delivery and development of the programme.
- Councillors – approve key decisions of the commissioning body.
- Supporting People team – delivers the local programme.

35 Supporting People commissioning bodies are a requirement under grant conditions for non-excellent authorities and must have senior representation from the administering local authority, the local health services (usually one representative from each primary care trust) and the area probation service. In two tier areas each district council is entitled to one representative. Each named representative has one vote although the administering local authority has a veto where there is a demonstrable financial risk to the administering local authority.

Commissioning body (CB)

- 36 In Essex, the size of the county and the high number of statutory partners, (12 district councils and 10 PCTs), presented enormous challenges when developing the Supporting People governance arrangements. The Supporting People Lead Officer and County Council Executive Member have worked diligently to engage all partners.
- 37 The Association of Essex Authorities agreed in February 2002 to establish a commissioning body to oversee the implementation of the Supporting People programme across Essex. The commissioning body is currently chaired by the Executive Member with responsibility for Supporting People within Essex County Council. It is comprised of one elected member representative from each Essex Borough and District Council, three Essex County Councillors, one member of the Essex Probation Service Board, a non-executive member from the Strategic Health Authority and one member from the Essex Primary Care Trust Forum.
- 38 There is also a commissioning body executive group that meets on an ad hoc basis to transact any urgent business and this is made up of the Commissioning Body Chair, Vice Chair, four District representatives and one PCT representative.
- 39 It is positive that the Commissioning Body has a memorandum of understanding with Essex County Council, the Administering Authority, together with terms of reference. However these need amending in light of the implementation of the Supporting People programme and the changes to the service review programme as laid down by ODPM. It is also a strength that elected members are involved and the Chair has done much to gain consensus in decision-making across the very diverse make up of district council representation.
- 40 It is a significant weakness that there has been no attendance from the Strategic Health Authority and the Primary Care Trust Forum representative attends without any authority to commit health to any of the decisions of the commissioning body. In addition, two of the district councils have not attended on a regular basis. This means there is no effective strategic co-ordination of the programme by all partners.
- 41 There have also been changes in the membership of the commissioning body which have hindered its development. Some members have come in with limited knowledge of Supporting People and there has been variable liaison between some district council members and their respective accountable officers which has impeded informed decision-making.
- 42 There is not a clear schedule of standard reports and information that should be going to the commissioning body. This includes good quality, regular, comprehensive, written reports on the budget position. While the commissioning body did agree the review programme it has not received sufficiently regular, comprehensive updates on progress. Performance information and updates on plans have not been robustly monitored and the commissioning body has not therefore been able to effectively oversee all the relevant aspects of the Supporting People programme.

Core strategy development group (CSDG)

- 43 The membership of the CSDG includes:
- the Chief Probation Officer, who chairs the meetings;
 - the 12 District Heads of Housing or the District Accountable Officer (DAO) for Supporting People;
 - the primary care trusts have four representatives on the core strategy development group. The representatives were nominated by the Essex Primary Care Forum on a health sub-economy basis, providing representatives for mid, northeast, south and west Essex;
 - a representative from adult social care and the County Council's Accountable Officer;
 - a representative from children's services;
 - a user representative; and
 - a senior manager from Essex Probation Service.
- 44 The membership and effectiveness of the core strategy group has been limited and there has not been regular attendance by all group members. Additionally, providers are not represented on the group other than in-house council providers and social care managers for the main service users groups such as people with a learning disability, mental health problems and older people are not consistently in attendance.
- 45 Essex chose to set up ten local core strategy groups to feed into the CSDG but these have not all met on a regular basis and those that have met have not all had appropriate partner representation. This has meant that mechanisms for reporting to and from the CSDG have not been clear and consistent, impeding effective strategic planning.

Inclusive/provider forum

- 46 There have been provider forum meetings and an Inclusive forum as well as a series of workshops on the quality assessment framework. These have all been well-attended. A number of providers commented that provider forum meetings tend to be more about giving out information rather than interactive and involved too large and diverse a group to really be effective. The Supporting People team have addressed these issues with proposals going to the next CSDG meeting to suggest smaller forums and workshops delivered by client group, service type and location.

Accountable Officer

- 47 The Accountable Officer is not the officer in attendance at the commissioning body and not therefore immediately answerable to that body for the Council's delivery of the Supporting People programme.

- 48 However, the current Accountable Officer is in a senior role in the authority and has used this to the advantage of the programme. She has been able to raise the profile of the programme among her colleagues on the senior management group and more widely in her role in the development of the local area agreements. She has been able to discuss Supporting People at these meetings, ensuring that the profile of the programme is raised and a wider audience is aware of the role it is playing in developing and maintaining the independence of service users.

Health and probation relationships

- 49 Probation has been represented at all levels in the Supporting People governance structure, with a Probation Board representative on the CB and the Probation Chief Officer chairing the CSDG for the last three years. However, the lack of an accommodation strategy in the probation service has limited effective strategic linkages.
- 50 Multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) to ensure that high risk offenders receive co-ordinated services, including housing support are in place and are generally effective. Partners confirmed that these arrangements were operating as required. However, because these operate at a district level, the ways in which the Supporting People programme benefits from these arrangements are not fully developed.
- 51 It is a weakness that the relationships with health are under developed and need to be strengthened. Essex acknowledges this and believes the rationalisation of the PCTs in the County which is anticipated, should assist this. The County Council has 'strategic conversations' with the health authority and three of the PCTs to discuss issues. The PCTs attending will not commit to anything but will feed back to the other PCTs. The Council uses this as a way to engage the PCTs in issues, especially Supporting People where they are not engaged in the governance arrangements.

Cross-authority working

- 52 Essex works well with the regional group on Supporting People issues and developments. The Supporting People Eastern Region Group (SPERG) is well attended by the East Anglian authorities and has produced a regionally agreed 'Steady State' contract. The group is currently working on value for money and accreditation, again to produce regionally agreed policies and processes that will improve cross-authority working and benefit providers with services across the region.

Voluntary sector engagement

- 53 Engagement with the voluntary sector including advocacy groups that operate across Essex needs further development. There has been consultation with voluntary groups over the five-year strategy for Supporting People and some have been invited to provider forums as they are providers. The Supporting People team are looking at how advocacy groups can be involved on the CSDG to support service users in being more engaged with the programme at that strategic level, but this has not taken place as yet.

Delivery arrangements

- 54 This is an area where weaknesses outweigh strengths. The team has not fully utilised the specialist skills of partners. The five-year strategy is overly long and lacks detail around financial and value for money issues. Financial monitoring is not robust but some information is being reported to the commissioning body and the core strategy group. There are, on the whole, good relationships with the providers as well as effective involvement in the regional Supporting People group. Capacity has been increased and the team have a service plan which is SMART.

The Supporting People team

- 55 Corporate understanding of the programme has improved. The Supporting People team is located in the adult social care directorate and the Supporting People Accountable Officer is the Director of Adult Social Care and line manages the head of Supporting People. The Head of Supporting People is a member of the adult social care senior management team. This structure follows a major restructuring last year when the Chief Executives management team was changed to include service directors and the adult social care directorate was established. The Supporting People team has benefited from this move by being included in a management team facilitating cross client dialogue and having contact through to the Chief Executive.
- 56 However, the work of the team is hampered by the management and operational difficulties of the current IT systems. The team is spending additional time to develop procedures and systems to ensure that data submissions to the ODPM are of good quality and in the case of data extracts, such as the performance indicator data, require considerable manual manipulation before they can be submitted. System slowness due to network issues is also a frustration for the team and service review officers who work from home do not have broadband facilities so the transfer of large report files can be very slow. The lack of resolution of these IT needs has resulted in increased workloads for the team as they have to find alternative ways of working.
- 57 Some corporate supporting systems have also been weak with the finance system not being an effective tool for budget managers and the human resources IT system not being effective. This has resulted in the team setting up its own systems to, for example, monitor sickness and practise commitment accounting. The Council is aware of these issues and is putting in place new systems and processes.
- 58 A new stand alone IT system for the Supporting People team to enable them to complete returns for ODPM electronically was about to be authorised when we were on-site but it will take some time before this is commissioned and installed.

22 Supporting People | How good is the programme?

- 59 The Supporting People team has a variety of skills and increased capacity with the recent appointment of a deputy head of Supporting People. There are distinct sub-teams within the team who have, in the past, worked in silos to the detriment of the whole team but the new deputy head of Supporting People is actively working to co-ordinate activities. There has been only very limited involvement in service reviews by partner agencies. Had partner agencies and stakeholders been involved with service reviews there would have been a much better understanding of the needs of particular client groups.

Five-year strategy

- 60 The Council produced and submitted a lengthy five-year strategy to the ODPM by the target date of 31 March 2005 with a fuller action plan added in October 2005. The strategy contains a lot of information about what could be good in the Supporting People programme and is unclear about what the team are actually doing until appendix four. Needs analysis is available for the majority of client groups but this information is not pulled together in one table and is not informed by the service reviews, the majority of which have taken place since the strategy was written. The strategy lacks financial detail and the summary, in line with the whole document, is not concise.
- 61 There was good consultation on the development of the strategy and the strategy details the ways in which service users shaped the strategy. The team has also placed statements from the consultation exercises on the Supporting People web-site and cross-referenced them to the final strategy.
- 62 There is a gap in the needs assessment for offenders. This is because the probation offender assessment system (OASys) is not being used consistently across the area and no analysis of reports from the system are available. Probation recognises the need for an accommodation strategy and the lack of this information has impeded their ability to effectively contribute to the five-year strategy.
- 63 The work of the Supporting People team is managed through the service plan. This is a robust document that is SMART and covers the tasks of the team and shows how the team contribute to the wider council objectives.
- 64 Eligibility criteria were only agreed with providers after the start of the programme and confirmed by the commissioning body in November 2004. The criteria have formed part of the review process where ineligible services or tasks have been identified and resolved. This may have been easier had providers had a clear understanding from the start of what the programme covers and how that then impacts on their services as there have been several services which have been high cost and covered more than just housing support.

Financial management

- 65** Arrangements for financial management and monitoring are cumbersome and laborious. As referred to earlier in the report good IT systems have not been available. Considerable time and effort has been directed at reconciliation work relating to payments and there is still more to do. The team anticipate completing this task by April 2006. Payments are being made regularly, but there are providers who have had over payments and providers who have had considerable underpayments and so the true financial situation cannot be accurately assessed.
- 66** Some reports have been presented to the commissioning body and the core strategy group on the financial situation. However, the Council is not yet able to set out, with confidence, the current financial position relating to the Supporting People main grant.
- 67** The commissioning body agreed across the board cuts of 10 per cent to the grant to providers with the proviso that individual negotiation should take place to protect providers whose businesses would be at risk. It was also decided that, following a year of no inflationary increase, services would be awarded a 2.75 per cent inflationary increase. The Council also decided that the Supporting People programme budget, even though it is currently ring fenced, should achieve 2.5 per cent Gershon savings. The negotiations with providers were still underway at the time of the inspection which again has meant that sound financial projections for the next three years are unreliable.
- 68** Essex received Supporting People grant of £32.233 million in 2003/04, £31.742 million in 2004/05 and £30.144 million in 2005/06. An underspend of £1.337 million was carried forward from 2003/04 into 2004/05 and £1.841 million was carried forward from 2004/05 into 2005/06 and £916,000 into 2006/07. The underspend was due to delays in pipeline schemes and savings generated through the service review process. There is a projected overspend of £2.481 million for 2006/07 according to current calculations, which is unsustainable.
- 69** ODPM grant conditions required all contracts should to be signed by 31 July 2003 and all contracts in Essex were signed by that date although service level agreements were put in place for almshouses in the county. The Council has not yet issued any steady state contracts. This creates additional uncertainty for providers and will also result in the workload on negotiating and finalising steady state contracts being concentrated in the next couple of months, which will create workload management issues.

Fairer charging

- 70 Although there is a fairer charging scheme in operation for adult social care service users, the commissioning body decided to opt out of applying this to Supporting People service users. This decision was made on financial grounds. It was estimated that the cost to the programme would be in the region of half a million pounds and that to fund this, services would need to be cut. The decision that was made ensured that no one receiving services, at that time, was worse off. It is likely that this decision will be reviewed in the future, however, with the introduction of integrated payments.
- 71 Relationships between the Supporting People team and providers are generally positive at an operational level although some providers told us that because of changes in the team, depending on who was spoken to, answers to queries varied.
- 72 We undertook a survey of providers as part of the inspection to assess satisfaction over a number of variables and found satisfaction with the Council's management of the programme to be, on the whole, high. Response rates were low and the majority were from in-house providers so the following figures should be read with caution. Some elements scored very highly, for example:
- the Council's arrangements for involving providers in the delivery and development of the programme advice and support available from the Supporting People team (98 per cent);
 - involvement of users in service reviews (94 per cent); and
 - the completed five-year strategy (91 per cent).
- 73 The lowest satisfaction ratings were for:
- the Council's contract negotiation arrangements (77 per cent);
 - arrangements for accessing move on accommodation (78 per cent); and
 - outcome of your service review (81 per cent).

Service reviews

- 74 ODPM guidance requires administering local authorities (ALAs) to review all services funded through Supporting People within three years, starting from 1 April 2003. ALAs are required to produce a service review timetable together with a rationale to explain how the reviews have been prioritised. Progress with the service review timetable is submitted to the ODPM as part of regular performance reviews.

- 75 Overall, there is a mix of strengths and weaknesses in the performance of carrying out service reviews. Reviews have been challenging issues of quality and eligibility and user involvement has been high. However, despite there being a comprehensive guide to carrying out reviews, the quality and consistency of the reviews and monitoring of progress has been inadequate. The deadline of March 2006 for the completion of all reviews was thought at the time of the inspection unlikely to be met but actions put in place since then, makes it appear that the deadline will be met.
- 76 It is positive that the service review timetable was developed on a risk assessed basis, using the ODPM framework. High cost services, such as those for learning disability and mental health service users which were in excess of £500 per week were set for early review. This approach was agreed by the commissioning body in October 2002.
- 77 In order to reduce the risk of continuing non-eligible or poor services, the commissioning body decided that no desk top reviews would be undertaken. This has been a challenging exercise and Essex are sure they will complete all reviews by the March 2006 deadline. At the time of our inspection there were 266 reports in draft, needing finalising and 108 reviews in progress with 409 reports compiled.
- 78 A service review manual is in place which is very comprehensive and a shorter summary version is also available.
- 79 When the programme was first set up there were officers attached to each of the 12 districts whose responsibility in part, was to undertake service reviews. It was decided that these posts should be centralised and in 2004 a centralised review team was created to help to ensure consistency. However, the officers still work on a geographical basis rather than according to their particular skills and providers told us that the quality of their reviews varied depending on which review officer conducted the review and our inspection of a small sample of review files confirmed this.
- 80 It was positive that the county's learning disability service worked with the Supporting People team in the learning disability service reviews. A care manager worked alongside the team so that both Supporting People and adult social care were clear about the services being provided. However, other partners such as probation have not been involved in reviews and the specialist knowledge of partners could have enhanced the quality of reviews.
- 81 A guide to service review complaints is available as well as an appeals leaflet for providers. The appeals process for service reviews can be instigated on completion of the report and there are clear timescales for the Supporting People team to respond.

26 Supporting People | How good is the programme?

- 82 Reports for providers following a review are produced too slowly. Only 10 per cent of reports have been produced within three months and one provider told us they had been waiting nearly two years. This is of major concern as many reports contain action plans requiring change or improvements to the service. Those action plans that do exist are not all being robustly monitored. This presents a potential risk to vulnerable service users where delays in improving services occur as a result.
- 83 It is a weakness that service reviews are 'signed off' by the local accountable officer in whose district the service lies and that there is no county-wide or external moderation to look at consistency or trends. Neither the commissioning body nor the CSDG are involved in signing off reviews and the outcomes of reviews are not routinely reported in any specific detail to these groups.
- 84 There have been no completed strategic reviews to date but the strategic reviews of services by client group will take place once all the individual service reviews have been completed. It is only when these strategic reviews have taken place that information will be shared with the core strategy development group and commissioning body. There may have been lost opportunities from not instigating strategic reviews earlier in the programme so as to have increased shared learning and reduce duplication of effort.
- 85 Service reviews have not been streamlined across regional authorities. Although SPERG has now established a group to look at joint accreditation and joint reviews this will have limited benefit to service providers although will be helpful in future monitoring. A number of providers we visited work across the region and reported multiple reviews having taken place so far. Essex have undertaken one cross-authority validation visit undertaken with Southend of one provider and accepted the Kent CC accreditation of another.
- 86 There have been some positive outcomes from the service reviews. Five services chose to decommission their services and a couple of services have voluntarily transferred to alternative providers in the light of the service review work while others have had recommendations to re model their provision in light of high costs, lack of appropriate Supporting People support or other concerns.
- 87 It was found that the high cost learning disability services were largely care-focused and were being paid too much Supporting People funding given the amount of housing-related support (HRS) they could reasonably provide service users. This resulted in those services being capped to £350 on an interim basis with a further review post April 2006 to establish the degree of improved life skills that have been achieved by the service users many of whom had only recently left long-term hospital or residential care. There was an overall saving of around £1million to the Supporting People budget.

- 88 The reviews have been effective in driving up standards. For example one provider, following their review, instigated new ways of working requiring staff to consider user's needs on an individual basis in order to plan and provide appropriate support services. The changes were a great success and support plans are now well structured with clear targets and timelines. Staff are working in a more flexible way with a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Users are now involved in their support planning and in other developments within the service.
- 89 The Supporting People team is currently developing plans for how it will manage and monitor services once the service reviews have been completed. These new arrangements will become effective from April 2006.

Value for money

- 90 This is an area where there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The average weekly cost of Supporting People services is lower than those in the region or nationally and some limited benchmarking has taken place. Progress is being made in challenging high and ineligible costs through the service review process and approaches to value for money (VFM) at a strategic level within the Supporting People programme is developing. However, alternative approaches to procurement have not yet been fully considered or implemented and more detailed benchmarking has not yet progressed. The grant has been consistently under spent but this money has not been used to develop services that would benefit service users. The Council did inherit some high cost services where care was being provided rather than housing support.

How do costs compare?

- 91 Comparison of unit costs with the east of England and England as a whole are set out in the data appendix. These are largely based on the 'platinum cut' data submitted to ODPM in July 2003, which is the most up-to-date comparison available. These figures contain some inaccuracies and will not reflect changes that have been made which have changed costs since April 2003.
- 92 Overall, the Council has lower unit costs in comparison with other similar Councils, with unit costs totalling £21.79 compared to the rest of England at £28.30. However, for accommodation-based services the Council shows apparently high costs for services for people with learning difficulties, mental health issues, drug problems and frail elderly.
- 93 For floating support the Council is showing above the national average for people with learning disabilities, mental health issues, generic needs and older people with support needs.

How is value for money managed?

- 94 High cost schemes are being challenged on value for money issues. When costs were first analysed at the commencement of the programme a number of learning disability schemes were found to have disproportionately high costs. Essex contributed to a regional analysis of reasonable levels of support for people with moderate or severe learning disability. The conclusions from this work complemented the recommendations of a consultancy report commissioned by the County Learning Disability service that no more than 20 to 25 hours per week of housing-related support would be justified. This formed the basis of an interim cap on expenditure on high cost cases of £350 per week which has resulted in around £1 million transferring from the Supporting People budget to the social care budget. The financial benefit of capping these services has not been realised in all cases because some of the service users, while resident in Essex, have been placed by other local authorities who have not, as yet, agreed to pick up the balance of the costs and in addition, capping services in this manner does not result in a proper analysis of the reasons for high costs.
- 95 The review process is challenging some aspects of value for money. This work has been based on a basic analysis of costs in comparison to other similar services in the County. The Council acknowledge this is not robust and are developing a multi-dimensional view of VFM which will include aspects of quality and outcomes for service users rather than just costs.
- 96 Benchmarking on value for money has been limited. Essex is involved with SPERG in developing a value for money benchmarking process. Currently, discussions are taking place to agree a regional technical document to ensure consistency of sharing data. The working group is also exploring the usage of SPLS⁴ data in like-for-like comparisons and are moving towards using this in conjunction with local look-up tables to produce the most suitable comparisons for each client group. This work will be implemented from April 2006.
- 97 There has been no assessment of value for money in the administration of the Supporting People programme. There has not been comparison of cost and quality outputs with other Supporting People teams.
- 98 There has been some cross-authority work on documentation and processes. This is a more cost effective use of resources as it avoids authorities all duplicating the same work. Regional work has been completed on steady state contracts but other work on for example, regional commissioning, is not ready for implementation as yet.

⁴ Supporting People Local System - a local authority computer system used to hold service, provider, payment and client details for Supporting People.

- 99 There has not yet been significant progress in commissioning and decommissioning services to address lack of provision for some client groups. The Council do have in the five-year strategy a clear view on how Supporting People grant should be spent to have the maximum impact in meeting priority needs which will then ensure that the programme overall represents value for money but this has yet to be realised.
- 100 The Council have put aside money from the Supporting People grant over the next three years to provide a development fund but it is unclear if this will be realised as currently the budget, post 2005/06, is predicted to be in deficit. The first three years of the programme rendered an underspend and the Council took the cautious view of carrying that forward rather than commissioning any one off, non-recurrent expenditure which could have benefited some service users.
- 101 The potential of value for money gains through alternative procurement methods has not yet been realised. For example, the possible value for money benefits of joint commissioning with internal and external partner, large scale contracts within Supporting People, or cross-authority contracts although explored have not yet been implemented.
- 102 A joint value improvement project involving Essex County Council and Thurrock is currently underway with regular reports to ODPM. Essex received £55,000 for the project. The purpose of the pilot is to identify and support the work of the Council in securing substantial improvements in value for money by improving how the Council commissions and procures services. In particular, Essex are looking at remodelling floating support services, achieving value for money and redistributing money so as to produce a pattern of service to better meet the needs across the county. At the time of the inspection there were no tangible benefits in terms of value for money from this project as it is too early but it is confidently anticipated that significant improvements from the legacy baseline of the Supporting People programme will be achieved in terms of both quality standards and value for money.

Service user involvement

- 103 Service user involvement is an area where there are more strengths than weaknesses. Service user involvement in the programme through the service reviews has been effective and there are outcomes that can be demonstrated through this involvement. There has also been user involvement in the development of the five-year strategy and in the value improvement project. The Council has acknowledged the need for a more structured approach and currently have a Supporting People service user involvement strategy out for consultation.
- 104 The Council have employed, since May 2004, a full-time user participation officer to ensure full engagement with service users. Service users have been involved in a number of different forums including three inclusive forums.

- 105** Service user involvement through the service reviews has been positive. Individual service reviews have involved service users on a one to one basis or through a focus group and through a questionnaire sent to each service user. The service review officers have worked closely with providers and service users to provide a number of tailored service user questionnaires. For example, with the Essex CC Traveller Liaison Officer particularly over traveller consultation, as it had been difficult historically to arrange meetings with this group. A specific traveller questionnaire was created to ensure maximum feedback on how the Supporting People programme has made a difference to traveller's lives and to identify differences between communities. A range of questionnaires have been developed including for floating support services, long-term services, short-term services, gypsies and travellers and a more pictorially-based one for people with learning difficulties.
- 106** Feedback from service users obtained as part of the service review has been used to effect improvements in the delivery of services. Examples of this include opening up access to communal facilities at one scheme, improved security at another service and re-modelling of a service to day time only staffing.
- 107** Service users were also involved in the consultation meetings on the five-year strategy. This was through existing groups for example, existing house meetings, but also through focus groups and forums. Lessons learned from the five-year strategy consultation have been applied to the service users' consultation that has been part of the value improvement project.
- 108** Service users, for example mental health service users, have also been involved in commenting on some of the Supporting People programme documentation and ensuring that it is in plain English.
- 109** One innovative piece of work has been that the Supporting People team has always had service user representation in the selection of senior posts. Most recently, a service user interview panel was used in the interview process for the deputy head of Supporting People to help to select the most suitable candidate for the job. The panel's findings were weighted into the selection process.
- 110** Service users are not involved in the strategic governance of the programme. The Supporting People team are aware of the need for a structured approach to consultation and involvement and this has resulted in a Supporting People service user involvement strategy being developed which at the time of the inspection was out for consultation. While this will improve the situation in the future, the lack of structured engagement to date means that service users have had limited influence over the programme.

Access to services and information

- 111** This is an area of strength. There is a range of information on Supporting People services for providers and service users. Information is generally of good quality and is available in a variety of formats. The website provides very useful information for both providers and service users.

- 112** Service users confirmed that information is available for them in a wide variety of formats and appropriate to their needs, for example large print and in plain English. Some service users and a number of providers report being involved in the development of information and questionnaires, such as people with learning disabilities and older persons with physical disabilities.
- 113** The Supporting People programme has its own website which can be accessed via the county council's website and the district council websites. We found that the site is easily accessible and contains useful information for current and potential service users, partners and providers. The content is topical, up-to-date and informative. The location and contact information of service providers for specific populations is available and it also provides direct links to key areas such as frequently asked questions (FAQs) about the programme, a glossary of terms, and direct contact information for Supporting People team members across the districts.
- 114** The Supporting People team produce a newsletter three times a year which is written in a user friendly format with plenty of articles on local providers and also has information on the Supporting People team, how to contact them, and current issues in Supporting People.
- 115** The Supporting People complaints system was until recently a stand alone system that did not link into the adult social care or the corporate system. This has now been resolved and complaints will be linked to the corporate system. It is a weakness that until recently, there was no monitoring of complaints by the Supporting People managers but these will now be monitored at the monthly operational senior management team meeting.
- 116** While we know there are various leaflets that have been published in relation to Supporting People, which was confirmed in our visits to providers, when we carried out our reality checks there were no leaflets available in either the county council or district council offices we visited.

Diversity

- 117** This is an area of weakness which is now receiving an increased focus of attention by the Council and the Supporting People team.
- 118** It is a weakness that there are no supported housing services specifically designed for or targeted at people from the black and minority ethnic (BME) communities although there is a proposal to provide a Chinese Elders scheme in Harlow.

- 119** The Essex Housing Officers' Group of which the Supporting People team are a member, commissioned a study into the housing needs of BME groups and how they were or were not being met by current supply, including interviews, surveys and review of existing information. The outcome report, 'Facing the Facts', found that the relatively poor uptake of housing services was not the result of a lack of supply of BME-specific services, but rather a lack of communication with the groups involved on the general services available. An action plan has resulted and a BME development worker of the Essex Housing Officers Group has been appointed and charged with implementing the recommendations across Essex and it is the intention of the Supporting People team to work closely with them.
- 120** Further weaknesses are that not all staff have received equalities training and no impact assessments have been carried out. The team are looking to address these issues and now have an equalities action plan. Departmentally, equalities and diversity has recently been given a higher profile with a social care equalities group convened and work being done with the Race Equality Council for Essex in respect of employment of advocates.
- 121** It is a strength that the cultural sensitivity of services and equality and diversity issues are picked up and addressed through the service review process. In particular, the user participation officer and the service review officers worked in partnership with the ECC Gypsy Services Manager to develop a tailored service review questionnaire for gypsies and travellers.

Outcomes for service users

- 122** Strengths outweigh weaknesses with regard to service user outcomes. The Supporting People programme has led to better outcomes for some people in Essex since its introduction in April 2003. Most services we visited as part of the inspection were promoting greater independence for service users. The programme is developing a comprehensive set of outcome measures by which achievements can be assessed. There are, however, some vulnerable people whose needs are not yet known and are not currently being served well.
- 123** Visits to services and meetings with service users during the inspection showed that most people place a high value on the support that they receive and some new services have been established, although for many there have not been discernible changes over the past year. The views of service users we visited included the following.
- A user of an accommodation-based scheme for people with learning difficulties was happy with the services he received. *'I talk with the staff about what I want to do over the next few weeks and they help me plan things. My home is nice and staff are very friendly and helpful.'*
 - Another scheme visited for frail older people has achieved small changes over the last year to help the tenants achieve greater independence. Tenants told us that they were now being asked to take a more active part in the running of the facility and taking steps to design their own social activities.

- 124** A number of new schemes were developed prior to the implementation of the programme in April 2003. The Council also identified funding for a range of pipeline schemes which have further added to the services in the county. So far, 15 new schemes have become operational since the programme went live in April 2003 and two services have been re-commissioned with new providers. New services include: floating support for people fleeing domestic violence in addition to the refuges; the floating support services can now also help men escaping domestic violence. Also, a transitional housing scheme for young people leaving care with medium levels of support needs are helped with targeted levels of support to make a good start to their independence.
- 125** The programme is also seeking to improve outcomes for service users by identifying the gaps in provision through the five-year strategy and addressing these through new services that will be commissioned using the development fund set aside in the supporting people programme budget for 2005 to 2008. There are some significant uncertainties about how these will be achieved.
- 126** Support plans are being used effectively. Since the introduction of the programme and the commencement of service reviews, support plans have been more formally documented and reviewed, giving a clearer indication to providers and users of how the route to independence is being achieved. In the projects we visited service users were provided with clear support plans which have been agreed with them and which are reviewed on a regular basis. Staff in some of the projects could demonstrate how the use of the support plan enabled users to become more independent as time went on, although this was not the case in most sheltered schemes.
- 127** We found instances of some services appearing to provide a limited level of support through Supporting People funding and inappropriately using funding to pay for care.
- 128** The programme is developing a comprehensive set of outcome measures by which achievements can be assessed. Work has been done with one provider to look at a scoring matrix in their support plans in order to identify improvements in outcomes for service users. The value improvement project will also include performance indicators so that contract-monitoring arrangements can focus on gathering data about the quality of outcomes for service users. These developments are not in place as yet.
- 129** A case study of a user receiving Supporting People funding in Essex is detailed overleaf.

Case study 1

M and her three girls moved into the refuge with Social Services involvement. She had been in controlling/abusive relationships all of her life, starting with her own father, and decided to make a clean break from everyone when she came into the refuge. M was lacking in motivation to do anything but always worked well alongside the welfare staff.

When she moved into her private rented accommodation she relied heavily on the floating support worker. M was being treated for depression, and found it hard to deal with her three children. All three children were unruly and did not take any notice of their mother. The children were on the child protection register for neglect.

M had two more moves before she got permanent accommodation and each time the children had to change schools. This could have had a detrimental effect on her but she continued to work closely with the floating support worker and seemed to blossom and grow with each move. Throughout this period there were a lot of agencies involved with the family but M continued to lean heavily on the support she received from floating support. They worked with her closely on dealing with the debts she had accrued, basic hygiene skills for the home, basic healthy/economical cooking, decorating and supported her in putting some routine back into her children's lives which enabled her to gain her children's respect again.

She was supported for 18 months and now the children are off the child protection register, they all attend school regularly, there is routine and basic rules at home and they have all started to bloom. The home is now always clean and tidy, she has replaced all the furniture she was initially given, she has decorated the home throughout, she has paid off all her debts and manages to save some money each week.

Summary

- 130 We have judged the Council's management of the Supporting People programme to be fair, one-star.
- 131 Governance structures are in place but have not been operating in the most effective way to drive and develop the programme. There has been a lack of proper engagement by all partners at all levels within the governance structures.
- 132 The team has a variety of skills but has not fully utilised the specialist skills of partners, particularly in service reviews. The five-year strategy is overly long and lacks detail around financial and value for money issues. Financial monitoring is cumbersome and laborious.
- 133 Despite there being a comprehensive guide to carrying out reviews, the quality and consistency of the reviews and monitoring of progress has been inadequate. However, some progress is being made in challenging high and ineligible costs through the service review process. The current decision not to report outcomes from reviews to the commissioning body is a breach of grant conditions.

- 134** The approach to value for money at a strategic level within the Supporting People programme is still developing and work is in progress through the ODPM sponsored value improvement project. The current approach does not fully consider quality and outcomes for service users alongside cost but good progress is being made to address this issue. Alternative approaches to procurement have not yet been fully considered or implemented and more detailed benchmarking has not yet progressed. Unmet need identified for priority funding will not be addressed unless savings can be found.
- 135** The Council corporately has only achieved level one of the local government equality standard and only 45 per cent of the county council buildings open to the public have public areas that are suitable for and accessible to people with disabilities. There are no supported housing services specifically designed for or targeted at people from the BME community but cultural sensitivity of services and equality and diversity issues are picked up and addressed through the service review process.
- 136** There are on the whole good relationships with the providers as well as effective involvement in the regional Supporting People group. Capacity in the Supporting People team has been increased and the team have a service plan which is SMART.
- 137** Service user involvement in the programme and development of the five-year strategy has been effective and there are outcomes that can be demonstrated through this involvement but they have not been routinely involved in the strategic governance of the programme. There is a range of information on Supporting People services for providers and service users and the Supporting People programme has led to better outcomes for some people in Essex since its introduction in April 2003.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the track record in delivering improvement?

- 138** This is an area with strengths outweighing weaknesses. Corporately, the authority has a track record of delivering improvement with further improvement plans about to be implemented. The Supporting People team has developed new services and improvements to services and savings have been made through the service review although learning from reviews has been limited. Progress on some activities in the Supporting People service plan 2004/07 has been slow and there has been limited proactive management and reporting on plans.
- 139** The Council has improved its corporate performance assessment from good to achieving four stars out of four in its assessment in December 2005 and its direction of travel statement produced by the Audit Commission states that it is improving well. There have been improvements in education, adult services and highways with accessibility to services improved with the introduction of a new customer contact centre, Contact Essex. However, some supporting systems were still considered weak and some of these have impacted on the Supporting People team in terms of IT and management systems that do not meet the needs of the programme.
- 140** The Supporting People team are able to demonstrate progress in a number of areas which are:
- positive day-to-day relationships established and maintained with most service providers;
 - savings have been made from some service reviews;
 - all the key processes relating to Supporting People have been mapped including related sub-processes;
 - some services have been remodelled or chosen to be decommissioned; and
 - a number of schemes were developed using transitional housing benefit, pipeline and other funding including a head injuries scheme, extra care scheme, support for people experiencing domestic violence and provision for people with learning difficulties.
- 141** New and 'pipeline' services have been introduced. Pipeline services are those which were being planned prior to the commencement of the programme but were not operational by April 2003. The ODPM agreed to fund these. As well as these the Supporting People team have supported the development of some new schemes supported by main grant such as a Stay Safe and Resettlement Service for Women Escaping Domestic Violence with the provision of an outreach worker to support women and children in the community.

- 142 There has, however, been slippage in some areas such as the delivery of reviews and joint commissioning and the lack of good quality performance information has made it difficult to track improvements. The lack of overall monitoring of the service review programme has limited the team's ability to learn from these and the team are only now undertaking some strategic reviews.
- 143 There is evidence that the Council is prepared to learn from others. Essex is an active member of SPERG and through this there has been considerable sharing and learning from other administering authorities. A steady state contract has been prepared and the value for money methodology is in development.

How is performance managed?

- 144 This is an area with a number of weaknesses but actions are underway to address these. The Supporting People team have not had effective systems to readily prepare and report performance information and performance management has not been good. Performance management across the Council is developing and a new performance framework is about to be introduced with a new corporate plan and culture of performance management. This will take time to become embedded.
- 145 Performance management of the programme is not well developed. There are concerns over the quality of some data being submitted by providers and the Council has been severely hampered by ineffective IT systems. The Supporting People Team have had to complete ODPM mandatory returns manually which has been extremely time consuming and has made effective monitoring and development of the programme difficult.
- 146 There has also been a problem around the accuracy of payments to providers which has then meant that accurate financial monitoring and projections are difficult. In the meantime, various spreadsheets have been created to enable a degree of performance reporting. Agreement has been reached for the purchase of a bespoke IT system but this will take some time to be fully utilised.
- 147 Until recently, there was no monitoring of complaints by the Supporting People managers but these will now be monitored at the monthly operational senior management team meeting. There have, however, only been 14 complaints in three years.
- 148 The Supporting People team are now developing and collecting local performance indicators to enable the monitoring of the Supporting People Partnership and to provide the senior management team, core strategy development group, the commissioning body and providers with regular feedback on performance. The team have worked with three providers in the development of performance indicators for measuring outcome improvement for service users. These initiatives are yet to be mainstreamed but have been used to inform the Council's approach to developing a corporate balanced score card and are due to be introduced as from 1 April 2006.

- 149 The Council corporately are looking to introduce a new, robust corporate performance management system linked to the new corporate plan. It is adopting a revised performance management framework linked to the balanced score card approach. However, these initiatives are not yet in place and the new culture of performance management will take time to become embedded.
- 150 The work of the Supporting People team on a day-to-day operational basis is better co-ordinated now that the deputy head of supporting people is in post. The team is made up of sub-teams that have, in the past, tended to work in silos. There is a SMART⁵ service plan and five-year strategy action plan and other plans that need to be better co-ordinated. There are regular meetings with managers and progress is monitored against individual members of staff through the annual appraisal process.
- 151 Supporting People are linked into corporate strategies and the five-year strategy has direct linkages to the Council's overall corporate objectives. Supporting People also links to strategies in adult social care in respect of older people which is currently in draft and to mental health and learning strategies. Probation are aware of the need to link their accommodation strategy, when written, to the Supporting People strategy. Supporting People has not been clearly linked into health strategies.

Is there capacity to improve?

- 152 This is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. The Supporting People team has been expanded and this has resulted in additional capacity. Support from senior managers and councillors is positive but support from partners needs to be increased in relation to the governance of the programme. The paucity of the IT system has affected the capacity of the team but there is a strong commitment to improve IT with a new system being installed in March 2006 which it is anticipated will go live in April.
- 153 It is positive that the management of the Supporting People Team has been enhanced by the recent appointment of a deputy head of Supporting People responsible for the inward facing management of the team allowing more time for the Head of Supporting People to concentrate on the more outward facing issues of managing relationships with the districts and other partners in the programme.
- 154 The Supporting People team know that restructuring will happen in the near future to ensure that tasks and responsibilities are aligned following the changes to the service review programme and the mainstreaming agenda with adult social care. This is seen to be an opportunity to address issues about silo working as raised earlier in the report and increase the effective capacity of the team.
- 155 The Council have recognised the need to supplement the capacity of the Supporting People team and the Supporting People administration grant is supplemented by additional money from the Council. For 2005/06, this was £28,000 but as the budget is currently overspent, the final figure may be higher than this.

⁵ Specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timetable.

- 156** A wide ranging re-structuring of the County Council has taken place in the last year, designed to better support the Council's strategic objectives. The key change is that customer-facing services have been consolidated into six 'businesses', each with a service director, one of whom is the Supporting People Accountable Officer, the director for adult social care. The service directors now form the senior management board and are directly accountable to the Chief Executive. The Head of Supporting People is now on the senior management team of the adult social care directorate. This means the Accountable Officer and the Head of Supporting People have greater opportunity to network and raise the profile of Supporting People within the Council and ensure that it is included in the wider council issues and agendas.
- 157** The Accountable Officer is actively involved in the set up of local area agreements (LAAs) which are due to come in from 1 April 2006 and is ensuring that the Supporting People Programme is integrated into the LAA targets. The PCTs have been working constructively with the Council on LAAs. This will help significantly in ensuring tie in of the Supporting People Programme with PCT local delivery plans in future as will the impending NHS restructure of the PCTs which will reduce the number in the county.
- 158** The capacity of the Supporting People team is impeded by the poor information technology. The current IT systems are to be replaced in March 2006 and be in operation in April which will significantly increase the capacity of the Supporting People team.
- 159** The Council recognise that some of its support systems, corporately, are not fully effective and affect the capacity of the service departments but looking to address these issues. For example: although the general ledger system operates efficiently, financial IT systems could be improved. One area is in terms of being able to model spending and out turn against data held in other systems and consideration is being given to an IT package that would achieve this. Meanwhile, the Supporting People team operate their own commitment accounting spreadsheet.
- 160** There is strong support from the County Council's executive member and the Leader and portfolio holder for adult social care. The executive member is very active in visiting schemes and gathering the views of service users and engaging with district council members and accountable officers. However, the lack of support from other partners, particularly health, is an impediment, particularly in terms of the governance of the programme but it is anticipated that as alluded to earlier, this will be assisted by the move to fewer PCTs and the implementation of the LAAs.
- 161** As a member of SPERG, the Council utilises the high degree of partnership work and networking opportunities offered. It has used these to improve capacity and information sharing in regard to performance and contracting issues.

- 162 The Council were successful in their bid to ODPM⁶ for an Essex Value improvement project which forms part of ODPM's value improvement project programme which has the aim of securing substantial improvements in value for money in the delivery of Supporting People services.

Summary

- 163 We have judged Essex's prospects for improvement as being 'promising'. This is because corporately, the authority has a track record of delivering improvement with further improvement plans about to be implemented. The Supporting People team has developed new services and improvements to services and savings have been made through the service review although learning from reviews has been limited. But progress on some activities in the Supporting People service plan 2004/07 has been slow and there has been limited proactive management and reporting on plans.
- 164 The Council has started to address many of the weaknesses in the Supporting People programme, such as the poor IT systems, a strategy for user involvement and poor performance management. The ODPM sponsored value improvement project is making progress and if this continues the value for money achieved by the programme will improve.
- 165 Performance management across the Council is developing but a new performance framework is about to be introduced with a new corporate plan and culture of performance management. However, this will take time to become embedded. The Supporting People team have developed local performance indicators which are service user and outcome focused and will be introduced as a new system for performance management as from 1 April 2006. Essex's Value improvement project is on track to deliver substantial improvements in value for money in the delivery of Supporting People services.
- 166 The Supporting People team has been expanded and this has resulted in additional capacity. Support from senior managers and councillors is positive but support from partners needs to be increased in relation to the governance of the programme and the Supporting People programme is not clearly linked into all partners' strategies. The paucity of the IT system has affected the capacity of the team but this is to be addressed with a new computer system to be installed in March 2006.

⁶ ODPM - Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Demographic information

- 1 This section includes demographic information relevant to Supporting People, comparing the Council and with England.

Table 1

Measure	Essex	England
Population (mid-2003) ⁷	1,330,400	57,851,100
Percentage of the population aged 65+ (mid-2003)	19.7%	18.5%
Percentage from minority ethnic groups (all groups other than white British 2003)	2.9%	10.44%
Percentage unemployment (claimant count rate) ⁸	1.6%	2.4%
Deprivation Index (1 highest, 354 lowest) ⁹	126 (Basildon)	-

⁷ Source: mid-year population estimates (2004).

⁸ Source: claimant count with rates and proportions (October 2005).

⁹ Source: deprivation Index 2004, average ward score for the authority.

Figure 2 Percentage of the population¹⁰ in each age group compared with England

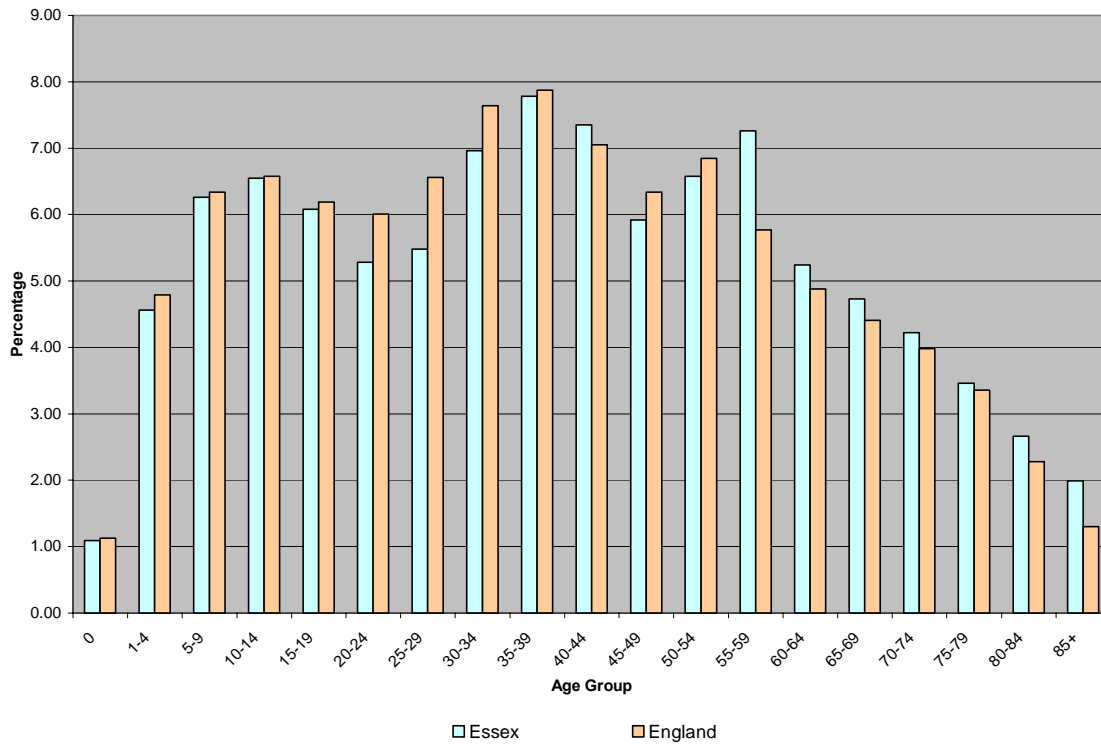
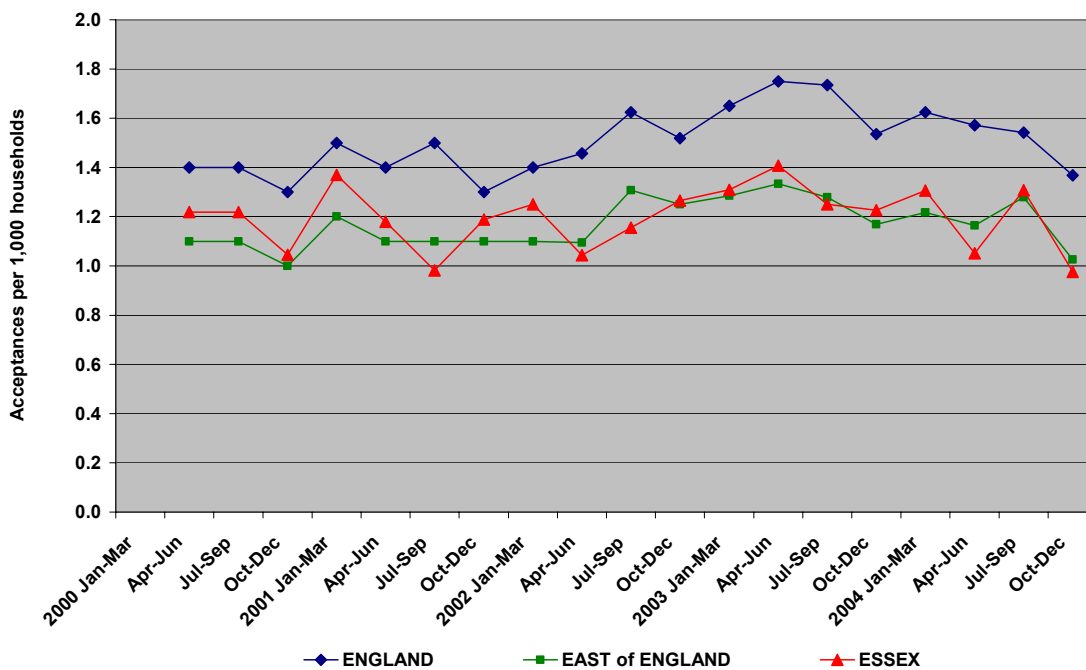


Figure 3 Households accepted as homeless between 2000 and 2004 compared with the region and England (acceptances per 1,000 households)



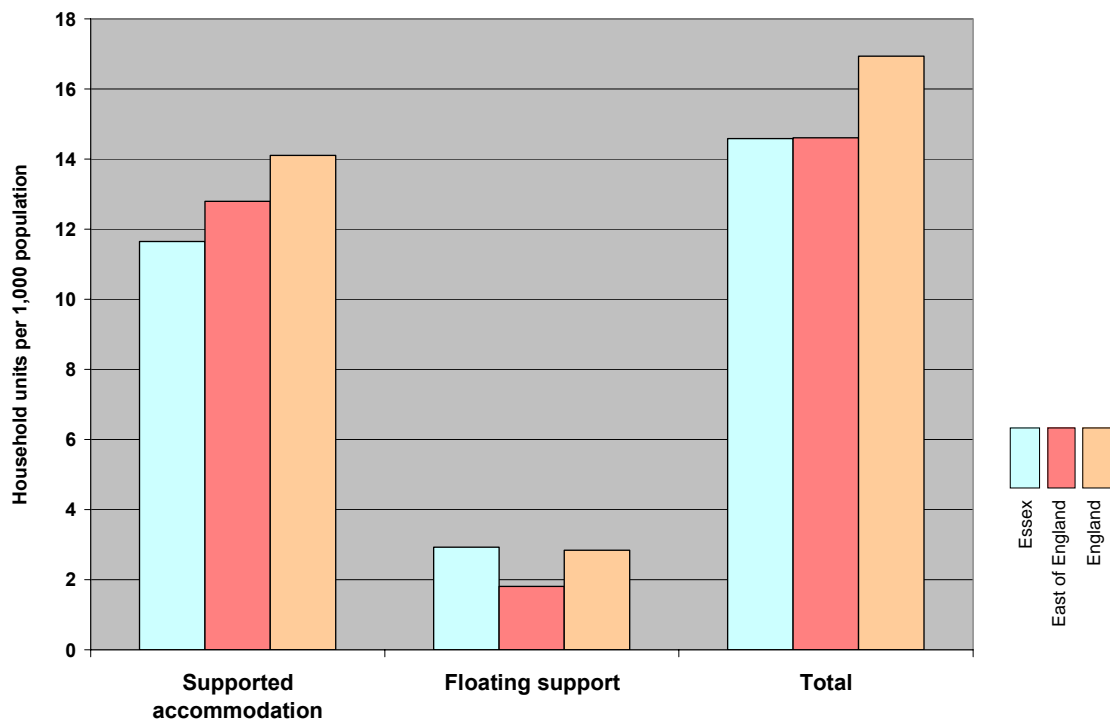
¹⁰ Source: mid-year population estimates (2003).

Performance information

- 2 This section highlights strong and weak areas of the Council's performance in services that are relevant to Supporting People. We have used the following information to help us reach our judgements:
- data for services funded through the Supporting People programme;
 - Comprehensive Performance Assessment scores;
 - star ratings for Social Services;
 - performance assessment framework indicators for Social Services; and
 - relevant best value performance indicators.

Supporting People data

Figure 4 Total service provision funded through Supporting People¹¹



¹¹ Source: Platinum cut data, ODPM November 2003. Excludes community alarms, home improvement agencies, leasehold schemes and pipeline services.

Figure 5 Services for older people with support needs compared with the region and England¹²

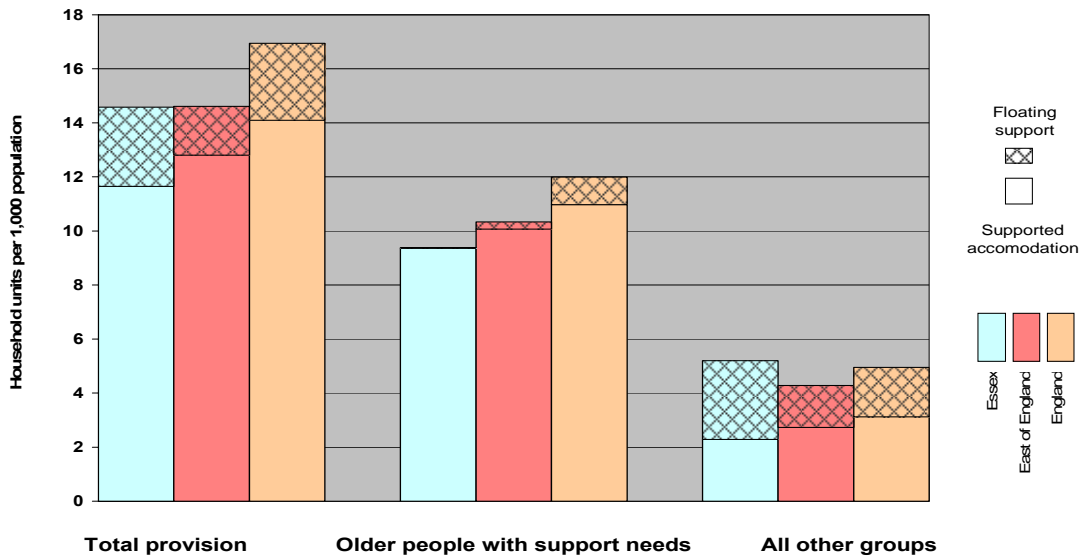
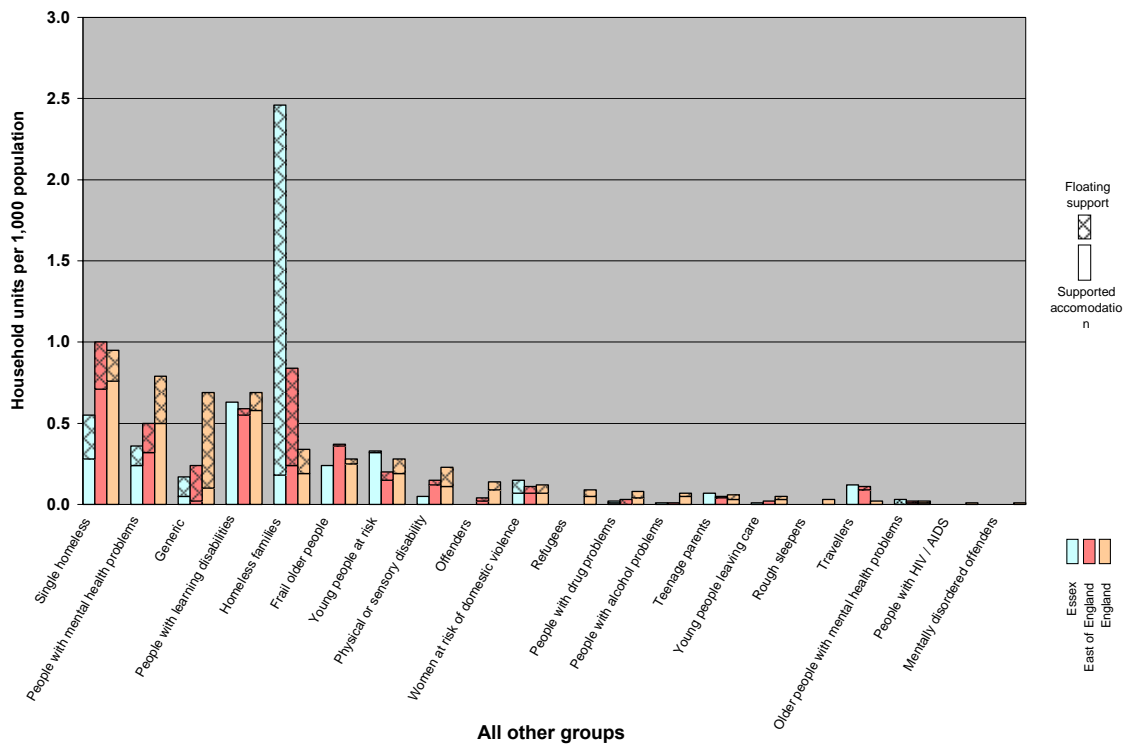


Figure 6 Services for other groups compared with the region and England¹³



¹² Source: Platinum cut data, ODPM November 2003. Excludes community alarms, home improvement agencies, leasehold schemes and pipeline services.

¹³ Source: Platinum cut data, ODPM November 2003. Excludes community alarms, home improvement agencies, leasehold schemes and pipeline services.

Table 2 Funding for Supporting People¹⁴

Essex	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06
Final Supporting People grant	£32,232,539	£31,742,850	£30,144,101
Pipeline allocation	£227,772	£409,445	-
Administration grant	£850,706	£919,408	£893,263

Table 3 Unit costs of Supporting People services in 2003/04 (£ per week)¹⁵

	Per head of population	Per unit	Per unit excluding community alarms	Per unit excluding community alarms and sheltered housing
Essex	£0.47	£21.79	£28.50	£50.84
East of England	£0.46	£22.73	£28.11	£65.57
England	£0.70	£28.30	£34.71	£76.37

The data quoted is taken from ODPM sourced material 2003/04. This is the only data currently available. ODPM will be able to provide updated data when it becomes available and this will then be used.

¹⁴ Source: Grant allocations, ODPM.

¹⁵ Source: Platinum cut data, ODPM November 2003

Figure 7 Unit costs of supported accommodation compared with the region and England (labels show costs in the highest 25 per cent)¹⁶

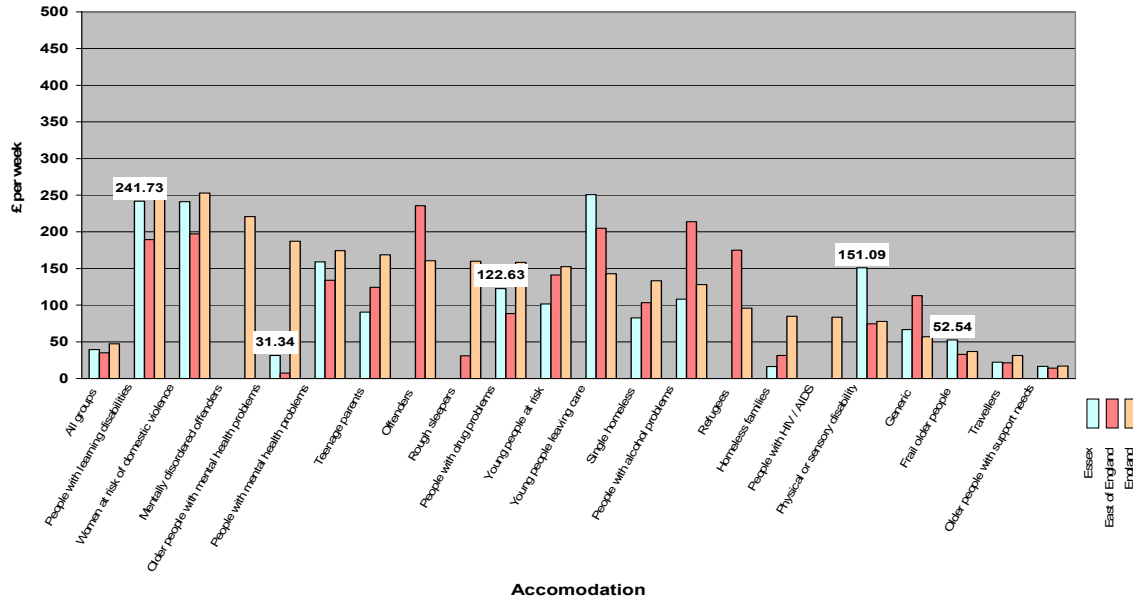
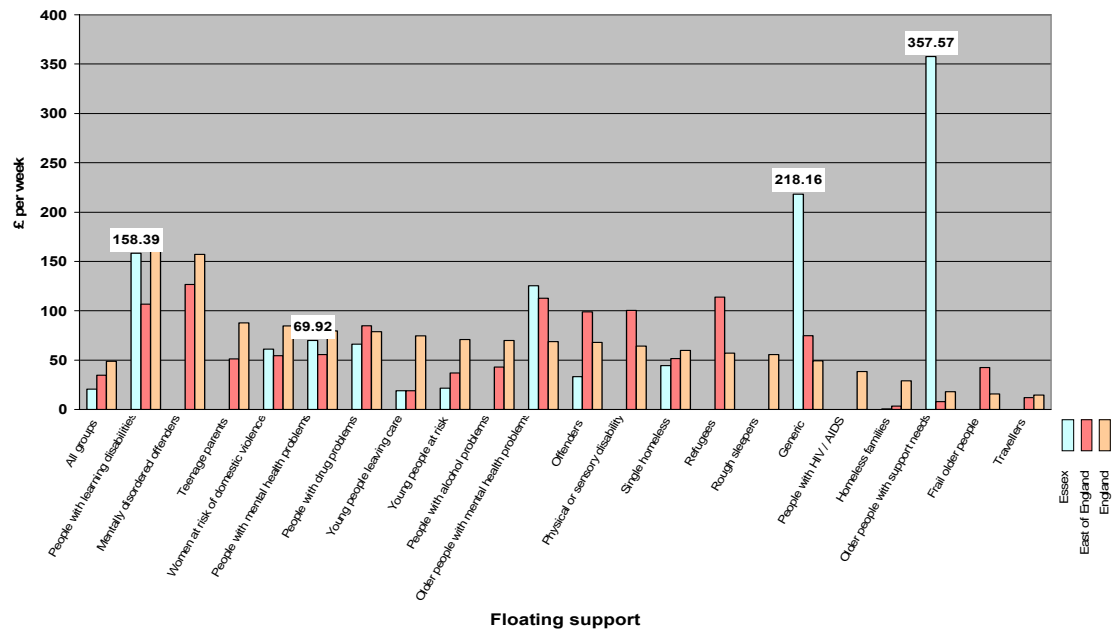


Figure 8 Unit costs of floating support services compared with the region and England (labels show costs in the highest 25 per cent)¹⁷



¹⁶ Source: Platinum cut data, ODPM November 2003. Excludes community alarms, home improvement agencies, leasehold schemes and pipeline services.

¹⁷ Source: Platinum cut data, ODPM November 2003. Excludes community alarms, home improvement agencies, leasehold schemes and pipeline services.

Figure 9 Supporting People grant per head of population per week compared with nearest neighbours,¹⁹ all county councils and all English councils (2004/05)

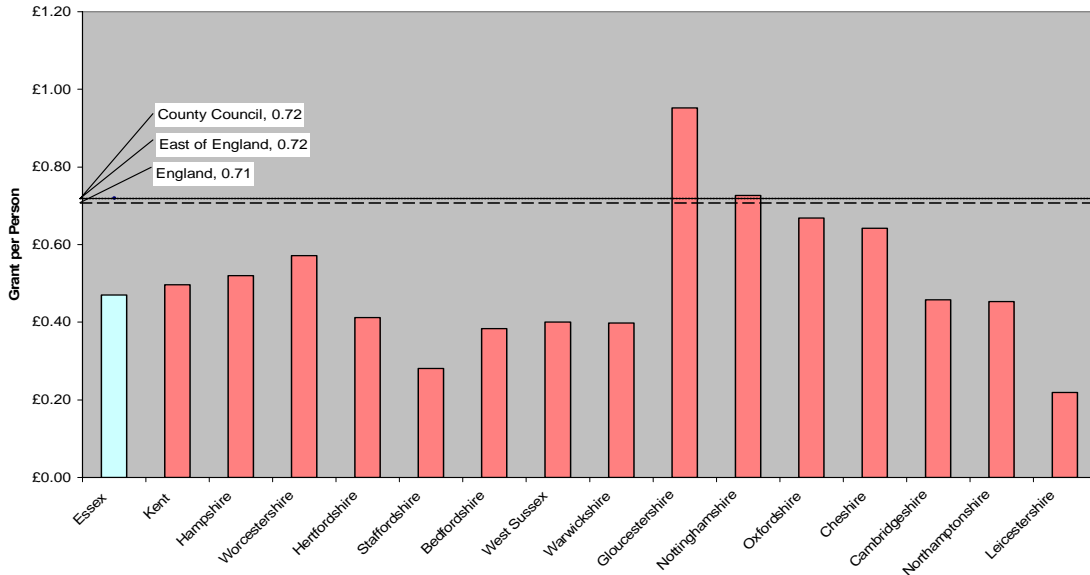
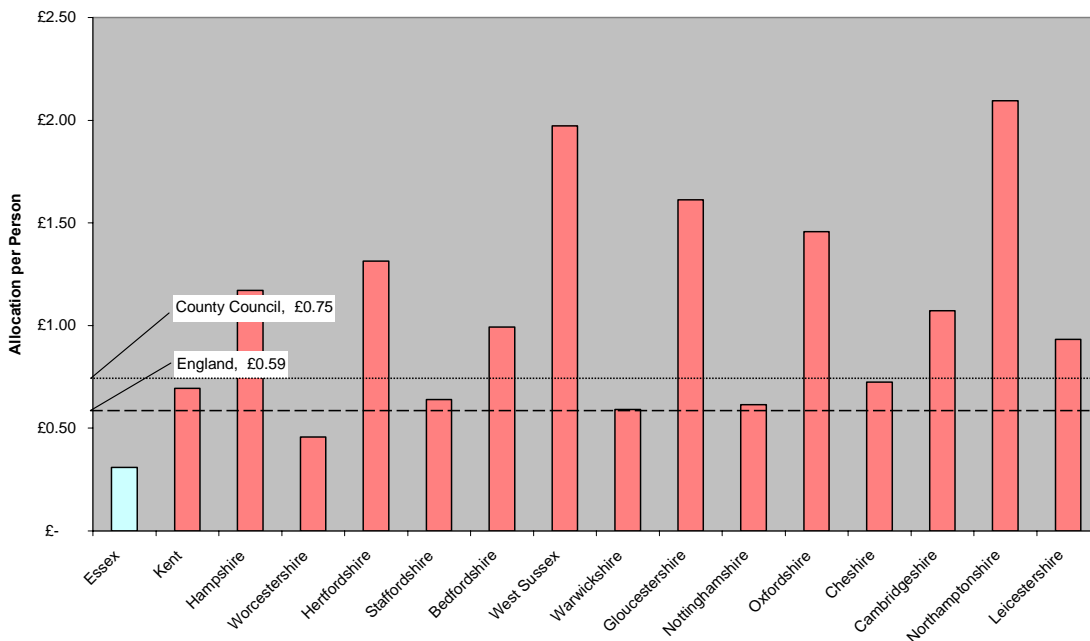


Figure 10 Pipeline allocation per head of population compared with nearest neighbours,²⁰ all county councils and all English councils



¹⁹ A comparator group of similar councils.

²⁰ A comparator group of similar councils.

Figure 11 Share of spending between user groups (£000s)²¹

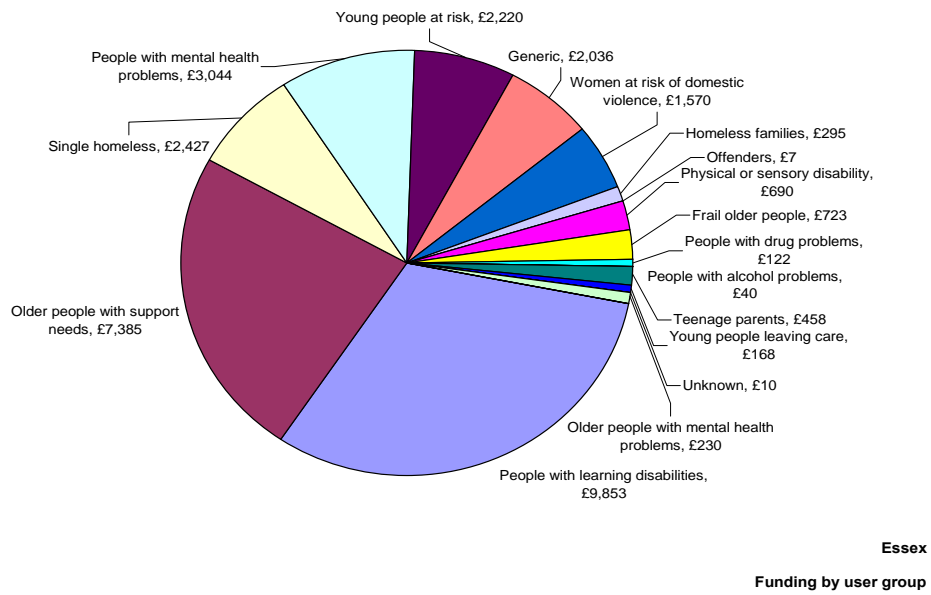
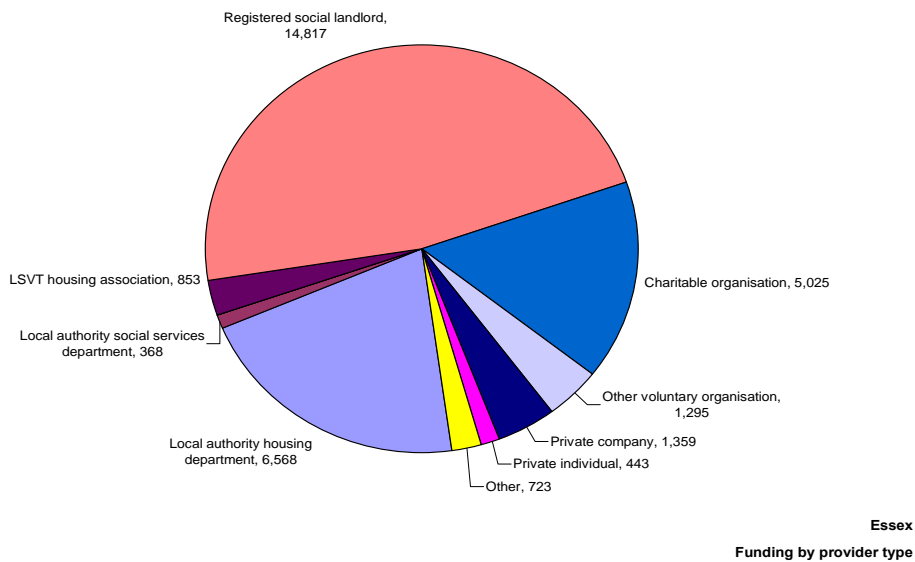


Figure 12 Share of spending between types of provider (£000s)²²



²¹ Source: Platinum cut data, ODPM November 2003. Excludes community alarms, home improvement agencies, leasehold schemes and pipeline services.

²² Source: Platinum cut data, ODPM November 2003. Excludes community alarms, home improvement agencies, leasehold schemes and pipeline services.

Table 4 Social Services star ratings November 2004

The table below shows the Social Services Inspectorate ratings of the Council's performance

	Serving people well?	Prospects for improvement?	Performance rating (CPA equivalent)
Adults' services	Some	Promising	★★
Children's services	Most	Promising	(2)

Social services performance indicators

Table 5 Performance assessment framework indicators 2003/04

The table below shows how the Council's Social Services performed on indicators relevant to Supporting People

Essex	
Significantly above average (•••••)	Adults with mental health problems helped to live at home (C31). Employment, education and training for care leavers (A4).
Above average (••••)	Admissions of older people to residential/nursing care (C26). Admissions of supported residents aged 18 to 64 to residential/nursing care (C27). Adults with learning disabilities helped to live at home (C30). Older people helped to live at home (C32). Delayed transfers of care (D41). Physically disabled and sensory impaired users who said that their opinions and preferences were always taken into account (D57). Percentage of items of equipment and adaptations delivered within seven working days (D54).
Average (•••)	Emergency psychiatric re-admissions (A6). Adults and older people receiving a statement of their needs and how they will be met (D39). Adults with physical disabilities helped to live at home (C29). Adults and older people receiving direct payments at 31 March per 100,000 population aged 18 or over (C51).
Below average (••)	Adults and older clients receiving a review as a percentage of those receiving a service (D40). Physically disabled and sensory impaired users who said that they can contact Social Services easily (D58).
Significantly below average (•)	Percentage change on previous year in total emergency admissions to hospital (A5)

Best value performance indicators

Table 6 Performance on relevant indicators in 2003/04 compared with county councils

The table below shows how the Council performed on best value performance indicators relevant to Supporting People

Essex	
Within the best 25 per cent	Domestic violence refuge places (BV176).
Average	The level of the equality standard for local government to which the authority conforms (BV2).
Within the worst 25 per cent	

Table 7 District council performance on relevant indicators in 2003/04

The tables below shows how district councils in Essex performed on best value performance indicators relevant to Supporting People, compared with all district councils

Basildon	
Within the best 25 per cent	The level of the equality standard for local government to which the authority conforms (BV2).
Average	Energy efficiency of local authority owned dwellings (BV63). Average time for processing new housing benefit claims (BV78a). Domestic violence refuge places (BV176).
Within the worst 25 per cent	Length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation (BV183a). Length of stay in hostel accommodation (BV183b). Council homes which did not meet the decent homes standard (BV184a).

Braintree	
Within the best 25 per cent	Length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation (BV183a).
Average	The level of the equality standard for local government to which the Authority conforms (BV2). Energy efficiency of local authority owned dwellings (BV63). Length of stay in hostel accommodation (BV183b). Average time for processing new housing benefit claims (BV78a). Domestic violence refuge places (BV176).
Within the worst 25 per cent	Council homes which did not meet the decent homes standard (BV184a)
Brentwood	
Within the best 25 per cent	Energy efficiency of local authority owned dwellings (BV63). Length of stay in hostel accommodation (BV183b). Domestic violence refuge places (BV176).
Average	The level of the equality standard for local government to which the authority conforms (BV2). Council homes which did not meet the decent homes standard (BV184a).
Within the worst 25 per cent	Length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation (BV183a). Average time for processing new housing benefit claims (BV78a).

Castle Point	
Within the best 25 per cent	Length of stay in hostel accommodation (BV183b). Council homes which did not meet the decent homes standard (BV184a).
Average	The level of the equality standard for local government to which the authority conforms (BV2). Energy efficiency of local authority owned dwellings (BV63).
Within the worst 25 per cent	Length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation (BV183a). Average time for processing new housing benefit claims (BV78a). Domestic violence refuge places (BV176).
Chelmsford	
Within the best 25 per cent	Energy efficiency of local authority owned dwellings (BV63). Domestic violence refuge places (BV176).
Average	The level of the equality standard for local government to which the authority conforms (BV2). Length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation (BV183a). Length of stay in hostel accommodation (BV183b).
Within the worst 25 per cent	Council homes which did not meet the decent homes standard (BV184a). Average time for processing new housing benefit claims (BV78a).

Colchester	
Within the best 25 per cent	Energy efficiency of local authority owned dwellings (BV63). Average time for processing new housing benefit claims (BV78a).
Average	The level of the equality standard for local government to which the authority conforms (BV2). Length of stay in hostel accommodation (BV183b). Domestic violence refuge places (BV176).
Within the worst 25 per cent	Length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation (BV183a). Council homes which did not meet the decent homes standard (BV184a).
Epping Forest	
Within the best 25 per cent	Council homes which did not meet the decent homes standard (BV184a)
Average	The level of the equality standard for local government to which the authority conforms (BV2). Energy efficiency of local authority owned dwellings (BV63). Length of stay in bed and breakfast accommodation (BV183a). Average time for processing new housing benefit claims (BV78a). Domestic violence refuge places (BV176).
Within the worst 25 per cent	Length of stay in hostel accommodation (BV183b).

Appendix 2 – Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
 - the Council's self-assessment;
 - Supporting People five-year strategy;
 - the Council's corporate strategies with impact upon Supporting People, including Essex Approach;
 - plans and strategies from partner agencies that may impact on Supporting People;
 - service documents including policies and procedures, information leaflets for users and providers, newsletters;
 - service review timetable;
 - *'Better Care, Higher Standards'* document;
 - service improvement plans;
 - performance reports;
 - terms of reference for key governing groups; and
 - minutes of the commissioning body, core strategy group and other key meetings.

Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
 - a questionnaire based survey sent to all providers of housing-related support services;
 - focus groups with service providers and with carers, advocates and voluntary organisations;
 - visits to contracted supported housing services, to talk to service users and front-line staff;
 - telephone calls to a number of service user access points to test the level and extent of information available for service users;
 - interviews with key staff and stakeholders within the County Council, district councils, the primary care trusts and the probation service;
 - interviews with the leader of the Council, the Executive member and with the Cabinet member with the adult social care portfolio;
 - review of the website;
 - mystery shopping visits to council offices;
 - desktop checks of procedure guides and service review files; and
 - observation of a meeting of the commissioning body.