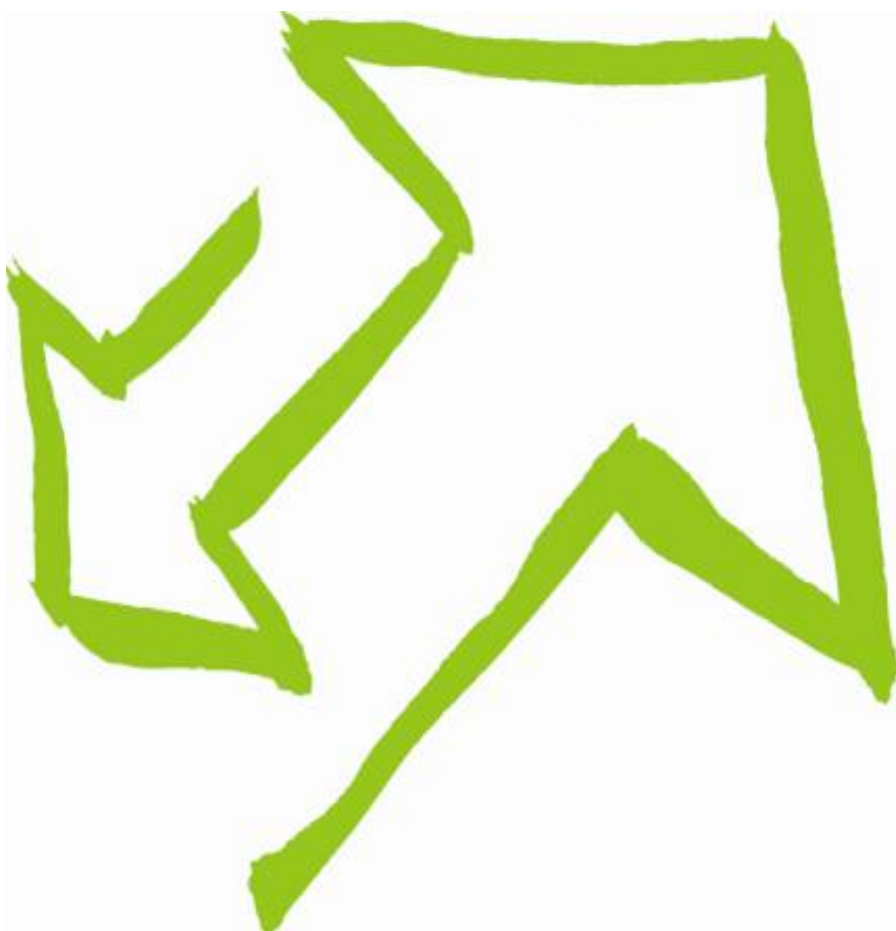


# Newark and Sherwood Homes (ALMO Reinspection)

Newark and Sherwood District Council

November 2008



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# Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) 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, arm's length management organisations (ALMOs) and housing associations. Our key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) set out the main issues which we consider when forming our judgements on the quality of services. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing).

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

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

This service was inspected as part of the Government's arms length housing management initiative, which encourages councils to set up ALMOs to manage, maintain and improve their housing stock. The Government decided that councils pursuing this option can secure additional capital funding if the new arms length body has received at least a 'good' rating from the Audit Commission's Housing Inspectorate.

An ALMO is a company set up by a local authority to manage and improve all or part of its housing stock. The local authority remains the landlord and tenants remain secure tenants of the authority. An ALMO does not trade for profit, and is managed by a board of directors comprising Council nominees, elected tenants/leaseholders and independents.

The Housing Inspectorate has published additional guidance for ALMO inspections:

- *'ALMO Inspections and the delivery of excellent housing management services'* (March 2003); and
- *'Learning from the first housing ALMOs'* (May 2003).

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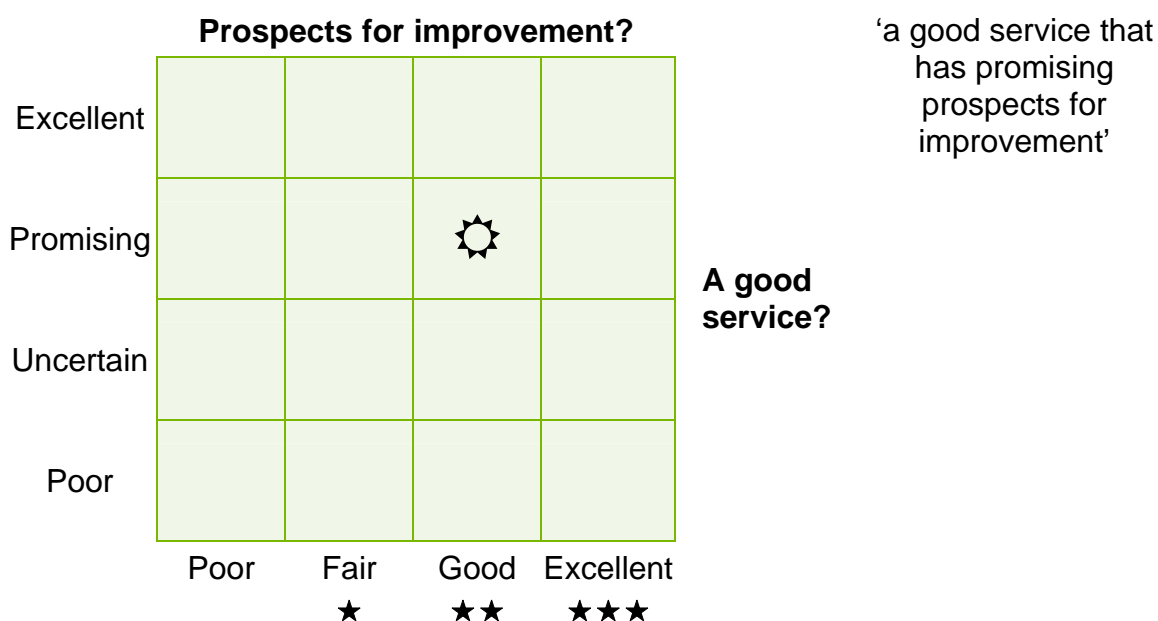
# Summary

- 1 In this inspection we have assessed Newark and Sherwood Homes (NSH) as providing a 'good' two-star, service to customers that has promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 Services are customer focussed and positive outcomes are being delivered. There are varied and appropriate methods of accessing services and NSH understands its customer profile which has helped it to provide services in a meaningful way. Resident involvement is embedded throughout the organisation and there are many ways for customers to be involved in shaping and monitoring the services that they receive.
- 3 Improvements to properties are delivered in line with the Decent Homes programme and NSH is on target to meet the Decent Homes Standard by 2010. Various partnerships are in place to support the organisation's approach to resolving issues of anti-social behaviour and rent collection performance is good.
- 4 NSH approach to value for money is embedded throughout the organisation, and staff demonstrate a sound understanding of value for money issues. NSH has delivered efficiencies that have resulted in savings being reinvested in delivering improvements to services.
- 5 There are some areas that require improvement. Estate inspections are held infrequently and this has impacted on the appearance of some estates, performance targets for responsive repairs are not systematically being met and the case management of Anti-Social Behaviour is inconsistent.
- 6 We have assessed NSH prospects for improvement as promising. Strong, effective leadership and robust performance management and improvement plans are in place. There is a track record of delivering improvements that customers would notice and NSH works effectively with partners to increase its capacity and to influence and deliver wider strategic priorities. There are some weaknesses including a lack of consistent approach to target setting with staff, IT currently limits some working practices and there is a general lack of inward investment. A number of policies and initiatives are new and there are limited outcomes so far.

# Scoring the service

7 We have assessed Newark and Sherwood Homes as providing a 'good', two-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 chart<sup>1</sup>**



Source: Audit Commission

8 We found the service to be good because it has a range of strengths including:

- services are generally easy to access and good information is available to customers;
- services are shaped in response to the collection of customer data;
- customers have been involved in designing and monitoring services throughout the organisation;
- there is a high level of customer satisfaction across all services;
- vulnerable customers are provided with services adjusted to meet their needs and funding made available for their properties to be adapted has been substantially increased;
- value for money is being delivered and efficiencies are being made in most service areas;

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

- properties are improved to meet the Decent Homes Standard and the programme is effectively managed;
- properties are relet quickly and satisfaction with void properties is high;
- performance on gas servicing is strong;
- rent income collection rates are strong and numerous payment methods are in place;
- a range of tools is used to resolve issues of Anti Social Behaviour (ASB), supported by effective partnership working;
- support is offered to residents by qualified staff and supported housing schemes have been re-modelled to reflect demand; and
- effective arrangements are in place to support leaseholders and those tenants considering exercising the Right to Buy.

**9** However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:

- opening hours are limited and access to most services is during office hours only with further developments required to the telephone system to support times of high call rates;
- the composition of the Board and staff does not reflect the local community and there is a lack of a strategic approach to equality and diversity issues including the collection of data;
- contractors are not monitored for compliance with NSH approach to equality and diversity;
- there is no long-term Asset Management Strategy in place and the lack of an integrated IT system has affected opportunities to forecast and plan improvements;
- responsive repairs performance is not meeting some targets and the service has not been assessed to determine whether it is accessible to all;
- refusal rates and void repair costs are increasing;
- there are limited outcomes from the Financial Inclusion Policy and the approach to supporting debt repayment is under developed;
- the Tenancy Agreement is out of date;
- the frequency of estate walkabouts is insufficient to adequately monitor and improve the appearance of estates; and
- the Choice Based Lettings scheme is restricted to NSDC properties only and promotional material is unappealing.

**10** The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- performance measured in a number of areas is improving and there is a range of service improvements that customers would notice;
- strong leadership has defined a clear vision for NSH;
- a well developed business plan is supported by robust improvement planning;

## Scoring the service

- a comprehensive performance management framework tracks and reports on key areas of service and performance against plans;
- NSH routinely learns from others; and
- the Human Resources Strategy supports a well funded training plan.

**11** However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include:

- a number of policies and initiatives are new and there are limited outcomes so far;
- not all of our previous recommendations have been fully completed and there is a lack of tangible progress in some service areas;
- the approach to managing staff is inconsistent with a variable approach to target setting and feedback; and
- there has been a lack of inward investment.

# Recommendations

**12** To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>2</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with the ALMO Board, the local authority and customers; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

## Recommendation

**R1** Improve services to customers by:

- reviewing with customers the access times to services, especially office opening hours and appointment times across a range of services;
- implementing an effective telephone answering service with targets for responding to calls and putting in to place an effective system for dealing with busy periods;
- taking an organisation-wide approach to gathering customer satisfaction information;
- ensuring that customers that are strategically involved in the organisation have had appropriate training made available to enable them to undertake their roles effectively;
- reviewing the response to Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) and ensuring that reports of ASB are responded to effectively, including offering an out of hours service if appropriate;
- ensuring that staff understand how to respond to reports of hate crime;
- ensuring that incidents of ASB are managed effectively and that case file management is methodical and systematic; and
- implementing an effective advertising programme of vacant properties.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased customer satisfaction; and
- improved access to services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by May 2009.

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

## Recommendations

### Recommendation

#### R2 Develop the approach to diversity by:

- working with contractors to increase their level of understanding in respect of equality and diversity and monitor their performance to ensure services are delivered equitably;
- taking positive steps to ensure that the Board of Management and workforce are representative of the local community, including accurate monitoring against all diversity streams; and
- implementing the findings of the audit of facilities accessed by the public to ensure they meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- a consistent approach to meeting the needs of the community.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by May 2009.

### Recommendation

#### R3 Deliver an effective responsive repairs service by:

- ensuring that an effective diagnostic system is in place, that staff are trained and that it is used to assist in accurately reporting repairs;
- continuing to train operatives to increase the numbers of multi-skilled staff to reduce the number of operatives required to complete a repair;
- ensuring that repairs to common areas and external facilities are effectively reported and undertaken;
- improving links between the responsive repairs team and the asset management team to ensure that voids are added to the Decent Homes programme in a more timely manner; and
- reducing recharges on void property repairs by undertaking pre-termination inspections.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- that properties are repaired to a high standard.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by November 2009.

### Recommendation

**R4** Develop the income management service to reflect the needs of customers by:

- developing a well managed systematic approach to the provision of support to those in need of money advice;
- increasing the take up of the most cost effective rent payment methods; and
- using data to profile, risk assess and target those tenants most likely to develop rent arrears and offer intensive support.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- that customers are supported to make rent payments.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by May 2009.

### Recommendation

**R5** Improve performance management by:

- ensuring that the approach to staff one-to-one meetings is consistent;
- implementing a systematic approach to checking a selection of letters and files for quality responses and file management;
- reviewing with customers additional opportunities for publicising performance information;
- seeking feedback and involvement of stakeholders on a systematic basis;
- responding to complaints effectively and providing quality feedback to complainants including an apology as appropriate; and
- taking appropriate steps to ensure that responsive repairs performance targets are met and that repairs are completed within stated timescales.

The expected benefit of this recommendation is:

- that there will be a consistent approach to staff monitoring.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by May 2009.

## Recommendations

- 13** We would like to thank the staff of Newark and Sherwood Homes and Newark and Sherwood District Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 1 September to 12 September 2008

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# Report

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## Context

- 14** Newark and Sherwood District Council (NSDC) covers 65,000 hectares in north east Nottinghamshire. It is predominantly rural with a number of ex-coal mining villages. Its main towns are Newark-on-Trent, Southwell and Ollerton.
- 15** Its population is 110,700<sup>3</sup> forming 46,000 households. It has a black and minority ethnic population of 3.07 per cent. Around 25 per cent of the population are aged between 0 and 19 years and 17 per cent are aged over 65 years. The District's population is expected to grow by 13 per cent between 1991 and 2011.
- 16** The District's economy is characterised by the shift from manufacturing (engineering, brewing and food) to the service industry. In less than 20 years, industrial (manufacturing and energy) employment has dropped by over 59 per cent. The district has lost many of its higher value jobs and, whilst unemployment has steadily declined since 2000, many of the replacement jobs in the District have been in the lower paid sectors of the economy. Unemployment<sup>4</sup> is 4.1 per cent, which is below both the regional and national figures (4.7 and 5.3 per cent). A large number of people work in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations.
- 17** When measured on the national deprivation index<sup>5</sup> in 2007, Newark and Sherwood ranks 175 out of 354 authorities (1 being most deprived), a considerable improvement on its 2004 ranking of 143. The two most deprived wards in the district are in the top 10 per cent most deprived wards in the country.

## The Council

- 18** The Council is controlled by the Conservatives with 26 councillors. There are also six Labour, ten Independent and four Liberal Democrat councillors. The Council was assessed as 'good' following the Audit Commission's comprehensive performance assessment (CPA) in 2007.
- 19** The Council owns around 5,450 properties, which accounts for 11 per cent of homes in the District. Almost 46 per cent of the Council's homes are sheltered and are occupied mainly by elderly people. The Council has very few difficult to let homes and, due to extensive and continuing re-modelling of sheltered homes, is able to let its entire housing stock rapidly.

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<sup>3</sup> Mid-year estimate 2006, Office of National Statistics (ONS)

<sup>4</sup> Economically inactive (Oct 2006-Sep 2007), seeking a job

<sup>5</sup> Indices of multiple deprivation 2007, rank of average rank

### The service

- 20** Following an extensive stock options appraisal Newark and Sherwood District Council created an ALMO, Newark and Sherwood Homes Limited, to provide landlord services to its stock. The initial five year agreement with the ALMO began on 1 November 2004 and is renewable for further terms of five years. The ALMO employs 180 staff and receives an annual management fee of £7.045 million.
- 21** The ALMO board consists of five tenants, five council nominees and five independent members. There are three committees covering finance and probity, service and performance and human resources.
- 22** Newark and Sherwood Homes (NSH) has delegated responsibility for providing housing management and maintenance services. The functions delegated to the ALMO can be summarised as:
- stock investment decisions and repairs ordering;
  - rent collection, dealing with arrears, debt counselling;
  - consulting and informing tenants on matters which are the ALMO's responsibility;
  - promoting tenant participation, including involving tenants in monitoring and reviewing service standards;
  - enforcement of tenancy conditions;
  - similar functions for leaseholders;
  - managing lettings, voids and under-occupation; and
  - estate management, caretaking and housing related support services under the Supporting People programme.
- 23** The functions retained by the Council include:
- overall housing strategy and enabling;
  - determining policies on lettings and anti-social behaviour (in consultation with the ALMO) and rents;
  - managing the Supporting People programme; and
  - homelessness and general housing advice.
- 24** In 2005, the Audit Commission inspected NSH and judged it to provide a good, two star service, with promising prospects for improvement. That assessment enabled Newark and Sherwood to receive additional Supported Borrowing to bring its homes up to the Decent Homes Standard.

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# How good is the service?

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## What has the service aimed to achieve?

25 In September 2007, Newark and Sherwood DC adopted a new vision:

**'We want Newark and Sherwood's urban and rural communities to take pride in being vibrant, sustainable and having a high quality of life. To achieve this we want to deliver excellent, appropriate services and value for money.'**

26 Five new core priorities, with similarities to previous ones, were adopted. To be:

- clean and green;
- safe and strong communities;
- economically vibrant;
- good health and homes; and
- culturally active.

27 Three supporting priorities were also adopted:

- value for money;
- raising aspirations; and
- accessible and responsive.

28 Newark and Sherwood Homes has a vision to 'Deliver Excellent Housing Services', via four objectives:

- to achieve a 3\* inspection rating from the Audit Commission;
- to deliver the Decent Homes Standard in accordance with the annual profile and for all NSDC stock by the end of March 2010;
- to achieve top quartile performance in all the performance indicators measured by the Audit Commission; and
- to be financially viable beyond 2010 and providing housing services within the Community.

29 To achieve the vision through its objectives, NSH adheres to the following Core Values:

- Customer First;
- Valuing Everyone;
- Delivering Excellence;
- Making Positive Improvements; and
- Sharing Information.

## How good is the service?

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

#### Access and customer care

- 30** In 2005, we found that NSH enabled customers to access its services in a range of ways appropriate to the dispersed nature of the homes it managed. Staff showed a strong commitment to customer care. There were some weaknesses including a lack of published and embedded service standards and a lack of detailed analysis of customers' actual and preferred access methods. There was also an inconsistent approach to seeking customer feedback.
- 31** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. Customer satisfaction is high and tenant data is being collected to help shape services. Service information leaflets and service standards are in place and tenants have been involved in shaping the service. However, access to services is limited by traditional opening hours and although a new Customer Access Team (CAT) has been set up, the telephony system is not fully developed and performance cannot be monitored.
- 32** There is a clear corporate focus on customer care. The customer is the central focus of the Core Values and this is understood well through the organisation. For example, as part of the Performance Management Framework (PMF), NSH undertakes a STATUS<sup>6</sup> survey every year to have an up to date record of customer satisfaction across a range of areas. The Balanced Scorecard, also part of the PMF, includes the measurement of outcomes from a customers' perspective including Disability Discrimination Act compliance of access points, satisfaction with complaints and 'awareness' of the NSH vision. This demonstrates the importance that NSH places on customer feedback.
- 33** NSH demonstrates clear and consistent leadership in ensuring that there is an unambiguous customer focus. Since the start of the ALMO there has been a focus on ensuring that tenants are at the heart of what NSH does. For example, the Chief Executive (CE) and Board of Management have supported staff to bring about a change in culture by procuring annual customer care training to all staff and Board members and a member of the Board takes the lead for this service area. In addition, the Procurement Strategy clearly identifies how important it is to consider the impact that procurement decisions may have on customers and gives appropriate examples to assist staff in their understanding. This shows that customer focus is corporately given a high priority.
- 34** NSH has taken steps to improve access to frontline services. The organisation has been restructured to deliver more customer focussed services via the establishment of the Customer Access Team (CAT) and bringing most customer facing services under one Directorate. This has led to clear lines of responsibility and reporting mechanisms.

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<sup>6</sup> STATUS survey - the standardised tenant satisfaction survey developed by the National Housing Federation and endorsed by the Housing Corporation and the Department for Communities and Local Government

- 35** A robust Access and Customer Care Strategy is in place. Tenants on the Access and Customer Care Continuous Improvement Group (CIG) were involved in developing the Access and Customer Care Strategy in 2007 and will be reviewing it on a rolling basis. Outcomes so far from the CIG include improving reception facilities at Farrar Close, ensuring that staff and committee members receive training on how to use loop systems installed at community centres, reviewing service leaflets, recommending improvements to the website and changes to straplines to include Polish. The Strategy clearly sets out the standard of service that customers can expect to receive.
- 36** A full range of service standards is in place. The service standards were designed with the input of tenants, are easy to read and understand and outline how services are delivered and what tenants can expect. Compliance with the standards is monitored across NSH and reported as part of the balanced scorecard.
- 37** Access to services for customers is not as easy as we would expect. Offices are located in various locations for customers including at the main office at Kelham Hall, at local offices on estates and at surgeries held in more remote areas. Services can be accessed in person at these offices, but also by telephone, email, text, by using NSH web enabled facilities and by requesting home visits. However, services are currently only available during traditional office hours. Opening hours were not reviewed as part of the establishment of the CAT and so access to the CAT remains limited to the traditional hours offered at other NSH offices. By limiting accessibility for tenants to make contact in person, NSH is not ensuring that services are available at times most convenient to customers.
- 38** The website is well presented and easy to use. A number of services are available including online repairs reporting, rent payments and bidding for vacant properties. Various documents can also be downloaded including service standards, the customer promise and service information leaflets. However, NSH acknowledges that website development was given a low priority in 2007 to enable other projects to go ahead. This has not been too problematic as information obtained from STATUS\* surveys show that 81 per cent of tenants prefer to make contact with NSH by telephone. However, some areas of the website that are more frequently used, including the Easylet<sup>7</sup> section, have been developed to meet customers' needs. More recently a Web Development Group has been set up that will work with the Access and Customer Care Continuous Improvement Group which enable customers to feed into improvements to the website.
- 39** NSH has not taken steps to ensure that it is easy to access its services by telephone. This is the most popular method of contact for customers. However, tenants we spoke to were dissatisfied with the telephone system and reported frequent occasions where their calls remain unanswered or the line is engaged. The CAT cannot currently monitor its performance at answering telephone calls and performance targets have not yet been set. Operational targets have not been agreed for the CAT, apart from the corporate target of answering calls within five rings. In addition, there is no 'wallboard' in the CAT to give 'real time' performance information and voice recording is not yet in place, although managers can 'listen in' on live calls to monitor the quality of calls. This means that NSH cannot monitor the length of time taken to answer calls, the number of missed or abortive calls and take the necessary steps to resolve the issue.

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<sup>7</sup> NSH Choice Based Lettings scheme

## How good is the service?

- 40** The arrangements for responding to 'out of hours' calls are mainly customer focussed. There is an out of hours repairs hotline that is available 24 hours a day. Customers who contact NSH out of hours by using the 0800 number are automatically transferred to the CCTV monitoring centre which takes out of hours calls on behalf of NSH. In addition, there is a lo-call number that tenants can use to make calls during office hours. This approach shows that NSH has taken steps to enable tenants to report emergencies easily and conveniently.
- 41** Good quality information is made available to customers. Information is available in service leaflets, on the website, in Homes from Home (the tenant newsletter) and in the tenants' handbook. The information is easy to read and understand and is clearly badged as NSH. This helps tenants to understand services that are available to them.
- 42** NSH makes sure that documents are available in appropriate formats. All documents contain details of how they can be obtained in other formats and NSH regularly offers large print and translated documents to customers where a need has been identified. Information is available on request in audio, large print, Braille and other community languages. The website has links to an online automatic translation service and Browsealoud<sup>8</sup> is also available. This shows how NSH has taken steps to respond appropriately to the various communication needs of its customers.
- 43** Performance information is systematically provided to tenants. Information is currently made available on the website and in regular articles in Homes from Home. The data made available for tenants is clear and easy to understand and details performance in areas that may be of special interest to tenants including responsive repairs, voids and rents. As a result tenants can easily understand and assess how NSH is delivering its services.
- 44** There are processes in place to ensure that complaints are responded to on time. The progress with each complaint, compliment or comment is monitored on a database and managers are regularly notified which complaints are still outstanding. This ensures that complaints remain a priority for NSH.
- 45** However, there is no systematic approach to ensure that customers receive an appropriate response to their complaint or comment. Although managers who are responsible for dealing with complaints have received training on the procedure, the guidance gives little detail about the quality of responses that NSH expects. Responses also failed to make clear what NSH had learnt following the complaint. Additionally, NSH does not currently reward or recognise comments or suggestions received from its customers that are adopted. This means that customers may not be encouraged to make complaints or comments and NSH may miss valuable opportunity for feedback.
- 46** NSH is actively learning from the complaints, compliments and comments it receives. Learning from complaints is actively captured on the complaints database and then discussed at Senior Leadership Team (SLT) meetings on a quarterly basis. The results of this are then published in the 'you said we did' article in the tenants newsletter. Additionally, all complaints receive a customer satisfaction feedback form, five months after the complaint was originally received. This demonstrates that NSH understands the importance of obtaining and giving feedback.

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<sup>8</sup> Browsealoud - online facility to receive an audio version of the page content

- 47** NSH actively captures feedback and customers are encouraged to comment. There are a number of ways that customers can make complaints, compliments or comments; by using a pro-forma which includes pre-paid postage, through the website, by telephone or by visiting one of NSH offices. Feedback from the most recent STATUS survey results showed that tenant satisfaction with the overall service is high at 87 per cent in 2006/07, an increase from 84 per cent in 2005/06. Satisfaction has increased generally across all services since 2005/06. This shows that, in general, NSH is providing services that tenants are satisfied with.
- 48** However, there is no systematic and co-ordinated approach to designing and implementing customer satisfaction surveys relating to services. Surveys are designed in an ad-hoc manner by teams or CIGs as a means of gathering feedback on a particular service. Co-ordination of the production of these questionnaires does not take place. NSH cannot therefore be sure that the information being requested is not being collected elsewhere and that questions are phrased in a standard way so that comparisons across services can be made. The lack of a co-ordinated approach leaves customers at risk of being 'bombarded' with questionnaires which may reduce the overall response rate.

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### Diversity

- 49** In 2005, we found a number of areas of strength including an appreciation of the needs of a diverse customer base, matched by the way in which services were delivered on the ground. Weaknesses included a lack of targets in relation to equalities and diversity, a lack of comprehensive information on the profile of tenants and a lack of guidance to staff on appropriate responses to customers experiencing domestic violence.
- 50** In this inspection, we found that there is now a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There is clear corporate lead and a comprehensive equality and diversity strategy in place with a detailed action plan. The needs of vulnerable tenants are identified and services adjusted appropriately. Information for customers is robust and available in a variety of formats. However, the Board and workforce are not representative of the local community and there is a lack of monitoring information across all six diversity streams. Contractors' performance on diversity issues is not monitored and the domestic violence policy has only recently been introduced.
- 51** NSH actively promotes its commitment to equality and diversity at a strategic level. There is clear leadership in this area with an equality and diversity lead at Board and at executive level. Equality and diversity information is reported to the Board as part of the balanced scorecard and includes performance in a number of areas including the percentage of employees from minority groups or who are disabled, compliant with the requirement of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) and whether complaints from customers from BME backgrounds reflect the make up of the tenant profile generally. This means that Board members have a well developed understanding of equality and diversity issues relating to NSH.

## How good is the service?

- 52** The strategic approach to equality and diversity is not yet comprehensive. Although NSH has recently revised its Equality and Diversity Strategy, the Strategy fails to clearly articulate its approach across the six diversity strands. There is a comprehensive action plan in place to help deliver the actions identified in the Strategy but a number of the targets in the action plan appear very challenging, such as ensuring that Board membership broadly reflects the local community by December 2008. There is a lack of milestones to monitor ongoing progress with actions that will be completed over a longer period of time. This means that NSH cannot be sure that the improvements that the Strategy aims to deliver will be completed.
- 53** NSH does not have its own diversity schemes in place for race, equality and gender and there is no overarching equalities action plan. NSH has adopted NSDC diversity schemes and has no plans to develop its own. Failing to develop its own diversity schemes means that NSH cannot be sure that it is delivering an overarching service that meets the needs of its vulnerable customers and the specific needs of its tenants.
- 54** NSH is not ensuring that its recruitment policies are effective at encouraging applicants to apply from under-represented groups. NSH is not monitoring recruitment across all six diversity streams and has not yet taken steps to target its job adverts at under represented groups, although there are plans to do this. The Board is not notified on a regular basis about what progress is being made with ensuring a more diverse workforce and does not receive regular reports on the diversity of the staff working for NSH. This information is fed to the Human Resources Committee through the Human Resources Strategy for approval. NSH cannot demonstrate that it is actively working towards ensuring that both the Board and workforce are representative.
- 55** Board membership does not currently reflect the diversity of the local community. Whilst it is positive that diversity information is now requested across the six diversity streams, only 8 out of 15 Board members responded to this request which weakens the Board's leadership and commitment to diversity within NSH. Currently there are no Board members who are from a black or minority ethnic (BME) community and there are no Board members under the age of 45, although there are two members with a known disability. The Board co-option protocol may assist NSH in addressing these gaps but at present the Board is not representative and does not have clear plans to address this.
- 56** Staff and board training on equality and diversity is mandatory and has been effective. Staff that we spoke to had a good general understanding of equality and diversity and how tenants' vulnerabilities may require them to adjust services. For example, repairs operatives cited instances where they have waited longer for an elderly person to answer the door or written notes for a tenant with hearing problems and have an awareness of different cultural beliefs that may impact on their ability to perform certain tasks. This means that tenants are more likely to receive services that had been adapted to meet their needs.

- 57** However, staff training on more specific areas has had a mixed focus. There has been no formal training or ongoing monitoring of the use of the vulnerable tenants policy to ensure that it is applied both appropriately and consistently. The approach to using the policy has been discussed at team meetings of the CAT on two occasions but not all frontline staff have received training on the Domestic Violence Policy. This means that staff may not be aware of the importance of the policies and how they can use it to provide additional support to tenants.
- 58** Information about NSH's approach to diversity is available for tenants. A comprehensive equality and diversity guide for tenants and residents has been produced by the Equality and Diversity CIG and is available on the NSH website. Other information available on the website includes the Domestic Violence (DV) Policy and information leaflets about DV and the Sanctuary Scheme, the Equality and Diversity Strategy is also available and an information leaflet about NSH's approach to equality and diversity. This demonstrates a commitment to customers' needs.
- 59** Translation and interpretation services are readily available. All public documents include a translation strap-line with services offered in the most commonly used languages. Some staff are able to use British Sign Language and all staff have access to translation services via 'The Big Word'. Documents are also available on audio tape. This encourages tenants to access services in a way that suits them.
- 60** Services are adapted to meet the individual needs of customers. Tenant profile data is being updated through the tenants' census. NSH currently has data against the six diversity strands on 78 per cent of all tenants and is confident that it will reach the target of 90 per cent by December 2008. As a result of information already obtained, NSH has identified several customers needing large print and translated documents and one customer requiring Braille. All staff have access to vulnerability data as it automatically appears on the IT system and our observations at the CAT showed staff routinely referring to it and making adjustments to services as appropriate. The approach means that customers are more likely to receive services tailored to their individual needs.
- 61** There is a clear, although un-ambitious, timetable in place for the completion of Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs). All assessments have been prioritised with all high priority EIAs due for completion by December 2008 and the remainder by January 2011. Completed EIAs, appear comprehensive and include improvement plans. However, not all the actions in these improvement plans are SMART which may limit their successful implementation. By completing EIAs across all services and policies, NSH can be sure that it is aware of the impact its services have on customers and any changes that need to be made as a consequence
- 62** NSH has been slow to meet the requirements of the Local Government Equality Standard (LGES)<sup>9</sup>. NSH has self assessed against the LGES and determined that it meets the requirements of level two. Level two is not particularly challenging, but incorporates several minimum requirements such as the completion of EIAs, which has not been undertaken by NSH. There is a target in place to reach level three by July 2009. Working towards level three will engage NSH in more challenging work including external validation of its assessment.

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<sup>9</sup> Equality standard - a framework to help local authorities introduce a comprehensive and systematic approach to dealing with equality issues.

## How good is the service?

- 63** NSH has systematically involved customers in developing its approach to equality and diversity. Tenants are represented on the Equality and Diversity CIG which includes monitoring NSH for compliance with the former Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) Code of Practice for Rented Housing. NSH is also working to achieve more involvement from under represented groups and has successfully engaged with young people by establishing two groups. STATUS survey results revealed no responses from BME groups and so NSH has targeted BME tenants identified through the tenants' census to encourage involvement in the future. This helps to shape services to reflect the needs of all groups.
- 64** NSH does not effectively monitor its contractors to ensure that they are providing a fair and equitable service. It has not been proactive in ensuring that contractors comply with contract requirements regarding equality and diversity issues. NSH has observed one contractor delivering equality and diversity training to its workforce, but it has failed to maximise opportunities to deliver joint training with contractors and its own staff or to undertake any kind of spot checks or other kind of monitoring activity. NSH is therefore unable to demonstrate that its contractors are not discriminating against customers from any kind of diverse group.
- 65** NSH works with partners to promote cohesion. Community cohesion and addressing exclusion have been targeted by local partnerships and NSH has contributed to various initiatives. For example, NSH worked closely with NSDC and the established Polish community on an engagement day that was organised to support new Polish migrants settle in to the community. NSH has also contacted local employers to distribute information about housing issues to potential customers that may not find it easy to access services. This shows that NSH is actively supporting members of vulnerable communities to assist them in becoming a valuable member of the community.
- 66** It is a weakness that NSH has only recently developed its own Domestic Violence (DV) policy. The policy was introduced in May 2008 following consultation with the DV Forum. However, there have been limited outcomes to date and not all staff have received training on the policy. As a result NSH cannot be sure that the policy is operating appropriately and that victims of DV are being identified and offered support.
- 67** NSH approach to hate crime is under-developed. There is currently no specific policy in place to assist staff when dealing with incidents of hate crime and racial harassment, and staff have had limited training on how to deal with incidents. If a case is reported it is referred to the Community Cohesion Forum (which has recently replaced the Racial Awareness Forum). NSH have recently developed an anti-harassment policy which is currently out to consultation. In the meantime, NSH cannot demonstrate that staff are effectively dealing with incidents of hate crime and harassment.

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## Stock investment and asset management

### Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 68** In 2005, we found that there were a number of strengths including positive steps to increase the sustainability of homes and estates, the development of a 'decent homes plus' standard in consultation with tenants and a wide choice of fittings and finishes. Weaknesses included delays in completing some improvement schemes and limited support and information for tenants whose homes were being improved.
- 69** In this inspection, we found that that this is now an area of strength. NSH is on track to meet the Decent Home Standard<sup>10</sup> by 2010 and the capital programme is managed effectively. There is comprehensive and accurate information held on stock condition. Tenants are involved in setting priorities and NSH has responded to feedback, resulting in personalised services with ample choice of fixtures and fittings. The capital programme has been used to reduce ASB and crime and there is an effective asbestos management strategy in place. However, there is no medium or long-term Asset Management Strategy in place although the introduction of a new asset management IT system will help develop this in future.
- 70** There is a robust short-term Asset Management Plan in place. The Asset Management Plan sets out the priorities for the coming year based on a number of factors including tenant expectations, life expectancy of components, landlord obligations and available resources. Other considerations include the opportunity to reduce ASB if necessary, demand for stock re-modelling and legal obligations changing. The Asset Management Plan clearly demonstrates the commitment of NSH to involve all potential stakeholders in the development of asset management. The Plan explains who the stakeholders are and includes tenants, the council and central government. This means that NSH has the support of all stakeholders in setting priorities for its stock.
- 71** However, there is no medium or long-term Asset Management Strategy in place that clearly sets out NSH future plans for the housing stock. A draft Asset Management Strategy has recently been developed but improvements have not been defined by street as the information available has not enabled this level of detail. The current Asset Management IT system limits available information, but the new system about to be launched should enable forecasting to be more accurate from 2009. However, a special edition of the tenants' newsletter has recently been distributed that has restated NSH ambitions and commitment to the DH programme and outlines to tenants when they may expect their properties to be improved. The lack of an integrated asset management system to date has impacted on NSH ability to forecast and to assess the likely impact of works.
- 72** NSH is on target to meet the DHS by 2010. At the end of 2007/08, 29 per cent of NSH properties were non-decent and the target for 2008/09 is that only 11 per cent remain non-decent. The percentage of non-decent properties is monitored on a monthly basis and reported as part of the balanced scorecard. This enables NSH to ensure that all appropriate properties will benefit from improvement works.

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<sup>10</sup> Decent Homes Standard - a minimum standard for housing set by the Government, covering basic legal definitions of fitness, reasonable state of repair, modern facilities and services and thermal comfort.

## How good is the service?

- 73** Capital spending decisions have supported sustainability. As well as Decent Homes improvement works, decisions made in respect of capital budget allocation have impacted upon the sustainability of properties. The average SAP<sup>11</sup> rating of properties has steadily increased and was 75 at the end of 2007/08 which is top quartile performance; in addition to this the budget available for aids and adaptations has doubled. These decisions have a real impact on tenants' lives.
- 74** Data held on stock condition is accurate. The data has been accumulated from a variety of sources and is currently being consolidated into the new Asset Management System. Surveys have been undertaken on each property benefiting from DH works and this information has supported the assumptions made in the stock condition survey carried out in 2001 and the validation surveys undertaken in 2005/06 when the DH programme was initially developed. External validation of the data is planned. This means that improvement programmes can be accurately planned in the short term.
- 75** The DH programme is managed effectively. NSH has effective systems in place to monitor all elements of the DH programme. In partnership with its two DH contractors, NSH has taken steps to document the history and current performance of various elements of the programmes in a detailed booklet that is used to monitor performance and prompt discussion in various areas. The booklet is comprehensive and includes information about complaints, defects, refusals, access, progress with the DH programme and publicity events. This means improvements are being delivered according to plans.
- 76** Contractors are managed effectively. NSH robustly manages the performance of contractors. A number of mechanisms are used to ensure that performance is systematically monitored, for example at an operational level there is a monthly site meeting with the contractor attended by the NSH surveyor where individual issues may be discussed as well as overall performance against the programme. At a more strategic level, a Procurement and Steering Group meeting is held each month and is used to discuss KPIs, equality and diversity issues, complaints, rectification and any low scores on the customer satisfaction returns. The meeting is also useful to discuss any problems with the supply chain, although both partners use the same supply companies in many cases and so have general experiences. Contractors that we spoke to reported that an effective system is in place to ensure that any issues are highlighted to them and there is an expectation that the issue will be rectified. This means that NSH is ensuring that good quality work is undertaken.
- 77** Works are completed on time and within budget. There are internal systems in place to ensure the effective management of the improvement contracts. Managers are supported by the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) to take responsibility for project delivery, focussing on budget and that the works are on track to be completed on time. Managers meet with finance staff each month to look at expenditure trends. The investment team meets on a monthly basis to scrutinise the programme and to agree the way forward with any issues that may arise and this ensures that the programme is managed robustly.

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<sup>11</sup> SAP - Standards Assessment Procedure - the Government's recommended system for home energy rating. The higher the number, the better the energy efficiency for the dwelling

- 78** Resident involvement is embedded in NSH approach to asset management. There are a number of examples where resident involvement has delivered outcomes that would be noticed by tenants. For example, tenants have been strategically involved in investment planning by sitting on the Service Development Group. Their work has resulted in the provision of freephone numbers to contact contractors and approving bids for Community Investment Funds. NSH has encouraged the involvement of tenants by sharing the results of benchmarking with peers to provide ideas and suggestions. This means that NSH can be sure that the asset management service is meeting tenants' aspirations.
- 79** There is ample choice of new fixtures and fittings for tenants. Tenants are offered choice when decent homes improvements are undertaken to their homes, including a variety of worktops, door and drawer fronts, floorings, tiles and taps fittings. A choice between two different bathroom suites is also offered. This means that tenants can play an active part in designing their new kitchens and bathrooms.
- 80** Tenant information about the commencement of decent homes works is comprehensive. Contact with tenants includes dissemination of information and support using a variety of methods including leaflets, DVDs and on-site Tenant Liaison Officers (TLOs). Our previous inspection highlighted that NSH was failing to inform tenants about the likely level of disruption that may be caused during DH works. This has now been addressed and the DVD, in particular, leaves tenants with a lasting impression of the impact on their home, meaning that they are fully informed and therefore able to prepare adequately.
- 81** NSH supports tenants to ensure that disruption is minimized during DH works. Tenants are notified three weeks in advance of the exact date that their property is due to be improved. In addition to this, the TLOs visit each tenant with a weekly schedule that shows exactly where their property fits in to the overall schedule of work. In this way, tenants are kept informed about the progress of the work.
- 82** The DH programme has been adjusted following comments from tenants. NSH has responded to issues raised from the DH customer satisfaction surveys and has altered services to meet demand. For example, a packing service is now offered, cleaning teams are provided and decoration is offered after the works are completed. As a result individual needs are now being met.
- 83** Services are adapted to meet needs. NSH has taken some steps to monitor the effectiveness of contractors in providing a service free from discrimination and that services are adapted where necessary to take account of any vulnerabilities that tenants may experience. For example, NSH use information obtained from BME tenants during satisfaction surveys to monitor whether there are any inequalities in service delivery. A needs assessment takes place with the tenant during the 21 days before works start on site. There are examples of where this approach has led to respite care being provided at local communal rooms at sheltered schemes. For tenants from nearby properties where TLOs can ensure that hot drinks and sandwiches are available if necessary.

## How good is the service?

- 84** NSH has low refusal rates for DH works. Offering bespoke packages of support during DH works has reduced the numbers of refusals of improvement works. There is a robust system in place to track properties where the tenant has refused works, as a result refusal rates are low (2.9 per cent at the time of our inspection, representing 156 properties). The Refusals Strategy was agreed by the Service Development Group and ensures that NSH retain funding for those properties should the tenant reconsider their decision or the property becomes void. Refusal information is shared with the CAT so that opportunities are maximised to discuss the issue with the tenant again should a repair be reported. This means that NSH has been successful in ensuring that all capital works relating to gas, electrical works and health and safety issues have been successfully undertaken.
- 85** NSH responds effectively to complaints about the decent homes programme. Feedback from complaints has resulted in various improvements such as a packing service and a finishing team to cut down on defects. However, some complaints made directly to the DH contractors are not reported on to NSH, but are resolved directly with the tenant. Whilst a quick response and rectification is important, NSH is unaware about the true level of complaints made.
- 86** Satisfaction rates with DH works are high. At the time of our inspection, 93 per cent of customers were satisfied with the improvements made to their homes. NSH monitors satisfaction rates to ensure that any downward trends in satisfaction and individual complaints or issues are resolved. Satisfaction surveys are used to measure the customer experience and a prize draw has been set up to encourage tenants to return their forms. Any satisfaction survey with a score of 5 (out of 10) or below in any category prompts a visit by the TLO from NSH. NSH can be confident that tenants are satisfied with the way that their properties are improved.
- 87** The capital programme has helped to reduce anti-social behaviour (ASB). Capital funds have been allocated to schemes where ASB and crime have been identified as major issues for local residents and works have been undertaken to create defensible spaces, security lighting and private parking areas. This means that the wider needs of the community are being addressed.
- 88** Asbestos is managed effectively. There is a robust asbestos management strategy in place that outlines NSH approach to asbestos and measures to be taken where asbestos is found. The asbestos management strategy states that sample type two surveys will be undertaken, but that type three surveys will be undertaken when refurbishment works are completed. There is an asbestos register in place that is made available to interested parties including contractors. Staff that are potentially exposed to asbestos have received appropriate training. This means that risks are minimized.
- 89** Asbestos information is widely available. Information about asbestos is made available for tenants, and also for contractors and their staff by way of an information leaflet. NSH maintains an up to date record of the likely location of asbestos, with independent surveys having been undertaken of common areas and a representative sample of stock. The results of the surveys are available using a web based application that NSH staff and contractors can use to determine likely locations of asbestos. This means that those likely to come into contact with asbestos are aware of its location.

### Responsive repairs

- 90** Previously, we found that the Council and the ALMO had worked hard to deliver improvements in the responsive repairs service and, overall, performance had improved substantially. There were weaknesses including an unacceptably high level of emergency and urgent repairs and a high level of pre- and post-inspections of repairs which were not strategically targeted. There was also a lack of routine monitoring of some areas such as jobs completed first time and a lack of proactive monitoring of cancelled jobs with a view to reducing these.
- 91** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. There are high levels of satisfaction with the service, challenging repairs priorities in place and appointments are now offered for all routine works. Mobile working has recently been introduced. However, the development of multi-skilled operatives has not progressed well and some targets are not being met.
- 92** The responsive repairs service is easy to access. Repairs can be reported in a number of ways: in person, by telephone, letter, email, text and online using the online reporting facility on the NSH website. There is also a free-phone repairs hotline that also provides the emergency out of hours repairs service. This enables tenants to report repairs using a method that is convenient to them.
- 93** Information about the responsive repairs service is comprehensive. The tenants' handbook contains useful information about the responsive repairs service including useful diagrams to assist tenants in diagnosing their repairs. It also has detailed sections on how to operate the heating, turn off the gas and the importance of gas safety checks. The handbook also lists repairs that are the responsibility of the tenant. The web-site is well used with an increasing number of tenants using the website as a way of obtaining information about responsive repairs.
- 94** However, NSH is not maximising the opportunity to diagnose repairs and it not using the diagnostic information available. During our reality checks we noticed that the diagnostic tools are not used on a regular basis by staff in the CAT to ensure that repairs are accurately diagnosed. This reduces the opportunity to ensure that pre-inspections are minimised.
- 95** Customer satisfaction with the responsive repairs service is monitored and is currently exceeding the target of 95 per cent. Questionnaires accompany each works order and ask whether the operative was helpful, whether the work was of a high quality and whether an appointment was made and kept. From these, performance reports are generated that alert NSH to any trends that can then be raised with operatives as necessary. However, there is a low rate of return of customer satisfaction surveys. During the year to date the level returned has ranged from around eight per cent to around 14 per cent. Tenants that we spoke to reported that the print on the satisfaction slip is too small to read and this may be contributing to the poor response rates. The low rate of survey returns limits the extent to which NSH can achieve a real understanding of tenant satisfaction with the service.

## How good is the service?

- 96** There area number of ways that tenants have influenced the responsive repairs service. Tenants are systematically involved in the responsive repairs service in a number of ways, including sitting on the Responsive Repairs Monitoring Group. Outcomes from this Group have included revising the repairs priorities resulting in three challenging repairs priorities being put into place. Tenants have also been involved in re-tendering the responsive repairs contract by helping to devise the specification and will be involved in selecting the contractor. This shows that NSH is committed to offering a service that meets tenants' needs.
- 97** Multi-skilling of operatives remains under developed and NSH cannot demonstrate value for money in its approach to the completion of responsive repairs. The lack of multi-skilled operatives was identified as an area of weakness in our last inspection and currently only two out of 38 operatives are multi-skilled. A memorandum of understanding has recently been agreed with the trade unions which should pave the way for detailed discussions about the revision of terms and conditions and encourage multi-skilling through the introduction of a competency framework.
- 98** Performance against NSH own targets for responsive repairs remains mixed as shown in the table below but is strong when compared to similar organisations.

**Table 1 NSH responsive repairs performance**

	<b>2007/08</b>	<b>Performance for July 2008</b>	<b>2008/09 Target</b>
Percentage of emergency repairs completed within 4 hours	96%	96%	98%
Percentage of urgent repairs completed within 4 days	91.20%	93%	98%
Percentage of routine repairs completed within 20 days	96.30%	95%	99%

- 99** NSH has taken some steps to improve performance. For example, 99 per cent of appointments made are now kept, hitting the target for the first time during the year to date and 99 per cent of jobs are now completed right first time, exceeding the target of 95 per cent. The number of active overdue repairs orders has also been steadily reducing throughout the year to date. These are improvements that would be noticed by tenants.

- 100** Repairs are now reported more accurately. Changing the responsive repairs priorities has resulted in more accurate reporting of works by tenants. In particular the introduction of the new urgent priority of three working days has encouraged tenants not to report repairs as emergencies. This has led to an improved balance between emergency/urgent repairs and routine, with the ratio now moving towards the good practice guidelines of 30:70 at 13:87. This has freed up resources to deal with emergencies within the revised priority of four hours.
- 101** The quality of repairs work is monitored effectively. Repairs works are monitored in a number of ways including post-inspections, customer feedback and satisfaction questionnaires. Staff in the CAT also regularly telephone customers to check if they are satisfied. In addition, repairs co-ordinators also carry out spot checks on operatives undertaking works, when they are out and about on the estates. The numbers of, and outcomes from, pre- and post-inspections are monitored for trends, with ten per cent of post-inspections randomly generated by the existing IT system. The approach enables NSH to quickly address any quality issues that may emerge.
- 102** The approach of operatives in relation to repairs completions is not adequately monitored. Operatives are given freedom to decide whether to repair or replace an item, or whether to ask for further advice from a repairs co-ordinator. Staff that we spoke to each had a different approach from making a new appointment through to contacting the repairs co-ordinator or simply undertaking the additional work. There are no triggers to guide operatives and outcomes are not measured or monitored. It is positive that a guidance note was issued to operatives when we raised this during our inspection which will help operatives make decisions more systematically.
- 103** Mobile working is enabling more repairs appointments to be made. Full mobile working was launched in August 2008 and each operative is equipped with a PDA that works in 'real-time', uploading new jobs as soon as the operative logs off a completed job. Van and stores stock supplies are automatically updated enabling new supplies to be sourced as necessary. Although the new mobile working system has not been fully evaluated yet, early outcomes have shown that operatives have been freed up to complete more appointments during the working day. This should have an impact on improved performance.
- 104** NSH takes steps to consider any vulnerabilities of its tenants and whether services need to be adjusted. For example, the rechargeable repairs procedure cites examples where items normally recharged for, would be exempt under certain circumstances, including domestic violence and anti-social behaviour as well as other factors such as age or disability. The responsive repairs team has also supported the tenancy and estates team to resolve issues of anti-social behaviour. For example, anti-vandal paint has been used on balconies and entrance walls of the stairwell as this was identified as a particular problem. A rolling anti-climb device has been fitted on all balconies to prohibit youngsters causing a nuisance in this way or gaining access to the balconies.

## How good is the service?

**105** There is mixed success in the way that NSH ensures that repairs to communal areas are identified. Although housing officers are not required to undertake regular and frequent estate inspections, repairs can be identified by all staff who regularly visit the estates. However, a recent breakdown of repairs reported and their origins during May 2008 showed that of 1,751 repairs reported, only 13 were reported by housing officers and only 9 by street wardens. This means that NSH is not maximising the opportunity presented by visiting staff to identify information about the condition of properties and many repairs may be un-reported

### Empty (void) property repairs

- 106** In 2005, we found that NSH was managing vacant homes effectively and was re-letting them quickly. There were some weaknesses such as a lack of service user involvement in quality checking vacant homes and the lack of a customer focused lettable standard.
- 107** In this inspection strengths outweigh weaknesses. We found that properties are repaired and relet quickly and that tenants are now closely involved in the service. However, some practises are restricting improved performance including the lack of property inspections before the property is vacant and failure to maximise opportunities for collection of customer satisfaction information. NSH also cannot be sure that it is delivering value for money when repairing void properties.
- 108** A comprehensive lettable standard is in place for void properties, covering components, facilities and external areas. The lettable standard was drawn up initially by staff following a benchmarking exercise and was discussed with tenants in a focus group. Various elements were rejected by tenants, including removal of damaged wall coverings. The standard is provided to tenants at the accompanied viewing and this approach means that new tenants are able to assess whether standards have been met.
- 109** Accompanied viewings are carried out with all prospective tenants. This enables the applicant to raise any queries about the property before accepting the tenancy. New tenants receive a welcome pack to help them settle into their new home. This approach is customer-focused and helps support NSH in reducing refusal rates.
- 110** NSH has some arrangements in place to help tenants decorate their homes, but these are not comprehensive. Although there is currently no decoration allowance in place, a cleaning allowance, which can be the equivalent of up to eight weeks free rent, can be offered at 'sign up'. NSH also gives vouchers for the 'Unique Scrap Store' where paint can be purchased at 50p per litre by tenants who are in receipt of benefits. This approach offers some choice to tenants and is easily accessible.
- 111** The involvement of tenants has helped to shape the void property repair service. A group of new tenants were invited to attend an event to enable them to feed back to NSH their experiences of their new property. As a result of this a pilot has been running where all properties in the eastern part of the District have undergone cleaning and decoration to kitchens and bathrooms as necessary. The pilot is due to be evaluated in December 2008. This approach demonstrates that NSH is able to respond quickly to suggestions made by tenants.

- 112** Tenants are able to influence the voids service in a number of other ways. For example, voids are inspected by a member of the Tenants' Federation before they are repaired and the same properties are then inspected after the void works are complete. Tenants are also represented on the Voids Progression Group, comprising of contractors, operatives, lettings staff and tenants who meet regularly to improve the void process.
- 113** Tenant satisfaction with the condition of void properties is high. Satisfaction has been consistently at 100 per cent during the year to date. However, NSH is not maximising opportunities to capture tenant feedback about their personal experience of void properties. A new tenant survey is completed at the sign up before the tenant has the opportunity to settle in and really assess the condition of the property. This information could be collected at the visit undertaken by NSH six weeks after the tenancy has started. This means that NSH has not been able to build up a complete picture of issues that may have been experienced by tenants.
- 114** NSH has not taken steps to streamline the void process. Although there are regular meetings between staff responsible for lettings and those responsible for voids, opportunities are being missed to ensure that the reletting process runs as smoothly and effectively as possible. For example, pre-termination inspections are currently not undertaken, although they are clearly part of the voids procedure. This affects the ability of NSH to plan work flows as the condition of the forthcoming void is not known. Opportunities to identify potential areas of rechargeable items to the outgoing tenant are also missed and this has impacted on the level of successful recharges being raised in respect of voids.
- 115** Some internal partnership working is under developed. For example, void properties are added to the Decent Homes programme if appropriate, but the links between the voids team and the Decent Homes team are minimal, so that the Decent Homes contract manager is not made aware of the void until the keys are received. This hampers effective planning of the workforce.
- 116** Void turnaround times are good. NSH has taken steps to reduce the time taken to make the property 'ready to let' by minimising administration at the time of the void inspection. For example the voids foreman inspects the property when the keys are received along with a plumber/gas fitter and electrician. Any works are undertaken if possible there and then, resulting in some properties being ready to let later that afternoon. This has resulted in void to ready to let performance for the year to date of 4.29 days at the end of July 2008, with performance for July itself at 1.96 days. Overall relet times are among the top performing councils with an average relet time of 23.1 days achieved at the end of 2007/08. This approach helps to minimise loss of revenue and ensures that tenants are able to quickly move into properties.
- 117** NSH is not maximising VFM in its repairing of void properties. Void repair works have been tendered and are undertaken by the in-house team (eastern area) and by a contractor (western area). Evidence shows that the average repair cost for properties repaired by the in-house team during the last financial year was some £150 less than those repaired by the contractor. This has not been challenged by the NSH and wider cost benefits not achieved.

## How good is the service?

- 118** Void repairs costs are increasing but remain competitive. Average void costs have increased from £900 in 2006/07 to £1,100 in 2007/08. This has largely been as a result of the increased voids works following the improved lettable standard and the pilot in the eastern part of the District.

### Gas servicing

- 119** In 2005, we found that this was a well managed area of the service. There were some weaknesses including a lack of customer satisfaction monitoring.
- 120** In this inspection, we found that gas servicing remains an area of strength and that the weaknesses identified during our last inspection have now been addressed.
- 121** NSH understands the importance of undertaking regular services of gas appliances in its properties. Performance in this area is reported as part of the balanced scorecard. The number of outstanding services is reported, along with the number of cases that have received the final letter as well as customer satisfaction. This ensures that gas servicing remains a high priority.
- 122** NSH complies with gas safety regulations. There are annual services and safety checks of gas appliances and performance in respect of gas servicing is good. Although not all properties had a current CP12<sup>12</sup> in place at the time of our inspection, only 11 were outstanding (representing less than 0.5 per cent of the total stock), with none of those more than six months overdue and with all cases referred to court. Gas certificates are completed and filed appropriately with copies held centrally by the CAT, with a copy issued to the tenant.
- 123** NSH has a range of ways to ensure that tenants are aware of the importance of servicing gas appliances and to ensure first time access. Gas safety is well promoted through a leaflet and a section in the tenants' handbook as well as through regular articles in Homes from Home. Letters to tenants with appointment times are sent by the contractor who also telephones or sends a text message to tenants the night before their service is due to remind them of the next day's appointment. The contractor also leaves cards at addresses due imminently for servicing when in the area. Where no access is gained, warning stickers are placed over the door and frame, which also serve to indicate to NSH if the property is being used. This approach ensures that tenants understand the need for gas servicing.
- 124** NSH has implemented tenant focused access arrangements. The contractor is able to offer appointments outside normal working hours and at weekends. This means that tenants' differing lifestyles are catered for.

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<sup>12</sup> CP12 - gas safety certificate

- 125** NSH takes effective steps to ensure that it complies with gas safety regulations by working with partners. There is a robust procedure in place that draws on the knowledge and expertise of other teams after the contractor has been unable to gain access by appointment. The case is passed to Tenancy and Estate Management staff who attempt to make contact themselves by also calling at the property, by approaching the tenant if seen out and about and by asking neighbours of their whereabouts. In addition, the Housing Management IT System is used to 'flag' up that the property is overdue for its gas safety check should the tenant make contact for any other reason. This approach increases the likelihood of contact with tenants being achieved.
- 126** NSH is robust in its monitoring of the gas servicing contractor. Seven per cent of all gas servicing jobs are checked by NSH using a combination of pre and post inspections. Tenant satisfaction rates are also used as a tool to measure performance of the contractor. Although the return rate is low at 13.4 per cent, satisfaction is high at 97 per cent. Monthly meetings including tenants are also held with the contractor to ensure that any issues are dealt with robustly. NSH is therefore able to demonstrate satisfaction in this area.

### Aids and adaptations

- 127** In 2005, we found that there were a number of strengths in this area including support to tenants undergoing work and good relationships with occupational therapists. Weaknesses lay in the time taken to carry out major adaptations and in a lack of robust and comprehensive performance monitoring.
- 128** In this inspection, we found this to be an area of strength. There is a significant and increased budget available, targets are being met and the service is well promoted.
- 129** NSH takes steps to ensure that tenants can remain in their homes. The aids and adaptations budget has been increased from £450,000 in 2007/08 to £900,000 in the current year. The budget was increased to take account of projected demand based on take-up in previous years. NSH has also taken on responsibility for major works that would usually result in a Disabled Facilities Grant application being made to NSDC. This has ensured minimum inconvenience to tenants.
- 130** The aids and adaptations service is well promoted. Leaflets are made available at many locations that potential customers may visit, including the communal rooms of sheltered schemes. The service is also promoted by articles in Homes from Home and during general visits from any member of staff. Relationships with partner organisations have also resulted in the service being promoted by the County Deaf Team and the Fire Service as well as Social Services. This shows that NSH is communicating well with tenant and stakeholders about the service.
- 131** The aids and adaptations service is easily accessible. Tenants can request that minor works are undertaken without the need for a referral from an Occupational Therapist (OT). This has reduced waiting times but also makes the process straightforward for tenants.

## How good is the service?

- 132** Performance has improved significantly since our last inspection. There is a target of 25 days for minor adaptations to be completed from the date the request is received from Social Services and a target of 250 days for major works to be completed. Both targets are within the guidelines set out by the former ODPM<sup>13</sup> (16 weeks and 52 weeks). Both targets are currently being met with performance being 19 days and 225 days respectively. This demonstrates that NSH is adequately resourced and monitoring this service.
- 133** Adaptations are provided quickly and to a high standard. Waiting times for adaptations are improving with 11 minor works and 64 major works applications currently on the waiting list. Customer satisfaction is high at 95 per cent. This demonstrates that NSH is satisfactorily managing performance and that inconvenience to tenants is minimised.
- 134** NSH takes a practical approach to the provision of aids and adaptations by coordinating the provision of aids and adaptations with other works. For example, aids and adaptations works are undertaken at the same time as DH works wherever possible. A target has been set to ensure that this type of approach remains a high priority. Six per cent of aids and adaptations works must be completed through DH works. Performance is currently that 7.5 per cent of aids and adaptations works completed using this route during the year to date. This minimizes inconvenience for the tenant and helps to ensure that the aids and adaptations budget is used effectively.
- 135** NSH makes effective use of its adapted stock. There are effective arrangements in place to ensure that previously adapted properties are allocated to suitable applicants when they become vacant. The aids and adaptations team maintain a database of everyone who requires an adaptation and this information is used to allocate adapted properties. This means that lettings can be made appropriately.
- 136** NSH has taken steps to secure VFM in the delivery of the aids and adaptations service. For example, a framework agreement has been entered into with two contractors and this is now used to package five major works together at one time. Taking this approach has delivered savings made through packaging works, but also through the consolidated buying power of the supply chain. Savings of £700 per level access shower are anticipated. Items are also recycled where possible and occasionally items are sold or cannibalised if they cannot simply be refitted in another property. This means that the budget available can be used more efficiently.

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## Housing income management

- 137** In 2005, we found that this was an area of strength. NSH had a track record of collecting a high proportion of rent and had achieved performance among the top 25 per cent of district councils for a number of years. It took a proactive approach to addressing arrears at a very early stage. There were some areas for improvement. Limited progress had been made in evaluating alternative rent payment methods and reviewing office opening hours despite these being recommendations in an earlier report. The ALMO did not have an overarching income management strategy in place.

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<sup>13</sup> ODPM - Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, replaced by the Department for Communities and Local Government

- 138** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. Collection of rent income has remained good with 99.73 per cent collected during the last financial year. A wide range of payment methods are available and information for tenants is supported by quarterly rent statements and flexible ways that staff responsible for recovering arrears can be contacted. There is a positive relationship with the Housing Benefit (HB) team at NSDC and evictions are low. However, the financial inclusion strategy has only recently been launched and there are limited outcomes so far and the current IT system limits capacity. Some of NSH own targets are not being met.
- 139** Information about rent payment is well publicised. Payment methods are publicised in a number of ways including in a leaflet 'Ways to pay your rent', via the website, during the sign up and in the tenants handbook. This means that tenants are aware of all opportunities available to them.
- 140** NSH provides a variety of payment options for tenants. Rent can be paid by a variety of methods including Direct Debit (DD), Standing Order (SO), via the internet, by post and by cash. A rent collection service is currently provided, which is being phased out following consultation with tenants and payments can also be made 24 hours a day using an automated telephone system. DD payments can be made weekly, fortnightly or monthly. This varied approach ensures that tenants can make rent payments through the most convenient method and is maximising rent payment opportunities.
- 141** NSH is not actively promoting the cheapest payment methods. NSH is aware of the cost of its payment methods, but despite this, 80 per cent of tenants still pay via the various cash receipting methods which are the most expensive. There is little promotion of the cheaper methods. However, the introduction of an incentive scheme for DD payments is due to be considered by the Income Management CIG in September 2008 which may increase the numbers of tenants currently paying by DD from current levels of 14 per cent. This means that NSH is not currently maximising opportunity to keep costs down.
- 142** Tenants are kept informed about their rent account. Quarterly rent statements are issued to tenants to ensure that they are aware of the balance on their account. These are also issued on demand and with all arrears letters. The statements are clear and easy to read. This ensures that tenants are up to date with the status of their rent account.
- 143** Rent arrears information is easily accessible to tenants. A robust approach has been taken to minimise loss of income by providing information for tenants who may be in rent arrears. Information on what to do if in rent arrears is available in leaflet format, on the website and in the tenants' handbook. Tenants are encouraged to get in touch to make an arrangement to repay any arrears and information is given about how to claim for Housing Benefit (HB). This means that tenants are clear about what action may be taken and what they can do to prevent this.
- 144** Customer satisfaction with the income management service is high. Tenants that come in to contact with the rent income team are surveyed for their satisfaction with the income management team. The results are reported as part of the balanced scorecard. Satisfaction is high with most survey respondents rating their level of satisfaction as good showing that NSH is providing a customer focussed service.

## How good is the service?

- 145** Arrears recovery procedures are appropriate and focus on early intervention. The procedure emphasises the importance of home visits to determine reasons for non-payment, to make referrals to advice agencies and to agree a repayment schedule. This means that tenants are supported to pay their rent and to retain their home.
- 146** Communication with tenants in rent arrears is achieved by using an appropriate balance of letters and home visits. Arrears letters are used to alert tenants to their arrears and are either generated automatically by the IT system or are sent by the Income Management Assistants (IMAs) from a suite of standard letters. Although the CIG recently reviewed the letters, they are not particularly 'customer friendly' with little use of 'plain English'. There are also flexible arrangements in place to ensure that IMAs can make personal contact with tenants who have fallen into arrears. As well as the normal suite of arrears letters, IMAs will undertake evening visits if requested, text messages and evening telephone contact are also used. Tenants in arrears are also invited to attend regular surgeries at local housing offices and community centres. For tenants who have literacy problems, the literacy policy is applied and outside support agencies are involved, if appropriate. This means that NSH is taking steps to achieve contact with tenants in a way that is suitable and appropriate.
- 147** IT systems are limiting opportunity to maximise income collection. The existing system is paper-driven and depends upon IMAs using printouts showing accounts in arrears. The system lacks the sophistication to enable the targeting of particular groups that may be most likely to accrue arrears. This means that NSH is unable to direct resources where they might be most needed.
- 148** Performance management arrangements are effective for the Income Management Team. Although there are currently no individual patch targets for IMAs (because of recent patch changes), the Team has clear targets for the key performance indicators (KPIs) which are included in the balanced scorecard and these are monitored through monthly one-to-ones and team meetings. This ensures that staff who are responsible for collecting arrears have a clear understanding of their role.
- 149** Performance in collecting rent arrears is strong. Rent collection at the end of 2007/08 was 99.73 per cent against a target of 99 per cent, compared to 99.20 per cent in 2006/07. Rent arrears were 1.70 per cent as a proportion of rent due at the end of 2007/08 and are now 1.97 per cent. Eviction levels for rent arrears are low. Only five evictions were carried out during 2007/08 and to date four have been carried out in 2008/09. This shows that NSH has in place an effective approach to income management.
- 150** NSH has not implemented an incentive scheme to encourage tenants to pay their rent on time. An incentive scheme for tenants who have a clear rent account has previously been considered and rejected by the CIG although incentives are currently being considered to encourage payment by direct debit. This means that all opportunities to maximise income collection may not be being used.

- 151** NSH is developing its approach to financial inclusion. A financial exclusion policy is in place which clearly articulates NSH aim of helping its financially excluded tenants. However, to date it has achieved limited outcomes. The policy was introduced in June 2008 and the Income Management CIG is currently working on developing a detailed action plan to enable implementation of the policy. Early action has been taken to update the website to include information on a range of money advice services and a specific leaflet is being produced to go out with the quarterly rent statements in September. NSH has not been actively involved in benefit take-up campaigns to date although this is an objective included in the new financial exclusion policy, together with the aim of promoting credit unions and providing better access to money and debt advice. Lack of sustained and long-standing work in this area means that tenants have not been able to access assistance at the time when they may have needed it.
- 152** Arrangements are in place to ensure that tenants receive the necessary support to pay their rent. A Service Level Agreement is in place between NSH and NSDC to monitor the effective payment of Housing Benefit (HB) and NSH staff have verification rights and access to HB IT systems. HB staff react quickly to requests for urgent calculations of HB entitlement, and also respond positively to requests to have the charge for overpayments of HB reduced as these are currently automatically collected at the standard amount. There are also positive informal arrangements in place to refer tenants to appropriate debt advice agencies. NSH has recently updated its website to include additional information about how to access debt and money advice agencies and information is also included on arrears letters. There is regular contact between staff at NSH and the Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) and a good understanding of the number and outcome of referrals.
- 153** However, it is a weakness that there are no formal referral arrangements in place to ensure tenants can receive appropriate debt and money advice services. Although there is an effective informal working relationship with the CAB, arrangements with other local agencies that may be able to offer advice and support to tenants, including credit unions, is limited. In addition, there are no systematic arrangements in place to monitor the outcomes of referrals. This means that NSH cannot be sure that the advice received is appropriate or that referrals to organisations other than the CAB may be more relevant for particular individuals.
- 154** NSH is successful in recovering other income and there is an effective 'write-off' policy in place. The policy was updated in June 2008 and 'uncollectible' debts are now written off on a quarterly basis with targets included on the balanced scorecard. This means that time is not wasted chasing unrecoverable debts.
- 155** Service charges from leaseholders are recovered in a systematic and a timely way. Performance is reported as part of the balanced scorecard and at the end of 2007/08 79.15 per cent of leaseholder service charges had been collected against a target of 79.25 per cent. Performance of leaseholder service charge recovered by payment plans is also reported with performance of 99.53 per cent recovered against a target of 99.57 per cent during the same period.

## How good is the service?

- 156** Performance in the collection of former tenant arrears has improved. This follows the outsourcing of the function to an external agency with former tenant arrears at the end of July 2008 representing 0.94 per cent of the rent debit compared to 1.20 per cent at the end of 2007/08. This means that NSH is maximising opportunity to recover all debts owed to NSH.
- 157** NSH is developing its approach to value for money in income management and there are limited examples of VFM being delivered. However, there are effective arrangements in place to ensure that NSH staff can represent the Company in court and this means that specialist legal advice is rarely required. NSH is about to start applying 'online' for court dates which will reduce court costs further. The withdrawal of the rent collection service by March 2009 will further improve VFM in this area.

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## Resident involvement

- 158** In 2005, we found that there were a number of strengths in this area including a genuine commitment to resident involvement and a range of ways for tenants to be involved. However, there was no up-to-date overarching strategy for resident involvement; tenants were not involved in the selection of procurement partners and involvement tended to be of a traditional nature and in some cases limited to considering proposals produced by officers.
- 159** In this inspection, we found that this remains an area of strength. Weaknesses identified in our last inspection have been addressed and there is now a robust resident involvement strategy in place. Resident involvement is clearly embedded at many levels in NSH, with tenants involved in designing and monitoring services. Involvement is well resourced and the Federation is supported in its role. However, the approach to tenant training remains under developed.
- 160** NSH has a genuine commitment to resident involvement. Our last inspection found that NSH had a long standing and genuine commitment to involving residents in the delivery of services. This commitment has been developed and now has a more strategic approach, with involvement embedded throughout the organisation. NSH is clear about the purpose of involving residents in the company and this is expressed in the resident involvement strategy as 'to make a difference'. The strategy is a useful explanation of how NSH intends to facilitate resident involvement to deliver improved services and confirms the opportunities available to residents who want to be involved. The ALMO delivery plan also emphasises the role that customers have in setting the priorities for NSH and states that NSH will operate with a strong focus on customer involvement. NSH has in place a sound base from which to develop resident involvement.

- 161** There are a number of opportunities for involvement. Opportunities for involvement include strategic involvement through participating in monitoring groups, contributing to the content of the tenant compact and resident involvement strategy and the selection of contractors. Involvement opportunities are also offered to tenants who may like their contribution to remain more local and these include, attending tenants and residents associations (TRAs), neighbourhood improvement panels and estate walkabouts. NSH has also been refreshing its consultation register which includes details of tenants interested in being involved to be held on a database for future contact. This means that tenants can be involved in a way that suits them.
- 162** Information about resident involvement is easy to access. A raft of information is available on the website including the strategy and minutes of monitoring group meetings. Ways to be involved are also explained with a link to the estate walkabout schedule and contact details of the Federation. A leaflet is also available and there is a detailed section in the tenant handbook. Tenants that we spoke to were aware of the opportunities to become involved if they wanted and had in the past received various invitations to attend events. They were aware of the Federation and knew how it supported TRAs and individual tenants. This demonstrates that NSH communicates effectively about resident involvement.
- 163** NSH understands that involvement with hard to reach groups is an area that requires improvement and has put measures in place in the resident involvement strategy action plan to address this. To support this work, the tenant consultation register has recently been refreshed via the tenants' census. This has so far identified that NSH has a number of BME tenants, and some live in supported housing. NSH has been trying to encourage BME tenants that have expressed an interest in being involved in joining one of the continuous improvement groups, with limited success. It is positive however, that NSH has been successful in working with young people and supports two TRAs that are specifically aimed at young people.
- 164** Satisfaction with opportunities to participate is good. Tenant satisfaction with opportunities to participate in delivering and designing services was 78 per cent at the end of 2007/08. NSH has set a challenging target to increase this to 90 per cent by the end of 2008/09. However, current performance is in the top 25 per cent of comparable organisations and shows that NSH is offering opportunities that meet the aspirations of tenants.
- 165** Resident involvement is appropriately resourced. There are no longer any specific staffing resources dedicated to developing resident involvement. However, NSH financially supports the Tenants' Federation with an annual grant of £27,000, of which £6,000 is fed through to TRAs. There is an annual tenants' conference that is supported by funds of approximately £5,000 and a further £12,000 is made available to support resident involvement more generally enabling the provision of training, room hire and other services. The Federation is satisfied with the grant it receives and reported that it had been able to access training opportunities. This demonstrates NSH commitment to resident involvement.

## How good is the service?

- 166** Resident involvement is embedded throughout the organisation. NSH does not have a resident involvement officer and the role of supporting TRAs on a patch by patch basis is now the responsibility of each housing officer. There are a number of corporate key tasks and local performance indicators that are the responsibility of individual managers, requiring that they take the initiative in setting up opportunities for tenants to be involved in the service that they manage. This has been successful and there are a number of monitoring groups in place that have helped to design services and appraise performance. Encouraging all staff to have some responsibility for involving residents has assisted in embedding resident involvement throughout NSH.
- 167** Training is made available to support tenants in their involvement opportunities. Members of the Tenants Federation have received training in a number of areas, including IT, equality and diversity and Equal Opportunities. They have their own training budget, but also have participated in training alongside members of staff. However, NSH is inconsistent in providing training to involved residents. For example, tenant members on the Housing Management Monitoring Group have not received training to assist them in their roles which may limit their impact. In addition, NSH is not currently recording what skills individual tenants have or those that have been gained through training courses. This is a missed opportunity to target involvement opportunities at tenants with the most appropriate skills.
- 168** Resident involvement has led to improved services. Resident involvement has led to tangible changes in services that tenants would notice. Feedback from tenants has led to improvements including changes to the repairs priorities, an improved lettable standard, creation of the voids pilot in the eastern area and alterations to the DH support services. Tenants are also involved in driving forward improvements alongside staff by their roles in continuous improvement and monitoring groups. This work includes monitoring void repairs, reviewing VFM and undertaking estate walkabouts. This close relationship has led to the designing of services that tenants are satisfied with.

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# Tenancy and estate management

## Tenancy Management

- 169** In 2005, we found that overall NSH had an effective approach to tenancy management and the management of anti-social behaviour (ASB).
- 170** In this inspection, we found that strengths are balanced by weaknesses. A range of tools are used appropriately to resolve ASB including intensive management of 'hotspots'. Partnership working is well developed and tenants receive some support to sustain their tenancies. However, the tenancy agreement has not been reviewed since 1997 and the ASB policy is dated. There is a mixed approach to case management and tenancy audits have had a limited impact.
- 171** Information on ASB and tenancy management is mixed. There is no section on the website dedicated to ASB or tenancy management and there is no specific leaflet on ASB available, although the ASB Policy can be downloaded in full or in summary form. The website provides some assistance to customers by enabling them to make a complaint online or to download diary sheets. There is no explanation of what ASB is, how NSH may respond to complaints or the purpose of completing a diary sheet. This means that tenants are not fully informed.
- 172** Access to the service is limited outside normal working hours. Tenants can report incidents of ASB in person, by email, phone or letter or by using the online reporting facility. However, currently NSH does not have a 24-hour reporting facility for reporting ASB but is at a very early stage of looking at the options for providing this facility. This means that at present victims of ASB cannot access support outside normal opening hours.
- 173** The ASB policy is dated. The Policy was drawn up in 2004 and has not been updated to include reference to the Respect Standard. The Policy includes a code of practice and defines roles and responsibilities but does not include response timescales for minor and serious reports of ASB. However, it is positive that there are clear procedures in place to support staff in taking action. There is a detailed plan in place to review the policy to be completed by the end of 2008, but at present the current policy is limited in delivering outcomes for tenants.
- 174** The tenancy agreement is also dated and has not been regularly reviewed to ensure it complies with the latest guidance and good practice. As the tenancy agreement has not been reviewed since 1997, NSH and NSDC cannot be sure that it complies with the Respect Standard and contains no 'unfair terms' based on Office of Fair Trading (OFT) guidelines. It is a corporate key task that the tenancy agreement is reviewed with the aim of issuing the new tenancy agreement in late 2009. Work on this review has not started and in the meantime NSH cannot be sure that it is not imposing unfair conditions on its tenants by using outdated key documents.

## Tenancy and estate management

- 175** There are service standards in place that explain NSH approach to ASB and which include an explanation of what constitutes ASB. The standards also confirm that NSH will take action against non-tenants if necessary. The standards outline the type of monitoring and reporting that will take place including the number of warning notices and the number of different types of action taken. Performance against the service standard is reported as part of the balanced scorecard. Tenants are therefore clear about the service they should receive in relation to anti-social behaviour.
- 176** Additional support is provided to tenants to help them to sustain their tenancies. The support needs of vulnerable tenants are identified by housing officers at the start of their tenancy. All new tenants receive a visit from their housing officer within six weeks of the tenancy starting. During this visit it is established whether the tenant will need support to maintain their tenancy and a referral can be made to a floating support scheme such as 'Framework'. Support needs may also be identified by the Housing Choice Officer during the allocations and letting process. This approach ensures new tenants receive any additional support and helps contribute to wider sustainability issues.
- 177** The recent introduction of tenancy audits is positive, but they have had limited impact to date. Tenants in supported housing have been receiving annual tenancy audits for some time but visits to general needs tenants have only recently started and are initially planned to ensure that all introductory tenants are visited after nine months to ensure that they are fulfilling their tenancy conditions before the tenancy becomes secure after 12 months. There are plans to 'risk assess' other secure tenants by making use of the vulnerability 'flags' on the system and targeting properties that have not reported repairs for 12 months and it is the intention that all general needs tenants will be visited on a bi-annual basis. However, the reasons for undertaking the audits are not completely clear and this means that NSH cannot be sure that resources are being used effectively.
- 178** NSH uses a range of tools to resolve incidents of ASB. Appropriate tools including demotions, injunctions, possession orders, ABCs, ASBOs, mediation and parenting orders are used to remind tenants of their obligations under the tenancy agreement, but also to enforce or support acceptable behaviour. NSH has introduced a traffic light system in place to deal with minor ASB and breaches of tenancy conditions with tenants being issued with warning notices that require the breach to be rectified within a set period of time. The approach ensures that NSH is able to respond appropriately to complaints of ASB.
- 179** There are appropriate arrangements in place to offer mediation to tenants as a way of resolving neighbour disputes. Mediation services are provided by Mansfield Mediation via an SLA with an annual fee of £8,000 which covers up to 12 cases. NSH has only referred four cases so far since the SLA was established, of these, three have been successful. NSH receives regular written updates from Mansfield Mediation and can therefore track the success or otherwise of the referral.

- 180** NSH has signed up to the Respect Standard although it does not fully comply with the Standard. Although NSH adopted the Respect Standard in 2006, a recent gap analysis showed that a lack of diversionary activities meant that full compliance had not yet been achieved. Housing Officers have been tasked with organising a number of events, the effectiveness of which will be evaluated at the end of the year. Various other actions were identified including using the media more effectively, ensuring the tenancy agreement meets the OFT guidelines and reviewing procedures to ensure that support is offered to tenants. Although it has been reported that these actions were completed in 2006, NSH cannot be sure that it meets all elements of the Respect Standard until the tenancy agreement is reviewed,
- 181** Staff from NSH and NSDC work effectively together at both a strategic and operational level to resolve ASB within the District. For example, joint work is underway to review and update the ASB Policy and all ASBOs are agreed in conjunction with the ASB Team. However, there are currently no agreed protocols in place that govern this relationship which means that the relationship is at risk if there are any changes in key staff.
- 182** NSH works in partnership to resolve ASB. There are examples where staff from NSH have worked effectively in partnership to resolve ASB in known 'hotspots'. For example, on the Hawtonville Estate an 'intensive management scheme' approach was used which involved the local Housing Officer, the ASB Team, Police, Social Services and the Youth Offending Team (YOT). As a result of this, the level of ASB has been greatly reduced and local residents are now more willing to come forward to report incidents as they have confidence that appropriate action will be taken against the perpetrators.
- 183** Customer involvement in ASB and tenancy management is mixed. Complainants are not routinely surveyed at the point of case closure and tenant satisfaction more generally is only recorded using the annual STATUS survey which asks about satisfaction with the neighbourhood. However, there are examples of where NSH is actively working with customers to reduce ASB. An estate agreement is currently being developed with residents in Coddington; including working with residents to agree scope and timescales. A visioning session has been held with residents to identify which elements they wish to include in the final agreement which it is hoped to have in place by December 2008.
- 184** There is an inconsistent approach to dealing with individual cases of ASB. Our reality checking of the ASB service found that staff sometimes gave unhelpful advice and external partners have experienced a varied approach to dealing with ASB depending upon which Housing Officer is dealing with the case. This means that customers and partner agencies cannot be confident of a consistent approach to ASB.
- 185** There are no effective procedures in place to ensure that all cases of ASB are being actioned appropriately. Action plans are not used for all cases of ASB, only the more serious cases and progress with live cases is not monitored via an IT or database solution although progress is discussed at monthly one-to-ones. The case closure process has been identified as a weaker area by NSH but currently this means that different cases may be receiving different levels of service.

## Tenancy and estate management

- 186** Case management is not robust and record keeping is of mixed quality. All cases we looked at contained a history sheet containing brief details of contact made with the relevant tenant. However, there is also an over reliance on the use of diary sheets as the only method of collecting evidence and complainants who did not return their diary sheets within the two week target were not contacted. There is no formal case closure process in place. This means that NSH cannot be sure that cases are being dealt with appropriately and that complainants are receiving an equitable service.
- 187** Support is offered to both the victims and perpetrators of ASB. However, it is not within an agreed framework for support and the current ASB policy gives little guidance on what form this support should take. Victims of ASB can be referred to Victim Support but there are no protocols in place or information for tenants on what support they are likely to receive. A dictaphone is available for use in recording incidents of ASB, but it is not advertised and so tenants are unaware of its availability. Perpetrators can be offered support via the Framework floating support scheme, but again, outcomes are not being appropriately monitored. Lack of consistent and sustained support may mean that complainants are unlikely to pursue their complaint.

### Estate Management

- 188** In 2005, we found that this was an area of strength. The overall appearance of estates was of a very high standard, well maintained and well cared for. While there were a few small pockets of relatively poor appearance, the ALMO was working with local residents to tackle these issues.
- 189** In this inspection, we found that there is now a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There is effective partnership working in place and working with customers is delivering positive outcomes. However, the appearance of some estates is mixed and estate walkabouts happen infrequently.
- 190** Estate management is supported by partnership working. Street wardens provide additional support for housing officers in 'hotspot' areas. They are jointly funded by NSH, Nottingham Community Housing Association and a local Town Council. They are used to report fly tipping, graffiti and repairs and also get actively involved in estate clean-ups and will attend local TRA meetings if requested. However, their impact is somewhat limited as they only work 25 hours per week and there are only two of them covering the whole district. The creation of these posts demonstrates that local partners understand the contribution they all need to make managing estates within the District.
- 191** Partnership working around estate management has been effective. There is evidence to show that the Retford Rd Estate Action Partnership has had positive impacts on the cohesiveness of that particular estate. Since the environmental and other improvements were completed, the average length of tenancy has increased, the number of terminations of tenancy has reduced and the level of tenants exercising their Right to Buy has increased. This shows that tenants are more satisfied with their environment.

- 192** The appearance of estate is mixed and communal areas unkempt. Estates that we visited were generally clean and well maintained, grassed areas were cut and trees and shrubs were pruned and tidy. However, garage areas that we visited were unlit, under used and shabby; some of the footpaths were in need of repair and there were instances where cars were parked on the grass. This demonstrates the need for more frequent and intensive estate inspections with appropriate action taken.
- 193** The current cleaning contract for communal areas expired at the end of 2007/08, despite this, little action has been taken to date to renew or re-tender this contract. NSH is currently consulting with their tenants and leaseholders about the specification for the new cleaning contract. In the meantime, it is providing poor outcomes for tenants and leaseholders.
- 194** Although estate walkabouts are infrequent. The current regime of estate walkabouts is recognised by managers as insufficient to deliver significant improvements in the appearance of estates. Currently all estates receive either an annual or bi-annual walkabout depending upon their size and type. Walkabouts are advertised in Housing Matters and on the website and an action plan is produced, copies of which are given to attendees and the local TRA. The estate walkabouts are well publicised and tenants that we spoke to were aware of them and had seen notices advertising the next walkabout. However, there is no risk assessment of estates or agreed standards to aspire to and TRAs are not encouraged to share the outcomes from the walkabouts more widely. This limits their effectiveness.
- 195** There are effective arrangements in place to deal with the removal of graffiti. There are targets in place to remove all graffiti within 24 hours. However, not all offensive graffiti is photographed prior to removal, which can provide valuable evidence in cases of hate crime and other ASB. This contributes to creating a pleasant environment.
- 196** NSH are taking a proactive approach to deter fly-tipping. Working in partnership with staff at NSDC, 'Investigation Stickers' have been introduced to try and identify the perpetrators responsible for fly-tipping. The stickers give the tenants an opportunity to help identify whether the perpetrators are local residents or people off the estate.
- 197** Customer satisfaction with estate management services is not measured on a regular basis. However, NSH has responded positively to tenants' dissatisfaction with their local environment using the information that it does currently have available. Following analysis of the STATUS survey data, NSH has identified a number of areas where tenants expressed dissatisfaction with their neighbourhood. These areas have then been targeted for a number of focussed initiatives which include; designing out crime at Chatham Court and Tithe Barn Court, responding to ASB hotspots by installing mosquito devices at Yorke Drive and Meering Drive, undertaking intensive management at Byron Close and Estate Action days and weeks in several locations around the District. NSH has responded to tenants' concerns.

### Leasehold management and Right to Buy

- 198** In 2005, we found that there were some strengths in this area including an active leaseholder association and effective administration of the Right to Buy (RTB) scheme which meant that statutory targets were being met. However, overall leasehold management was underdeveloped with a number of weaknesses including a lack of service standards or leaseholders' handbook, delays in issuing invoices to leaseholders and a lack of awareness of leasehold issues among front line staff.
- 199** In this inspection, we found that this is now an area of strength. Weaknesses addressed in our last inspection have been addressed and strengths now include a leaseholders monitoring group, information is now systematically made available and leaseholders are able to 'buy into' services. RTB service standards are in place, there is comprehensive information available for tenants considering buying their own home and satisfaction rates are high. Invoices are not always issued promptly.
- 200** Information for leaseholders is comprehensive. There is a raft of information available for leaseholders including a handbook and leaflets offering guidance on service charges and buildings insurance. The leaseholders' handbook is detailed and explains the rights and responsibilities of being a leaseholder, including how leaseholders can be involved in the services they receive from NSH and what to do if the property purchased is no longer suitable for them to occupy. The NSH website has a section specifically for leaseholders that includes links to the Leasehold Advisory Service and downloads of the minutes of the Leaseholders Monitoring Group meetings as well as details of TRA meetings. This demonstrates a customer focussed approach.
- 201** NSH consults and involves leaseholders. For example, leaseholders have been involved in the procurement of contracts including the new grounds maintenance contract and leaseholders will be involved in the tendering of the communal cleaning contract. There is an established Leaseholder Monitoring Group. The Group meets two or three times each year and standing agenda items include performance updates and decent homes works. Leaseholders were consulted on the design of the leaseholders' handbook and satisfaction with the service is routinely measured. This means that leaseholders are able to express their views about the services that they receive.
- 202** Leaseholders are able to purchase services. NSH has arranged for leaseholders to benefit from its own contract for gas servicing. Leaseholders are able to contact the contractor direct and arrange services at a preferential rate. Arrangements are being made to enable leaseholders to join the DH programme. This helps leaseholders access services cost effectively.
- 203** Service charges are collected effectively. NSH has improved its performance in respect of charging and collecting service charges. Charges are accurately made by dividing the cost of the work completed for a block of flats during the year by the number of flats in the block. Although NSH is slow to raise invoices, with invoices for 2007/08 not yet raised at the time of our inspection, collection rates have improved. Of £22,000 charged during 2006/07, over £20,000 has been recovered. This means that NSH is working to collect income effectively and offering appropriately payment arrangements to leaseholders.

- 204** Satisfaction amongst leaseholders is mixed. Of leaseholders who have received improvement works, 100 per cent were satisfied. However, a third of those who responded to surveys felt the service in respect of communal grounds maintenance was poor and 75 per cent who receive communal lighting felt the standard was poor. There has been a very low return rate of satisfaction surveys from leaseholders and NSH is working towards improving this.
- 205** NSH is pro-active in ensuring that RTB applicants understand the rights and responsibilities of becoming a leaseholder or owner. An information pack is issued to RTB applicants including a financial statement form to assist applicants to realistically understand the cost and budget implications. A sample draft deed is also included to ensure that potential leaseholders or owners understand their obligations to the wider community in respect of nuisance as well as their responsibilities to NSDC. This approach supports potential leaseholder understanding and reduces confusion at a later stage.
- 206** NSH is working to ensure that RTB services are free from discrimination by monitoring RTB applications by diversity groups to ensure that services can be adjusted if necessary to meet needs. For example, home visits are available to resolve any queries from customers who are unable to attend the offices and information about Islamic faith mortgages is provided as part of the information pack, but take up from BME groups have been very low.
- 207** There are effective performance monitoring arrangements in place. There are comprehensive service standards in place to ensure that customers know what to expect. The service standards set out timescales so that customers can measure performance against, for example, whether information is sent on the day it is requested. Performance is reported as part of the balanced scorecard and currently all targets are being met and customer satisfaction with RTB services is 100 per cent.

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### Allocations and lettings

- 208** In 2005, we found that this was an area of real strength. NSH had successfully implemented a choice based lettings scheme (CBL) which was operated effectively by enthusiastic, knowledgeable and committed staff with a strong customer focus. A number of improvements had been made as a result of customer feedback.
- 209** In this inspection, we found that strengths still outweigh weaknesses. A CBL scheme is still in operation and properties are advertised extensively with effective arrangements in place for 'bids' to be made. Accompanied viewings are carried out and property turnaround time performance is strong at 23.1 days. However, there are some weaknesses. The CBL scheme is limited to NSH vacancies only and applications cannot be made online, refusal rates are increasing and support for non-bidding applicants needs further development.

## Tenancy and estate management

- 210** There are a range of ways that customers can access the allocations and lettings service. Application forms can be obtained from any of NSH offices, via email or telephone request or by downloading the application form from NSH website. Applications cannot be submitted online at present, but the completed application can be emailed to NSH. This means that NSH is making it simple for customers to make an application, although limited by the lack of an online facility.
- 211** Clear information is provided to customers, but the information is under developed. Applicants receive an application form that is straightforward and easy to complete. To support applicants there are a number of leaflets available that explain how to apply for a home, how to apply for a mutual exchange and how to request a review. Also available is a list of all properties split into locations and types. It is a missed opportunity that there is no information about prospects for housing in areas or information about the costs of running a home both of which would assist potential applicants in deciding whether to apply for housing.
- 212** There is extensive advertising of properties available through the CBL scheme. Properties are advertised in a number of ways including using the website, in all NSH offices, at hostels providing temporary accommodation, in three local newspapers and via a distribution list sent to an extensive list of statutory and voluntary agencies. This has helped maximise opportunities for customers to be made aware of vacancies.
- 213** However, the information currently supplied in adverts for the CBL scheme is limited and the adverts themselves are not particularly eye catching or customer friendly. No pictures are used in adverts, although there are plans in place to introduce photographs onto the website and internal adverts, but the Lettings CIG was not supportive of using photographs in newspaper adverts. This means that applicants who are unfamiliar with a particular property type or area maybe be dissuaded from bidding.
- 214** The current CBL scheme is only used to advertise vacant council properties. Many other CBL schemes advertise housing association vacancies, shared ownership, private rented properties and mutual exchanges. The current IT system will not support these options, but at present this means that applicants' choice is limited.
- 215** The CBL system is accessible for customers and bidding is made easy. There are a variety of ways of bidding for properties via the CBL scheme. These include; leaving a message on the answer phone, text messaging, via email, via telephone, by visiting a NSH office or by letter. By making all these opportunities available, NSH is maximising opportunities for customers to make their bids as easily as possible. NSH also ensures that applicants are made aware of the outcomes of their bids. The results of bids are available at all NSH offices and on the website. This means that applicants are able to understand why they may not have been successful in their bids and helps them plan their future bidding more effectively.

- 216** Bidding is restricted by the current CBL Policy. The new CBL Policy which has been approved, but not yet implemented, also restricts applicants to a maximum of two bids per cycle. The CLG<sup>14</sup> recommendation is that wherever possible multiple bids should be encouraged. This approach cannot be supported by the current IT system. Bidders can withdraw a bid, but as this is a manual process it is not easy to do and bidders are therefore unlikely to take this approach. This means that some applicants may be unable to bid for properties, restricting the likelihood of successful offers being made.
- 217** NSH supports vulnerable applicants in the CBL process. There are arrangements in place to ensure that vulnerable applicants can have an advocate to 'bid' for properties on their behalf and there are effective arrangements in place to ensure that vulnerable applicants receive ongoing support once they have been allocated a tenancy. The CBL Team assess support needs either at the application stage or prior to sign up and can refer to a number of support agencies such as Framework, and care leavers are given priority and receive ongoing support. This means that vulnerable applicants are supported throughout the CBL process in order to obtain and sustain housing.
- 218** The lettings service is customer focussed. Accompanied viewings and sign ups take place at times that are convenient for customers. Signs ups are conducted effectively and enable key tenancy issues to be highlighted. The sign up is also used to sign post new tenants to a local furniture project, to support agencies and to complete an application for HB and low cost home insurance if appropriate. Tenants are also provided with a pack of information including the Tenants' Handbook, the tenancy agreement and leaflets explaining how to pay your rent and a fact sheet about the local area. This provides positive customer service to customers and helps them to settle in to their new homes.
- 219** NSH is making the best use of its housing stock. The Changing Places scheme has been successfully used by NSH to encourage tenants who are under occupying their property to move to smaller accommodation. Transfer cases that qualify for this scheme are given Band 1 status and receive a payment of £300 if they are successfully rehoused. In 2007/08, 12 per cent of all transfers went to tenants on this scheme at a total cost of £2,400. NSH is planning to publicise this scheme more widely on the website, in the tenants' newsletter and in local NSH offices. The approach frees up larger properties and makes best use of the stock.
- 220** NSH is working to ensure that all communities have equal access to the service, although this requires further development. For example, NSH has recently reviewed its target for the proportion of lettings to be made to BME applicants. Sub-regional census data has been used to set the target at 2.8 per cent for 2008/09 and diverse groups are catered for in the lettings process with strap lines and alternative format information on all leaflets and on the housing application form. However, opportunities are being missed to actively promote the CBL scheme within diverse communities and to target information more effectively.
- 221** NSH cannot be sure that the lettings service is accessible to all. Non-bidders are not routinely contacted to find out the reasons why they are not actively bidding. It is good practice to do this to ensure that applicants understand how the scheme works. This means that there may be applicants who are unable to bid for properties and so will not be offered accommodation.

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<sup>14</sup> CLG - Department for Communities and Local Government

## Tenancy and estate management

- 222** The lettings service has mechanisms in place to help identify vulnerable applicants. For example, there are effective arrangements in place to ensure that medical priority is awarded appropriately. Banding decisions are made based on information provided by the applicant in a comprehensive medical assessment form, additional evidence can also be provided. If the applicant disagrees with the banding a review is undertaken by the CBL Team Leader who was not involved in the original decision. This means that individual circumstances are assessed appropriately.
- 223** There are appropriate arrangements in place to ensure that housing association nominations are effectively managed. The larger housing associations who also operate CBL schemes advertise that preference will be given to NSH applicants to ensure that nominations are maximised.
- 224** Performance management in respect of lettings is effective. There is a clear audit trail in place for allocations and key performance information is collected and reported as part of the balanced scorecard, including customer satisfaction with CBL and void properties and whether service standards have been met. Robust information is collected to assist staff determine trends. For example the numbers of properties let in each band and the number of applicants in each band. This provides NSH with the opportunity understand its own performance.
- 225** There is an effective review and appeals procedure in place. NSH receive very few requests to review a decision not to allow someone to join the waiting list as very few people are ever refused. A pragmatic approach is taken towards applicants that have former tenants' arrears with offers being made if a payment plan has been maintained. The reviews and appeals procedure is widely advertised to customers by way of a leaflet and the website, and therefore supports applicants in resolving any issues that they may have.

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## Supported Housing

- 226** In 2005, we found that overall this was an area of strength. The Council and the ALMO had taken proactive steps to ensure the future sustainability and continued demand for supported housing in the district. Making effective use of its sustainability index, it had reviewed its supported housing provision and made changes including converting bedsits into two bedroom flats and reviewing the allocations criteria in some schemes. As a result it had none of the difficulties associated with low demand sheltered homes experienced by many social landlords. This was a positive achievement given that 44 per cent of the homes managed by the ALMO were designated as supported housing.
- 227** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. Satisfaction is high and tenants are involved in the supported housing service. A value for money review has taken place and there is an Older Persons Strategy in draft form. The Careline service has been successfully marketed and a large number of schemes have been re modelled.

- 228** NSH is taking steps to meet the needs of older people. NSH has developed its own Older Person's Strategy. The Strategy is currently in draft form, but NSH has decided not to consult on it until after the launch of the Countywide Older Person's Strategy. Doing this means that NSH is able to ensure that its strategy appropriately reflects the priorities of the Countywide Strategy.
- 229** However, the current supported housing service is limited in its scope and ability to provide services based on the range of needs of vulnerable tenants. The supported housing service provided by NSH is a basic monitoring service with an annual support planning visit and weekly contact via the call alarm service. NSH also provides a Care Line service for residents who are not in NSH stock. NSH is currently unable to respond appropriately if vulnerable tenants need greater support over a long period of time (apart from Vale View, the high dependency scheme). Support required by tenants beyond that offered by NSH is provided by partner agencies. It is clear that it is an ambition of NSH to provide formal tiered support but progress has been limited by the lack of a Countywide Older Person's strategy and current commissioning contractual arrangements with Nottinghamshire County Council. Positively, NSH is working closely with the Supporting People Team in rolling out assistive technology via a pilot project. However, this means that at present NSH cannot respond directly to the range of needs that tenants may have.
- 230** NSH actively promotes the supported housing service. There are specific leaflets available to help with advice for tenants interested in supported housing itself and on the services that Careline offers. Information is also available on the NSH website. NSH staff also attend coffee mornings and workshops with other agencies to promote the service. Effective promotion of supported housing is essential given the high proportion of this type of housing (46 per cent of homes managed by NSH are designated as supported housing) in the District.
- 231** NSH has been successful in marketing the Careline service to vulnerable people in the private sector. Currently there are over 700 residents connected. The supported housing team is proactive at marketing this service and this means that the wider community is able to take advantage of the services that NSH offers.
- 232** Satisfaction rates for supported housing are high. Regular surveys are undertaken of 40 service users each week. Satisfaction is currently 100 per cent which enables NSH to demonstrate that service users are satisfied with the services that they receive.
- 233** Schemes are well cared for and meet the requirements of the DDA. A large number of supported housing schemes have been re-modelled and where possible all bedsits have been converted into self contained accommodation. Plans are in place to review all community centres attached to supported housing schemes which are costly to run and some are under used, although many schemes are self sufficient and organise their own events using the facilities. This will ensure that tenants and the local community are able to make the best use of these valuable facilities.

## Tenancy and estate management

- 234** Supported housing tenants receive support from well trained staff. Most of the staff who visit supported housing tenants have formal qualifications, either the National Wardens Certificate or the National Certificate in Supported Housing. Staff undertake visits to new tenants of supported housing schemes within six weeks of the tenancy commencing and then maintain weekly contact via the Control Centre. Weekly surgeries are held at all supported housing schemes, where staff can regularly meet with tenants. This means that staff can be alert to any changes in the support needs of the tenant and that the necessary referrals for support can be made.
- 235** There are effective arrangements in place to ensure that supported housing tenants can be referred onto appropriate support. The role of the Supported Housing Team is to assess support needs via the support planning process. Support needs are reviewed every time there is a change in the tenant's circumstances and at a minimum, annually. A risk assessment is also undertaken, and based on the outcomes of this tenants are referred to the appropriate support agency. This enables the correct level of support to be given.
- 236** NSH responds quickly to emergency calls. Calls to the Careline control centre are answered quickly. NSH answer their own calls from 7am to 7:45pm and the target is to answer all calls within 30 seconds. Current performance is that 99.5 per cent are answered within this timescale. NSH also monitor the performance of Tunstall who answer calls out of hours and their performance is comparable with NSH. This exceeds the standards set by the Telecare Standards Association. Tenants can be confident that emergencies will be dealt with promptly.
- 237** There are good relationships between NSH and other stakeholders assisting in providing the supported housing service. NSH is a member of First Contact which is a Nottinghamshire-wide single assessment process for multi-agency referrals. This means that residents needs only have to be assessed once and the details of this assessment are shared amongst all the relevant agencies.
- 238** There are protocols in place to support relationships with healthcare providers. For example, there is a very positive working relationship between the Supporting People Team at the County Council and staff at NSH. To aide the running of Vale View there is an SLA between NSH, NCHA and Social Services with partnership meetings held every quarter.
- 239** NSH has worked with partners to deliver improved services. NSH has proactively taken part in a county-wide pilot of assistive technology which has helped residents in the District to remain in their homes by providing a range of technology (funded by the Supporting People Team) such as falls detectors, wander alerts, inactivity sensors and flood detectors. Monitoring of the outcomes from this pilot which is due to end in March 2009 is being undertaken by the County Council. By being involved in this project NSH has been able to address the needs of residents in their own homes.

- 240** The Supporting People funded services provided by NSH are only currently achieving minimum standards. It is a weakness that the supported housing service has only attained a minimal level C when assessed against the Supporting People Quality Assessment Framework (QAF). However, the most recent self-assessment shows that services have continued to improve with scores of B or A for the relevant parts of the QAF. It is not a priority for Nottinghamshire County Council to undertake a reassessment as it does not have any concerns about the standard provided by NSH. But in the meantime NSH cannot demonstrate that its services are above the minimum level required.
- 241** Resident involvement is embedded within the supported housing service. The majority of Community Centres at supported housing schemes have an active committee and they are offered training in areas such as food hygiene and using the hearing loop system. The Supported Housing CIG includes two tenants and the majority of members of TRAs are residents of supported housing schemes. This level of resident involvement means that NSH can take confidence that it is providing the service that tenants have assisted in designing.
- 242** NSH takes steps to ensure tenants are safe. NSH has a Safeguarding Adults Policy in place. All cases of abuse or potential abuse are logged and NSH have been notified of three cases in the last three years. In addition, all supported housing staff have received training on domestic violence. This means that staff are aware of incidents and can take appropriate action.
- 243** There are limited examples of VFM outcomes in this area. Although a VFM review of supported housing has been undertaken, the review was undertaken recently and there are limited outcomes to date. A raft of proposals are articulated in a detailed key tasks project plan including benchmarking with three tier services, reviewing the application of service charges and working with tenants to generate VFM solutions for communal facilities.

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### Is the service delivering value for money?

- 244** In 2005, we found that NSH had made progress in this area. Efficiency savings were being achieved in a number of areas. Partnering and the use of flexible 'drop-down' contracts were delivering improved value for money. However, there was still work to do to embed a strategic approach to value for money across all service areas.
- 245** In this inspection, we found that this is clearly an area of strength. NSH can demonstrate that it delivers VFM and that this priority is embedded throughout the organisation. There is a clear strategic approach to ensuring that achieving VFM is comprehensively addressed and that efficiencies are achieved. Efficiency targets have been met, with all staff contributing to NSH strong performance. There are also suitable reporting mechanisms in place to enable VFM performance to be challenged. NSH is continually exploring opportunities to improve VFM outcomes, in partnership with others, but has so far failed to attract any new inward investment. NSH has also failed to maximise some opportunities to maximise VFM by not developing a multi-skilled responsive repairs workforce.

## Tenancy and estate management

### How do costs compare?

- 246** In this inspection, we found that NSH has achieved VFM in a number of key areas and costs compare favourably with others. There is a clear commitment to ensuring that both cost and quality of service is improved.
- 247** NSH understands its costs. NSH regularly undertakes benchmarking exercises to compare organisation and management costs to inform improvements. Costs are predominately benchmarked using a benchmarking consultancy, but other comparison activities take place. Using national ALMO efficiency comparisons, NSH demonstrates generally high satisfaction with low cost and retains this favourable position when compared with non metropolitan ALMOs. Understanding costs means that NSH can ensure that it is aware of higher spending areas and can look for ways to reduce expenditure if necessary.
- 248** NSH costs of delivering services overall and for individual services compare favourably with other comparable organisations. Benchmarking data shows that overheads per property and back office costs are low compared with others and have reduced since 2006/07. Finance costs are relatively high, but have reduced substantially since 2006/07, although measurement of finance costs against other organisations has been difficult as NSH finance functions include rent recovery. NSH can therefore demonstrate that costs are managed effectively and that high levels of service are offered for minimum cost in most areas.
- 249** NSH understands the relationship between cost and quality. NSH has a clear understanding of costs of individual elements of service delivery. Voids costs have increased during the current year to date but remain comparatively low at £1,100. NSH has worked with tenants to improve the standard of void repairs and this has increased costs. Expenditure on decent homes works per property is high when compared to others, but this is not surprising given the size of the improvement programme. However, the cost of implementing and managing the decent homes programme remains average and is reducing, when compared to others. NSH can be sure that it is directing resources at the most appropriate service areas.

### How is value for money managed?

- 250** Value for money is a clearly strategic priority for NSH. The Business Plan contains robust proposals for delivering VFM and the Corporate Key Tasks contain several actions that directly relate to VFM, including market testing responsive repairs and the procurement of a new housing management information system. This ensures that it is clear that VFM is a high priority for the whole organisation.
- 251** Management arrangements are focused on delivering VFM outcomes. The VFM Strategy was drawn up in 2007 and provides a framework to assist staff in delivering VFM outcomes and its launch was supplemented with training for staff. The Strategy is held on the shared IT drive so that all can access it, with a summary leaflet available for easy reading. The VFM Strategy shows that VFM is a clear part of the improvement planning process and how VFM links to other internal strategies and to external priorities and pressures. The Strategy ensures a clear focus to the co-ordination and delivery of VFM.

- 252** NSH is clear which service areas can deliver VFM. A VFM Delivery Vehicle sits underneath the Strategy and guides staff through a clear process that includes a desk top review, testing the efficiency of the service area and whether there are other opportunities available that could deliver improvements. Using the VFM Delivery Vehicle, NSH has identified the service areas most likely to be able to deliver efficiency gains, to assist them in meeting their savings target of three per cent.
- 253** Delivering VFM is one of the key principles of the Procurement Strategy. The Procurement Strategy includes reference to external factors that affect social housing providers and that provide a framework for delivering VFM outcomes, including the Gershon report and a more recent report from the Audit Commission, 'Better Buys'. It also emphasises the benefits that partnership working can bring and there is a Partnership Protocol in place to support this. This has led to a number of partnerships being procured that deliver VFM.
- 254** NSH has developed modern methods of procurement. Many areas of expenditure have been market tested, with the responsive repairs contract currently undergoing a re-tendering exercise. The Decent Homes programme has been jointly procured with a neighbouring ALMO and this has resulted in economies of scale as well as various learning opportunities. Recently procured contracts have been let using a cost quality ratio, with the emphasis on quality, representing 70 per cent of the tender analysis scoring. This has resulted in high levels of satisfaction, but also contractors are putting things back in the community including sponsoring football team, tenants' conference and painting community centres for free. Procuring contracts in this way has been of benefit to the wider community as well as delivering VFM.
- 255** NSH understands the strategic link between customer satisfaction and VFM. The VFM Strategy includes eight major themes, one of which is 'Our Customer'. This ensures that customers are involved in VFM decisions, that the impact of services on customers is considered when VFM decisions are made and that VFM is reported to the customer. This ensures that VFM considerations take in to account the benefits to the customer.
- 256** NSH understands that tenants can help guide the organisation towards achieving VFM. For example, tenants were involved in drawing up the VFM Strategy and received training from the Finance Manager to enable them to contribute effectively. This has been further assisted by tenants challenging existing VFM outcomes in a number of areas, including the expensive paint supplied to tenants in receipt of the disturbance allowance, the cost of telephoning DH contractors and alterations to the specification for the kitchen units during DH works. Working with tenants has helped NSH make the link between cost and quality, enabling them to make difficult decisions that have been supported by their customers
- 257** Tenants have also been involved in delivering VFM outcomes. For example, tenants have been involved in the procurement of a new grounds maintenance contractor, in market testing responsive repairs, DH decisions and the use of debt collection agencies. However, tenants involved in procurement have not received specialist independent training that would enable them to not only effectively be involved in the process, but to also challenge the way that NSH approach procurement and the selection of contractors.

## Tenancy and estate management

- 258** NSH has maximised partnership working to deliver VFM. The DH partners work together with NSH to identify VFM and efficiency savings that result from change made to various elements of the DH programme, this can include the specification, the scope of the work, any logistical changes and any changes made to the programming of works. These changes are captured in a spreadsheet that is monitored by the Steering Group, known as the Operational Efficiency Action Plan and it is used to ensure that instances of actual savings are recorded. Examples of changes made include:
- reviewing performance of the vans;
  - re-visiting specifications;
  - reviewing performance of components; and
  - benchmarking the performance of suppliers.
- 259** NSH has also challenged stakeholders to deliver improved VFM. For example, rent transaction costs have been reduced following liaison with NSDC and free training was secured from the external auditing company. Working in partnership with others has reduced costs and contributed to efficiency gains.
- 260** NSH has delivered VFM outcomes in its approach to capital works. NSH is working towards achieving the optimum split of expenditure on planned and responsive works, expenditure on capital works has increased since 2007/08 and expenditure on responsive works repairs reduced. The split is currently 42:58 (July 2008) and is regularly monitored. Partnering agreements have been entered in to with two contractors to deliver DH works, with the DH contractors procured in partnership with a neighbouring authority. Benchmarking of costs takes place as part of the partnership. This has resulted in savings as well as shared experiences.
- 261** Effective performance information is available to help NSH ensure that VFM performance remains a high priority. NSH has developed its reporting mechanisms to include VFM outcomes. The Corporate Finance PIs are included in the balanced scorecard and the report includes targets and performance on a range of issues relating to VFM including expenditure per property on repairs, housing management, overheads and staff costs. The report also includes performance in respect of inward investment project funding secured and cost savings realised through partnership working. The information enables the Board to challenge performance on VFM where appropriate.
- 262** VFM targets are in place and are being met. A raft of targets has been set for the future to ensure VFM outcomes are achieved and the sustained focus on VFM over time has resulted in efficiency targets being met. Savings this year amount to £220,000 leaving NSH on track to exceed its target of £240,000 (3 per cent). To assist in achieving VFM throughout the organisation, a 'Championship League' has been introduced. Each team has a target to submit at least one idea that could lead to VFM or efficiency savings and the results are collated. This has resulted in a competitive spirit developing between teams, as well as a genuine understanding of how operational teams can impact on delivering VFM outcomes.

263 Efficiencies achieved during 2007/08 are shown in table 2.

**Table 2 Newark and Sherwood Homes - Efficiency Gains 2007/08**

Activity	Savings
Undertaking communication words in-house	£22,000
Renegotiating building rental	£24,000
Changing translation service provider	£1,000
Introduction of procurement cards	£1,500
Centralising stationary and printing costs	£22,000

Source: Newark and Sherwood Homes

- 264** A value for money culture is embedded in NSH. This has been achieved partly by the implementation of the Championship League, but also by the appointment of 'VFM Leads' at an operational level. For example, two members of the Tenancy and Estates team sit on the VFM Group and feedback to their own teams. This has resulted in general awareness-raising. Staff have a good awareness of VFM issues and how their contribution can assist NSH in achieving its VFM targets. For example, VFM is a standing item on all team meeting agendas and staff were able to give a number of examples of how they had helped achieve VFM.
- 265** Efficiency savings are re-invested in a number of areas. An improvement and innovation fund has been set up using some of the efficiency savings with budgets available to enable staff to access the fund to assist in improvement and innovation. The impact of spend from this budget is measured and VFM outcomes are tested as part of the impact matrix.
- 266** Some of the expenditure from the improvement and innovation fund during 2007/08 is shown in table 3.

**Table 3 Newark and Sherwood Homes Improvement and Innovation Fund 2007/08**

Activity	Expenditure
Purchase of PDAs	£9,000
Resident involvement Strategy Review	£300
Additional cleaning resource	£1,500

## Tenancy and estate management

Activity	Expenditure
Temporary resources for Tenants' Census	£3,265
Purchase of TP Tracker	£9,462

Source: Newark and Sherwood Homes

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- 267** Additional resources have been identified to support operational teams in delivering VFM through procurement arrangements. A new post has been created and the postholder is responsible for Procurement and Internal Governance. Early outcomes delivered by this post include the adoption of Procurement Cards through Procurement for Housing resulting in savings being made on each small purchasing transaction.
- 268** NSH is a member of various consortia to access purchasing opportunities. Examples of this include using Procurement for Housing to procure a new stationary contract, networking with Sandwell Homes resulted in savings from changing a paper supplier, new Lifelines were procured using the Northern Housing Consortium (NHC) and NSH has recently joined Constructionline where further VFM savings are anticipated. NSH has also recently re-procured its Home Contents Insurance Scheme with the NHC which has resulted in reduced costs for tenants. This has had direct benefits for tenants.
- 269** There is a lack of an effective use of resources to ensure optimum VFM is achieved. NSH has not progressed with the move towards operating a multi-skilled responsive repairs workforce and this has impacted on its ability to complete repairs on time using minimal operatives. A cost benefit analysis of rent payment methods has not resulted in clear targets to encourage customers to use the most cost effective payment methods and it is not clear whether access arrangements are offering the most effective VFM. In addition, there are no examples where NSH has attracted inward investment and although this has been recognised as an area that needs development, this has limited resources available for service improvement.

# What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

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

- 270** In 2005, we found that NSH had made progress in improving its services since an earlier inspection in 2003. It had paid particular attention to areas which directly affected customers. While progress against some inspection recommendations had been slow, the ALMO had taken important steps to deliver benefits, improvements and efficiencies in the longer term, for example, by appointing strategic partners for the capital investment programme.
- 271** In this inspection, we found that NSH has continued to deliver improvements to services and that this is an area where strengths outweigh weaknesses. A number of improvements have been delivered that customers and partners have noticed and the general trend of performance is in the top 25 per cent of comparable organisations. However, some policies have been introduced recently leading to limited outcomes, not all of our previous recommendations have been fully completed and there is a lack of tangible progress in some service areas.
- 272** NSH has responded positively to most of the recommendations made in our previous inspection. In addition, weaknesses identified in the inspection report more generally have been addressed following the implementation of a detailed action plan. However, some important recommendations relating to value for money have only been partially completed.
- 273** Progress against the recommendations made is shown in table 4.

**Table 4 Recommendations of previous inspection**

Recommendation	Progress
Implement the service standards currently in draft form, publicise them to tenants and monitor and report on performance against them within three months.	Completed
Establish customer satisfaction and feedback methods for all services provided by Newark and Sherwood Homes and report on the outcomes and action taken to the board and all service users within three months.	Completed
Publicise the freephone number for out-of-hours emergency repairs to all tenants within two months.	Completed
Develop and implement a plan to gather comprehensive profile information for all tenants within six months.	Completed

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

Recommendation	Progress
Develop a systematic approach to ensuring that straplines are consistently included on all printed material for customers within three months.	Completed
Set equality and diversity targets for all service areas and monitor and report on performance against these to the ALMO board within six months.	Completed
Develop, implement and monitor an overarching strategy for resident involvement, with tenants, within six months.	Completed
Undertake a fundamental review and cost benefit analysis of current and potential rent payment methods. Set clear targets for customer take-up of the most cost-effective payment methods and consider customer incentives, in consultation with service users, within five months.	Partially completed
Undertake a fundamental review and cost-benefit analysis of all current service access methods and opening hours, consult all tenants on their preferences and act on the findings within twelve months.	Partially completed
Publicise estate walkabouts to all tenants and residents and give feedback on the outcomes to the wider tenant audience within three months.	Completed
Undertake and complete a best value review of leasehold and Right to Buy services within twelve months.	Completed
Take action to understand the decline in the average SAP rating of homes to ensure that resources are effectively targeted within three months.	Completed

Source: AC inspection report 2005

- 274** NSH has delivered some improvements against plans. Changes have been implemented that have been derived from a number of sources. Drivers for change include the Corporate Key Tasks and the Three Star Action Plan drawn up following a mock inspection of the service in 2007. Various changes that have emerged from these tasks and plans include revising the Governance Guide, developing a Financial Inclusion Strategy, reviewing VFM across a range of services and implementing mobile working in the responsive repairs service. Outcomes from these plans have delivered benefits to customers.

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

- 275** NSH has delivered improvements to services in key areas that impact on customers. A new Grounds Maintenance contract has been procured that will commence in October 2008. The new contract replaces a poorly performing service and it includes enhancements such as fly-tipping and graffiti removal. Tenants have been involved in developing the specification which is output based and they will also be involved in performance monitoring. The Access and Customer Care CIG has achieved a number of outcomes that customers would notice. These include improving reception facilities at Farrar Close (although this office is not one predominantly used by customers), ensuring that staff and committee members receive training on how to use loop systems installed at community centres, reviewing service leaflets, recommending improvements to the website and changes to straplines to include Polish. This means that NSH is aware of the importance of delivering improvements to service delivery.
- 276** Partners have recognised service improvements made by NSH. Partners receive positive feedback from their own customers about the services they also receive from NSH. Feedback has included positive comments about the advice provided to women experiencing DV, being flexible about agreeing repayment of rent arrears and positive feedback from customers at Vale View. Members of the Council can also clearly identify service improvements that have been made by NSH in the last three years. NSH is also helping to deliver the Council's objectives via its partnership working by its active involvement in the Safer Neighbourhoods Group and NSH has chaired the Housing Forum from the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). This means that NSH improvements are clear and delivered to the wider community.
- 277** Performance is generally good. Of the 15 Key Performance Indicators measured and monitored by NSH, only two have a negative direction of travel, and these remain in the top 25 per cent of comparable organisations. NSH has delivered improvements in other areas including tenant satisfaction, which has increased to 87 per cent at the end of 2007/08 compared to 84 per cent in 2006/07, decent homes plans are being delivered and now 29 per cent of homes do not meet the Decent Homes Standard at the end of 2007/08, compared to 44 per cent in 2006/07. These are improvements in service delivery that customers would notice.
- 278** However, there are some areas where NSH has failed to meet its own performance targets. For example there is a target to complete 98 per cent of repairs on time. Although performance for 2007/08 was 97 per cent, performance during the year to date has been inconsistent, with performance at the end of July 2008 at 94 per cent. The percentage of repair appointments kept has reduced from 91.2 per cent to 88.18 per cent at the end of 2007/08. The average time to complete non-urgent repairs has increased since 2006/07, when it was 14.7 days to 16.2 days at the end of 2007/08, against a target of 12 days. This inconsistent performance is in areas of service that are directly experienced by tenants.
- 279** NSH has reacted slowly to the review and development of new policies. NSH has not effectively prioritised some important policy revisions and additions. For example, the tenancy agreement has not been reviewed since 1997, full compliance with the Respect Standard cannot be demonstrated and the CBL scheme is dated. Although a number of policies have been introduced including a Literacy Policy, the Financial Inclusion Policy and the Domestic Violence Policy, these have all been recent and therefore outcomes to date are limited.

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

**280** There are a number of service areas that have not developed since our last inspection. Key service areas including Allocations and Lettings and Tenancy and Estate Management have not developed at the rate that tenants now expect or at the rate that an organisation with aspirations to deliver excellent services would want to deliver.

### How well does the service manage performance?

**281** In 2005, we found that NSH had a strong and genuine commitment to continuous improvement. This was demonstrated by the range of customer facing improvements achieved, work done to improve repair response times, the drive to reduce already low re-let times even further and the challenging targets set for further improvements across a range of services. The approach to performance management was strong, although there were some areas needing attention.

**282** In this inspection, we found this to be an area of strength. A clear corporate vision is supported by a well developed framework of improvement planning and performance management arrangements. Plans reflect local issues and priorities and there is visible and strong leadership. However, performance management of some areas is under developed.

**283** NSH has a clear vision for its own service. The vision is 'to deliver excellent housing services' and is clearly set out in the Delivery Plan, which explains the way that NSH will provide services delegated to it from NSDC. The plan includes the service standards that NSDC can expect to receive from NSH and how the customer promise will be delivered. It also includes the financial arrangements, budgets and resources available to deliver services. Objectives and core values that support delivery of the vision are reviewed annually as part of the improvement planning process and take into account any environmental issues that may have emerged or be emerging. However, planning beyond completion of the decent homes programme is at an early stage. A stock option appraisal has recently started and this will clarify the future for NSDC housing stock.

**284** NSH has developed a good working and strategic relationship with NSDC. The relationship between the two Chief Executives (CE) is good and a mutual trust has developed between the organisations. The Community Plan identifies the priorities for the Council and these are supported by NSH. NSH has also been able to influence the strategic direction of housing within the District by its representation on the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and has successfully taken on the role of chairing the Housing Forum, one of the issue groups reporting to the LSP. Although this representation has not yet lead to demonstrable outcomes for tenants, it is anticipated that the current review of the LSP structure may lead to improved arrangements and outcomes. The approach supports the ability of the organisation to deliver improvements and there are clear links between NSH aims and those expressed by NSDC.

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

- 285** There are robust performance management arrangements between NSH and NSDC. There is a clear protocol to guide the relationship with regular meetings held at various strategic and operational levels. NSDC is satisfied with the performance of NSH and supports the development of the ALMO. NSH actively engages with elected members to help sustain the relationship with NSDC and managers from NSH hold regular briefing sessions for elected members to update them on current performance and the latest 'hot topics' for the Company. This has helped to retain a good working relationship with Members following the establishment of the ALMO and to develop the arms length relationship.
- 286** NSH effectively manages the performance of Service Level Agreements (SLAs) that it has entered into. The effectiveness and VFM offered by SLAs has been systematically assessed resulting in some services being tendered and awarded to external contractors, for example grounds maintenance. The good relationship between the two organisations has helped to facilitate these reviews and deliver positive outcomes.
- 287** Plans reflect local issues and priorities. The Business Plan (BP) is a well developed document that outlines the objectives and values of NSH and details the actions that are necessary to support outcomes. Tenants were involved in the development of the BP and NSH took into account the demographic profile of tenants to ensure that development of the business accurately reflected the future needs of tenants. The Asset Management Plan also demonstrates how delivery of the plan will help NSH not only meet its objectives but also the objectives of the Council and therefore meet local needs. By working with partners and developing local enterprise, NSH is helping to encourage economic prosperity and can demonstrate that priorities for the business reflect the priorities of the customers.
- 288** There is visible and strong leadership. The CE meets regularly with staff during ad-hoc briefings and 'Face to Face' sessions where messages are cascaded and feedback received. The Board of Management has taken a positive approach to its role and has not been afraid to tackle issues of inappropriate behaviour. Although governance is not systematically monitored, there is some evidence that issues that have arisen in the past have been effectively dealt with by meeting with individuals outside the Board meetings. Strong leadership has helped NSH to reinforce key messages.
- 289** There are appropriate arrangements at Board level to support improvements. Expertise at board level in respect of cross cutting areas has been developed by the appointment of 'leads', this has resulted in increased confidence to challenge, question and guide others. For example, the board lead for VFM delivered some VFM training to board colleagues to assist them in understanding how they could contribute to this area. The Board of Management is aware of its responsibilities and this has helped them challenge performance. Gas servicing performance has been robustly challenged over time, and this had lead to improvements. This approach has helped to successfully drive continuous improvement.

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

- 290** The Board undertakes its role effectively. Board Members are experienced and clearly understand their roles and the Board itself is regularly scrutinised to ensure that any skills gaps are met. Annual appraisals take place of all board members and training needs are identified as part of this process. In addition to this, a critical friend has been appointed to assess Board governance issues. Members of the Board have received support through mentoring and training to enable them to actively challenge performance. However, there are some areas of operation where the Board has not received the necessary training. For example, although the Chair and Vice Chair of the Board carry out each others appraisals, they have not received training to do this. Failing to provide training in all areas may hamper the Board in effectively undertaking all its duties.
- 291** The Board effectively monitors and challenges performance. There are effective processes in place to enable the Board to monitor progress against targets and plans which have resulted in the Board understanding which elements of service delivery need to be improved. The Board is aware of the importance of the ratio between planned and responsive repairs and the impact that an imbalanced ratio can have on VFM, they are keen to see the current split between these two areas move towards good practice recommendations. The Board clearly understands its role in relation to the difference between performance management and performance monitoring. Board members that we spoke to understand that their role is the challenge performance and the role of the staff is to manage performance. This has helped Board members remain strategic.
- 292** NSH is clear about its performance against key targets. Performance against Corporate Key Tasks and KPIs is reported on a monthly basis. There are systems in place to ensure that areas of performance not meeting targets are addressed, with managers being required to complete a remedial action plan to address the issue. There are targets in place to ensure that Team Meetings and one-to-ones are held regularly at least 20 times each year and performance against these targets is monitored and reported. This ensures that performance against targets remains a high priority.
- 293** There are a number of plans in place that support improvements to services. There are plans in place to introduce an annual property health check, to improve performance with regard to major adaptations, to develop an older persons strategy and to refurbish under used and out dated communal areas in supported housing schemes. However, it is unclear how the plans for implementation of the CAT have been determined and whether its priority is to develop its customer access role or whether this is merely an 'add on' to its role of providing administrative 'back office' services to support other 'customer facing' teams within NSH. This means that NSH cannot be sure that all plans will increase capacity to deliver improved services.
- 294** Staff understand their contribution to improvements. There are clear integrated plans and processes in place to drive improvements that feed through from the Corporate Key Tasks to front line staff delivery. Services delivered by front line staff that link to the achievement of Corporate Key Tasks are regularly discussed at team meetings, at one-to-ones and at SDIs with targets that link to the corporate ambitions. This ensures that frontline staff are aware of their individual contribution to achieving the NSH vision.

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

- 295** However, performance management arrangements are inconsistently applied. Annual staff development interviews (SDIs) are used to ensure that corporate targets are translated into individual targets and to identify skills gaps and are supplemented by monthly one-to-ones. However, to date only 75 per cent of SDIs have been completed by the target date. Not all staff receive written feedback from their managers detailing what was discussed and agreed during one-to-one meetings. This means that NSH is not maximising opportunities to ensure that any issues with staff performance are addressed.
- 296** NSH also has an inconsistent approach to setting and agreeing targets with staff. Some staff that we spoke to do not have regular formal one-to-ones with their line manager and could not recall personal targets being agreed as part of their annual SDI. It is unclear from the SDIs that we saw how the performance of individual staff members is being assessed by their line manager, and although the member of staff is asked to comment on their performance there is no indication as to whether this assessment is accepted by their manager, or if any remedial action is required. Most SDIs lacked clear targets with many just listing a number of key tasks to be delivered, often without time limits and outcome measures attached. This means that staff may be unclear about the assessment of their performance and whether any targets have been agreed.
- 297** Performance management of some areas is under developed. Lack of systematic performance management of staff by managers has led to an inconsistent ASB service with different advice offered by different staff and cases being managed inconsistently. Responses to complaints made by customers are not checked for quality or appropriateness and there is also no systematic approach to ensuring that repairs to common areas are reported by staff. This approach has directly affected NSH ability to offer excellent services and has impacted on the tenants' experience and understanding.
- 298** NSH systematically learns from others. NSH uses opportunities to learn from others including benchmarking, partnership working and direct contact with high performing organisations. For example, NSH is a member of the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIH) Good Practice Unit and has used information from the Unit to assist in the use of customer data. It has also learned from the process of ISO Accreditation with efficiencies being made as a result of standardising some systems.
- 299** NSH also learns from direct feedback. Staff are encouraged to make suggestions for improvement and feel confident that these will be considered. Repairs operatives meet in small groups each month with their line manager and use the opportunity to discuss latest developments, but also to air their views. Staff are also satisfied with other communication methods available to them including Rooftop Reports (CE newsletter) and toolbox talks. This means that NSH is able to maximise opportunities for learning from many sources to deliver improved services.

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

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

- 300** In 2005, we found that both the Council and NSH had made substantial progress in increasing capacity to deliver improvement, including capacity to achieve the Decent Homes Standard by appointing strategic investment partners. The relationship between the ALMO and the Council was positive and constructive with an effective framework for liaison. Board members had a good mix of skills and experience and governance arrangements were working well.
- 301** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. A new staffing structure is delivering positive outcomes and the Human Resources Strategy is ensuring that staff are generally well supported and trained, with partnerships adding to capacity. Although IT is currently limiting capacity, there are plans in place to address this. However, individual performance management arrangements are delivered inconsistently and inward investment has not been a priority.
- 302** NSH has in place an appropriate staff structure to deliver services. A major restructuring exercise undertaken during 2007/08 has led to better outcomes for customers. The focus has been to deliver more customer focussed services via the establishment of the Customer Access Team, bringing most customer facing services under one Directorate and ensuring that Support Services could effectively support front line service delivery. A number of managers were recruited from external organisations to provide an external challenge and promote new ways of working and this has already started to have an impact.
- 303** There is a robust Human Resources (HR) Strategy in place. The HR Strategy provides a framework for maximising capacity to ensure that NSH vision, objectives and core values can be delivered. The Strategy was developed with the input of staff following a survey, as well as consultation with staff more generally, management and trade unions. The HR Strategy encompasses numerous distinct objectives that generally aim to develop managers and empower staff to deliver improved services. These objectives have been drawn together in the 'People Plan'. The 'People Plan' is supported by an action plan for the period 2008-2010. There are clear links between the HR Strategy and the ability of NSH to satisfactorily meet its objectives.
- 304** NSH is taking steps to maximise staff attendance. There are effective strategies in place that have led to a reduction in sickness absence, although it is still relatively high at 11.7 days. In addition to this, NSH is actively seeking to learn from others to reduce sickness levels and will use opportunities to benchmark with local colleagues in the Midlands ALMO Group to gather additional examples of good practice. Staff turnover is low with performance during the first quarter of 2008/09 at 3.8 per cent. Managers are confident that NSH is on course to meet its target of 12 per cent at year end, which would be top quartile performance and will help to maximise capacity to deliver services.

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

- 305** NSH is committed to having a well-trained workforce. There is a company training plan in place with the annual training budget equates to about 2 per cent of annual staff payroll and training opportunities include equality and diversity, mental illness, equality impact assessments and recruitment. Staff also have the opportunity to apply for post entry training which could lead to a recognised qualification. Staff that we spoke to reported being able to access training that they needed, but that they are also kept up to date with any training necessary for them to be able to undertake their roles. For example, repairs operatives reported training on health and safety, Corgi registration and new boilers. This ensures that staff are equipped to undertake their roles effectively.
- 306** Staff are well-supported to undertake their roles. NSH currently offers a confidential Stress Management Counselling service to all its employees, who are free to ring the counsellor at anytime in confidence. At the end of September 2008, NSH will be developing this facility further by launching the new Employee Assistance Programme which provides confidential and unlimited 24-hour telephone access to counsellors who specialise in financial and legal advice as well as dealing with stress and depression. This service will assist staff with any work or personal issues that may be impacting on their lives.
- 307** Communication with staff is not measured for effectiveness. There are a number of ways in which NSH communicates with its staff, but the effectiveness of these opportunities is not routinely measured. The communication channels currently include staff newsletters, Rooftop Reports, newsflashes, monthly team meetings and emails. In addition, the results of the staff satisfaction staff are not routinely report to the Board, but are included in the HR Strategy which is approved by the HR Committee and then forwarded onto the rest of the Board. This means that the NSH is unable to demonstrate that the way it communicated with staff is having an impact.
- 308** The Board of Management is trained to undertake its roles. An annual board training plan includes annual mandatory training on equality and diversity issues and customer care. The Council's view is that if NSH were to become totally independent via a stock transfer, then there would be a need to strengthen the skills and competencies of Board Members to enable them to adapt to a new, more challenging commercial environment. However, board members are currently effective in their roles.
- 309** There is an effective succession plan in place to ensure that capable individuals are recruited to the Board. The succession planning also includes enabling existing board members to be able to take on additional responsibilities. The appointment of board leads has helped to develop capacity in this way. New tenant board members are generally identified through existing involvement mechanisms and the succession framework assists in harnessing their ambitions. Although it is a weakness that the board members that are leads for cross cutting areas have not had specific training on these areas (other than the mandatory training experienced by all), they feel supported by colleagues and senior staff and that this has helped them develop their awareness and confidence. It has been recognised that the Board will suffer from a lack of some key skills some when some board members move on. To address this issue a co-option protocol has been developed that will enable specific skills to be targeted. This means that the skill levels enjoyed by the Board will be maintained.

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

- 310** IT is limiting capacity in some areas, however there are plans in place to address this. There is an IT Strategy in place that has been approved by the Board that will enable NSH to maximise the use of IT to support delivering services, including linking together Housing Management information with Asset Management details. This will free up staff time currently occupied by administrative tasks as well as providing a more reliable source of data.
- 311** NSH is planning to use IT to assist planning workflows. The Customer Insight Strategy enables the collation of customer data and patterns of behaviour to enable staffing levels to be adequately resourced. For example, knowing the times when most rent payments are made will enable NSH to plan resources accordingly.
- 312** Staff have access to appropriate equipment and facilities to assist them in delivering their roles. Most staff have laptops and many work from home on occasion. NSH currently access their telephony via NSDC and trials of web-enabled telephony is currently being undertaken that will enable staff to access web based services whilst out on their patches. This will free up staff from needing to visit one of the offices to obtain information.
- 313** NSH has contributed to issues other than delivering services to its tenants, by assisting NSDC in meeting its aims. NSH is represented on the Safer Neighbourhood Committee as part of the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) and has more general involvement in safer communities' initiatives. The ALMO has also worked closely with the ASB team at the Council to resolve issues in a particular area. NSH has also assisted the Council in the Ollerton Week of Action by undertaking leaflet drops, door to door surveys and providing events for local residents. NSDC has been more than satisfied with the contribution made by NSH in establishing a Housing Forum on the LSP, which led to NSH influencing the agreement of Local Area Agreement targets. Although the outcomes from the LSP have so far been limited, the role of the ALMO has been crucial in coordinating ideas and creating plans. This means that NSH is contributing to the capacity of others to deliver services clearly aligned to its own.
- 314** NSH is increasing its capacity by being actively involved in partnership working. Partners that we met were able to give a number of examples where NSH had either taken the lead in partnership working or had been actively involved from the beginning. Partnership working has included intensive management on the Hawtonville Estate involving the Police and other agencies which led to a reduction in ASB; working closely with staff at Nottinghamshire Community HA to resolve ASB on estates where they both have stock; home safety checks with the Fire Service and being proactive in helping to establish the Sanctuary Scheme for people experiencing domestic violence.
- 315** It is also clear that NSH draws on the expertise and support from other organisations. For example, NSH works with the Police, Social Services, Health and third sector organisations to help it deliver its aims and there are a number of outcomes from partnership working where customers would notice a difference including more intensive management of areas that suffer from ASB, improvements in the provision of Aids and Adaptations and on a more local level, a recycling paint project. Working in partnership has delivered improvements that NSH could not have delivered on its own.

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

- 316** There is little evidence of NSH attracting inward investment. This has not been a priority for the organisation, although more recently Grant Finder has identified some possible funding streams for TRAs. This means that NSH may be missing the opportunity to lever in additional funding to increase capacity further.

# Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Performance indicator (BVPI ref)	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08 (unaudited)	DC top 25% 2006/07
63 Average SAP rating	72	75	75.4	72
66a Percentage rent collected	99.67	99.21	99.20	98.81
66b Percentage tenants with > 7 wks arrears (gross)	2.57	2.89	3.35	3.43
66c Percentage tenants in arrears with NoSP served	17.48	12.44	15.61	13.61
66d Percentage LA tenants evicted for rent arrears	0.00	0.13	0.09	0.17
74a Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	84	87	-	84
75a Percentage tenants satisfied with TP	-	78	-	70
184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	47	44	27	10
184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	2	4	38	32.9
212 Average re-let time (days)	18	13.8	22	25

# Appendix 2 – 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:

- focus groups with staff, tenants, Board members, partners and contractors;
- interviews with staff, Board members and partners;
- viewing property improvements and repairs;
- inspection of ready to let properties;
- shadowing staff carrying out their activities;
- observation of the Customer Access Team;
- visits to all local offices;
- estate inspections;
- tour of the district and housing stock;
- talking to tenants;
- observation of meetings and tenancy sign up;
- various file checks;
- review of Council's website and leaflets; and
- mystery shopping.

# Appendix 3 – Positive practice

**‘The Commission will identify and promote good practice. Every inspection will look for examples of good practice and innovation, and for creative ways to overcome barriers and resistance to change or make better use of resources’. (Seeing is Believing)**

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## Effective monitoring of the Decent Homes Programme

- 1 NSH has developed effective systems in place to monitor all elements of the DH programme. In partnership with its two DH contractors, NSH documents the history and current performance of various elements of the programmes in a detailed booklet that is used to monitor performance and prompt discussion in various areas. The booklet is comprehensive and includes information about complaints, defects, refusals, access, progress with the DH programme and publicity events.

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## Delivering value for money in capital programmes

- 2 DH partners work together with NSH to identify VFM and efficiency savings that result from change made to various elements of the DH programme, this can include the specification, the scope of the work, any logistical changes and any changes made to the programming of works. These changes are captured in a spreadsheet that is monitored by the Steering Group, known as the Operational Efficiency Action Plan and it is used to ensure that instances of actual savings are recorded. Examples of changes made include:
  - reviewing performance of the vans;
  - re-visiting specifications;
  - reviewing performance of components; and
  - benchmarking the performance of suppliers.

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## Assisting staff in understanding value for money

- 3 To assist in achieving VFM throughout NSH, a 'Championship League' has been introduced. Each team has a target to submit at least one idea that could lead to VFM or efficiency savings and the results are collated. This has resulted in a competitive spirit developing between teams, as well as a genuine understanding of how operational teams can impact on delivering VFM outcomes.

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