

Stevenage

Homes

Stevenage Borough Council

June 2009



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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.

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 arm's 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).

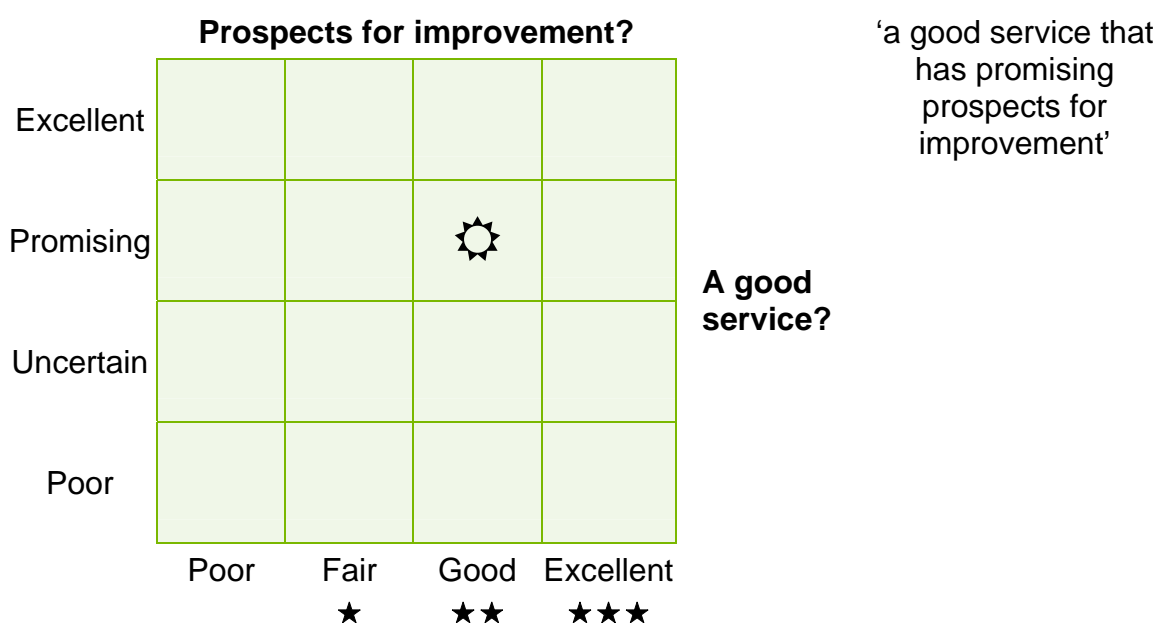
Summary

- 1 Stevenage Homes (SH) is providing a good, two-star service which has promising prospects for improvement.
- 2 Its services are easy to access through a range of methods. Enthusiastic staff are committed to meeting customers' individual needs. SH has a strong and genuine commitment to involving residents with many examples of them shaping services.
- 3 SH is carrying out improvement work and responsive repairs to the homes it manages in a customer-focused way. Its approach to annual gas safety checks and servicing is very effective. Anti-social behaviour is handled well with positive support for complainants, witnesses and perpetrators. SH is providing a positive living environment with clean and well cared for estates and communal areas.
- 4 The Home4U choice based lettings service is easy to access and customer focused. Supported housing services are helping people to live independently with a choice in the level of service they receive.
- 5 There are areas for improvement. Monitoring of satisfaction rates among different groups of tenants is limited. The whole time that tenants with disabilities wait for adaptations to their homes is not monitored. Some sheltered housing schemes do not meet modern standards and are not accessible to tenants who have disabilities.
- 6 Prospective tenants do not receive enough guidance on the importance of paying rent and the affordability of their new home. Despite some recent improvements, the service to leaseholders is weak in many areas.
- 7 SH has achieved widespread change and improvement over the last two years. Existing services have improved and new services have been developed. The focus on performance management is strong and SH has used learning from other organisations and customer feedback well to improve and develop services. Partnership working is ensuring positive outcomes for service users.
- 8 While service plans are comprehensive, they do not focus on outcomes and there are some gaps in performance management activity. The approach to reviewing staff performance is not systematic or consistent and Board member skills assessment is underdeveloped. However, the progress made to date; Stevenage Homes' self-awareness and the fact that improvement plans reflect key weaknesses indicate that the prospects for further improvement are promising.

Scoring the service

- 9 We have assessed Stevenage 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 chart¹



Source: Audit Commission

- 10 We found the service to be good because it has a range of strengths including:
- committed, enthusiastic and customer-focused staff;
 - easy to access services;
 - a wide range of good quality customer information and an easy to use, informative website which enables tenants to access most services online;
 - a strong focus on supporting tenants to maintain their tenancies;
 - many examples of services being tailored to meet individual tenants' needs;
 - major works which are completed with a strong focus on the needs of customers;
 - an effective repairs service which has a high level of customer care;
 - vacant homes are let quickly and repaired to a good standard;

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

- highly effective arrangements for carrying out annual gas safety checks and servicing;
- an effective approach to income collection with action targeted to those tenants most likely to have difficulties paying their rent;
- a genuine and strong commitment to involving residents with a wide range of examples of them shaping service delivery;
- anti-social behaviour is tackled effectively;
- estates and communal areas are clean and well cared for;
- the Home4U choice-based lettings service which is easy to access and customer focused; and
- supported housing services which are promoting independence and offering customers a choice in the level of service they receive.

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

- limited monitoring of customer satisfaction to establish if different sections of the community are less satisfied than others;
- a lack of focus on how long tenants with disabilities are waiting for adaptations to their homes from the point at which they first expressed a need to the work being completed;
- some sheltered housing schemes do not meet modern standards and are not accessible to tenants who have disabilities;
- limited focus on ensuring that prospective tenants understand the need to pay rent and whether they can afford their new home;
- performance on collecting income from leaseholders and from rechargeable repairs is not strong;
- residents who are not members of the Board or of the Federation of Stevenage Tenants Associations (FOSTA) do not have a role in monitoring performance;
- a lack of comprehensive comparison of all services' costs, performance and customer satisfaction to ensure that tenants are receiving value for money; and
- leaseholders are not accurately charged for the services they receive, communication with them on repair issues is not effective and key information on matters such as major works plans and how to pay for them is not available.

Scoring the service

12 The service has promising prospects for improvement because:

- widespread change and improvement has been delivered over the last two years in line with SH's improvement plans;
- SH has made strong progress on the 2007 inspection report recommendations;
- a range of customer-facing improvements has been delivered;
- existing services have improved and new services have been developed;
- the focus on performance management is strong and supported by a clear framework;
- SH is keen to learn from others and this is being used well to improve and develop services;
- restructuring has increased customer focus and improved outcomes; and
- partnership working is strong and ensuring positive outcomes for service users.

13 There are some weaknesses which include:

- the focus on improving the leasehold management service has increased, although this is relatively recent and some key weaknesses remain;
- service improvement plans are not outcome based;
- there are some gaps in performance management activity including rent arrears, aids and adaptations and leasehold management;
- the approach to reviewing staff performance is not always systematic, robust and consistent; and
- the approach to assessing the skills of Board members is underdeveloped.

Recommendations

- 14** 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 costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

Recommendation

R1 Improve outcomes for service users by:

- analysing and reporting on customer satisfaction by the six diversity strands and taking corrective action where lower satisfaction is identified;
- reviewing the policy for adjusting repair priorities for vulnerable tenants to ensure that it provides clear guidance on the circumstances in which this should take place;
- ensuring that discussions about rent payment and affordability are included in pre-tenancy processes for new tenants; and
- monitoring the length of time it takes for adaptations to disabled tenants' homes to be completed from the point the need is first expressed to work completion, and reporting on the outcome and taking any corrective action needed to improve the service to tenants.

- 15** The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved outcomes for service users and
- increased customer satisfaction.

- 16** The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented within three months of report publication.

² 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 Strengthen the service to leaseholders by:

- ensuring that they receive clear, accurate and detailed explanations of how their service charges are calculated;
- establishing a clear rationale for the leasehold management fee which is based on actual costs and clearly communicated to leaseholders;
- ensuring that leaseholders receive comprehensive information on the planned major works programme, how it will affect their homes, how their contribution to costs is worked out and the payment methods available;
- establishing clear mechanisms to communicate with leaseholders about reported repairs, their contribution to the costs and whether they have been completed satisfactorily;
- taking steps to maximise collection of service charges and leaseholder contributions to major works; and
- establishing a specific policy for resolving leasehold disputes and taking steps to record and monitor the number and nature of service charge queries and disputes.

17 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- improved outcomes for leaseholders;
- increased customer satisfaction; and
- improved value for money.

18 The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented within six months of report publication.

Recommendation

R3 Strengthen the approach to value for money and performance management by:

- undertaking comprehensive comparisons of cost, performance and customer satisfaction for all services and report and act on the outcomes;
- taking steps to ensure that all service improvement plans and strategy action plans have clear and measurable outcomes;
- systematically evaluating the service delivery outcomes of staff training and development activities; and
- ensuring that staff personal development reviews are carried out in a systematic, robust and consistent way.

- 19 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:
- improved use of resources and
 - increased focus on business objectives and performance improvement.
- 20 The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented within three months of report publication.

Recommendation
<p>R4 Fully implement the actions contained in existing service improvement plans and strategy action plans including completion of the strategic options appraisal for sheltered housing, the review of the housing register and market testing of the responsive repairs service.</p>
<p>R5 Take action to address all other weaknesses identified in this report and report on the findings to the Stevenage Homes board, Stevenage Borough Council, residents and key stakeholders.</p>

- 21 We would like to thank the staff of Stevenage Homes and Stevenage Borough Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.
- 22 Dates of inspection: 16 February to 27 February 2009

Report

Context

The locality

- 23** Stevenage is situated in Hertfordshire, 33 miles north of London, and was the first of the post-war new towns. Stevenage has a population of approximately 80,000 people. This population is contained within borders originally designed for 60,000 and the demand for housing in Stevenage continues to increase.
- 24** There is a strong correlation between deprivation and social housing in Stevenage. Bedwell and Shephall are among the most deprived wards in the region according to the Index of Multiple Deprivation and are the locations with the highest proportion of SH properties. Stevenage has a young population with the 2001 Census showing that 65 per cent of residents are under 45 which is higher than the figures nationally (60 per cent) and for the East of England (59 per cent).
- 25** Only 5 per cent of residents described themselves as belonging to a visible minority ethnic group with the most common being Indian (1.1 per cent). A joint review by North Hertfordshire and Stevenage in the lead up to the Strategic Housing Market Assessment 2007 predicted a high growth rate in the population aged 65 and above, by 57 per cent (17,300 people) between 2004 and 2029. It is estimated this age group will represent 20.3 per cent of the North Hertfordshire and Stevenage population, with far reaching implications for housing, health, social care policy and provision.
- 26** The resident profile for Stevenage Homes (SH) is different from Stevenage as a whole. SH estimates that its residents are more likely to be under 16 or over 64 than the population as a whole and are less likely to be from a visible minority ethnic group (2.6 per cent compared to 5.4 per cent) but more likely to be Irish (2.7 per cent compared to 1.7 per cent). The largest visible minority group among tenants is Black Caribbean at 1 per cent. SH residents are also less likely to be from a minority religious group (1.6 per cent compared to 2.5 per cent for Stevenage as a whole), less likely to be economically active and more likely to be in a lone parent household. The largest number of new migrants to Stevenage comes from Poland, India, Zimbabwe, France, the Philippines and South Africa.

The Council

- 27** The Council comprises 39 councillors and is led by the Labour party, with 30 seats. The business of the Council is governed by a cabinet with a leader and cabinet members.
- 28** The Audit Commission assessed Stevenage Borough as a 'good' Council in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment in 2004.

The service

- 29** The Council established an Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO) called Stevenage Homes (SH) on the 1 October 2006. The ALMO has delegated responsibility for providing housing management and maintenance services to approximately 8,300 tenants plus approximately 1,300 leaseholders, receiving a management fee for this service. It manages the Council's £14.8 million capital programme budget. It employs approximately 270 staff to deliver the service.
- 30** The Council has retained the following functions:
- overall housing strategy, including liaison with housing associations, housing needs assessments and cross-tenure stock condition surveys;
 - homeless responsibilities;
 - lettings policy in consultation with SH;
 - general housing advice, not relating to an individual's housing tenancy;
 - policy for anti-social behaviour, in consultation with SH and with clear responsibilities and procedures for dealing with actual incidents;
 - owner occupation (private sector) strategies;
 - Housing Benefit/rent rebate administration;
 - tenant participation in developing housing policy and strategy;
 - overall policy on rents;
 - programme of Best Value reviews in consultation with SH;
 - progress reporting on energy efficiency measures under the Home Energy Conservation Act 1995;
 - membership of the Supporting People Commissioning Body; and
 - determining minimum standards of service required of SH and monitoring its performance.
- 31** Most customer contact with Stevenage Homes is through the Customer Service Centre which is situated in the town centre with a call centre attached.
- 32** The ALMO is managed by a board that is made up of four tenants or leaseholders, four council nominees and four independents. It also has four sub-committees which focus on delivery and implementation; resources; governance and ethics; and audit. The day-to-day running of the company is delegated to the executive management team of five which includes the chief executive.
- 33** In September 2007 we inspected Landlord Services and judged it to be a poor, zero star service with promising prospects for improvement. Where relevant we start each section of the report with a brief description of what we found in 2007.
- 34** If the standards of Stevenage Homes meet Government criteria, the Council will receive additional Supported Borrowing to help it bring its homes up to the Government's Decent Homes standard.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

35 Stevenage Borough Council's mission³ is;

“Council and community working together to improve quality of life”

36 Its vision is to be ‘A town we can be proud of, a place people want to be.’ The Council's values are designed to show its commitment to the community it serves by recognising the importance of:

- putting people first;
- delivering value for money services; and
- ‘working together’ both as one organisation and in partnership with other agencies as appropriate.

37 Stevenage Homes' mission is;

"To deliver an excellent and efficient service, involve tenants and communities in Stevenage Homes' work, and transform homes and services”.

38 Its priorities are reflected in its strategic objectives to:

- provide value for money services that focus on customer needs;
- involve customers in all that it does;
- help develop communities that people are proud of;
- achieve the Decent Homes standard;
- be a learning organisation which encourages staff to do their best and achieve their potential; and
- find new business opportunities and put income back into services.

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

Access and customer care

39 In 2007, we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths in this area. Although there were some positive elements, such as aspects of the service provided from the customer service centre, the organisation had not defined its approach to customer care, there was limited measurement of customer satisfaction, few service standards in place, published information was limited and the ALMO was unable to determine who was not accessing services.

³ Making a Difference 2008-2013

- 40 In this inspection, we found that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Leadership is clear with a strong focus on access and customer care. It is easy to access services and staff are enthusiastic and committed to meeting customers' needs. Good quality customer information and comprehensive service standards are in place. Customer feedback is systematically captured and used to inform service improvements. Customer satisfaction with services is generally high and complaints are managed effectively. However, customer involvement in the strategic framework for access and customer care is underdeveloped.
- 41 There is clear leadership and a strong focus on access and customer care. This is reflected in SH's strategic priorities and is supported by a good quality customer focus strategy and action plan and a communication strategy, staff training, a cross-cutting working group of staff and a Board member champion. This is providing focus and direction for SH's work in this area.
- 42 It is easy to access services and staff are enthusiastic and committed to meeting customers' needs. Services can be accessed in person or by telephone through the high quality customer service centre provided by the Council under a service level agreement (SLA), or through SH's website. Opening hours have been extended in consultation with service users and satisfaction with this is high at 98.1 per cent. Repair appointments are available from 8am to 8pm and on Saturday mornings. The service is responsive with 91 per cent of calls answered within the 30 second target during the year to date and only 2.3 per cent of calls abandoned. Enquiries on issues covered by the SLA are dealt with at the first point of contact in 96.5 per cent of cases and in 66.1 per cent for other matters. The recent launch of an online customer account is enabling people to access the majority of SH services and information about their tenancy when it suits them best. The customer service centre is accessible to people who have disabilities and translation and interpretation services are readily available and publicised well. Opportunities to use services are maximised.
- 43 A clear and comprehensive set of service standards is in place. These have been developed with tenants and leaseholders and include general standards for customer service and specific standards for each service SH provides. Performance is systematically monitored and widely reported and shows that the majority of targets are being met. Customers can be clear about what they can expect when accessing SH services.
- 44 Customer information is comprehensive and of good quality. This has been developed with tenants and leaseholders and includes clearly written, attractive service leaflets, handbooks for tenants, leaseholders and on repairs, and the informative 'Housing for You' newsletter. Recognising that some tenants have limited reading skills, the tenant handbook is also available in a high quality DVD format. The focus on clear communication is strong and supported by corporate membership of the Plain English Campaign with staff trained and key documents awarded the Campaign's 'Crystal Mark'. The website is attractive and easy to use and provides a range of useful information. Customers are well informed about the services available.

How good is the service?

- 45 SH systematically and actively seeks customers' feedback on their experience of services. This is done through the structures for tenant and leaseholder involvement, road shows and conferences, the comments, compliments and complaints process, and through satisfaction surveys for all services. Feedback is used effectively to improve and shape services and customers are told how their views have had an impact. Improvements include placing mutual exchange adverts on the website, the redesigning and ideas for content of Housing for You, the development of the online customer account and changing the timing of text reminders for repairs from 24 to 48 hours before work is due to be done. This clearly demonstrates that customers' views are valued.
- 46 Customer satisfaction with services is generally high. The 2008 STATUS survey showed that 77 per cent of tenants were satisfied with the service overall. While this has fallen from 81 per cent in 2006, SH is working to understand the reasons for this although the results are too recent to allow comparison with those of similar organisations to identify if this is a specific local issue or part of a national trend. Ongoing surveys of customers accessing specific services show high satisfaction and include:
- 96 per cent with telephone contact with the customer service centre and 100 per cent with face to face contact;
 - 95 per cent with major works and 91 per cent with completed responsive repairs;
 - 83 per cent with anti-social behaviour casework; and
 - 81 per cent with the caretaking service.
- 47 The approach to complaints is effective and well managed. The process is simple, clear and well publicised. Complaints are tracked to ensure that published timescales are met and customers receive good quality, clear responses which detail the action that will be taken to address issues raised. The executive management team receives a weekly report detailing the numbers, types and status of complaints received which highlights the high corporate priority given to this service area. Learning points are captured and used to drive improvement. While a very low response to customer surveys makes it difficult to assess overall satisfaction, the service incorporates all the features of an effective service.
- 48 Customer involvement in the strategic framework for access and customer care is underdeveloped. While it is positive that customers have been involved in setting service standards and feedback has led to many improvements, the customer focus strategy was drawn up without the involvement of customers, the communications champions group does not include any tenants and customers are not systematically involved in monitoring services, although there are plans to do this. SH cannot demonstrate that services are consistently delivered in line with customers' expectations and priorities.

Diversity

- 49 In 2007, we found that this was an area of considerable weakness. Although SH was developing its strategic approach it could not demonstrate that it was providing services fairly and equitably.
- 50 In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. SH has a good understanding of its customers' needs and is delivering and developing services in line with this. There is a strong focus on tenancy sustainment. Positive progress has been made on equality impact assessments with changes made as a result. The approach to hate crime, including domestic violence, is well developed. However, SH lacks a complete understanding of relative satisfaction for diverse groups and the approach to ensuring contractor compliance with equality and diversity principles is underdeveloped.
- 51 SH has a sound understanding of who its customers are. Good progress has been made in gathering customer profile information. Customer census forms have been completed by 57 per cent of residents with work taking place to increase the proportion further. In addition, information is held on gender and age for all tenants, ethnicity for 71 per cent, disability for 57 per cent, religion for 48 per cent and sexual orientation for 39 per cent. This is being cross checked with national Census data and also with data on new migrants registering for National Insurance purposes to identify issues. This is enabling SH to develop services which meet different needs.
- 52 Customer profile information is effectively used to inform service delivery and the development of new services. Information on individual tenants' needs is accessible to all staff through the IT system with many examples of it being used well to tailor services such as offers of sheltered housing being produced in large print and tenancy agreements translated into Polish. Profile information is also informing developments such as the tenant handbook on DVD, the pictorial lettable standard and anti-social behaviour leaflet, the development of passwords for repairs customers and a very successful targeted approach to tenants with rent arrears. Services are delivered in line with customers' needs and preferences.
- 53 There is a strong focus on tenancy sustainment which is evident in all areas of service delivery. This is supported by a clear policy, a vulnerable people strategy and a dedicated staff team. Needs assessment is built into pre- and post-tenancy processes with referral to appropriate agencies and floating support providers to ensure that tenants are able to remain in their homes.
- 54 The focus on equality and diversity is strong. This is supported by a corporate value to 'include everyone in our work by promoting equality and diversity', a good quality equality and diversity strategy with a detailed action plan which includes a single equality scheme, a cross-cutting working group and a Board champion. Board members, 97 per cent of staff and involved residents have had introductory sessions on equality and diversity with cultural awareness sessions now rolling out. This is supporting SH's work in this important area.

How good is the service?

- 55 Positive progress has been made on equality impact assessments (EIAs). SH has devised its own tailored scheme for EIAs and, of 21 services scoped, 17 have undergone a level one assessment with three to be completed by the end of March 2009, and a sheltered housing assessment is underway. Level two assessments have been completed for three service areas with two in progress and a further three identified for possible level two assessments depending on the outcome of monitoring. Summaries of completed EIAs are published on the website. Outcomes of EIAs to date include working with the Council to revise the allocations scheme, placing less reliance on written communication with customers, using positive action to address under-representation on the board where appropriate, successfully targeting arrears work towards BME tenants and including adaptations within future DHS works.
- 56 SH is monitoring who is accessing key services. This includes the housing register, Home4U, resident involvement and responsive repairs. This is showing that access is broadly in line with the profile of tenants and the wider community with corrective action having been taken to address potentially discriminatory elements of the housing allocations scheme.
- 57 SH complies with key equality guidance. Following changes to the allocations scheme mentioned above, it has self-assessed as complying with the Commission for Racial Equality's Code of Practice on Racial Equality in Housing. It also considers that it has reached level three of the Equality Standard for Local Government with a formal external assessment scheduled for March 2009.
- 58 Service users are influencing SH's work on equality and diversity. A tenant member sits on the equality and diversity cross-cutting group and a resident EIA group has been established which has influenced the EIA of resident involvement. This ensures that a customer focus is maintained.
- 59 SH is actively monitoring the profile of staff, Board members and involved residents to ensure that it reflects the wider community. Involved residents reflect the wider tenant profile apart although people who do not have disabilities are under-represented and the Board is also broadly representative. Disabled people are under-represented in the workforce and so SH has been recognised under the Job Centre Plus 'Two Ticks' scheme as being 'positive about disability' in a bid to address this. It has also signed up to 'Age Positive' to ensure that its employment practices reflect good practice.
- 60 Efforts have been made to engage with and consult 'hard to reach' communities. Customer census data has been used to inform a series of targeted telephone calls to residents in different diversity strands to establish if they saw any barriers to access. Having identified through the STATUS survey that Muslim tenants were proportionately more dissatisfied than other tenants, a focus group was held to understand the reasons for this with the main issues being that they were in the main waiting for very large properties which are in short supply. A focus group with 40 disabled people provided information on individuals' experience of accessing services and a focus group was held with under 29 year olds although this was not well attended and no specific issues emerged. SH has also commissioned a local translation and interpretation service to make contact with 34 customers who are known to not speak English to capture information on their needs and any barriers to accessing services.

- 61** SH is taking steps to understand how levels of satisfaction with services compare between different needs groups. When the 2008 STATUS survey showed that 75 per cent of BME tenants were satisfied overall compared to 77 per cent of white tenants with lower levels of satisfaction among Muslim customers, a focus group was held to identify any particular issues. STATUS results have also been broken down into the remaining diversity strands and have shown that satisfaction is generally higher for customers who have disabilities, customers receiving HB and lesbian, gay and bisexual customers. While this has not led to adjustments in service delivery, this monitoring is helping SH to develop its understanding of the needs of different groups.
- 62** The approach to hate crime, including domestic violence, is well developed. Appropriate policies and procedures are in place supported by staff training and helpful customer information with a clear person-centred approach. There is close monitoring and reporting of incidents and trends. Partnership working with a range of agencies is strong and supported by appropriate information sharing protocols. SH has also developed a third party reporting process so that staff and members of the public can alert it to cases where they believe that domestic violence may be an issue so that appropriate steps can be taken.
- 63** SH lacks a complete understanding of relative satisfaction for various diverse groups. While STATUS survey information is being used well, SH is not currently analysing its routine satisfaction surveys according to the main diversity strands of ethnic origin, gender, age, disability, religion and sexual orientation. Opportunities to identify and address any unequal experience of service delivery are being missed.
- 64** There is a lack of clarity about how the repairs service may be adjusted to meet the needs of vulnerable service users. A policy is in place which partly covers this, but the explanation of the circumstances in which a repair priority could be increased due to a tenant's vulnerability is not specific enough to support the delivery of a fair and equal service or to ensure that repairs are not unnecessarily upgraded to urgent or emergency status.
- 65** The approach to ensuring contractor compliance with equality and diversity principles is underdeveloped. While this is part of the tender selection process, ongoing monitoring of contractors is at an early stage and, while contractors are invited to attend SH's equality and diversity training, none have done so for some time. Opportunities to ensure that contractors work in accordance with SH's own stance on equality and diversity are not being maximised.

Stock investment and asset management

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 66** In 2007, we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths. There was no track record of effective procurement. In the absence of a resident profile the service was not fully customer focused and there was limited information for tenants on the improvement programme. However, there was appropriate information and policies around stock investment and procurement to establish the new investment programme on a proper footing.

How good is the service?

- 67** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. Asset management planning and programming is supported by robust stock condition information. Residents are influencing the major works programme. Works are completed to a high standard, show customer focus and the delivery of the investment programme is effectively managed. However, the strategic approach to sheltered housing and the approach to promoting increased energy efficiency are mixed.
- 68** SH's asset management strategy provides a sound basis for its approach in this area. It is informed by robust, validated stock condition data and supported by tools to assess the longer term sustainability of homes. It has been recently updated and links to wider strategies such as affordable warmth. The strategy sets out the broad principles of SH's approach to asset management including aids and adaptations, vacant homes, response repairs, and estate management. It sets the direction for delivering the Decent Homes Standard (DHS) and is supported by a detailed two year action plan.
- 69** Asset management planning and programming is supported by robust stock condition information. This is providing SH with the capacity to plan and test funding and DHS scenarios, including non decency by year, through a comprehensive IT system. The system has a high level of functionality and links well into existing housing management systems. Other staff are able to view the information generated by the system, such as programmes, on the intranet.
- 70** The risks associated with asbestos are managed effectively. The policy and procedure are sound and data on the presence and location of asbestos, captured through surveys and cloned across the stock, is held within the asset management and housing management IT systems. This enables electronic sharing of information with contractors, automatic updates on works orders and job tickets, and automatic updates on handheld devices for operatives who are piloting the mobile working system. Asbestos training has been delivered to all operatives. Guidance for tenants whose homes are affected has been improved and new tenants are given information on its location in their new homes. This is promoting the health and safety of both tenants and staff.
- 71** Effective partnership working is releasing resources, which means that in spite of constraints on capital programme funding, tenants are benefiting from improvements to their homes. Efficiencies have been targeted towards making homes decent, with 400 properties made decent in 2007/08, and with the support of savings, a further 720 planned for 2008/09.
- 72** Residents are actively influencing the major works programme. They are involved in procurement decisions, supported by one to one training, in contract monitoring through attendance at the reinvestment panel and strategic core group, and participate in reviews of each phase of work. Residents also determined programme choices such as materials, colours, and finishes informed by partners' advice on standardised fittings to minimise future maintenance and replacement issues. This is ensuring that programmes are delivered in line with tenants' aspirations.

- 73** Adoption of partnering principles within contract management is delivering savings and wider community benefits. Operational and strategic performance indicators are discussed at joint and individual performance meetings, contracts contain targeted efficiencies of 3.5 per cent per year, with freedoms introduced based on performance, for example, contractors using their own surveyors. Contracts also provide for community benefits such as providing one apprenticeship for each £1 million invested with one provided to date. Although there are no shared risk or reward arrangements, SH is programming work geographically to make best use of contractor time and resources, while maximising the number of elements renewed, which is releasing efficiency savings through discounts. Savings achieved in this way have enabled SH to implement planned and cyclical maintenance programmes.
- 74** Partnership working has delivered some positive outcomes for residents. An example of this is the replacement of a concrete staircase at a flat block at Shephall Way. Joint project management and use of the partner contractor's skills and expertise meant that the job came in under budget. A temporary staircase was used with adaptations such as ramps to enable access and two way radios were given to residents during the demolition phase for their safety. Added value included an extra layer of render and garden improvements at no cost. Careful choice of equipment and planning meant that no residents had to move out of the block while the work was completed.
- 75** Customer information about medium-term planned and major works is not fully in place, but is developing, and has improved. Due to uncertainties about future funding a broad outline has been included in Housing for You, the new tenant pack and on the website showing where the major works programme is scheduled to be, which is updated annually. Information for leaseholders is still developing, and SH has started to work with leaseholders to design a format for provision of recently procured programmes, such as roofing, which are due to commence in April 2009.
- 76** Major works are completed to a high standard and show customer focus. Open days provide advance information and help to explain how work will be done. One visit to measure, design and assess tenants' support needs, supported by customer census data, minimises disruption. Information packs are high quality, clearly written and comprehensive with photographs showing the stages of the different types of work with indications of timescales, the code of conduct and information on how to complain. A range of choices is available for fittings and finishes and also in the way work is done, for example, a choice of chasing or trunking when rewiring. Published standards ensure that customers know what to expect while work is carried out. Overall satisfaction is high at 95 per cent and higher for completed work at 98 per cent.

How good is the service?

- 77** SH is actively tackling the relatively high level of tenants who are refusing to have major works done to their homes. Refusals, which include 'no access', account for around 25 per cent of homes due to have work. Quality issues were a contributing factor, and this has been addressed. Lack of decoration vouchers or help for some types of major works is also a factor, and this is currently being explored with the Council. Where access has been difficult, for example, where people are not in during the day, SH and the partner contractors have introduced flexible appointment times for surveys and works such as early evenings and weekends. Other measures include ensuring that resident liaison officers have 'before and after' photos to encourage take-up, offering help with moving belongings and furniture and, more recently, being able to offer daytime respite space within contractor premises.
- 78** The delivery of the investment programme is effectively managed. Sound monitoring and control, with resident involvement, ensures that work is completed on time, within agreed budgets and to a high standard with action taken to address contractor underperformance. Work programmes for 2008/09 are on target to date for spend and delivery.
- 79** An appropriate range of planned and cyclical programmes are in place. This includes legionella testing, asbestos surveys and removal, door replacement, roofing repairs and renewals and external fabric maintenance, funded by efficiency savings. Lift, stair lift and fire alarm maintenance have been recently tendered. Following extensive consultation the internal decoration scheme has been reviewed to provide a service paid for by those who use it which is providing assistance to those who need it in an equitable way. This is ensuring the ongoing maintenance of components and services.
- 80** The strategic approach to sheltered housing is not yet fully developed. A number of schemes no longer meet modern standards and expectations and this has prompted a strategic review of provision to inform future investment decisions. Assessments of compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act have been carried out with a programme of short-term works completed to address some immediate issues. However, some issues cannot be remedied and until a longer-term approach has been developed by SH and the Council, some unsuitable housing remains.
- 81** The approach to the low energy efficiency levels of some homes is mixed. While the average standard assessment procedure (SAP) rating of the energy efficiency of homes is high at 69 points, there has been limited work to target mainly non-traditional homes with SAP ratings of less than 35 points. Some tenants are experiencing lower levels of thermal comfort as a result. However, a cavity wall insulation programme is underway with 75 per cent funding levered in from a national energy provider, targeted towards areas of highest deprivation.
- 82** The approach to some aspects of health and safety is not yet fully developed. SH has responded to recent Health and Safety Executive alerts, for example, on issues relating to back boilers and scalding risk, in a reactive way by checking when in properties and alerting contractors. It also placed an article in the May 2008 issue of Housing for You to alert tenants to this danger. However, a planned approach to tackling this issue has yet to be developed.

Responsive repairs

- 83** In 2007, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Performance was improving, appointments were available for repairs, reporting arrangements were generally good and there was increasing customer satisfaction. Weaknesses included inadequate performance monitoring, a high level of pre-inspections of work and a low level of post-inspections.
- 84** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. It is easy to access the service, which is delivered by SH's in-house building maintenance organisation (BMO). Repairs are generally completed quickly, work is of a high standard and there is a strong focus on completing repairs in one visit. However, post-inspection information is not used to take a strategic approach to improving quality and the balance between emergency and urgent repairs is variable.
- 85** It is easy to access the repairs service. There is a wide range of ways to report a repair including via the website and by freephone, and the revised repairs handbook supports tenants through the process. Repair appointments, made at the point the repair is reported, are available from 8am to 8pm and on Saturday mornings. Customers receive a text reminder 48 hours before the tradesperson is due to visit which is minimising missed appointments. Appropriate arrangements are also in place for dealing with out of hours emergencies. On average 93 per cent of the appointments made were kept in November, December and January 2009.
- 86** Repairs are generally completed quickly as shown in the table below. Following a data quality exercise in 2008, performance information is now accurate although comparison with previous data is not possible due to the unreliability of that data. Customers are generally receiving a responsive service.

Table 1 Responsive repairs performance

	November 2008	December 2008	January 2009
Emergency repairs - 24 hours	97.59 per cent	96.56 per cent	97.2 per cent
Urgent repairs - 5 working days	96 per cent	95.6 per cent	98.1 per cent
Routine repairs - 20 working days	99.7 per cent	96.42 per cent	95.8 per cent

Source: Stevenage Homes Performance Reports

- 87** Work is completed to a high standard. Tradespeople are well trained and committed to providing a good service to their customers. Post-inspection of a 10 per cent sample of completed repairs with corrective action taken is ensuring that work is of a consistently high quality. Customer satisfaction is high at 91 per cent.

How good is the service?

- 88** There is a strong focus on completing repairs in one visit. This is supported by a high proportion of multi-skilled tradespeople who also carry out their own pre-inspections, accurate diagnosis, appropriate arrangements for accessing and storing materials, vans stocked with appropriate parts and a mobile working pilot supported by handheld technology. Between October and December 2008, 99.8 per cent of repairs which were done as part of the mobile working pilot were completed in one visit. This is providing a customer focused service and value for money.
- 89** Steps have been taken to increase the value for money of the service. There is a strong focus on completing jobs right first time as detailed above. Pre-inspections and work order variations are well controlled. The bonus system for tradespeople has ended. There has been a significant reduction in the use of expensive agency staff. Savings have been achieved through stores and van fleet procurement and the mobile working pilot is making effective and efficient use of resources. Tenants are receiving a better service as a result.
- 90** The approach to post-inspection of completed work is underdeveloped. Although remedial works are carried out, there is a lack of analysis by, for example, operative or job type, to see if there are common or recurring issues which could be addressed. Opportunities to further improve quality are being missed.
- 91** The balance of emergency and urgent repairs is variable. While in the past emergency and urgent repairs have been in line with the recommended levels of 10 per cent and 20 per cent respectively, this has fluctuated through the year. Between November and January 2008/09 these increased to a combined total of around 41 per cent. While steps are being taken to ensure that repairs are not unnecessarily ordered on a higher priority, resources are potentially being wasted.
- 92** It is not clear if the arrangements for completing emergency repairs out of hours are providing value for money. Work out of hours is currently done by a variety of contractors. SH has recognised that this is a weakness and is exploring options such as assigning two multi-skilled operatives to undertake such work. However, until this is complete, value for money is not assured.

Empty (void) property repairs

- 93** In 2007, we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths. Performance was improving but remained poor. Tenants were not given the opportunity to use the re-let standard when viewing properties, the decorating voucher scheme was inflexible and there was inadequate information about works which may be carried out to the property after tenants moved in.
- 94** In this inspection, we found that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Vacant homes are repaired quickly and to a high standard. The process is customer focused and satisfaction is high. However, the policy does not reflect practice when setting targets for completing repairs.
- 95** Vacant homes are repaired quickly. A target of ten days has been set to complete work, including carrying out rewiring or other major works if needed, and this is met for 98 per cent of vacant homes. New tenants are not waiting longer than necessary to move in and rent loss is minimised.

- 96** Vacant homes are repaired to a high standard. This is supported by a lettable standard which has been developed with tenants and which includes photos of what is and is not acceptable. This is given to prospective tenants at offer stage so that they can be clear what to expect. Customer feedback has led to the introduction of a dedicated cleaning team to ensure that homes are cleaned to a high standard and garden tidying is now included in the lettable standard. New tenants receive decoration allowances in the form of a pre-paid card for a national DIY chain which has increased customer choice and also value for money for SH. Energy efficient light bulbs are fitted in all rooms free of charge as part of an arrangement with a national energy provider. Customer satisfaction with the condition of their new home is high at 93 per cent.
- 97** The process is customer focused. As well as repairing homes quickly and to a high standard, all customers have an accompanied viewing at a time to suit them. New tenants receive a useful welcome pack which includes items such as refuse sacks. They also receive a comprehensive information pack which includes a schedule of any outstanding repairs, details of major works which are due to take place, asbestos information where relevant, gas and electrical safety certificates and an energy performance certificate.
- 98** Guidance for setting targets for void repairs is not fully effective. Although there is a clear focus to complete repairs in ten days, this is not supported by policy guidance for staff which still contains timescale targets based on the value of works required rather than the amount of work needed. While in practice targets are based on the volume of work, the current wording of the policy means that, if there are staff changes, otherwise strong performance in this area could be undermined.

Gas servicing

- 99** In 2007, we found that this was an area of significant weakness. The organisation was not effectively managing the risks associated with the health and safety of its tenants.
- 100** In this inspection, we found that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Performance is strong and legal duties are met. SH is effectively using available tools to gain access and there is a clear customer focus. Innovative methods are used to ensure that tenants understand the importance of allowing access. The gas contract is adding value for service users and SH. However, SH has not fully evaluated the effectiveness of its approach and customer satisfaction surveys have not yet begun.
- 101** Performance on gas safety checks and servicing is strong. At the end of February 2009, 99.97 per cent of homes had been serviced within the 12 month target with only two overdue, both under four weeks with appointments made for work to be done. Scrutiny is strong with performance reported to appropriate levels. The 16 homes with solid fuel appliances are serviced annually with chimneys swept. Gas servicing is offered to leaseholders at cost price. External quality checks are undertaken on 10 per cent of completed work. Legal duties are being met.

How good is the service?

- 102** SH is effectively using a range of tools to ensure access is gained. There is a strong focus on gaining access quickly through a clear no-access procedure. This is supported by evening and weekend appointments, text reminders, support from tenancy officers, flags on the IT system, and effective promotion of the need to allow access. While Environmental Protection Act provisions have been used as a last resort, legal action has reduced from around 100 cases in 2006/07 to 12 cases in 2008/09.
- 103** The importance of allowing access for safety checks is well promoted to tenants. This is highlighted in handbooks and articles appear in every edition of Housing for You. SH has recognised the importance of not using the same text and article format each time so that readers do not assume it is the same information and so do not read it. Posters are used and widely circulated, and again, SH has changed the design to keep the information fresh. An eye-catching animation design based on story boards is being used to target younger tenants. A factsheet has also been developed, and new tenants receive an easy to understand information sheet in the new tenant pack. This is supporting SH's effective approach in this service area.
- 104** The service is delivered in a customer-focused way. SH attends contractors' 'toolbox talks' to emphasise its expectations on wearing uniforms, showing ID and conduct in tenants' homes. Tenants are contacted 24 hours before the appointment to remind them. A female engineer is available for tenants who prefer this. Evening and weekend appointments are offered and publicised. The contract covers servicing and repair where necessary which minimises disruption by avoiding repeat visits. This is ensuring that customers receive a responsive service.
- 105** Appropriate arrangements are in place to minimise risks to tenants who may be sleeping in rooms which have gas appliances. Contractors are aware of the risks and requirements, which include capping any fires. Tenancy management staff alert the service where they know of a hospital discharge or other reason where the tenant may have to do this for a temporary period, in which case appliances are capped and boilers serviced, carbon monoxide detectors are fitted and if required, alternative means of heating are provided. This complies with safety guidelines.
- 106** The gas contract is focused on achieving value for money and added value. Payment is made on completion only with no provision for abortive calls or follow-up visits. Gas engineers' vans carry imprest stock matched to known property features which supports a 'right first time' approach. A dedicated resident liaison officer is the link between engineers and tenants with a freephone number to provide direct contact. This provides effective use of resources and positive outcomes for service users.
- 107** While SH is beginning to evaluate the relative success of the different stages of its no access procedure, this is at an early stage and so has not yet led to improvements in processes or in the use of resources.
- 108** Customer satisfaction with the service cannot yet be evidenced. While a survey has been developed and is due to be implemented, there is currently no data to indicate whether or not customers are happy with the service provided. Opportunities to improve the service have not been maximised.

Aids and adaptations

- 109** In 2007, we found that weaknesses substantially exceeded strengths. The service was undeveloped and lacked customer focus. There was no formal policy and procedure for aids and adaptations. A draft policy had been drawn up in consultation with social services and the officers who dealt with private sector works, but it was not finalised and there had been no service user involvement in its production.
- 110** In this inspection, we found that strengths and weaknesses are balanced. The service is promoted well and the policy and procedure reflects recommended practice. SH has worked hard to tackle a significant backlog and overall waiting times are now low. However, adaptations work is not linked to the investment programme and there are gaps in performance management activity.
- 111** The service is widely promoted. As well as coverage in the repairs handbook, a useful booklet, drawn up with service users, includes a clear explanation of the process, helpful examples, target timescales and answers to common questions. The leaflet is also available on the website and has been widely distributed to community centres, hospitals, GPs and libraries. This is ensuring that customers know that the service is available.
- 112** The policy and procedure for aids and adaptations is clear and reflects recommended practice. This has been developed together with FOSTA, the County Council, and stakeholders such as Age Concern, and reflects government guidance. It includes overall target timescales, supplemented by targets for each stage and delivery targets based on job types. This is providing a sound framework for the service.
- 113** Efforts are made to ensure that the work done is of high quality. Adaptations work is done by a multi-skilled team which minimises disruption for tenants. All work is post-inspected with a follow-up one month later to check that the adaptation is meeting the needs of the customer. Customer satisfaction is high with 93 per cent satisfied with the overall process and 95 per cent with the quality of the work during October to December 2008.
- 114** Steps have been taken to minimise delays. Minor works are completed quickly through the responsive repairs service. Due to a backlog of around 150 cases waiting for an occupational therapist (OT) assessment, SH has trained some of its own staff to be 'trusted assessors'.
- 115** Effective use is made of vacant adapted homes wherever possible. Adaptations details are recorded on the main database and these are included in property adverts when homes become vacant. A list of applicants who need adapted homes is maintained and lettings staff contact them when suitable vacancies arise to remind them to bid. An in-house OT also assesses adapted empty homes to ensure that they are suitable for particular applicants and to assess any further alteration required. Arrangements are in place for the stair lift supplier to remove and reinstall adaptations which are no longer needed so that other tenants can benefit from them. This is helping to make best use of resources.

How good is the service?

- 116** SH has worked hard to tackle a significant backlog and overall waiting times are now low. In the past year a backlog of 145 longstanding cases has been cleared, assisted by additional funding to bring the overall budget for 2008/09 to £1.1 million. Performance has substantially improved with the average time taken to assess and complete works steadily reducing from 556 days in February 2008 to 47 days in January and February 2009. However, some customers have faced lengthy waits for the adaptations they need.
- 117** Adaptations work has not been aligned to the investment programmes. While this will be included for the next phase of works, the potential to minimise disruption for tenants whose homes require work to bring them up to the Decent Homes Standard and to maximise value for money has been missed.
- 118** Work to set budgets based on likely levels of need is still at an early stage. The 2009/10 budget of £1.1 million has been based on analysis of referral rates by cost per month, additional monies for extensions, and further funds anticipating an increase in demand following publicity for the service and a broad understanding of the tenant profile. Further work is planned to pull together data from a number of different sources, such as PCT data, national Census data, SH customer profile information, OT information, and intelligence from MORI and STATUS to help inform an assessment of need to influence budget setting. However, a firm basis for future budget setting has not yet been established.
- 119** Procurement arrangements are underdeveloped. Major adaptations are subject to individual tendering and the servicing contract for stairlifts and hoists has not been reviewed for some time. While a pilot for walk-in showers took place with partners in 2008/09 and reduced rates have been negotiated with partners for work done as part of the Decent Homes programme during 2009/10, opportunities to maximise value for money through effective procurement are being missed.
- 120** There are gaps in performance monitoring activity. Minor works done as responsive repairs are not separated out from other repair performance to enable targeted monitoring and management. While the time taken to complete work is monitored, there is no monitoring of the length of time the process takes from the point that the need was first expressed through to the need being met, including the lengthy time taken to complete an OT assessment. The whole customer experience is not captured and opportunities to improve and speed up the service are being missed.

Housing income management

- 121** In 2007, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The approach to benefit and debt advice was unsystematic, collection of leaseholders' service charges was improving but was still poor and there had been limited involvement of residents in the service. There were positive aspects including a focus on leaseholders and a well-structured approach to former tenants' arrears. A full range of payment options were available, there was helpful information for residents on rent and service charges, and arrears management including former tenants' arrears was well structured.

- 122** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. It is easy to make rent payments. Performance on rent collection is improving and compares well to other ALMOs. The rent arrears procedure is robust. There is a strong focus on tenancy sustainment and customer profile information is used to target support. However, there is not enough focus on rent payment issues at pre-tenancy stage and customers are not routinely involved in shaping the service.
- 123** It is easy to make rent payments. A comprehensive range of methods is available including online payment with a focus on increasing the proportion of tenants paying by Direct Debit as the most cost effective method. This method is promoted through flyers, personal contact and incentive payments which have led to an increase from 22 per cent tenants choosing this method to 26 per cent against a target of 32 per cent.
- 124** There is a positive range of customer information. This includes clear quarterly rent statements with tenants now able to access their current balance online. The website carries useful information including a range of rent-related leaflets, advice and signposting to other agencies including the credit union, a link to the Council's Housing Benefit (HB) calculator and to the Financial Services Authority debt awareness test.
- 125** Performance on collection of rent and rent arrears is improving and now compares well with other ALMOs. In 2006/07 SH collected 97.85 per cent of rent due, 98.31 per cent in 2007/08 with 98.11 per cent collected to the end of December 2008. Current unaudited performance places SH among the best performing ALMOs based on in-year benchmarking data.
- 126** There is an effective relationship with the Council's HB team. Regular monthly meetings are held to discuss cases and to update each team on emerging issues. However, SH staff are not able to verify information and can only access some elements of the HB system. This limits the effectiveness of SH to provide a full service to its tenants.
- 127** SH has adopted the Council's Corporate Debt Policy to help it deliver a flexible and sensitive approach when dealing with multiple debts, including debts to the Council. There are effective arrangements between SH and the Council that enable Housing Benefit claw-backs and payments to Council Tax debts to be renegotiated.
- 128** The rent arrears procedure is robust. It clearly supports SH's approach to early intervention and income maximisation, with processes starting when one weeks' rent is overdue and with an emphasis on personal contact. The procedure sets out the requirements for the Income Advisors to offer support to tenants by way of direct advice or referral to external agencies, as well as the importance of securing information about tenants' income and expenditure to help determine whether any arrangements achieved are sustainable. This is supported by an effective IT system and effective case management in line with procedures. This is supporting SH staff in minimising and collecting arrears.

How good is the service?

- 129** The new staffing structure has enabled SH to shift its focus towards tenancy sustainment when dealing with cases of rent arrears. This includes a specialist team concentrating on income recovery which is now able to spend time on establishing reasons for non-payment, assessing benefit entitlement and signposting customers to agencies to provide support and advice. This change in focus has resulted in fewer evictions during the year to date and has increased rent collection rates.
- 130** SH understands who is most likely to be in arrears and has taken steps to target this group. Using customer census data, SH has analysed its arrears cases and found that tenants aged between 20 and 45 are most likely to be in arrears. A targeted approach has been taken to mitigate this risk including making contact with this group of customers in a way that is appropriate, including radio adverts and text messaging. Following an EIA of income collection, SH found that tenants from a BME background were disproportionately represented at higher levels of arrears. Action was taken to improve translation services including written information and there is now no longer a disparity.
- 131** SH communicates effectively with residents experiencing rent arrears. All standard letters are in plain English and easy to understand, the use of difficult terminology is limited and letters include the strapline 'if you fail to maintain payments, you may risk losing your home'. This approach makes it clear to residents that payment of arrears is important.
- 132** SH adopts innovative techniques to encourage rent payment. In 2008 it ran a Christmas campaign and sent cards to those with clear accounts thanking them for payment, and to those in arrears reminding them to pay. This cost in the region of £3,500 and generated additional income of £31,000 when compared to the same period in previous years.
- 133** Relationships with the courts support SH in recovering debt. Over the years SH staff have established a good relationship with the County Court and this has helped with the right of audience issues that some ALMOs have experienced. It is positive that of the three judges that are most frequently hearing cases, two have granted SH the right of audience. The Council supports SH in presenting cases where there is no right of audience. This arrangement has reduced costs for SH which, combined with online court applications being routinely made, has resulted in this element of the service offering value for money.
- 134** Tenants have access to appropriate and timely advice and support. SH has created a Welfare Rights Officer post to promote tenancy sustainment by supporting customers who need help to maximise their entitlement to benefits. The service is accessible with surgeries provided at the customer service centre, at temporary accommodation and in sheltered housing schemes. The post also provides advice and assistance to other SH staff to ensure that they are fully aware of the help available to customers. The post has to date generated additional income of over £3,000 in HB backdates alone since its inception. SH income advisors have been trained to prepare financial statements with tenants to establish realistic agreements for debt repayment. Effective referral arrangements are in place with external providers of money advice including the CAB and the Credit Union with outcomes monitored.

- 135** SH is engaging in positive work to minimise the impact of the current economic climate on service users. SH is part of a Borough-wide Credit Crunch Task Force with outcomes including the provision of credit union surgeries in the Customer Service Centre and wider promotion of the service. SH pays the joining fee for tenants, leaseholders and Careline users and has also paid for credit union leaflets to be printed. This is ensuring that customers are aware of the availability of affordable borrowing.
- 136** Performance on recovering former tenant arrears is strong. SH has used ALMO benchmarking data to help it determine whether its former tenant arrears service offers value for money and found that the average ALMO recovery rate is 9.72 per cent compared to its own collection rate of 47.79 per cent which includes 8.87 per cent collected by external agencies. SH is increasing resources for service delivery.
- 137** While some work has taken place to create a payment culture, this is underdeveloped. At present, no work takes place with potential tenants, with a pre-tenancy assessment only being undertaken at the sign up interview. It is positive that SH undertakes a new tenant visit four weeks after letting and again at eight months and the staff who do these visits do liaise with income advisors in respect of any issues relating to non-payment. However, limited work before tenancies begin means that some tenants may be unaware of the implications of the costs of sustaining a tenancy and this increases the risk of tenancy failure.
- 138** Customers are not routinely involved in the income collection service. SH undertook a rent survey in June 2008 which showed that 73 per cent of those with arrears were satisfied with income recovery processes and that 91 per cent of those with clear accounts were also satisfied. However, regular satisfaction information is not routinely collected and customers have not been involved in setting priorities, agreeing the procedure or in managing performance of the service, although there are examples where feedback has influenced some changes including the creation of the welfare rights post and early intervention. Opportunities to develop the service in line with tenants' preferences and aspirations are being missed.
- 139** Performance on collection of other debts is weak. Only 84.3 per cent of leaseholder service charges for 2008/09 had been collected to the end of December 2008. Also, although SH has incentivised payment of rechargeable repairs by not charging an administration fee to advance payers, this has not resulted in improved performance which stands at 30 per cent compared to a target of 35 per cent. While a new process to ensure that all potential transfers and mutual exchanges are inspected before tenancy termination is expected to have a positive impact, income is not currently maximised in this area.

Resident involvement

- 140** In 2007, we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths. There was an over-reliance on traditional methods of involvement, resident contribution to policy and practice was not fully developed, early involvement was of recent introduction and the approach to hard-to-reach groups was undeveloped. However, there was positive promotion of resident involvement, satisfaction with opportunities to be involved was improving and the service was under active development.

How good is the service?

- 141** In this inspection, we found that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. SH's strategic approach is strong and it is genuinely committed to involving residents. Residents can shape and influence services in a well-publicised range of ways and there are many positive outcomes from this. SH is working hard to ensure its approach is inclusive. However, resident involvement in monitoring and managing service performance is underdeveloped as is the range of training opportunities available.
- 142** SH is clear about the purpose of resident involvement and has a strong strategic approach. This is supported by a strategic objective 'to involve customers in all we do', a well developed Tenant Compact, 'Making Your Voice Heard', and a Board member champion. Resident involvement is also emphasised in the Delivery Plan.
- 143** SH is genuinely committed to resident involvement and is working to embed this across the organisation. The staff competency framework has helped to focus behaviours on delivering outcomes and all staff are required to demonstrate that they 'involve others' in order to meet the standards set by the framework. All staff have had resident involvement training and it is regularly raised at one-to-one and team meetings. The message that resident involvement is key to successfully delivering services is communicated to staff through the induction process for new staff, through the staff newsletter, by the executive management team, through staff conferences and training. This has enabled SH to deliver changes at a consistent pace.
- 144** There is a clear framework for resident involvement. This is supported by a structure which shows a clear path from involvement opportunities at an operational level through to the Board which enables involved residents to influence and connect with Board members and for Board members to be able to identify issues that are important to residents.
- 145** Resident involvement is well resourced. SH has created a dedicated staff team, a budget which is complemented by provision in service budgets for involving residents, funding for the Federation of Stevenage Tenants Associations (FOSTA) and a resource centre for residents. SH provides childcare, travelling expenses, room hire, a carers' allowance, and meets dietary and access needs. It also fulfils the treasury function for groups and takes minutes. Training has covered issues such as chairing, secretarial and presentation skills, value for money and equality and diversity. Residents are supported to be fully involved.
- 146** Residents can shape and influence services in a well-publicised range of ways. A high number are doing so with 600 people in the customer pool, or around 6.3 per cent of tenants and leaseholders. The approach is inclusive with two people living in temporary accommodation currently in the pool and the service aims to ensure that customers feel able to engage in a way that they feel most comfortable with. Consultation activities are well planned and monitored ensuring that individuals are not overcommitted, duplication is limited and learning maximised. Opportunities for involvement in strategic and operational issues include:
- contributing through customer satisfaction surveys;
 - being part of the customer pool of people who have indicated they are interested in influencing services;
 - membership of the consultation board;

- attendance at annual tenant roadshows with 600 attending in 2008;
- shaping the content of Housing for You and customer information through the editorial board;
- participation in estate walkabouts;
- involvement in the customer conference planning team;
- involvement in focus groups on particular issues such as leasehold matters, caretaking and estate management;
- membership of service groups such as repairs, value for money and anti-social behaviour;
- the leaseholder forum;
- involvement in focus groups for sheltered housing residents and Careline users;
- membership of a network of tenants' and residents' associations;
- membership of FOSTA; and
- membership of the SH board.

147 SH is actively working to increase the number of involved residents. It has set a target to increase customer pool membership by 5 per cent each year. This is partly being achieved by targeting new tenants through the settling-in visit. Tenants are given a leaflet explaining the pool and the pool newsletter and resident involvement staff then follow up the visit with telephone calls. Large well-attended events like Stevenage Day and Broadwater Day are also targeted along with more local events. This is helping to draw in fresh membership.

148 SH is taking steps to encourage representation from customers from hard to reach groups in its involvement structures. It has recognised that some people such as those from BME communities and young people under 25 are under represented. To address this, SH has worked with the social exclusion forum to 'piggy back' events that may attract under-represented residents although this has had limited success as the forum has tended to focus on events and support for older people. The resident involvement team has also personally invited customers from under-represented groups to attend events, by telephoning them directly, rather than relying on the usual publicity materials. This has been more successful with people with disabilities advising on signage for events.

149 As the main representative body for tenants and leaseholders in Stevenage, FOSTA is influencing all services provided by SH. This is increasing awareness and resident focus within the organisation and provides valuable feedback on housing and wider community issues. FOSTA has comprehensive and robust terms of reference which highlight the importance of its role in encouraging and empowering residents to have a greater influence in their community. There is a well defined code of conduct and equalities issues are given a high profile, with membership open to all. Minutes of residents' meetings show that they are well organised with a good level of challenge and discussion. This is supporting the effective engagement of service users.

How good is the service?

150 Residents are actively shaping and influencing service delivery. Examples include:

- the selection of major works contractors and the ongoing monitoring of contracts;
- selection of the range of choices of fittings and finishes for major works;
- shaping improvements to the repairs service including developing the repairs policy, simplifying repair categories, defining 'right first time', updating the repairs handbook and reviewing existing repairs satisfaction surveys;
- the appointment of senior staff;
- the development of service standards for all services;
- the development of the online account;
- the development of new customer information;
- developing policies on domestic violence, anti-social behaviour and the revised lettable standard for empty homes; and
- shaping the estate walkabout programme.

151 SH actively monitors and publicises the impact and outcomes of resident involvement. It systematically evaluates activities by diversity of participants, their satisfaction and value for money. It also captures the resulting improvement and includes a 'you said, we did' response to issues raised. Outcomes are widely publicised through, for example, the resident pool newsletter which targets current and potential pool members. SH and residents can be clear that resident involvement is delivering outcomes.

152 Satisfaction with opportunities for involvement is mixed. The 2008 STATUS survey showed that this had unexpectedly fallen from 61 per cent to 55 per cent. SH has moved quickly to understand this by comparing its data with that of ALMOs which have also received their 2008 data, which shows a mixed picture, and by looking at data from in-house surveys that asked the same question following specific involvement events. This data shows a much more positive response with satisfaction ranging from 68 per cent to 89 per cent.

153 Involvement of residents in monitoring and managing performance is currently underdeveloped. At present performance information is provided to FOSTA and to the wider tenant body through Housing for You and the website. It is positive that there are examples of where FOSTA has challenged performance in some areas, including the standard of grounds maintenance, which resulted in a change in standards and an additional £50,000 of funding made available to bring landscaping up to an acceptable standard. However, at present there are limited opportunities for residents to systematically challenge performance in individual service areas. SH has plans in place to develop some service groups to undertake this role.

154 Training opportunities available for tenants are underdeveloped. General training is offered to involved tenants, as outlined earlier. However, a skills analysis of involved residents has not taken place and tenants involved in more strategic issues, such as procurement, have not received specialised training. This limits the capacity of residents to become fully involved.

Tenancy and estate management

Tenancy Management

- 155** In 2007, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The approach to serious anti-social behaviour (ASB) was well rounded. However, the priorities for work in neighbourhoods, while well defined and beginning to develop, were not yet balanced.
- 156** In this inspection, we found that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Tenancy audits are systematic and deliver positive outcomes. There is a strong focus on tenancy sustainment. The approach to ASB is well developed, tools are used effectively and casework is well managed. Multi-agency working is strong and productive. Data on ASB and trends is used well to target activity. Diversionary activity is leading to positive outcomes. However, the lack of IT to support ASB casework is not making best use of staff resources and there has been no formal evaluation of the overall effectiveness of SH's approach to ASB.
- 157** A well-established, systematic approach to tenancy audits is in place with a rolling programme of 20 per cent undertaken each year. As well as checking occupancy, tenant profile information is gathered and vulnerability, support needs and adaptation requirements are also identified. Direct Debit payment and the home contents insurance scheme are promoted along with signposting to benefits advice with around £8,000 in additional benefits claimed since August 2008. This is ensuring that homes are legally occupied and that tenants' needs are identified and met.
- 158** Efforts are made to ensure that new tenants successfully maintain their tenancies. New customer interviews take place immediately prior to the letting interview to assess any support and other needs with referrals to appropriate agencies made as necessary. Settling-in visits take place four weeks after letting and, as well as providing information on matters such as the customer pool, support needs are considered again. A further visit takes place after eight months of tenancy to ensure that the tenancy is progressing smoothly with a view to granting a secure tenancy and this provides a further opportunity to identify and address needs. This is supporting SH's work to promote tenancy sustainment.
- 159** SH's overall approach to ASB is well developed. This is supported by a clear, good quality ASB policy and procedure with a comprehensive process map to guide staff. It has signed up to the Respect Standard and has completed all actions identified in its gap analysis. It is easy to report ASB through a range of methods including a 24 hour line and the website and customer information is clearly written and helpful.
- 160** SH has a sound understanding of the nature of ASB and nuisance and makes proportionate use of a range of tools. This includes effective use of in-house mediation with 16 cases supported to date, the issuing of 300 ASB contracts (ABCs) and ASB agreements (ABAs) with only 27 breaches to date, three ASB injunctions, the closure of five crack houses and only two evictions. The tools used are effective overall with only 24 per cent of ASB cases resulting from repeat offenders. A range of tools is used to gather information including CCTV, mobile cameras, Dictaphones and portable video cameras all of which provide evidence which is admissible in court. This is all supporting an effective approach to ASB.

How good is the service?

- 161** Support for complainants, witnesses and perpetrators is effective. Action plans are developed with both complainants and perpetrators with arrangements for ongoing contact agreed at the outset. Dedicated, independent witness support has been arranged to support people during and after the court process if required. Perpetrators are referred to floating and other specialist support depending on their needs. Overall there is a strong and effective focus on tenancy sustainment.
- 162** ASB casework is well managed. There are clear targets for responding to reports of ASB depending on the severity of the situation and these are generally being met with 29 out of 36 cases dealt with within the stated targets in the third quarter of 2008/09. There are appropriate arrangements for quality checking casework and this is picked up through one-to-one meetings with discussions on each case to ensure that appropriate action is taken and that progress is being made. Customer and perpetrator satisfaction with the service provided by the ASB team is high at 83 per cent during 2008/09.
- 163** Multi-agency working is strong. SH is well represented at multi-agency forums, both at a strategic and a more operational, case-based level. Having a Police Community Support Officer co-located with the ASB team is enabling the sharing of intelligence and a unified approach through, for example, joint visits and work on ABCs and ABAs. SH has also led on the development of a bail address protocol to ensure that prolific offenders are not bailed to properties occupied by vulnerable tenants, an important part of tenancy sustainment. Overall, this is supporting an effective approach to ASB.
- 164** Positive use is made of data on ASB activity and trends. Information on hot spots is mapped and overlaid with police geographical information system data to establish common issues which could be addressed through a joint approach, for example, in the Bedwell area where there is a concentration of nightclubs and of flatted properties with 'cut throughs'. Data is also used to inform 'Your Neighbourhood' surveys with 25 carried out to date. These provide an opportunity to consult local people on their experience of nuisance and ASB to establish if there are issues which require further attention and resolution or if it is more an issue of perception with no evidence of problems. This process has been used to good effect at Ingleheim Court sheltered scheme where planting of bushes has provided boundaries without installing fencing, a gate has been fitted to stop people taking short cuts through the scheme and bins have been provided for dog walkers to deal with fouling issues. This is providing better outcomes for service users.
- 165** SH is developing an appropriate response to issues in specific locations. It has developed and piloted a 'good neighbour' agreement at Brent Court with a quarter of residents signed up in the first four weeks and plans to extend this to all high rise blocks by Easter. This is helping to prevent and manage issues and is providing a more positive environment for residents.
- 166** SH is promoting its success in dealing with nuisance and ASB through regular articles in Housing for You. This is sending a clear message on its stance and also highlighting to residents that it is worth reporting incidents of nuisance and ASB.

- 167** Positive work is taking place to divert young people away from nuisance and ASB and to encourage people to adhere to ABCs and ABAs. Staff have been working with 11 to 15 year old pupils through citizenship lessons and there are plans to extend this to work with younger pupils. The 'Get Smart' programme targets people with ABCs and encourages victim empathy and covers the punishments attached to different crimes with only four out of 23 going through the programme re-offending. A further stage involves young people and their parents watching a court enactment followed by a visit to a local prison with only 6 of the 20 who have gone through the programme re-offending. The Life Project enables young people to be fire-fighters for a week to raise awareness about the importance of rules and of team work, followed by a 'passing out' ceremony. One person has re-offended out of 15 who have been through the programme. Referrals are also made to a local mentoring programme linked to activities such as basketball, football, and cheer leading. There are issues with mini-motorcycles and so SH is working with the police on a joint project from March 2009 to enable young people to ride them in an authorised way. This is creating positive opportunities for young people.
- 168** The lack of an IT package to support ASB work is potentially impacting on the efficiency of the service. The introduction of a package has been delayed and it is not clear when this is scheduled to happen. In the meantime, record keeping is paper-based and performance information is collated through spreadsheets. Staff do ensure that there are 'pop-ups' on the main database to alert colleagues to work taking place on particular cases, but overall staff resources are not being used to best effect.
- 169** Although there is evidence to indicate that the approach to addressing ASB is effective and that diversionary activities are having an effect, there has been no formal evaluation to date. SH cannot yet be sure of the impact of its overall approach in this area.
- 170** Although the organisation is clearly willing to look at and learn from others' practices, there has been no formal benchmarking of the cost, quality and performance of the ASB service with peers and progress on this has been hindered by the lack of a suitable IT package.

Estate Management

- 171** In 2007, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Estates were well maintained; the caretaking service was contributing to this but the service was still developing.
- 172** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. The overall appearance of estates and flat communal areas is high. The caretaking team is providing a responsive service which is enhancing the quality of estates and blocks of flats. Appropriate arrangements are in place to monitor grounds maintenance services. Customers are shaping services. However, while a range of activities are taking place to monitor and manage the quality of estates, these are not drawn together to inform an overall strategic approach.

How good is the service?

- 173** The overall appearance of estates and flat communal areas is high. The environment surrounding homes managed by SH is well cared for, clean, free of litter and with minimal graffiti. The 2008 STATUS survey showed that 83 per cent of residents were satisfied with their neighbourhood as a place to live.
- 174** The caretaking team is providing a responsive service which is enhancing the quality of estates and blocks of flats. Clear, prominently displayed service standards are met or exceeded with cleaning records displayed so that residents know that work has been completed. Health and safety checks are systematically carried out in blocks with special features. Graffiti is removed promptly in line with published standards and drying areas are kept free of moss and weeds. Staff are trained to the British Institute of Cleaning Science (BICS) standard and have cleaning guidance packs to support them in their work. Regular quality control checks take place to ensure that standards are met and customer satisfaction is high at 81 per cent during September to January 2009.
- 175** A firm and successful approach is taken to fly-tipping. Efforts are made to trace and take action against those responsible with close working with ASB staff and 20 people were recharged in 2008/09. Residents are carded to reinforce that the activity is illegal and to ask them to report any information that they have on those responsible and this has been recently updated to include information on bulky item removal as a preventative measure. The level of fly-tipping on land managed by SH has declined from 151 tons in 2006/07, to 107.7 tons in 2007/08, and 81.32 tons to 18 January 2009.
- 176** Appropriate arrangements are in place to monitor grounds maintenance services which are provided by the Council under an SLA. SH's Environment Team members carry out regular checks. Monthly operational meetings involve stakeholders such as the supported housing and leasehold teams, tenants, leaseholders and FOSTA and quarterly meetings take place to monitor the SLA. There had been some issues with the standard of service provided but overall performance has improved and this has been assisted by SH contributing additional funding of £30,000 to enable concentrated work to be done in particular 'hot spots'. This is also supported by four multi-agency environmental action days a year to address issues in particular areas.
- 177** A widely advertised programme of estate walkabouts is in place with SH staff, residents and Council staff taking part. Issues are recorded with follow-ups taking place to ensure that they have been addressed and rubbish and litter are dealt with there and then. Outcomes to date include removing some fencing to discourage fly-tipping in a particular location. Residents taking part in walkabouts receive updates on action taken to address any issues identified but there has been no recent reporting to all residents in the area, for example, through Housing for You. However, walkabouts are contributing to the overall positive appearance of estates.
- 178** Customers are shaping services provided by SH's Environment Team through the caretaking focus group and the estate service group. The groups have provided a forum for consultation, monitoring of standards and discussion of issues and have brought changes such as the relocation of refuse bins in some blocks.

- 179** While a range of activities are taking place to monitor and manage the quality of estates, these are not drawn together to inform an overall strategic approach. Tenancy officers, caretakers, team leaders, estate walkabouts and residents are all formally and informally monitoring the quality of estates but this is not coordinated to ensure that the overall approach is systematic and contributing to the maintenance of high standards and improvement.

Allocations and lettings

- 180** In 2007, we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths. The choice-based lettings (CBL) system had only recently been adopted and learning was still taking place. There were weaknesses in dealing with vulnerable people, there were no service standards, no effective measurement of customer satisfaction and no effective analysis of the process. The practical arrangements for lettings were poor with joint viewings, inadequate information for prospective tenants and a poor lettings pack. The housing register was not up-to-date and there was poor learning from its administration. The CBL process, however, had many positive aspects, and there were effective nomination arrangements.
- 181** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. The allocations scheme has been reviewed to ensure fair and equal access. The housing application process is well managed and the Home4U Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme is working well. The offer and letting process is customer focused. There is a strong focus on letting homes quickly. However, the housing register has not been regularly reviewed and SH is not making the most of opportunities to free up under-occupied homes.
- 182** The allocations scheme has been reviewed to ensure that access to housing is fair and equal. An equality impact assessment and diversity monitoring identified that certain categories of applicant were disadvantaged due to the relatively high weighting given to time spent on the housing register. Homeless applicants were also not receiving timely offers as they were insufficiently prioritised. Following a review in conjunction with the Council, a cap has been placed on waiting time points, the scheme has been simplified, the value of points given for various categories of housing need has been increased and homeless applicants are now given due priority. While the policy was only fully implemented at the start of January 2009, the early signs are that the profile of applicants being housed has changed considerably and is reflective of the overall profile of the housing register.
- 183** The housing application process is well managed. Applications are promptly processed and assessed within the stated ten day target which means that applicants are able to bid for homes with a minimum of delay. Medical priority is assessed by an independent medical advisor with clear explanations provided for the level of award given. Appeals against decisions are well managed and are considered by a senior officer who has not been previously involved in the decision made with decisions issued within the stated 20 day target. Customer satisfaction is high with 97 per cent indicating that they were happy with the way in which their application was handled between April and December 2008.

How good is the service?

- 184** The Home4U CBL scheme is working well. The scheme is easy to access through a range of methods, including a freephone number, with a clearly written user guide and magazine. The scheme is well publicised and the fortnightly magazine is circulated to a range of local agencies. Appropriate arrangements are in place to support around 60 applicants who need help in making bids and also those who have specific needs such as wheelchair access or very large homes. Support agencies have been trained on the bidding process so that they can support clients. The main RSLs in Stevenage participate in the scheme which is increasing applicant choice and access to those vacancies.
- 185** The offer and letting process is customer focused. Successful bidders are telephoned in the afternoon following the midday closure of the bidding round with accompanied viewings arranged at their convenience including early morning and evening appointments. The lettable standard is provided at viewing stage so that applicants can be clear about the standard they can expect and, between April and December 2008, 96 per cent of applicants indicated that they had been clear what to expect. Following this, a new tenant interview takes place which provides useful advice and information and, following this, the letting, all of which is arranged at a convenient time for the customer. Customers are well informed and have ample opportunities to raise concerns and queries.
- 186** A number of improvements have been made in response to customer feedback. This includes producing a pictorial lettable standard, improving the standard of cleanliness of vacant homes, ending the practice of group viewings, improved information on the demand for different property types in different areas and the inclusion of floor plans on the website alongside property adverts. The service better reflects customers' needs.
- 187** The approach to cases of urgent housing need has been strengthened to ensure that it is fair and well controlled. Since the review of the allocations scheme far fewer cases need to be considered by the housing panel and, for those that are, a set level of points is now awarded for a fixed period of time to ensure that the household concerned has sufficient priority to successfully bid for homes. The number of cases referred to the housing panel and trends are reported to the executive management team (EMT) and also to the Council and the Council's executive member for housing. There is an appropriate level of accountability.
- 188** There is a strong focus on letting homes quickly. Good use is made of the notice period to pre-inspect and advertise homes through Home4U. As mentioned earlier, staff proactively make telephone offers and arrange accompanied viewings as soon as the bidding period has closed and there is a strong focus on letting homes as quickly as possible, subject to the needs of the new tenant. Void repairs are completed quickly. This is making sure that people do not have to wait longer than necessary to move into their new home.
- 189** SH has taken positive steps to tackle long-term empty sheltered homes. Applicants bidding for a sheltered home are automatically shown around all empty properties in the scheme, in the recognition that some flats have slightly different layouts and aspects that it is not always possible to clearly reflect in the Home4U information. The sheltered housing leaflet provided for prospective tenants also attempts to address some of the negative myths around living in supported housing by including positive comments about schemes and supported housing officers.

- 190** Performance on average re-let times is mixed but the underlying picture is positive. The average has fallen from 46.1 days in 2007/08 to 38.16 days at the end of January 2009 against a target of 35 days. While overall performance is only slightly above that of the worst performing ALMOs, this is affected by the letting of long-term empty sheltered homes. However, it is positive that long-term vacancies are being let as a result of marketing activity, and that the total number of empty homes has reduced from 100 in June 2007 to 56 in February 2009. General needs vacancies are let quickly with the average falling from 24.81 days in 2007/08 to 20.81 days to the end of January 2009. Overall, SH is making effective use of vacant homes.
- 191** The housing register has not been regularly reviewed. While a review is now well advanced, applicants' housing needs and preferences have not been annually reviewed and updated since 2000, resulting in a number of households on the register who no longer require housing. The review is allowing a number of cases to be closed and the exercise is due to be completed by March 2009, after which a rolling annual programme of reviews will be introduced. In the meantime SH and the Council lack an accurate picture of the extent and nature of housing need in the area.
- 192** The approach to under-occupied homes is not fully developed. SH knows that 694 tenants, or 8.4 per cent, are under-occupying their homes. The allocations scheme awards points for under-occupation and 298, or 43 per cent, of those tenants who are under-occupying are on the housing register. Help is given with removal costs and organising the move itself for tenants moving to smaller homes but this is not widely publicised and not all staff are aware of this. There has been no consideration of financial or other incentives to encourage tenants to move to smaller homes. Opportunities to make best use of the housing stock are not being maximised.
- 193** While the Council has local lettings plans covering some parts of the borough, it is not clear that they are all meeting the intended purpose. The local lettings plan for Silkin Court extra care scheme is working well and is ensuring that homes are allocated to those who will benefit most from that accommodation. The plan for Bedwell Crescent is also generally ensuring that a balance of household types is maintained. However, the plan for Harrow Court, developed in 2005, lacks clarity on what it is trying to achieve and has been largely superseded by the Home4U scheme. SH has recognised this and has developed a procedure to support the overall approach with discussions taking place with the Council about the overall purpose and what can be achieved.

Supported Housing

- 194** In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses. Supported housing services are tailored to individual needs and support people to live independently. Needs assessment and support planning are effective and procedures for safeguarding adults are robust. Supported housing service users are shaping services. However, some sheltered housing no longer meets modern needs and expectations.

How good is the service?

- 195** To provide context, SH provides a supported housing service to tenants in 18 sheltered schemes, as well as older and disabled people living in their own homes. It provides a 24 hours a day, seven days a week emergency response service to 936 older and disabled people living in Stevenage through Careline services. It also manages temporary accommodation for homeless households on behalf of the Council.
- 196** SH provides a supported housing service that is tailored to meet the needs of individual customers. The Options Agreement model has been rolled out across all sheltered schemes and enables customers to choose the level of contact and support they feel they need including visits from the supported housing officer, the use of the master key and liaison with relatives. SH's own monitoring shows that overall satisfaction with supported housing is high with 90 per cent of respondents stating that the service has improved their quality of life and 92 per cent satisfaction with the supported housing officer.
- 197** SH works effectively with its partners to deliver services to more vulnerable older people. A Frail Elderly Strategy supports SH in providing extra care accommodation at Silkin Court in partnership with the Council and an external care provider. The scheme has helped residents to remain in the community when they otherwise would have been admitted to either hospital or residential care.
- 198** SH supports customers to remain in their own homes. It provides Careline, an emergency response alarm system, to both SH tenants and customers in other tenures to enable them to remain independent. It has been successfully marketed with over 957 users to date. Although the written promotional material is currently being redrafted, SH promotes Careline through a variety of media including the Council's 'Get a Life ' campaign aimed at older people in the community taking part in volunteering activities and the provision of information at community centres, GP surgeries and with Age Concern. Satisfaction is high with 97 per cent of service users stating that it helped them to remain independent.
- 199** Careline service users and sheltered housing tenants who need to use the alarm system receive a responsive service which exceeds industry standards. Calls made to Careline or to the supported housing officer are received by the call centre operated by North Hertfordshire District Council, under contract to SH. Performance is monitored by way of monthly statistical analysis and quarterly meetings. Telecare Services Association (TSA) targets are used and performance is strong with the proportion of calls answered within 30 seconds being met. Response times to a request for a personal visit by a supported housing officer are currently at 91 per cent of visits being made within 15 minutes against a TSA standard of 90 per cent in 45 minutes. Service users are receiving a prompt service with 98 per cent reporting satisfaction.
- 200** SH encourages customers to remain independent and discourages a dependency culture. All supported housing staff have received training to help them with this issue and continuous reinforcement is provided through one to one and team meetings. In addition there is a range of activities available to encourage customers to retain their independence that focus on helping customers understand that they are still part of the community. This includes the recent gardening schemes run in conjunction with Groundwork and the Prince's Trust and work undertaken with local colleges to provide training courses for customers.

- 201** SH provides sheltered housing services that meet external requirements. It has been assessed as reaching level C against the Supporting People Quality Assessment Framework. However, it has self-assessed that it has reached level B with some individual elements at level A. Hertfordshire County Council will reassess the service later in 2009, when SH anticipates achieving level B across all the service.
- 202** SH takes positive steps to help new tenants settle into their homes by providing a comprehensive welcome pack. The pack includes details of the service standards, local activities and an introduction letter from the supported housing officer and includes their photograph. The pack means that tenants have detailed information at their disposal to use alongside the tenants' handbook.
- 203** Needs assessment and support planning are effective. Tenancy sustainment staff assess support needs before an offer of housing is made. This helps to ensure that all parties understand the customer's needs and whether they can be met by SH alone or with the assistance of partner organisations. Support plans are agreed with tenants two weeks after moving in and are reviewed every six months or more frequently if needed. Senior supported housing officers do spot checks to ensure that support plans are completed and appropriate to meet the needs of the customer. Any issues that need attention by the supported housing officer are logged on a spreadsheet so that actions can easily be tracked and managed for completion. This is ensuring that tenants receive tailored support and help.
- 204** Robust procedures are in place for safeguarding adults. Effective systems ensure any suspicions of abuse are reported promptly. All supported housing officers have received training on SH's Safeguarding Adults Policy, including online scenario sessions to back this up. This has resulted in staff being confident in identifying issues and making the necessary referrals to other teams as required.
- 205** Sheltered housing residents are encouraged to be involved in shaping the services that they receive. They can attend the Sheltered Housing Focus Group held every two months or the quarterly Careline Focus Group. They can also attend scheme surgeries attended by a range of SH staff to discuss issues and queries. Quarterly scheme newsletters include information about events in each scheme. These opportunities have led to outcomes including the re-opening of communal bathrooms to benefit tenants and meet access needs for a cross-section of people and concerns raised about the condition of the communal gardens resulted in the grounds maintenance project with Groundworks. This approach has also supported customers to take responsibility both individually and collectively.
- 206** SH works with partners to positively influence outcomes for customers. SH has been contributing to the Council's Older Person's Strategy by sharing its service improvement plan to jointly shape service provision. SH regularly attends Supporting People provider forums and has been able to share its experiences of dispersed scheme management. Joint work undertaken as part of the countywide Accommodation Services for Older People group has helped those customers in extra care housing to have a more seamless service as agencies are now working together more effectively in the provision of information.

How good is the service?

- 207** SH is ensuring that those living in the temporary accommodation for homeless households receive a positive service. Wellfield Court, a former sheltered housing scheme, provides well-maintained temporary housing for customers who are under 25 with children. Support plans are developed with residents following the same process used in sheltered housing. There are regular house meetings to enable residents to give feedback about services with changes made as a result, such as providing access to IT facilities, and the welfare rights officer runs regular surgeries to provide benefit advice. Assessments are undertaken to ensure that support needs are identified and met when residents move on.
- 208** Some of the sheltered housing stock managed by SH is not fit for purpose. A review has been taking place over the last two years that combines the physical requirements of each scheme with the outcome of consultation with residents and the wider community. SH has completed a detailed stock condition survey to support what it already knew about Decent Homes failure and Disability Discrimination Act requirements to reach conclusions about the future viability of each scheme. The final outcome is not yet known and will depend on funding being made available to support the improvements as well as support from Hertfordshire County Council as the administering authority for the Supporting People programme. In the meantime, however, the stock in some schemes cannot support the physical needs of some tenants.

Leasehold management and Right to Buy

- 209** In this inspection, we found that weaknesses outweigh strengths. SH provides some useful information for leaseholders and service users are shaping services. Statutory timescales for processing Right to Buy (RTB) applications are generally met. However, the quality and availability of some key information for leaseholders is underdeveloped. Communication about repairs and their completion is not effective. SH is not accurately charging leaseholders for all the services they receive.
- 210** SH provides some useful information for leaseholders. This has been developed with service users and reflects issues they felt they needed guidance on. It includes a dedicated area on the website, a leaseholder handbook and information leaflets including a guide to major works and section 20 notices, what to do in an emergency and a specific leaseholder fact sheet. The leaseholder satisfaction survey showed 82 per cent satisfaction with being kept informed and 78 per cent agreed information was easy to understand.
- 211** There is a range of ways to pay service charges and, more recently, for major works. Service charge payment methods are comprehensive, mirroring those for rent payment methods. They are publicised on the website and included with the service charge bill. Payment by instalments is available for leaseholders who cannot afford to pay the whole amount at once. Payment options for major works have, until recently, been extremely limited, but the February 2009 Board meeting approved proposals to offer options such as placing a charge on the property and interest free periods for payments. These options will be published along with programme information when it is finalised.

- 212** Leaseholders are involved in shaping services. The leaseholder forum has agreed terms of reference and meets every two months. The dates are published a year ahead and all leaseholders are invited to attend. Forum arrangements have been strengthened to include a 'surgery' session at the start of each meeting so that individual concerns can be addressed leaving meetings free to focus on more strategic issues. Leaseholders have informed discussions about changes to the grounds maintenance contract and the restructuring of caretaking and communal services following leaseholder dissatisfaction from the flat block surveys. Suggestions from the forum have also led to a dedicated leasehold section in Housing for You and a leaseholder on the editorial board. The leaseholder survey showed that 69 per cent were satisfied with the opportunities for involvement.
- 213** SH is generally meeting statutory timescales for processing RTB applications. In 2007/08, of 88 section 125 notices issued, two were out of time. In 2008/09, to the end of February, of 20 notices issued, two were out of time. Of the four that were out of time, three were held up while due diligence investigations were completed. Service standard performance for October to December 2008 shows that all RTB application forms were acknowledged in two days, and applications were processed within target timescales. Information requests from purchaser solicitors were also processed within target time. Overall, purchasers are receiving a responsive service.
- 214** The quality and availability of some key information is underdeveloped. Between October and December 2008, the service did not meet its service standard for sending out a full pack of information to new leaseholders within the specified three week time limit in six out of 14 cases. There is a lack of information detailing how service charges are calculated, future maintenance and major works plans and details of the recently agreed major works payment options. As the future major works programme is not yet known, SH has not included any estimates of the likely costs in service charge bills. This is a source of concern to leaseholders and the lack of detailed information has contributed to low levels of satisfaction with the value for money of the service charge at 38 per cent, with major works at 33 per cent and satisfaction with consultation on major works of 52 per cent.
- 215** Communication about repairs and their completion is not effective. There is a lack of clear communication about work ordered, whether it is necessary and whether it has been completed satisfactorily before leaseholders are charged. While SH is starting to address this, it is a source of concern and frustration for leaseholders and is not providing a customer-focused service.
- 216** Major works collection rates have been affected by mistakes made in the consultation process. This has come to light during the last year, when calculating recovery rates. SH is working now to implement systems, such as IT improvements, to address this, and is confident that future consultations will be managed effectively. However, although strengthened going forward, it does mean that income due has not been recovered.

How good is the service?

- 217** SH is not accurately charging leaseholders for all the services they receive. The management fee is charged as a fixed percentage and is not based on the actual cost of providing the service. Some elements of the service charge have been reviewed, for example, utility costs and grounds maintenance, but work is still taking place to ensure that insurance costs are apportioned to specific blocks and to ensure that other costs are apportioned fairly based on floorspace. SH cannot currently demonstrate fair and equal apportionment of costs.
- 218** SH does not have a specific a policy for resolving leasehold disputes apart from formal recourse to the Leasehold Valuation Tribunal (LVT). While recourse to the LVT is publicised, alongside the corporate complaints process, a dedicated policy for early intervention and resolution before formal steps would provide a clear and consistent framework within which to tackle disputes and prevent them from escalating.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 219** In 2007, we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths. SH was not able to compare the cost of the majority of its services with other providers and the approach to value for money was very recent, and as a result was not embedded. However, costs had been compared for the repair service and were shown to be close to privately-tendered work. Savings had been made by service efficiencies.
- 220** In this inspection, we found that strengths slightly outweigh weaknesses. SH has a clear focus on value for money which is embedded across the organisation. It has exceeded its 2008/09 target for cashable efficiency savings and significant efficiencies have been achieved within the BMO. A wide range of value for money improvements have been delivered across services. However, the use of cost, performance and satisfaction benchmarking is still developing. The strategic approach to value for money is underdeveloped.

How do costs compare?

- 221** The use of cost, performance and satisfaction benchmarking is still developing. SH is comparing its services with its ALMO peers through a national benchmarking service provider. However, the organisational restructuring in 2008 and, therefore, changing cost centres mean that, for non-central services, the relevance and usefulness of the data is limited. The exception to this is ICT, which was flagged as being comparatively high cost. This has informed current activity on strategy development and planning. Overall, SH is not yet able to demonstrate accurately how its service costs, performance and satisfaction compare to those of its peers.

222 The results from the 2007/08 report show a mixed picture when comparing cost and performance to other non-metropolitan ALMOs.

- Major and cyclical repairs spend per property are in the upper 25 per cent.
- Repair and void repairs spend per property, overall satisfaction, and current tenant arrears as a percentage of rent due are in the middle upper 25 per cent.
- Percentage satisfaction with repairs and the percentage of homes failing the Decent Homes Standard are middle lower 25 per cent.
- Percentage of repairs completed on time, tenant satisfaction with decision making and the number of weeks taken to re-let vacant homes are lower 25 per cent.

How is value for money managed?

223 There is a clear and longstanding focus on value for money which is a stated corporate priority. A cross-cutting group was set up in February 2007 with the aim of mainstreaming value for money across all departments and services. It has helped to monitor delivery of Annual Efficiency Statement targets and implement and monitor value for money action plans, led on the review of all SLAs completed in 2008, and formed a sub-group to take forward improvement work for the leasehold service. This has provided focus and direction for SH's work in this area.

224 SH has developed a strong value for money culture which is embedded across the organisation. A guidance booklet for staff explains the principles of value for money and how SH is seeking to achieve this, illustrated by examples of what this means in practice. Staff show a well developed understanding of what value for money is, how it links to customer satisfaction and can show how it has been achieved in their work areas. This is supporting SH to improve value for money in all service areas.

225 SH has achieved its 2008/09 target for cashable efficiency savings. The target was £700,000 and, at the time of inspection, this had been exceeded with £721,000 achieved across all services. Targets for cashable efficiency savings are informed by the need to keep the HRA in balance. Financial sustainability is listed as the top risk to the ALMO. The housing subsidy determination and inflation and interest levels as a negative capital financing authority mean that there is an estimated funding shortfall of £1 million in 2009/10. Although discussions with Communities and Local Government have indicated that this level of shortfall may not materialise, SH has retained this high level target for cashable efficiencies, as a means of managing its top risk, and has already identified £660,000 potential savings.

226 SH is working with service users to promote its approach to value for money and to involve them in exploring priorities. The need to generate cashable savings to balance the Housing Revenue Account has meant limited opportunities for service users in influencing how gains should be reinvested. Despite this, sessions have been delivered on value for money and what it means at the customer conferences, and sessions also run on budget setting and what attendees' priorities would be. Feedback as a 'You said, we did' was presented in the customer newsletter, and from the last conference, of 11 tenants who expressed an interest in value for money, two came forward to provide their views on the draft budgets for 2009/10.

How good is the service?

227 Significant efficiencies have been achieved by changes within the BMO which have transformed the maintenance services it provides. Moving from a bonus system to a salary scheme will, when protection on payment levels ends after 12 months, release cashable savings of £22,000 a year. At the same time, evening and weekend appointments have been introduced, providing a better service to tenants. Eighty per cent of operatives are now multi-skilled and this is supporting a focus on completing repairs right first time. A mobile working pilot using hand-held technology and improved arrangements for procuring and accessing materials and supplies have also improved the efficiency of the service. The proportion of agency operatives has reduced from 47 per cent in 2007 to 8 per cent. Overall, these changes have led to more effective use of resources and provided a better service to tenants.

228 A wide range of value for money improvements as a result of more efficient working practices and improved procurement have been delivered across all services. These include:

- tenant training is procured and shared with four other landlords, the local college provides some free training opportunities and impact assessments include a value for money assessment of every resident involvement activity;
- use of Possession Claims Online is saving time and money and reducing the level of court costs being passed on to tenants;
- text reminders for repair appointments are saving around £2,300 per year and also providing good customer care;
- a reduction in the number of empty homes and in average re-let times has brought additional income of £250,000 and met housing need;
- the introduction of cards for a national DIY chain has brought a 13 per cent saving on decoration allowances and increased customer choice;
- outsourced supply and maintenance of the BMO van fleet of 50 vehicles has released £500,000 of capital funding which has been redirected towards aids and adaptations;
- outsourcing stores management to an external chain has provided substantial imprest stock improvements, brought expert advice and savings of £65,000 per year;
- environmentally-friendly cleaning products for the caretaking team are bulk purchased from a local supplier with added value in the form of SH branded containers and free PAT testing;
- following action to address longstanding overpayments on utility bills in flat communal areas, SH has recovered a £230,000 refund as well as strengthening its approach to ensure that bills are accurate in the future; and
- temporary staff are now sourced through one agency which has saved £65,000.

- 229** All service level agreements (SLAs) for services provided by the Council have been reviewed. As a result, some, such as the van fleet and HR services, have ended with savings and/or added value achieved on the remainder. For example, negotiations on the grounds maintenance SLA expected to provide a higher level of service for a similar cost which compares favourably to the cost of services provided by similar ALMOs.
- 230** The approach to procurement is effective. It is supported by a procurement strategy, detailed guidance notes and evaluation strategies for each contract renewal to ensure that procurement methods are appropriate and informed by an assessment of risk. This includes the type of procurement as well as quality and price split for evaluation, with a standard of 60/40. Adherence checks are made by internal audit, with decision escalated upwards for sign off as appropriate. A range of methods are considered including the use of consortium arrangements for the stores procurement which brought savings and added value and also the joint procurement of stationery and mobile technology with the Council. This is releasing cashable efficiencies and securing added value.
- 231** External funding has been levered in to complement SH's own investment. Partnership working with a national energy supplier on the cavity wall insulation programme has brought grant funding to meet 75 per cent of the cost of the programme so that SH can improve thermal comfort and energy efficiency in more homes. The supplier is also providing free energy efficient light bulbs and power-down kits, for household appliances left on standby, for new tenants.
- 232** The strategic approach to value for money is underdeveloped. While strategies are in place for value for money and procurement they lack a long term focus of the outcomes SH is aiming to achieve in all areas of service.
- 233** SH is not currently maximising income. Performance on collecting leaseholder service charges is weak and only 30 per cent rechargeable repair costs are recovered. While it is positive that the main housing associations are participating in Homes4U, they are currently doing so free of charge with SH and therefore tenants are bearing the £6,000 per year cost of this. Although work is taking place to ensure that RSLs meet these costs in the future, the current arrangement is not equitable or providing value for money.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 234** In 2007, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses. Measures taken had resulted in improvements that tenants would notice and this was reflected in improvements in performance indicators and rising levels of tenant satisfaction. The establishment of the ALMO had also been managed well. However, improvements had been delivered from a low base and performance fell short of that achieved by comparable authorities in key service areas. The overall approach to value for money was not fully embedded.
- 235** In this inspection, strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses. Widespread change and improvement has been delivered over the last two years in line with SH's improvement plans. It has made strong progress on the 2007 inspection report recommendations. A range of customer-facing improvements has been delivered and new services have been developed. There is a positive direction of travel on the majority of performance indicators. However, the picture of improvement on customer satisfaction is mixed and, while the focus on improving the leasehold management service has increased, this is relatively recent and some key weaknesses remain.
- 236** Widespread change and improvement has been delivered over the last two years. This has been achieved through a strong, continuous management focus which has ensured that the actions contained in the 'Short Steep Climb' and 'Route-map to Two Stars' improvement plans have been successfully delivered. This included carrying out an organisational restructuring during 2008 to better meet customers' needs and to increase customer focus and fundamental changes in working practices and service delivery within the BMO. The restructuring has supported improved outcomes across services including ASB, gas servicing, repairs service delivery and income collection.
- 237** SH has made strong progress against the recommendations made in the 2007 inspection report. Out of the 53 recommendations made, 49 have been fully completed and four partly completed. This has resulted in improved outcomes for service users. Full details of progress against recommendations are detailed in Appendix 2.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

238 SH has successfully delivered a range of customer-facing improvements. These include:

- appointments for repairs with extended hours;
- a freephone number for repairs reporting;
- a strengthened approach to gas servicing;
- improved customer information influenced by service users;
- the development, with service users, of a lettable standard for vacant homes;
- carrying out major works to 1,100 tenants' homes;
- the clearance of a longstanding backlog of aids and adaptations cases;
- a strengthened approach to resident involvement with increased opportunities to become involved; and
- the development and tailoring of services in line with customers' needs in the light of customer profile information.

239 At the same time as improving existing services, SH has developed new services. These include the launch of an online tenancy account, the creation of a welfare rights officer service and also the development of a tenancy sustainment service.

240 Overall, the direction of travel is positive on most performance indicators. This includes sustained improvement in gas servicing, the time taken to let vacant homes, the number of vacant homes, rent and arrears collection, the time taken to complete adaptations for disabled people, and the speed of call handling. Service users are receiving more responsive services and resources for service delivery are increased.

241 However, there is a mixed picture on customer satisfaction overall and with individual services. The 2008 STATUS survey shows that satisfaction with the overall service has declined from 81 per cent in 2006 to 77 per cent in 2008 while satisfaction with opportunities for participation has fallen from 61 per cent in 2006 to 55 per cent in 2008. SH is still working to understand the reasons for this but its own ongoing satisfaction surveys show high satisfaction with individual services and with resident involvement opportunities.

242 SH can demonstrate a track record of improved value for money over the last two years. Within a context of reducing resources, it has exceeded its efficiency targets and, as detailed above, improved existing services and developed new services. A value for money culture has been successfully embedded across the organisation.

243 While the focus on improving the leasehold management service has increased, this is relatively recent and a number of key weaknesses remain. There is a lack of information explaining how service charges are calculated and on future maintenance and major works plans. SH is also not accurately charging leaseholders for all the services they receive. SH recognises that it needs to improve this area of service and had plans in place to support this with work already underway.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

How well does the service manage performance?

- 244** In 2007, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. The new ALMO was developing a robust service planning framework. The aims, objectives and priorities of the organisation and performance management arrangements were evolving, but initial work was starting to provide direction. There was ongoing major investment in understanding the strengths and weaknesses of services, systems and operations and in improvement planning. Performance management was adequate in some areas and leadership of the service was increasingly effective. However, SH was not yet a learning organisation, benchmarking was underdeveloped and a consistent approach to VFM was not embedded across the organisation.
- 245** In this inspection, strengths and weaknesses are balanced. SH has a clearly expressed mission and well-defined values and objectives. Key strategies are in place. The focus on performance management is strong and supported by a clear framework. Future plans should bring improved outcomes for service users. SH actively learns from other organisations in developing and improving its services. However, service improvement plans are not outcome based. There are some gaps in performance management activity. The approach to reviewing staff performance is not always systematic, robust and consistent.
- 246** SH has developed a clearly expressed mission and well-defined values and strategic objectives. Their delivery is supported by a comprehensive delivery plan and by service improvement plans which are comprehensive, address key weaknesses and show self-awareness. These are well publicised across the organisation and staff are clear about their contribution to their delivery.
- 247** However, service improvement plans are not outcome based. Plans clearly demonstrate which areas SH intends to improve and include outputs and milestones with progress clearly tracked. However, they do not include measurable or clear outcomes and so SH cannot demonstrate that its actions are making a difference to residents.
- 248** Key strategies are in place and show appropriate links to local and regional strategies and priorities. This includes strategies for customer focus, communications, equality and diversity and asset management. Strategies are also in place for value for money and procurement although these would benefit from a review to reflect SH's current stage of development. Strategies are supported by appropriate action plans and provide the direction needed to bring about further improvement.
- 249** Leadership has been shown and difficult decisions have been taken. This includes addressing the longstanding underperformance of some staff and services, the review of SLAs, changes made to the funding of the assisted decoration scheme and fundamental changes in working practices within the BMO. This has supported SH in improving services to customers.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 250** Appropriate arrangements are in place to manage the relationship between SH and the Council. Fortnightly client liaison meetings focus on performance and operational matters. Bi-monthly strategic meetings between the SH chief executive, the Council's lead officer for housing issues, the Council executive member and the chair and vice chair of SH board consider high level matters. More informal meetings also take place between officers at different levels and communication is sound overall. There have been healthy and constructive debates on matters such as the strategy for sheltered housing, the Housing Revenue Account and financial strategy and progress towards Decent Homes. Overall the relationship is productive and mature.
- 251** The focus on performance is strong and supported by a clear performance management framework. This includes sound arrangements for monitoring and reporting on financial performance. Targets are generally challenging yet realistic, and the range of indicators has been streamlined from around 700 to a more meaningful balanced scorecard of 40 indicators. Performance is reported to appropriate levels, including to service users, the Board and the Council, and at regular intervals. There is evidence of challenge, with corrective action taken in areas such as contractor performance, sickness absence and capability and also a shared understanding of the areas for improvement.
- 252** There are some gaps in performance management activity. Rent arrears target setting is underdeveloped as staff do not have individual targets for arrears recovery other than a target to reduce the arrears on their patch by a set amount at the end of the year. Spot checks on arrears cases are not done systematically and the performance reports available are not routinely used. The whole customer experience of the aids and adaptations experience is not yet being monitored or reported. There is also no performance monitoring or reporting on the level of leaseholder service charge queries and disputed items. Opportunities to identify and resolve performance issues and so improve services to customers are being missed.
- 253** A range of mechanisms is supporting the focus on improvement. This includes cross-cutting groups focusing on areas such as customer care and equality and diversity and project teams focusing on the performance of specific service areas. One-to-one meetings, toolbox talks and team meetings are also providing a focus on performance and improvement across the organisation.
- 254** While staff performance should be reviewed through personal development meetings (PDMs) and one-to-one meetings, these are not always done in a systematic, robust and consistent way. Only 47 per cent of staff received a PDM in 2008/09. A review of PDM records for those that had been done showed that some had not been referenced against the competency framework, not all were signed by the manager, and one-to-one notes were recorded in a variety of ways and reflected a variety of styles. SH has recognised that this is an area for development and has plans to involve human resources and line managers more effectively.
- 255** Future plans will bring further service improvements. Examples include the marketing of the Careline service to community groups; a customer reward scheme; the use of a tracing package for former tenant arrears; the 'move on move in' programme to support new tenants to sustain their tenancies; the speed of response by the Customer Service Centre; the market testing of the BMO; and the development of packs of essential items for people fleeing domestic violence.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 256** SH has reviewed and strengthened its arrangements for risk management. The new approach is more focused on prioritising key risks, providing more clarity about mitigating actions, and making sure that risk maps are dynamic. The new arrangements have been implemented following discussion with the Council and mapping exercises with the executive team and senior managers. This provides a robust approach to identifying and managing risks on an ongoing basis and is informing audit planning.
- 257** SH actively learns from other organisations in developing and improving services. This has informed the development of the customer census form; the use of interim relief orders for gas servicing; the development of the leasehold handbook; the approach to resident involvement; integrating gas servicing IT; the review of stores and procurement practice; and the development of major works leaflets. Services and outcomes have improved as a result.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 258** In 2007, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses. SH was developing its capacity through new appointments and temporarily using consultants. Technology was used to improve services and efficiency and there was a developing approach to procurement. The Board was developing its strategic capacity and there was general clarity about the roles and responsibilities of the Board and the Council. However, the scale of the task faced was substantial and plans to manage staff through transition and change were developing. Training lacked a strategic context and the human resources strategy was not contributing fully to the management of the organisation.
- 259** In this inspection, strengths outweigh weaknesses. Staff are committed, enthusiastic and keen to provide a good quality service to customers. The Board is working well together. Restructuring has led to increased customer focus and improved outcomes. SH is investing in staff training and development and HR practices are increasing capacity. Partnership working is strong and ensuring positive outcomes for service users. However, the approach to assessing the skills of Board members is underdeveloped. The impact of staff training is not evaluated and there is no strategy to inform the overall approach to leveraging in external funding.
- 260** Staff at all levels are committed, enthusiastic and keen to provide a good quality service to customers. They can demonstrate a range of ways in which they are identifying, considering and meeting individual tenants' needs in the way in which they are providing services. Managers have shown strong and continuous leadership which has guided the organisation through a period of fundamental change and improvement. This contributes to SH's capacity for further improvement.
- 261** The Board is working well together and providing direction. Members bring a wide range of skills and experience with them and work together with a shared sense of purpose. Board champions provide leadership on specific strands of work such as equality and diversity, access and resident involvement and members have also provided guidance and leadership on matters such as SH's approach to risk management and value for money.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 262** SH is actively managing Board succession issues. It has a 'reserve' independent board member who attends the open elements of the board meetings and away days and participates in the board skills development programme. The succession framework addresses tenant board member vacancies through advertising vacancies in the local press. If a vacancy arises mid-term, a member of FOSTA stands in until a permanent replacement is recruited. To encourage tenants to come forward, shadowing and mentoring opportunities are made available to support learning and development. This is helping SH to plan for any future changes in Board membership.
- 263** Capacity for improvement has been increased through organisational restructuring. Staff have been well supported through this process, particularly within the BMO where fundamental changes have occurred. This has led to increased focus and improved outcomes in areas including income management, gas servicing, aids and adaptations, ASB and responsive repairs. Service to customers has improved as a result.
- 264** SH is investing in staff training and development. It has devised and implemented a competency framework which sets out the skills and behaviours required for different job roles. A range of training and development opportunities are supporting staff in service delivery. It has designed a 'Managers Standard' development programme with Middlesex University which is due to begin in April 2009. SH has also invested in specific areas such as Gas Safe and electrical periodic checks training, BICS training for caretaking staff, trusted assessor training for staff to do adaptations assessments, mentoring of staff through the Housing Diversity Network, and recognised qualifications from the Chartered Institute of Housing and the Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supplies. This is developing in-house skills and expertise in key areas.
- 265** HR practices are increasing capacity. SH's approach to recruitment is robust and the appointment of a number of external staff has brought fresh ideas and challenge to existing working practices. Relationships with trade unions are good and this has supported SH in bringing about considerable change. Staff satisfaction, measured by quarterly surveys, is increasing and shows that staff understand their aims and objectives, are satisfied with the methods of communication that SH uses and have received training that has helped them to undertake their roles.
- 266** SH has strengthened its approach to sickness absence. It has invoked the capability procedure and taken steps to resolve some cases of long term sickness. Staff are also supported back to work through return to work interviews and phased returns. SH has also commissioned an external agency to act as an interface with staff that are declaring themselves to be sick and unable to attend work. The agency advises staff on action they can and should take in order to return to work. Although this is a recent development, it is already having an impact on sickness levels with rates currently at 12.58 days compared to 13.64 before the scheme was adopted.
- 267** SH is investing in IT to support effective working practices. Existing systems are generally supporting service delivery. The introduction of hand-held technology is supporting mobile working within the BMO and is increasing efficiency and effectiveness. Investment is prioritised in line with the areas most in need of improvement and the draft ICT strategy is aiming to address areas such as existing systems not being used to their full potential and gaps such as the management of ASB casework.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 268** Finances are in place to deliver the improvements detailed in service and action plans. SH and the Council have invested in improvement through the 'Short Steep Climb' action plan and the 'Route-map to Two Stars' improvement programme. SH has established a medium term financial strategy, a 30 year business plan, and the building cost model. SH has also developed a five year capital strategy modelled on two scenarios based on possible Decent Homes funding release. It has also explored partner capacity to increase delivery based on those scenarios, and capacity for this has been assured.
- 269** Partnership working is increasing SH's capacity to improve services and meet customers' needs. Productive working relationships with gas and major works contractors have led to improved outcomes. Multi-agency working on ASB is well developed and effective. Partnership working is also enabling SH to access floating support and money advice services for those who need them. This is ensuring better outcomes for service users.
- 270** The approach to assessing the skills of Board members is underdeveloped. Annual appraisals are carried out and training needs are identified. Board members have had training on a range of issues including housing finance, equality and diversity and on local matters such as SH's work on ASB. However, there has been no detailed assessment of the Board's skills and no higher level training or development to equip members to fulfil their roles as strategic leaders of the organisation as it proceeds to its next stage of development.
- 271** SH is not systematically evaluating the impact of staff training on service delivery. It is monitoring satisfaction with the training provided but there is no detailed assessment of how staff have put their learning into practice. SH cannot be sure that its investment is leading to positive outcomes for service users. Plans are in place to address this.
- 272** While SH has had some success in levering in external funding, for example, for cavity wall insulation programmes, there is no formal strategy to inform the overall approach and potential opportunities are not being maximised. This has been included in the Delivery Plan for 2009/10.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 2 Stevenage 2005/06 to 2007/08

Performance indicator (BVPI ref)	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	Districts top 25% 2007/08
63 Average SAP rating	69	69	69	72.8
66a Percentage rent collected	97.35	97.85	98.31	99
66b Percentage tenants with > seven wks arrears (gross)	12.18	11.81	5.57	3.3
66c Percentage tenants in arrears with NoSP served	17.73	32.94	28.69	14
66d Percentage LA tenants evicted for rent arrears	0.37	0.51	0.23	0.15
74a Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	73	81	81.00	84.9
75a Percentage tenants satisfied with TP	-	61	61	71
184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	30	30	48	7
184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	-13	-56.7	-14.6	38.3
212 Average re-let time (days)	65	42	39*	24

Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Table 3 Recommendations from inspection in 2007

Landlord Services

Recommendation	Progress
R1 Strengthen the focus on customers by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • completing the development of the customer focus strategy and implementing its provisions; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • developing a comprehensive range of service standards, involving residents in this process and in subsequent monitoring; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring effective customer feedback arrangements for all customer facing services together with appropriate reporting arrangements; and 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring the integration of all customer feedback in one place to maximise knowledge of what residents think and how services could be improved. 	Complete
R2 Strengthen access arrangements by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consulting with residents about access to services to ensure that arrangements meet their needs; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reviewing the customer service centre arrangements with particular regard for privacy matters, to ensure telephone answering targets are stretching and that it delivers a SH-focused service; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • completing and publishing the tenants' and leaseholders handbooks and producing an appropriate range of other published material for residents, that have been produced in collaboration with residents, and are easy to understand; and 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reviewing the arrangements for producing published material in alternative formats and the design of the 'translation box' to ensure timely production of material and clarity about what the document is. 	Complete

Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Recommendation	Progress
R3 Substantially improve the approach to equality and diversity by, for example:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • completing the development of the diversity strategy, the associated action plan and equality impact assessments; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establishing the detailed demographic profile of the organisations customers and the implications of that. Ensure that this is effectively networked and shared, including with contractors, and that services are delivered appropriately; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reviewing the approach to racial harassment and domestic violence ensuring that policies and procedures are well understood and staff know what action to take; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • monitoring service user satisfaction collecting, analysing and reporting data according to age, gender, ethnicity and disability; and 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring that all staff, the board and contractors receive training in cultural awareness and diversity and evaluating the outcomes of the training to further inform training or service developments. 	Complete
R4 Strengthen arrangements for the repair service by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasing the proportion of post-works inspections to 10 per cent and ensuring a cross-section of work values are inspected; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • effectively monitor pre-inspection of work and reduce the level of pre-inspections; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduce the time taken to carry out inspections; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establishing a monitoring system for works completed right first time; and 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establishing repair targets that are clear to residents and that form the basis of monitoring and reporting. 	Complete
R5 Strengthen arrangements for void repairs by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • completing the process mapping for void works and introducing processes to deliver an efficient, value for money service; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establishing a re-let standard that is unambiguous, easy to understand and made available to prospective tenants at the time that they view a property; and 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring that all incoming tenants are made aware of future works planned for their homes either in the short or long-term. 	Complete

Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Recommendation	Progress
R6 Strengthen the arrangements for gas servicing by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> working towards a target of 100 per cent access to meet statutory responsibilities; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ensuring all procedures conform to published good practice; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> including gas servicing in the risk map; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reviewing the access arrangements to ensure their effectiveness; and 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> establishing effective performance monitoring. 	Complete
R7 Substantially improve the arrangements for adaptations for people with disabilities by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> establishing formal policies, procedures and service standards for the service jointly with the welfare authority and in consultation with tenants and agencies representing the interests of the client group; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> establishing performance management arrangements jointly with the welfare authority that encompass effective joint casework monitoring, 'end to end' measurement of the service, and reporting arrangements including that to tenants; 	Partly complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> working closely with the occupational therapy team to establish a prioritisation process that reflects need and impact; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> establishing the level of need and demand so as to effectively inform budget setting; and 	Partly complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> in all other respects ensuring that the service is designed and delivered in conformity with the published good practice guidance. 	Complete
R8 Strengthen the arrangements for income management by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> developing a systematic approach to the early and proactive provision of welfare benefit and debt advice; and 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reviewing the process for rechargeable repairs. 	Complete

Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Recommendation	Progress
R9 Strengthen the approach to tenancy and estate management by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reviewing the balance of delivery of estate-based services; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reviewing the way in which residents can access and be involved in monitoring local services, and the way in which services are delivered; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ensuring easy access to information about services for dealing with neighbour nuisance and anti-social behaviour; and 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reviewing the co-ordination of local services delivered by different agencies. 	Complete
R10 Strengthen the arrangements for allocations and lettings by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reviewing the arrangements for vulnerable applicants; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> updating the housing needs register; and 	Partly complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reviewing the lettings process. 	Complete
R11 Strengthen resident involvement by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> taking positive action either to mainstream the service or effectively develop the central service; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> developing processes to ensure the early involvement of residents in the development of policy and practice; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> widening the opportunities for residents who are not part of formal consultation or governance arrangements to participate in shaping or monitoring service delivery; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ensuring that the support that is available to allow people to be involved is widely publicised; and 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> exploring the wider opportunities for tenant learning and development. 	Complete
R12 Develop the approach to value for money by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> establishing and benchmarking service costs; 	Partly complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> agreeing a value for money strategy and an associated action plan; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> carrying out process mapping and process re engineering of services; and 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> establishing a programme for the evaluation of service level agreements. 	Complete

Appendix 2 – Previous recommendations

Recommendation	Progress
R13 Improving performance management by:	
• establishing the aims, objectives and priorities for the service;	Complete
• establishing a clear planning framework that translates the aims, objectives and priorities into service and team plans and personal objectives with defined targets, timescales and accountabilities;	Complete
• establishing a performance management framework that defines what is to be monitored, analysed and reported at what frequency and to who, together with processes for identifying and addressing risk and accountabilities for the elements of the work; and	Complete
• developing appropriate budgetary and other management information together with the management skills to use that information.	Complete

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Appendix 3 – Reality checks undertaken

- 1 When we went on-site we carried out a number of different checks, building on the work described above, in order to get a full picture of how good the service is. These on-site reality checks were designed to gather evidence about what it is like to use the service and to see how well it works. Our reality checks included:
- a review of key documents including Stevenage Homes' self-assessment and performance reports;
 - mystery shopping of the customer service centre;
 - a review of the website;
 - a review of complaints;
 - a review of ASB and rent arrears cases and gas safety certificates;
 - a tour of key parts of the Borough;
 - visits to estates, high rise blocks and sheltered schemes;
 - inspection of vacant, ready to let homes;
 - visits to tenants whose homes had received improvement work;
 - interviews with Council and ALMO staff, councillors, board members and other stakeholders;
 - focus groups with front-line staff, tradespeople, tenants, leaseholders and partner agencies; and
 - observation of meetings including the ALMO board, a FOSTA meeting and the equality and diversity cross-cutting group.

Appendix 4 – 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)

Bail address protocol to protect vulnerable tenants

- 1 Stevenage Homes identified that there were instances where vulnerable tenants were experiencing tenancy difficulties as a result of friends, relatives or associates being bailed to their address following offences. Following discussions with ASB partners the ALMO devised a bail address protocol for use by the local courts to avoid this occurring in future. This is promoting tenancy sustainment for vulnerable tenants.

Consultation policy to coordinate activity

- 2 Stevenage Homes has developed a robust and clearly set out consultation policy to guide staff. It includes all consultation events for the coming year to avoid duplication and staff are required to assess the impact of each event.

Christmas card campaign to promote rent payment

- 3 In December 2008 Stevenage Homes ran a Christmas campaign and sent cards to those with clear accounts thanking them for payment, and to those in arrears reminding them to pay. This cost in the region of £3,500 and generated additional income of £31,000 when compared to the same period in previous years.

Customer profile data used to inform development of customer information in other formats

- 4 Stevenage Homes has made positive use of customer profile data to inform the way that it develops and delivers services. Profile information has indicated that a relatively high proportion of customers have some difficulty reading. It is therefore taking steps to ensure that printed information is easier to read and is working to deliver information in other ways. It has developed a DVD version of the tenant handbook which conveys key messages about tenancy matters in a professional way. It has also produced a pictorial lettable standard and anti-social behaviour leaflet.

'Your Neighbourhood' surveys to identify ASB issues

- 5 Stevenage Homes is making good use of data to map ASB hotspots and this has informed 25 'Your Neighbourhood' surveys in areas where there were several reports of issues. These provide an opportunity to consult local people on their experience of nuisance and ASB to establish if there are issues which require further attention and resolution or if it is more an issue of perception with no evidence of problems. This process has been used to good effect at one sheltered scheme where planting of bushes has provided boundaries without installing fencing, a gate has been fitted to stop people taking short cuts through the scheme and bins have been provided for dog walkers to deal with fouling issues.

The Audit Commission

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

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

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