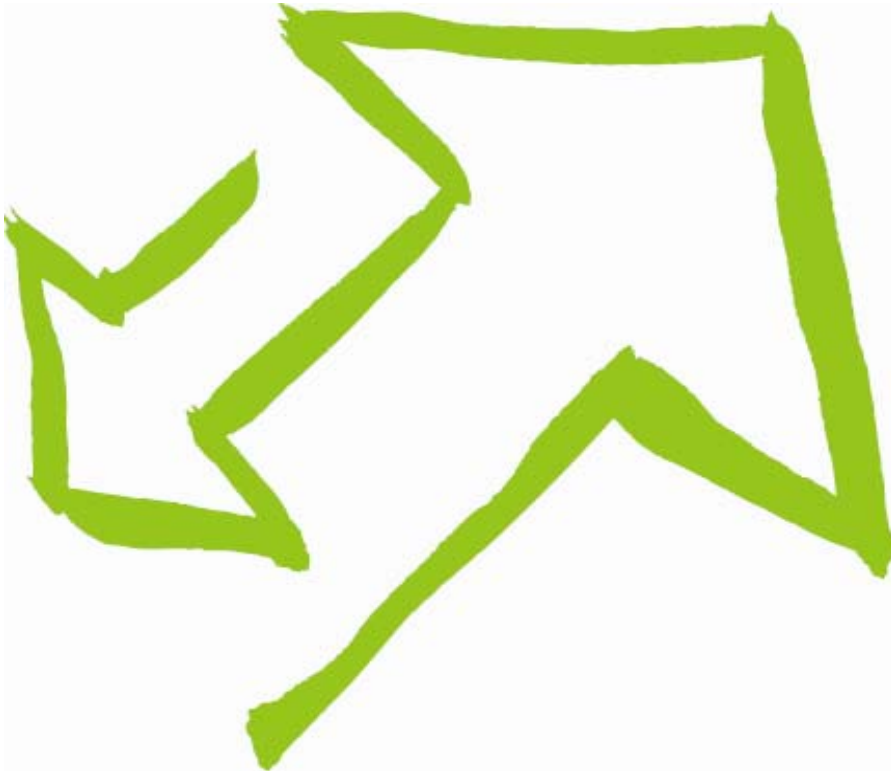


St Georges Community Housing

Basildon District Council

October 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 In June 2008, the Audit Commission published a report on St Georges Community Housing and judged it to provide a fair, one-star service with promising prospects for improvement. In this re-inspection, we found that SGCH (St Georges Community Housing) provides a good two-star housing service with uncertain prospects for improvement.
- 2 Services have a number of strengths. Information for customers is of a high quality including a wide range of service standards and there is an effective website. Local offices are well presented and provide a range of services, and frontline staff are customer focused. There is a range of ways residents can become involved in shaping services and ongoing satisfaction surveys show high satisfaction across most service areas. The complaints process is managed well and the organisation has a well developed understanding of its customers, which is being used to tailor the delivery of services, including support for vulnerable people. Sheltered housing services are also being effectively delivered.
- 3 There is effective emphasis on customer care in the delivery of major works, which are of a high quality and contracts are managed well. There is a high level of information on asbestos which is being effectively shared with contractors and residents. Day-to-day repairs are delivered quickly and with high levels of satisfaction. There is strong performance on completing repairs to empty properties on time and to a robust standard agreed with residents. Aids and adaptations are being carried out quickly and effectively. Gas servicing is being coordinated well resulting in high levels of performance.
- 4 Arrangements for rent payment are strong, welfare benefits advice and access to benefits is coordinated well and preventative actions are reducing evictions. Former tenant arrears are low and performance on collection of service charges is also strong. SGCH is very focused on preventing and dealing with anti-social behaviour. There is a consistent and comprehensive approach in this service area and strong partnership working. SGCH works effectively in partnership with Basildon District Council to ensure that the allocations and lettings process is managed well and customer orientated. There is an increased focus on value for money resulting in analysis and action on high cost areas.

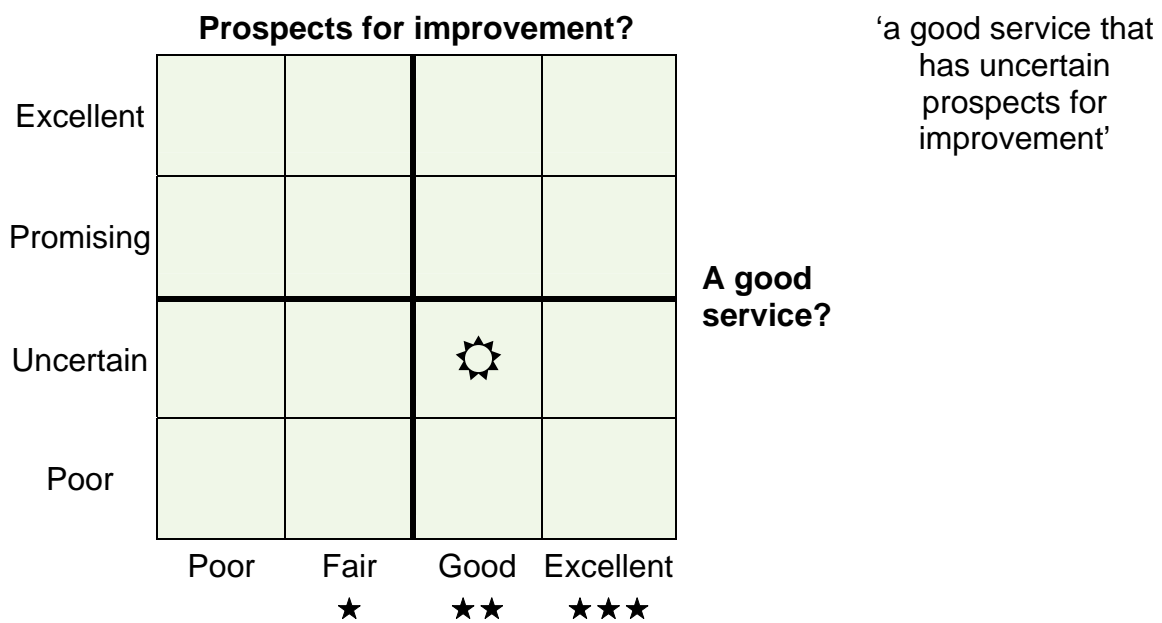
Summary

- 5 However, there are still weaknesses. The approach to telephone access is confused and the appointments system for repairs is not effective. The major works programme is still not sufficiently driven by planned programmes of improvement linked to stock condition information and focused on achieving the decent homes standard. There has not been a coordinated approach to electrical testing and cyclical decorations. Joint working with the County Council at strategic level on the delivery of aids and adaptations is underdeveloped. Some possession cases for rent arrears do not comply with legal requirement; rent collection, comparatively, is still below average, and joint working on debt advice is not comprehensive. Estate inspection processes are underdeveloped and SGCH has not taken a sufficient leadership role in coordinating the approach with partners. Resident participation is still too focused on formal meetings and the small number of involved tenants. Leaseholder satisfaction is low. Value for money cannot yet be demonstrated in all areas and detailed benchmarking is still underdeveloped.
- 6 Prospects for improvement are uncertain. There is a track record in delivering improvements in a range of areas although this is not yet comprehensive. There are also a range of plans in place which cover some key issues for improvement, including improving value for money. Partnership working and procurement is now increasing capacity. However, the strategic approach to planning is weak with an absence of key strategies to direct improvement and in particular the integration of plans is limited. There are some weaknesses in strategic leadership and performance management, the human resource strategy is limited and aspects of IT capacity are not being effectively developed.

Scoring the service

- 7 We have assessed St Georges Community Housing as providing a ‘good’ two-star service that has uncertain 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

- 8 We found the service to be good because it has a range of strengths including:
- information for customers is of a high standard including a wide range of service standards;
 - there is effective access to services through local offices and a well developed website and a wide range of communication methods are being used;
 - ongoing surveys show high levels of satisfaction in most service areas and complaints are being well managed;
 - there is a well developed understanding of customers, effective use is being made of profile information and there is a strong approach to supporting vulnerable customers;
 - major works are of a high quality, well managed and customer focused;

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.

Scoring the service

- there is a high level of information on asbestos which is being effectively shared with contractors and residents;
 - day-to-day repairs are being delivered quickly, gas servicing is well managed and both show high levels of satisfaction;
 - empty properties are being repaired quickly and to a standard agreed with residents;
 - aids and adaptations are being well resourced and quickly processed by SGCH;
 - there are strong arrangements for rent payment, and welfare benefits advice and preventative actions are reducing the number of evictions;
 - former tenants arrears are low and performance on collection of service charges is strong;
 - there are a wide range of ways residents can shape services and resident participation is well resourced;
 - there is effective work on preventing and dealing with anti-social behaviour linked to strong partnership working;
 - lettings processes are operating effectively and are customer focused;
 - Right To Buy processes are well managed;
 - sheltered housing schemes are well maintained and services are generally of a high standard; and
 - there is a focus on value for money and high level benchmarking has been effectively used to analyse and address particular areas.
- 9 However, there are some areas which require improvement. These include:
- telephone access is confusing and limited outside of normal working hours and the system for repairs appointments is not operating effectively;
 - there some outstanding issues with compliance with equality legislation and guidance and good practice in applying Disability Discrimination Act provisions to sheltered housing has not been effectively progressed;
 - the major works programme is not sufficiently driven by planned programmes of improvement linked to stock condition information and focused on the decent homes standard, and there has not been a coordinated approach to electrical testing and cyclical decorations;
 - there is insufficient partnership working with the County Council on aids and adaptation services to address delays in occupational therapy services;
 - some possession cases for rent arrears do not comply with legal requirement; performance on rent collection is below average and access to debt counselling is not being well coordinated;
 - resident participation is still too focused on formal meetings and a small number of involved tenants;

- estate inspection processes are underdeveloped and partnership working to ensure a holistic approach to ensuring estates have a positive appearance is not working effectively;
 - Leaseholder satisfaction is low; and
 - Value for money cannot yet be demonstrated in all service areas.
- 10 There are uncertain prospects for improvement. There are some drivers supporting improvement:
- there is a track record in delivering improvements in a range of service areas;
 - there is a vision for the organisation and a robust approach to prioritisation;
 - performance monitoring generally provides effective coverage of services;
 - there are a range of plans in place, which are well informed by learning and cover a range of key issues for the service;
 - there is a positive approach to training for most staff; and
 - partnership working and the approach to procurement is increasing capacity in a number of areas.
- 11 However, there are a number of barriers to improvement. These include:
- improvement has not yet been consistently delivered across all services areas;
 - the strategic approach to planning is weak with an absence of key strategies to direct improvement;
 - plans are not consistently SMART or well integrated and there are some weaknesses in performance management;
 - there are some weaknesses in strategic leadership;
 - the human resource strategy is underdeveloped and the approach to appointing senior staff is not robust; and
 - the ICT strategy is not effectively developing increased capacity.

Recommendations

- 12 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs² and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with the ALMO Board, the local authority and customers; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

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.

Recommendation

R1 Improve access and customer care by:

- reviewing telephone access to ensure that clear and simple arrangements are in place that provide access at times convenient for service users and ensure that response times are of a consistently high standard;
- implementing an effective system for repairs appointments so that tenants are provided with an appointment at the point of contact for all eligible repairs;
- ensuring full compliance with equality legislation and guidance, and in line with good practice applying Disability Discrimination Act provisions to sheltered housing;
- ensuring all possession cases for rent arrears fully comply with legal requirement (to be implemented with immediate effect);
- developing clear information and a clear programme of work for electrical testing in homes and assessing the condition of cyclical decorations across homes to determine any areas where work should be completed prior to decent homes work activity;
- developing effective strategic links with the County Council to ensure partnership working addresses delays in the delivery of occupational therapy services;
- developing clear protocols for joint working with the CAB to ensure access to debt counselling is well coordinated and effectively monitored;
- continuing to refocus resident participation to ensure it is fully inclusive and that a wide range of residents are influencing services through a range of different mechanisms;
- further developing estate inspection processes to increase resident involvement, increase clarity over rating systems and ensure effective feedback;
- taking action at senior level to ensure partnership working delivers a holistic approach to ensuring estates are effectively maintained and have a positive appearance; and
- analysing in detail leaseholder satisfaction, benchmark with other landlords and take action to raise the level of leaseholder satisfaction.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

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

The implementation of this recommendation will have low costs with high impact. This should be implemented by March 2010 unless otherwise stated above.

Recommendations

Recommendation

R2 Improve value for money by:

- ensuring that major works are driven by robust stock condition information and that these works are procured, packaged and delivered in a manner which will maximise value for money;
- carrying out more detailed benchmarking and performance analysis in areas not yet effectively covered and take action to improve efficiency; and
- taking action to improve rent collection and achieve performance in line with the best 25 per cent of district councils.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased income for the organisation;
- increasing efficiency and freeing up additional resources for key priorities;
- improving performance; and
- maximising the benefits and the efficiency of the major works programme.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by March 2010.

Recommendation

R3 Improve the approach to planning by

- developing robust strategies to inform improvement in all key service areas and support activities;
- ensuring that plans are integrated well and in particular that there is clear coordination between service plans and plans for human resources and information technology;
- ensuring that all plans are SMART; and
- developing a longer-term business plan.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increased certainty about the deliverability of plans; and
- having plans that are well informed, that address the short, medium and long term, and that are effectively focused to maximise impact.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by January 2010.

Recommendation

R4 Improve management and leadership by:

- ensuring planned management development training is delivered;
- ensuring that permanent appointments are made to senior management positions;
- ensuring performance appraisals are completed on time; and
- taking action to develop the strategic leadership capacity within the organisation.

The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- increasing strategic coordination which will maximise the impact of the organisation; and
- developing staff to ensure effective delivery of improved services.

The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by January 2010.

- 13 We would like to thank the staff of St Georges Community Housing and Basildon District Council who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 15 June to 26 June 2009

Report

Context

The locality

- 14 Basildon District Council is in south Essex. Made up of the towns of Basildon, Billericay and Wickford, it has a population of 169,800, and has areas of affluence, with pockets of deprivation. Sixty-two per cent of Basildon's council tenants are in receipt of Housing Benefits. Crime levels are below the average for England, but anti-social behaviour remains a concern for a majority of tenants and leaseholders³. In 2006 there were an estimated 15,300 Black Minority Ethnic (BME) residents in Basildon (9.1 per cent of population), an increase from 5.3 per cent in the 2001 census survey. Of these 3 per cent are from white minority groups and 6.1 per cent from non-white groups.
- 15 Although overall population growth is low, there is an estimated shortfall of 788 units of affordable housing each year⁴. Population growth is highest among residents over 65 years old. A large proportion of tenants have a disability, long term illness or infirmity - over a quarter have difficulty walking, and 9 per cent use a wheelchair outside the home.

The Council

- 16 The Council has 42 councillors. The Conservatives form the administration with 29 seats, with the remaining seats held by ten Labour and three Liberal Democrat Councillors. The Conservatives have led the Council since 2002. Currently a leader and cabinet with eight portfolio holders govern the business of the Council.
- 17 Basildon District Council was assessed as 'fair' in the Comprehensive Performance Assessment carried out in 2004.
- 18 The Council's gross revenue expenditure for the year 2009/10 was £152.4 million. Expenditure on capital projects was £19 million, with £10 million on housing.

The service

- 19 St Georges Community Housing (SGCH) is an Arm's Length Management Organisation (ALMO), which became operational in April 2007. It manages 11,440 properties on behalf of the Council; this includes 1,889 sheltered units, 1,949 leasehold units and 267 shared-ownership properties. A large proportion of the stock was transferred from the Commission for New Towns to Basildon District Council in 1994. There is a wide range of building types, reflecting the rapid growth of the area in the 1950s and 1960s, and this presents challenges in terms of achieving the decent homes standard. Around 60 per cent of this stock is non-decent.

³ Tenant and leasehold surveys 2007

⁴ 2004 Housing Needs Survey

- 20 Funding for the ALMO is provided through a management fee from the Council. In 2008/09, the fee amounted to £23 million, plus £9.2 million for capital works. Services are currently provided through two local offices, a town centre office and a repairs service centre. Following the closure of three local offices since 2006, a mobile office service has been introduced.
- 21 The functions delegated to the ALMO by the Council are:
- tenancy management, granting of new tenancies and mutual exchange management;
 - estate management (except environmental services);
 - repairs, maintenance and improvement;
 - void and empty property management;
 - resident involvement;
 - supported housing (except refuges and homeless and temporary accommodation);
 - right to buy administration and calculation of discount;
 - leasehold management;
 - finance (except rent setting, insurance and claims); and
 - management of garages.
- 22 The functions retained by the Council include:
- overall housing strategy and enabling;
 - lettings and allocations, and dealing with homelessness applications and housing advice; and
 - managing the Supporting People programme.
- 23 The activities of the ALMO are governed by a management board. This has 15 members, comprising five councillors, five independents, four tenants and a leaseholder. Specialist functions are delegated to four sub-committees: audit and risk, service improvement and performance, finance and regulatory and resources and remuneration.
- 24 In June 2008, the Audit Commission published a report on St Georges Community Housing and judged it to provide a fair, one-star service with promising prospects for improvement. This report, therefore, follows the re-inspection of services.

How good is the service?

What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 25 Basildon DC (BDC) has a vision to 'improve the quality of life for the people of the District, now and for future generations'⁵.
- 26 The Sustainable Community Strategy themes are:
- developing a prosperous economy;
 - promoting community safety;
 - providing homes for the future;
 - maintaining a clean and sustainable environment;
 - improving health and well-being;
 - raising educational attainment;
 - promoting inclusive communities; and
 - developing an effective transport system.
- 27 The ALMO's mission statement says 'St Georges Community Housing will work in partnership with the Council and its residents to develop a district and community where people are proud to live. We will do this by providing excellent customer-driven services and ensuring Decent Home funding is available to the district.'
- 28 SGCH has six strategic aims:
- excellent customer-focused and accessible services;
 - involving and empowering residents;
 - financial management;
 - asset management and Decent Homes;
 - regeneration and sustainability; and
 - becoming a learning organisation and an employer of choice.

⁵ Strategic Improvement Plan 2008-2011

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

Access and customer care

- 29 In 2008, we found a mixture of strengths and weaknesses in this area. Tenant satisfaction with overall services had increased significantly in the previous year, and was now comparable to best performing ALMOs. Local offices offered a welcoming environment, and staff were accessible and helpful. However, the telephone service was variable, and office procedures did not facilitate confidential discussions with residents. The level of complaints, although falling, remained high.
- 30 In this inspection, we found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses in access and customer care. Information for customers is of a high standard including a wide range of service standards and there is an effective website. Local offices are well presented, provide a range of services, and frontline staff are customer focused. Complaints handling is a strength and satisfaction surveys are generally well used. Overall tenant satisfaction is at average levels but leaseholder satisfaction is low. Telephone answering has improved but is still mixed and the overall approach to telephone access is confused. The strategic approach to customer access is underdeveloped.
- 31 There is a comprehensive library of well presented customer information. This includes a Tenants' Handbook, Leaseholders' handbook, quarterly newsletter and a full range of leaflets which are available at offices and online. There is consistent presentation with a clearly identified SGCH style. Published literature is resident approved with a 'resident thumbs up' stamp. This helps ensure that written information is assisting customers to access services.
- 32 There is effective access to services through local offices. SGCH provides customer services from three local offices. These are pleasantly presented and have a wide range of facilities including adequate seating areas and activities for children. Office procedures facilitate confidential discussions with residents, addressing a weakness identified at the last inspection. All offices now have a customer toolkit to assist access for residents with specific needs. One office was undergoing refurbishment at the time of inspection and some temporary arrangements were in place. There is also a mobile bus office in which visits outlying areas. Overall, the offices provide effective access for residents requiring face-to-face contact and transactions.
- 33 However, telephone access is confusing and is limited outside normal working hours. There are a large number of published telephone numbers for different offices, teams and individuals. In addition to these, a freephone number has recently been introduced which has automated menu options for anti-social behaviour, repairs or housing fraud, with an option for leaving a message, or a fifth option for switchboard services. The fifth option diverts the call to the Council's switchboard which, under a Service Level Agreement (SLA) with SGCH, redirects the caller to the appropriate SGCH team. General service calls are limited to 9.00am and 5.15pm Monday to Friday. Overall this fragmented approach makes it more difficult to access services.

How good is the service?

- 34 The menu system for repairs is also confusing and access, although extended beyond normal hours, is still limited. The repairs call line has a range of menu options depending on the stage of the repair and the nature of work making it more likely that calls will be misdirected. Repair calls are only taken 8.00am till 5pm which makes it more difficult for customers who prefer to report repairs during the evening or weekend. An emergency number is available at other times. However, overall this makes the service less easy to access.
- 35 Performance on telephone answering is mixed. The freephone and repairs lines have initial menu options which run for approximately 25 seconds although other direct lines do not. Repairs call answering was weak during 2008 but has been stronger during 2009 with calls answered in an average of 19 seconds, and with over 80 per cent of calls answered in 20 seconds since February 2009. The performance on other SGCH calls is strong with 96 per cent answered in 12 seconds, which compares well with the Council's switchboard performance - 99 per cent of calls answered in 12 seconds - in the same period. Out of hours calls are directed to the Careline call operators who are answering 84 per cent of calls in 12 seconds. There are also differing service standards, as the standard for repairs calls is to answer 80 per cent of calls within 20 seconds while all other calls should be answered in 12 seconds. This means that although many callers get a reasonably prompt response this is not yet a consistently high standard.
- 36 Performance on responding to other forms of communication is relatively strong but needs to be more closely analysed. The target is to respond to 97 per cent of written communications within eight days and this was achieved in 2008/09, with 95 per cent achieved in the first two months of 2009/10. The focus is on providing a full response in the eight days but an acknowledgement can be sent if this cannot be achieved. However, the proportion of cases which receive acknowledgements and take more than eight days is not being monitored which weakens the understanding of performance in this area.
- 37 SGCH is using a wide range of communication methods including providing new methods as they develop. As well as using the traditional methods described above residents can now text enquiries to SGCH. SGCH is also registering residents for its text alert service which is being used for a growing range of services including reminders for gas servicing and new tenant visits. Enhancement of IT to facilitate more text services is still required but the use of new methods is making communication easier and more efficient.
- 38 The SGCH website is easy to use and provides a wide range of information and interactive facilities. The site is well presented, easy to navigate and customers can check rent accounts, pay rent, report repairs, make complaints and contact SGCH via a range of email addresses. This is helping make services accessible in an efficient way.
- 39 It is positive that there is a wide range of service standards that have been agreed with residents. These have been reviewed and updated since the last inspection. They are published in a suite of 27 leaflets and cover all service areas apart from leaseholder services where standards are still in development. The standards are well publicised. This helps ensure residents are clear about the standard of service they should receive.

- 40 However, monitoring and reporting against these standards is underdeveloped. Mechanisms for measuring performance against service standards have been identified but for many areas this only began in April 2009. This means data is still limited and some standards where performance is to be assessed through mystery shopping are still to be tested. In addition there is not yet a coordinated approach to reporting against service standards. Some standards, such as performance on repair timescales, are already reported in the annual report or internal performance indicator (PI) reports. However, the majority are not. SGCH is currently working with residents to identify the key service standards to report but currently residents are not well informed on the organisation's performance against service standards.
- 41 Mystery shopping is being used effectively test access to services. Mystery shopping is carried out quarterly by customers and the outcomes are reported to the Board Sub-Committee for Service Improvement and Performance. Recent mystery shopping exercises covering income management, repairs and reception areas were comprehensive and in particular highlighted problems with the text service. This is helping to ensure service standards are being implemented.
- 42 Frontline staff show a positive approach to customer care. All staff have been trained in customer care during 2009. Staff were seen dealing with customers in a friendly and professional manner and could provide evidence of how changes in the way the SGCH delivers services is having a positive impact on the customer experience. This helps ensure customers have a positive experience in their dealings with SGCH.
- 43 The strategic approach to customer access is underdeveloped. There is no customer access strategy in place or alternative clear identification of the strategic approach on access. A draft strategy is currently going through consultation with customers but the draft is weak, providing overarching principles and aims, but not a strategy to direct service development. This has resulted in a lack of clear direction and coordination in some areas of access and customer care.
- 44 Overall, there is effective use of satisfaction surveys to monitor performance and inform service improvement. Nearly all service areas are covered by ongoing satisfaction surveys with only estate services not effectively covered. Details of the outcomes of these surveys are included in the relevant sections of this report. We found examples of individual dissatisfaction being effectively investigated, although there is still some inconsistency in the quality of these surveys and response rates. The move to a coordinated approach to satisfaction surveys with clear quality control is ongoing, with the new system currently being piloted in repairs although a number of other services have also revised surveys in line with the new approach. In addition the Council carries out bi-annual STATUS⁶ surveys with SGCH carrying out bespoke surveys in the intervening years to get a more rounded view of customer satisfaction. The approach to surveying satisfaction is helping performance management and service improvement.

⁶ Standardised Tenant Satisfaction Survey - a standardised survey used by social landlords

How good is the service?

- 45 There is average performance on overall tenant satisfaction. The 2008 STATUS survey shows overall satisfaction at 79 per cent which is average compared to other councils in 2007/08. In comparison with other ALMOs this performance is above average. This is a significant increase on the 2006 survey when satisfaction was 68 per cent. This shows that services are meeting the expectations of many residents but not the levels achieved by the best performing social landlords.
- 46 Leaseholder satisfaction is low. Leaseholders were surveyed as part of the 2008 survey, which showed that only 40 per cent of leaseholders were satisfied with the overall service they receive. This figure has not been benchmarked so comparative performance cannot be assessed but this demonstrates that the services provided are not meeting the expectations of a significant number of leaseholders.
- 47 Complaints management is a strength. The ALMO has developed a new complaints policy based on Housing Ombudsman guidelines (2002). Staff have been trained in the new procedure and an effective new customer information guide has also been produced. All stages are monitored robustly through a monthly complaints working group. Performance on responding to complaints in timescale is running at 94 per cent for April - May 2009/10 with 88 per cent achieved in 2008/09. The level of complaints being upheld and compensation paid is not being effectively reported, but the performance monitoring group analyses customer feedback to see what learning can be derived. Positively customers are invited onto the group, including customers who have been through the complaints process themselves. The STATUS survey 2008/09 identified an improving trend in customer's perceptions of the way complaints are managed in terms of being kept informed and speed of resolving the problem. This approach is helping ensure customer complaints are dealt with effectively.
- 48 Complaints have now reduced and the ratio to compliments is now positive. Complaints reduced by 56 per cent in from 2007/08 to 2008/09. In 2008/09 524 complaints (informal and formal) were received, and over 700 compliments which is double the number of compliments received in 2007/08. Analysis of complaints shows that the majority are repairs or improvement programme related and there has been a reduction in complaints received since the new repairs contract has been introduced, with a corresponding increase in customer satisfaction leading to the increased number of compliments. This is an indication of increasing satisfaction with the services provided.
- 49 The ALMO has a clear approach to awarding compensation for service failure. The Compensation Policy provides staff with clear guidance on when to award compensation. In 2008/09, £11,000 was awarded to customers including customer with failed repairs appointments where a customer is awarded £10. This provides effective customer care in instances of failed services.

Diversity

- 50 In 2008, we found that strengths balanced weaknesses in SGCH's approach to equality and diversity. SGCH demonstrated strong corporate commitment to improving equality and diversity. Profiling of residents was progressing well, and there were positive initiatives in terms of process and outcomes. The profiling exercise was also collecting information about residents' preferred method of contact with SGCH to feed into a service standard review. However, systems to identify disabled and other potentially vulnerable residents were weak, and recent initiatives had yet to deliver clear benefits for customers.
- 51 In this inspection, we found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses in the approach to diversity. There is a strong focus on diversity and positive outcomes can be demonstrated. The organisation has a well developed understanding of its customers and this is being used to tailor the delivery of services. There is effective support for vulnerable customers and equality impact assessments are being well used. However, compliance with some equality legislation and guidance is not complete and monitoring is not yet fully comprehensive.
- 52 SGCH has a strong focus on equality and diversity, which is one of its key strategic objectives. It has recently revised its equality and diversity strategy, based on the six main diversity themes. Positive outcomes for customers delivered through the equality and diversity action plan 2008/09 include improved access to translation and interpretation services and engagement with more diverse residents. The 2009/10 Action Plan contains further actions to improve their approach across all teams including those which will have a direct impact on customers such as producing pictorial guides to services for people with literacy issues. SGCH is delivering nine key actions to support the BDC 'Opportunities for All' single equalities scheme. SGCH is a partner in promoting equality and diversity and community cohesion, and is involved in a range of partnerships and forums through engagement with the Basildon Local Strategic Partnership (LSP). It demonstrates commitment through a board member champion and senior managers chair the high-level equality and diversity monitoring group that consists of staff from across the ALMO. There is a dedicated Equality and Diversity Coordinator who supports the approach within SGCH. This is helping ensure the equality and diversity agenda is delivered in SGCH.
- 53 SGCH has a well-developed understanding of its customers and is making effective use of its customer profile information. Good progress has been made in collecting customer profile information resulting in information across each of the six diversity strands for 82 per cent of its customers, including leaseholders. There are plans in place to pick up gaps through the new tenancy audit process. The information is readily available to all staff through the housing management IT system. This is well used by SGCH staff to ensure that the diverse communication needs of individual customers are met and for monitoring purposes, as well as externally with contractors where necessary. There are numerous examples of individual needs being met across services, including the support given to vulnerable people experiencing or perpetrating ASB and the targeting of promotion of involvement to hard to reach groups.

How good is the service?

- 54 SGCH is actively working to ensure that the board, involved residents and the workforce is representative of the community it serves. Employees and the board are generally representative due to positive recruitment and retention processes and this is regularly monitored against the six equality strands, although only 25 per cent of the workforce is male. The approach to broadening the representation of involved residents reflects the recent move to a wider menu of opportunity for involvement. Ensuring the organisation reflects the community helps demonstrate equality and helps ensure the views of all communities are effectively heard.
- 55 An effective programme of Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) is being delivered. A comprehensive programme is in place and carried out by staff who have received specific training including training on cultural sensitivities. A toolkit for EIAs has been produced and support is available through diversity partners, such as the disability forum. Actions required from EIAs undertaken in 2008/09 have been identified and are ongoing. These include undertaking vulnerability checks on the 17 per cent of homes that do not have gas and therefore will not get a vulnerability check. This is helping to ensure that the services delivered by SGCH are not negatively impacting on different sections of the community.
- 56 There is a strong approach to supporting vulnerable customers. Examples include:
- vulnerability assessments are carried out at a number of points of contact with customers including the pre-tenancy stage, on the four-week visit to new tenants, and annually through vulnerability checks carried out by the gas contractor during gas safety checks - this is captured on the housing management IT system and flagged up when the tenancy details are accessed as well as recorded through the customer insight database;
 - low levels of literacy are recognised by SGCH and they have responded to this - for example, literacy courses are offered to residents through Havering College;
 - key policies and strategies reflect the need to ensure vulnerable people are supported - for example the income management strategy specifically addresses the approach to dealing with vulnerability; and
 - where the need for additional support is identified, housing staff make referrals to the local floating support service provided by Family Mosaic or to a range of specialist support providers - SGCH made 95 referrals to Family Mosaic over the last year.

This helps ensure that vulnerable customers are supported to maintain their tenancy and independence.

- 57 It is positive that mandatory diversity training (including involved residents, board members and contractors) is in place. This includes awareness raising and how diversity issues affect SGCH's service delivery, such as respecting the cultural needs of communities on entering their home at a time of prayer. This helps ensure the delivery of services is sensitive to the needs of the diverse community in Basildon.

- 58 Diversity forums provide positive external challenge to SGCH and support it in meeting the diverse needs of its customers. Through partnership working with the Council and its LSP, SGCH has exploited networking opportunities with a range of consultation and support organisations to provide a clearer understanding of the needs of all residents. This has benefited customers; for example, the disability forum has been consulted on the communication strategy and support is now provided by a local charity to BME residents suffering from mental health issues. Diversity partners are very positive about the support from SGCH to them and their clients.
- 59 There is a positive approach to providing information in different languages and formats. SGCH has undertaken an assessment of translation needs in line with government guidance, and have arrangements to provide translated information and telephone interpreting services. Staff have been trained on how to access these services and these are being used. The approach to straplines in community languages has been standardised in response to the issues of an inconsistent approach in the last inspection report. Telephone translation services are available and staff are aware of these and utilising them. Customer profile information is used pro-actively in different formats where records indicate this requirement and a letter reading service is also offered. This is helping ensure fair and equal access to services.
- 60 SGCH is engaging with harder to reach groups. One of the largest Gypsy and Traveller communities in England lives in the district and SGCH have been working with the Council to ensure the needs of any families re-housed are met. A range of initiatives are in place to engage with younger people, such as the Veggies R Us scheme to grow their own food and through the Basildon Youth Council. SGCH also works with Probation to ensure ex-offenders are supported to maintain their tenancies. This is helping ensure services are tailored to meet these customers.
- 61 Other examples of the positive approach to diversity include:
- feedback from customers in a 2007 survey led to adding straplines in five additional languages in customer leaflets, introducing customer care toolkits at all offices including magnifying strips and making large grip pens available and providing large print versions of the tenancy handbook, agreement and sheltered housing handbook;
 - SGCH offers customers over 60 years old a free home safety check to help reduce fall hazards and assist in remaining independent in their home - should adaptations or support be required, customers are referred to appropriate agencies and support provided;
 - SGCH is actively contributing to the worklessness agenda in Basildon - painting and decorating experience is provided to ex-offenders in partnership with probation and the Trade School at the local college - work placements are also provided to people seeking work through a partnership with a local recruitment agency; and

How good is the service?

- while SGCH encourages customers to pay rent through cost effective automated processes it also provides a collection service for 'housebound' residents who have not adopted these methods - 17 residents currently use this service.

These examples demonstrate the organisation's positive approach to meeting the needs of a diverse community.

- 62 Compliance with key equality legislation and guidance is mixed. SGCH has self assessed itself as being at level two of the Local Government Equality Standard, with plans in place for external challenge to improve this under the new framework. The three SGCH local housing offices comply with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). SGCH has completed the required audit of child safeguarding issues and reported this to the board in June 2009, although training of staff in this area has not been comprehensive. There are disability and race equality schemes in place. It is positive that SGCH requires and monitors contractor compliance against equality legislation and ensures their practices are consistent with the SGCH approach through joint training. However, while SGCH has made further progress in 2008/09 against gaps in meeting the CRE code of practice on racial equality in housing, it is still not compliant with all aspects of the code. SGCH does not currently have a gender equality scheme in place although it has plans to address this within a single equalities scheme planned for completion in 2009/10. This means that while residents are benefiting from legislative measures and guidance in some areas this is not yet comprehensive.
- 63 Good practice in applying DDA requirements to sheltered housing schemes has not been completed. An assessment of DDA issues in sheltered housing was carried out in 2007. Some improvements have been undertaken at an operational level via a dedicated sheltered housing improvement budget which has allowed completion of a number of access requirements including ramps, thresholds and improvements to footpaths. However, there has not been a coordinated and prioritised approach to addressing this issue to ensure the accessibility of schemes is maximised.
- 64 It is a weakness that there are some areas where the organisation is not analysing diversity information. Diversity in lettings is not effectively monitored. The Council, which runs the choice-based lettings scheme, collects information on allocations and can provide information on age and ethnicity and recently updated forms will allow future collection of the six main diversity strands. However the ALMO has not been receiving reports on this or analysing this information. Complaints are not currently monitored by diversity strands. This means that the ALMO cannot be sure that it is enabling fair and equal access in these service areas.

Stock investment and asset management

Capital improvement, planned and cyclical maintenance, major repair works

- 65 In 2008, we found that strengths balanced weaknesses in this area. There were significant programmes of boiler and window replacement. There was robust stock condition and asbestos data, and residents were involved in selecting contractors and monitoring work. However, satisfaction with major works was not high, and the lack of a gutter clearance programme was causing damage to property and leading to complaints. Residents were not involved in setting priorities for major works.
- 66 In this inspection, we found that there are still a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There is a clear asset management strategy in place which is having a developing influence over the delivery of stock investment. There is an effective emphasis on customer care in the delivery of major works, contracts are being well managed and satisfaction with major works is very high. There is a high level of asbestos information on homes and communal areas and this is being shared with contractors and residents. However, stock condition information is not comprehensive and the major works programme is still not sufficiently driven by planned programmes of improvement, linked to stock condition information, and focused on achieving the decent homes standard. There is not yet a clear decent homes plus standard and there has not been a coordinated approach to electrical testing and cyclical decorations.
- 67 There is a clear asset management strategy which is having a developing influence over the delivery of stock investment. The first asset management strategy was developed in 2007 with a revised version produced in April 2009. This is focused on achieving the decent homes standard and the delivery of increased levels of planned maintenance. Stock condition information has been analysed to assess future requirements and residents have been consulted about the approach to stock investment. The strategy includes identification of sustainability which is being used to guide investment. There has been insufficient analysis of responsive repairs trends to inform the strategy and potential DDA work in sheltered housing has not been assessed. An asset management group is in place to coordinate the delivery of the strategy which includes SGCH staff, resident representatives and Council representatives. Overall, the strategic approach to stock investment demonstrates a focus on achieving key priorities.

How good is the service?

- 68 Collection of stock condition information is mixed. An annual survey of 10 per cent of homes was carried out from 2004/05 to 2007/08 but not in 2008/09. An asset management database holds this information and has been updated with programmed works carried out by SGCH. A positive approach to collection of stock condition information has recently begun. An internal stock condition team has been established since April 2009 which is carrying out stock condition surveys using handheld IT to ensure efficient collection and transfer of information. Void surveyors have also recently been trained to carry out stock condition surveys and voids are now being surveyed. Information on Energy Performance Certificates currently provided by an external contractor is also being cross-referenced with stock condition information. There is a target is to achieve 100 per cent stock condition information by 2011 but currently there is only information on 42 per cent of homes. This level of information, while sufficient for broad investment profiling, still creates some uncertainty about investment requirements and limits the ability to accurately programme work.
- 69 The major works programme is still not sufficiently driven by planned programmes of improvement and replacement linked to stock condition information and focused on achieving the decent homes standard. While the future approach to investment is to be based on a more coordinated approach with 'just in time' replacement, as identified in the asset management strategy, the current approach is still largely based on developing work programmes from individual reports of element failures. For example, heating, kitchen and bathroom replacement programmes are developed from failures in these elements reported through responsive repairs or servicing rather than a planned programme of replacements across all homes based on stock condition information. There is a mixed approach in respect of roofs and windows where feedback from residents has been cross-referenced with stock condition information. Approximately 60 per cent of Council homes in Basildon are still non-decent. A reactive approach means that elements will fail before they are replaced, causing problems for residents, and the approach impacts on both the efficiency of the programme and the level of reduction in decent homes.
- 70 Major works contracts are being effectively managed. There are regular monitoring meetings in place, post inspection systems and use of performance indicators including satisfaction surveys. There has been strong performance in delivery of contracts on programme and in budget. Between April 2007 and April 2009 this resulted in a £13 million investment in homes.
- 71 Satisfaction with major works is high. Satisfaction surveys are in place for all contracts, with surveys sent to residents for return by post. Approximately 50 per cent of surveys are returned and during 2008/09 99 per cent of residents were satisfied with the service. This shows that the service is meeting the expectation of residents who receive works.

- 72 There is an effective emphasis on customer care in the delivery of major works. For example, tenants are involved in the design process, with computer aided design used to assist consultation on design and a range of choices available for tenants on colours and finishes. These choices were agreed with tenant representatives. Tenant Liaison Officers are employed by the contractor and these maintain regular contact with the resident. There is some inconsistency in the quality of written information provided in the lead in process for works but overall the approach to delivering major works is helping ensure high levels of satisfaction.
- 73 Works are being delivered to a high standard. Elements used are of high quality and there is a comprehensive approach to works. For example kitchen and bathroom replacement also includes flooring, decorations, tiling and electrical upgrades. Elements used in the replacement process have been approved by residents. This helps ensure high levels of satisfaction as well reducing future maintenance requirements.
- 74 There is a focus on providing adaptations in the property improvement process. There is effective communication between major works and the adaptations team. There is cross referencing of referrals for adaptations with planned major works. Where a resident is found to have adaptation needs during the lead-in to major works an in-house Occupational Therapist (OT) can quickly assess needs to ensure delivery is not delayed. Other aspects of the major works improvement programme are focused on meeting some specific needs. For example, lever taps are offered for all kitchens and bathrooms and different types of lighting are available for people who have visual impairments. This helps ensure the programme meets any specific needs.
- 75 There is not yet a clear decent homes plus standard. Improvements being delivered are above the basic decent homes standard, such as the holistic approach to kitchen refurbishment. Some discussions with residents have taken place identifying priorities for improvement over and above the minimum decent homes standard but this has not been developed into a comprehensive deliverable standard or future aspirational standard. The future planned programme of works for decent homes includes replacement of all elements which individually fail the decent homes standard, even if taken together some elements would not have to be completed to prevent failure of the home overall. However other priorities for decent homes plus standards still require costing and then further consultation with residents.
- 76 There is a clear refusal policy in place which is focused on encouraging tenants to have works completed. The largely reactive nature of the current programme means that there are very few refusals but the policy may be more significant as the programme shifts to a more planned replacement and improvement programme.
- 77 It is positive that there is now information for residents on longer term future works programmes although this is very recent. The provisional five-year major works programme has recently been placed on the website. Prior to this only the programme for the year ahead was publicised. A series of meetings took place in July 2009 to answer any resident queries about the programme. This allows tenants to be clear about the likely future works to their homes.

How good is the service?

- 78 The approach to ensuring affordable warmth in homes is mixed. SAP⁷ ratings are high compared with other district councils and there has been significant investment in new windows and heating systems along with external grants for insulation works. However there is no affordable warmth strategy in place to guide this activity and no scenario planning to determine the cost benefit analysis of undertaking specific programmed works. This is planned for 2009/10 but the current approach means the organisation cannot be sure it is maximising the impact of its activity in this area.
- 79 A high level of asbestos information is available on individual homes and communal areas and this is being shared with contractors. There are asbestos records available for approximately 97 per cent of homes and all communal areas. Contractors can access information on asbestos held by SGCH. The two day-to-day repairs contractors have direct access to the asbestos database. For other works SGCH provides copies of the data held with orders. This ensures operatives are aware of the location of asbestos where this is known which increases safety.
- 80 There is also a positive approach to sharing information with residents on the presence of asbestos. Data on asbestos in a property is provided at letting. There is also general information on asbestos in the tenants' handbook and on a specific leaflet which is available in offices and on the website. This makes clear the risk asbestos can cause if damaged and that SGCH can be contacted to check on the presence of asbestos.
- 81 There have been no regular asbestos surveys to assess any deterioration in the condition of known asbestos in communal areas, and many of the BDC surveys provided to SGCH date back to the 1990s. SGCH has implemented a programme of asbestos surveys starting with the high risk communal areas. However, this means potentially unsafe asbestos may not have been identified.
- 82 There is a positive approach to asbestos awareness training. All SGCH staff who work on property inspection activity have been trained on asbestos awareness. Contractors have been offered the opportunity to buy into SGCH training on asbestos, which has been used by some contractors. SGCH has requested confirmation of training for contractor staff on asbestos and has received confirmation of 100 per cent coverage from two key contractors but is still awaiting information from other contractors. While the lack of this information means the approach is not yet comprehensive the overall approach is seeking to minimise the dangers of asbestos.
- 83 IT Systems for planned programme works and stock condition information are not fully integrated. The planned maintenance module linked to the asset management module is not currently used which means that planned works are entered on to the day-to-day repairs system. Separate reports have to be run to update the asset management database and individual entries on the responsive repairs system for identification of planned works and guarantee periods. Although work to integrate systems is due to begin in September 2009 the current system increases chances of errors, which were found, and is less efficient.

⁷ Standard Assessment Procedure - a measure of energy efficiency in homes

- 84 The approach to cyclical decorations has been mixed. All sheltered housing schemes have received internal and external decoration within the last five years and future works are programmed. However 40 per cent of general needs properties have not been decorated in the last six years and there is not a clear picture on other communal areas on estates. The policy now is to complete decorations as part of the external works contracts for the planned decent homes programme which is due to run to 2013/14. A significant programme of UPVc window replacement has already been delivered and over the last year this has included a comprehensive approach to replacing other external elements with UPVc to reduce future decoration requirements. This means that while cyclical programmes have maintained the quality of decorations in a proportion of homes, they have not ensured this has been achieved in all homes.
- 85 There has not been a coordinated approach to electrical testing in homes. Electrical testing has been driven by associated works, primarily voids, mutual exchanges and major works. There is not a clear picture of which properties have had electrical testing over the last ten years (the frequency necessary to comply with good practice guidance). Some work required as a result of tests completed up to 18 months ago, has not yet been completed. This represents work to 5 per cent of the housing stock. This means SGCH cannot be sure that electrical safety standards are being maintained in homes.
- 86 It is positive that there is an ongoing process of upgrading electrical fittings in communal areas to provide improved energy efficiency. There is an operative dedicated to carrying out this work across estates. Work on high usage areas has been prioritised and about 30-40 blocks have been completed, which is approximately 10-15 per cent of the work required. While there is still considerable work to be done in this programme the approach is positive and is starting to have an impact on energy efficiency.

Responsive repairs

- 87 In 2008, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. There were a variety of ways to report repairs, and the operation of the call centre benefited from the co-location of different teams. An improvement programme for responsive repairs had led to enhanced outcomes, and there were regular meetings between contractors and residents. The handyperson service was popular among users. However, performance did not always meet targets and, despite high levels of post-inspection, residents had concerns about the quality of work. The schedule of rates system limited the ability of the service to meet customers' needs. The IT system did not fully meet the requirements of either the organisation or vulnerable residents. The appointment system continued to offer some flexibility, but did not achieve best practice in this area.
- 88 In this inspection, we found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses in responsive repairs. Repairs are being delivered quickly and with high levels of satisfaction. Pre-inspections are being managed well and there is flexibility in the approach to ensure all repairs required are completed. Repairs centre staff are well trained and performing effectively. The approach to ensuring jobs are completed 'right first time' is developing although it is not yet comprehensive. There are still weaknesses in the appointment system and the approach to post inspections is underdeveloped.

How good is the service?

- 89 There is strong performance on delivering repairs within challenging target timescales. The repairs contractor in place at the time of the last inspection was replaced in August 2008. The two new contractors have delivered much improved performance. Repairs completed in target since the change in contractor have been 99 per cent for emergency repairs, 99 per cent for urgent repairs, and 95 per cent for routine repairs. Performance on emergency repairs is measured against a commitment to attend in two hours. Following consultation with customers other repairs timescales were simplified and made more challenging from April 2009, with urgent orders reducing from five to three days and 15 day and 28 day jobs all being included in a single 15 day timescale. This ensures customers receive a prompt response to repairs requests.
- 90 There are still weaknesses in the approach to appointments for repairs. Only about 10 per cent of repair calls receive an appointment at the first point of contact. This is because systems are not in place to allow repair call operatives to identify appointment slots. The repairs contractors have responsibility for making contact with the tenant and agreeing an appointment, although this is only being achieved for 79 per cent of eligible repairs. It is positive that evening and weekend appointments are offered. Performance on keeping appointments is very strong with 99.7 per cent kept and a compensation scheme is in place for missed appointments. Appointments are confirmed in writing although there is no follow up reminder system. The number of repairs cancelled is low, at 1 per cent, which demonstrates access is being achieved to complete requested work. However, overall the system for making appointments for repairs is not customer-friendly or efficient.
- 91 Satisfaction with the repairs service is high and there is a robust system for carrying out satisfaction surveys. A new 'TP tracker' survey system is being used to assess satisfaction. This is a postal survey using random sampling supported by telephone surveys which is achieving a 24.5 per cent return rate. This shows 95 per cent satisfaction with the service. There are systems in place to investigate dissatisfaction involving discussions with the contractor and the resident. This shows that the service is meeting the expectations of customers.
- 92 Repairs call centre staff are well trained and supported to handle repairs requests. Call centre staff have all been on repairs ordering training, have shadowed operatives and are following customer care National Vocational Qualifications. They also utilise repairs diagnostic software to assist in accurate ordering. Call staff were found to be providing an effective and professional service. This helps reduce disruption in the repairs process.
- 93 There is a positive approach to pre-inspection of works. Approximately 5 per cent of works are pre-inspected which is a reasonable level and therefore limits unnecessary disruption for tenants. These are identified by call operatives where there is significant uncertainty about the nature of the works or cost of rectification. A large proportion of these are condensation issues due to the susceptibility of some property types to this problem. In response to this issue, surveyors have received specialist training and are provided with the equipment to make a full assessment, advise tenants and specify appropriate works. Previously, external specialists were being used to make this assessment which was expensive. The approach to pre-inspection is increasing efficiency and reducing disruption to residents.

- 94 There are some weaknesses in the post-inspection process. Post-inspections are reportedly carried out on approximately 12 per cent of works, but only one third of these are physical inspections with the others done by telephone. It is positive that inspections are carried out by appointment and in an effective manner. However there is no clear system or criteria for selecting jobs for post-inspection. The IT system is unable to select at random jobs linked to specific criteria. The current approach is to select jobs manually trying to get a range of different types and costs. The payment of repairs on hourly rates/actual material costs as part of open book arrangements means control through post-inspection is particularly important as well as ensuring a consistent quality of repair has been completed.
- 95 It is positive that there is flexibility for operatives to complete all appropriate works when visiting a tenant. Operatives will complete all works required at a property including additional works, even if they do not match the job order, as long as they can be completed within the time available. A schedule of rates is no longer in use for the costing of work as costing is now directly linked to actual labour and material costs, which has eliminated delays due to specification disputes. Procedures for verbal authorisation of high cost additional works are in place. This helps provides a customer focused service.
- 96 There is a mixed approach to ensuring works are completed 'right first time'. This is effectively measured and monitored as a key performance indicator. A number of aspects of the service covered above such as effective repairs diagnosis and low pre-inspections assist in reducing instances where more than one visit to a property has to be made. A system of imprest stock on vans is also used to assist this process. Completion of works in one visit is being achieved in 80 per cent of cases. SGCH has attempted to benchmark this performance with three other organisations. These reported performance in the mid to high 80s but different definitions were being used, making comparison inconclusive. SGCH has signed up to a definition recently agreed by a national benchmarking club, so future monitoring will be more effective. However, it is a weakness that there has been no analysis of the jobs that are not completed first time as this could inform improvement. The organisation cannot yet be sure it minimising disruption to tenants by maximising the number of jobs completed in one visit.
- 97 There are effective arrangements for out of hour's emergency repairs. A team of operatives are on-call for emergency repairs. Emergency repair calls go through to the Careline service who have been trained in dealing with emergency repairs and also have the support of on-call surveyor if required. The staff place orders directly onto the repairs IT system so it can also interrogate the history of repairs if required. This ensures an effective emergency repairs service for tenants.

How good is the service?

Empty (void) property repairs

- 98 In 2008, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. A revised lettable standard had been developed with residents. Although it was not user friendly, in practice we found that voids did meet the standard. Satisfaction was high, based on a relatively small sample of new residents. The letting of longer-term voids had led to a longer average re-let period.
- 99 In this inspection, we found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses in void repairs. Mechanisms are in place to encourage residents to provide notice and leave properties in a good condition. The contract for void work is focused on achieving fast turnaround of empty properties as well as achieving required standards. There is strong performance on completing void repairs in timescales. A clear lettable standard has been agreed with residents and properties are being repaired to this standard. The level of notices and pre-termination visits are not regularly monitored but, overall, the approach is focused on ensuring tenancies are ended in a way which assists the void management process.
- 100 Mechanisms are in place to encourage residents to provide notice and leave properties in a good condition. Technical officers carry out pre-termination visits where notice is provided and they can get access. This is used to identify any repairs which are the tenant's responsibility and identify any other issues likely to affect void works. A 'goodbye' reward scheme that provides a financial incentive to residents to leave the property in good condition is having an increasing effect on void turnaround. This resulted in an estimated saving on average void costs of £20,000 and also contributed to an overall reduction in average void costs. It is a weakness that the level of notices and pre-termination visits are not regularly monitored. Overall however, these processes are helping ensure voids are repaired quickly and that costs are minimised.
- 101 The contract and pricing mechanism for void work is focused on achieving fast turnaround of empty properties as well as achieving required standards. An average cost for direct works to standard voids has been agreed which means there is no need for pre-inspection and placing of orders by SGHC. These standard voids are on a maximum ten day turnaround time. There is some weakness in that there is no shorter target timescale for some voids, although this would only be of benefit if the CBL scheme adjusted its procedure. Currently advertisement of homes takes place on the tenancy end date with the bidding process then completed in ten days. Where works are more substantial, SGCH authorises additional work and will extend the target time to a three week category where necessary. Performance on turnaround times and resident satisfaction are linked to contractor payments. This speeds up the repair process, reduces administration costs and maintains a focus on the quality of works.
- 102 There is strong performance on completing void repairs on time. The contractor is completing 97 per cent of voids in target time against a target of 95 per cent. There are regular monitoring meetings involving SGCH, the contractor and BDC to monitor performance on void properties. This has contributed to the improved performance on total re-let times which shows that 93 per cent of properties are now let within 21 days (7 per cent are harder-to-let sheltered housing units) and void loss has reduced to less than 1 per cent of the rental debit. This helps make homes available to new tenants quickly and helps increase income for SGCH.

- 103 It is a strength that a clear lettable standard has been agreed with residents and properties are being repaired to this standard. The SGCH lettable standard has been reviewed in consultation with residents and is given to housing applicants prior to viewing properties. Ready to let properties viewed during the inspection achieved the lettable standard with the exception of one minor concern. Residents are asked if they believe the property achieved the lettable standard in a satisfaction survey provided after sign up. This shows that over the last year 98 per cent (from a 41 per cent return) believed the property achieved the lettable standard. Positively SGCH monitors the number of repairs requested in the first three months following letting to assess performance in repairs voids and these are at very low levels. Photographs are also taken of completed voids to help deal with any disputes over condition and these are stored on the asset management database and will also be referred to in the future for any rechargeable repairs. This is ensuring empty properties are appropriately repaired for new residents.
- 104 There is an effective approach to decorations in empty properties. Tenants are provided with financial assistance to decorate their home through a card-based decoration allowance scheme. This allows residents to purchase decorating materials at two major outlets. Where residents cannot carry out decorations, for example, older people or people with disabilities where there is no family assistance, SGCH does the work. This provides effective customer care in relation to the decoration of homes.

Gas servicing

- 105 In 2008, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. Non-access had reduced, but legal action had not been used effectively to reduce this further.
- 106 In this inspection, we found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses. There is strong performance on completing gas servicing in time. A range of publicity is being used to publicise the importance of gas safety and there is a positive approach to ensuring access for gas servicing, including legal action where necessary. However, there is insufficient focus on ensuring leaseholders arrange for gas servicing to be completed and a small number of mechanisms for assisting access are not fully developed.
- 107 There is strong performance on completing gas servicing in timescales. At the time of inspection 99.7 per cent of properties with gas appliances had a compliant CP12⁸ and performance has been consistently over 99 per cent. The current gas contract also provides added value in relation to testing and installation of smoke alarms. These are provided free by Essex fire and rescue, and installed and tested by the gas contractor. This helps ensure the safety of residents.
- 108 A range of publicity is used to publicise the importance of gas safety. The tenant handbook, resident newsletter, and SGCH leaflets are used to publicise the importance of gas servicing. In addition, the local press and radio have been used to publicise the danger of not having gas servicing completed. This helps ensure that residents understand the importance of allowing access for gas servicing.

⁸ Certificate confirming the completion of gas servicing which should be carried out every 12 months.

How good is the service?

- 109 There are a number of positive aspects to ensuring access for gas servicing. Following a notification of appointment by letter there is an opportunity to change this appointment including arranging an evening or weekend appointment. Gas repairs and servicing issues are dealt with at the first point of contact as a menu system enables these to be directed to the contractor. Text reminders are sent the day before appointments, although this is only semi-automated. The programme operates on a ten-month cycle, allowing sufficient lead-in time to allow problems of non-access to be dealt. There is an agreed procedure to address access issues involving a series of letters, visits and telephone calls. Legal action is being taken in the form of injunctions, although forced entry has only been necessary on one occasion. A flag is placed on the responsive repairs system for overdue CP12s which blocks other repairs orders being placed. This helps ensure access for gas servicing.
- 110 There are a small number of gas servicing arrangements which do not maximise opportunities to gain access. The contractor element of the process is focused on written communication and telephone contact is not attempted until after the second missed appointment. The level of access on first appointment is not monitored as an indicator which can help focus activity and judge effectiveness of early access processes. The outstanding gas servicing flag on the responsive repairs system is not put on the system until the CP12 has expired although this procedure was changed to six weeks prior to servicing being due when highlighted during inspection feedback. SGCH has not sufficiently pursued the option of using the Environmental Protection Act to gain access for servicing. SGCH has received legal advice that it would not be able to use this Act, but it has not fully investigated how other ALMOs do use this mechanism. In these areas the focus on gaining access has not been maximised.
- 111 There are clear systems for management of gas servicing information. The programme for gas servicing is regenerated weekly from housing management systems which holds updated appliance information to ensure property lists are kept up-to-date. The contractor submits regular updates on a gas servicing spreadsheet, with copies of CP12s scanned into the asset management database as well manually filed. Checks on servicing certificates confirmed the accuracy of records. This provides confirmation that gas servicing is being delivered effectively.
- 112 There is a strong, effective approach to quality control in gas servicing. Currently 10 per cent of gas services are being post-inspected by an external agency. This is a change from previous arrangements whereby the contractor had its own quality control processes with a separate team inspecting between 5-10 per cent of work. The external agency also carries out checks on the processes and procedures for gas safety. Satisfaction surveys are carried out and these currently show 100 per cent satisfaction with servicing. This helps ensure services are maintained to a high standard.
- 113 There is insufficient focus on ensuring leaseholders have gas servicing carried out. Leaseholders have been sent a leaflet on this issue and gas servicing is offered to leaseholders. However there has not been a focus on establishing the level of properties not serviced and targeted actions. New leases require leaseholders to produce a CP12 annually, which increases the possibility of gas safety in leasehold properties.

Aids and adaptations

- 114 In 2008, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. Satisfaction with aids and adaptations was high where work had been completed, but there was a backlog of major adaptations. The service was promoted well. There had been a reduction in the revenue budget, which had been partially offset by closer work with the Telecare service.
- 115 In this inspection, we found that strengths now outweigh weaknesses in aids and adaptations. The service is generally well publicised, effectively resourced and satisfaction levels are high. Minor adaptations are carried out very quickly and major adaptations are also completed quickly from the date of Occupational Therapist (OT) referral. However joint working with the OT service and other partners at strategic level is underdeveloped, resulting in some delays in the overall service, and leaseholders are not well informed on how to access adaptations.
- 116 It is positive that a range of publicity on the availability of aids and adaptations is provided. Aids and adaptations are promoted through leaflets in area offices, posters on estate boards, in sheltered schemes, the SGCH website, the tenants' handbook and through representation at community events such as the Basildon festival. Action to get posters into GP surgeries and hospitals is also ongoing. Adaptations are effectively promoted during major works processes. It is a weakness that SGCH has not used its customer profile information to target publicity on aid and adaptations and has not specifically produced information on how leaseholders can access adaptations. However, overall, general publicity is being used effectively to promote the availability of aids and adaptations.
- 117 The service is now being well resourced. The budget for aid and adaptations was increased in 2008/09 to address a backlog in work resulting from historic under-funding. The same level of budget has been maintained for 2009/10 and there are no longer any funding related delays in the service. Added value is also provided with the adaptation team assessing any insulation improvements required and checking rent issues and benefit entitlement. This demonstrates SGCH's commitment to ensuring effective services to this client group.
- 118 There is very strong performance in the delivery of minor adaptations. An independent living advisor has been trained to assess requirements and to carry out the works. Minor works have been delivered in an average of 2.5 days in 2009/10 and an average of four days during 2008/09. This ensures customers receive a prompt response to requests for minor adaptations.

How good is the service?

- 119 SGCH's performance on completing major adaptations is strong. These are currently being completed in 54.5 days from referral from the OT service with urgent cases completed much quicker. Following a tendering process three specialist contractors were appointed to deliver adaptations using a schedule of rates which enables a short lead-in process. At operational level there is some positive joint working with the County OT service with regular monthly liaison meetings to discuss delivery and joint visits are arranged when required. Satisfaction levels are very high at close to 100 per (with an 82 per cent return rate) although it is a weakness that the survey does not ask a question on satisfaction with waiting times. The performance on delivering adaptations is helping to ensure customers do not have long to wait for much needed adaptations.
- 120 However, there has been insufficient partnership working to ensure the effectiveness of the OT service for aids and adaptations. Accurate information on the waiting times for OT visits and the number of SGCH cases waiting is not being regularly monitored in partnership with the County Council. It is estimated by SGCH that there is currently a five-month wait (approximately) for an OT visit which is significant. There has been insufficient consideration of how partnership working could improve this performance. There is no county-wide group for liaison with the Council on aids and adaptations and there is no joint working protocol in place. This means that some residents will be experiencing unnecessary hardship while they wait for OT visits.
- 121 There are arrangements to make best use of adapted properties. Details of adapted properties are entered onto the asset management database. Where adapted properties become void there is liaison with the in-house adaptations team (which is in the same section as the voids team) to see if it would be suitable for someone seeking an adapted property. Similarly where a current property is not suitable for adaptation the adaptations team will work with the voids team to identify a suitable property to be adapted. BDC holds a list of residents seeking an adapted property which is also used. There is also evidence of recycling specific adaptations as well as allocating appropriately to already adapted properties. Straight stairlifts and keysafes are being recycled where possible. This helps ensure all adaptations are effectively used.

Housing income management

- 122 In 2008, we found that weaknesses balanced strengths in this area. Although SGCH was close to the performance of the best performing ALMOs, it was still below the levels achieved by many District Councils. A partner organisation provided welfare benefits training and surgeries, but tenants waited for several weeks to access these surgeries. There was a positive relationship with the Council's Housing Benefits service. Monitoring of arrears was underdeveloped, and the ALMO did not follow best practice in terms of early intervention to prevent arrears building up.
- 123 In this inspection, we found that there is still a balance of strengths and weaknesses in income collection. Arrangements for rent payment are strong, welfare benefits advice and access to benefits is well coordinated and preventative actions are reducing evictions. There is effective management of former tenant arrears (FTAs) although procedures for possession action do not meet legal requirement in relation to FTAs. In addition financial inclusion strategy is underdeveloped, rent collection is still comparatively below average, joint working on debt advice and corporate debt policy is underdeveloped.
- 124 Arrangements for rent payment are strong. A wide range of payment options is available including payments online and direct debit (with two optional dates to pay each month) is promoted as the most efficient mechanism. Payment methods are well publicised and tenants receive quarterly statements of their accounts as well as being able to download statements directly from the SGCH website. SGCH successfully encourages new tenants to pay rent from the first day of tenancy. Information on rent setting policy is on the organisation's website although not well publicised in other documentation. The only weakness in this area is that there are insufficient warnings of the costs and dangers of paying by credit cards. However, the overall approach on rent payment makes it easy for residents to pay rent therefore encouraging regular payment.
- 125 Joint working with the Council's housing benefit department is delivering an effective service for SGCH tenants. SGCH has funded three housing benefit officers to process all new applications. These officers focus on processing new claims and attend sign-ups when benefit is likely to be payable. Form completion and verification will then take place at the sign up resulting in housing benefit entitlement being confirmed and processed at tenancy commencement. The Council's Housing Benefit department is processing change of circumstances in 11 days and appeals are being processed in an average of three days. A benefits calculator is available on the SGCH website, and recent partnership working included a recession busting day hosted by the benefits service where SGCH took 75 enquiries. There is a service level agreement in place between the HB department and SGCH but this is not being effectively monitored which could mean any problems which do occur are not quickly resolved. Currently, however, the service is ensuring that tenants are clear about what they need to pay and that arrears are not inflated by delays in housing benefit payments.

How good is the service?

- 126 Preventative approaches to debt recovery are resulting in a reduction in possession actions. The level of evictions is monitored as a performance indicator and shows that the number of evictions due to rent arrears has reduced from 47 in 2005/06 to 31 in 2008/09 with a corresponding reduction in notices seeking possession (NoSP) for arrears from 20.57 per cent of tenants in arrears in 2007/08 to 13.97 per cent in 2008/09. The proportion of tenants evicted for rent arrears shows better than average performance compared with other ALMOs in the benchmarking club with performance in the best 25 per cent on percentage of NoSPs served. This means that more customers with debt are receiving better support in dealing with the debt rather than losing their homes through enforcement action.
- 127 Performance on rent collection is below average. In 2008/09 SGCH's rent collection was 97.68 per cent which, although a slight improvement on the previous year, is still below average compared with other district councils and below the organisation's target of 98.3 per cent. Arrears as a percentage of annual debit was 2.35 per cent at the end of 2008/09 which is a small reduction on the previous year. The number of tenants with more than seven weeks arrears increased slightly from 5.74 per cent in 2007/08 to 5.8 per cent in 2008/09 which is also higher than the organisation's target of 4.9 per cent and below average compared with other ALMOs (although a contributory factor may be that the debt includes former tenant debt). This means that SGCH is not yet maximising its income to deliver services for its customers.
- 128 It is a significant weakness that legal processes are not being correctly applied in pursuing possession actions for arrears. Specifically former tenant arrears (FTAs) have been included in the total arrears cited on notices seeking possession for current arrears where an FTA has been 'transferred' or brought forward from a previous tenancy. In ten cases we reviewed in 2008/09 legal action resulting in eviction included FTAs in the total debt possession was sought on. In one case the tenant was evicted for 'arrears' of £5,266.56 which included a former tenancy debt of £4,727.21. Although tenancy agreements do include a clause confirming agreement to pay former debt and the organisations own legal opinion expressed the view that the former tenant arrears could be included on the notice, it also identified that it should be made clear that possession was being sought on another breach in tenancy conditions rather than non-payment of rent. This has not been made explicit on notices or in court and therefore these evictions are potentially unsafe.
- 129 The management of former tenant debt is a strength. A dedicated in-house team manages the collection of former tenant arrears (FTAs). The level of debt is low at 0.99 per cent in 2008/09 against the organisation's provision target of 1.15 per cent. This performance is in the best 25 per cent of ALMOs participating in the benchmarking club. Write-offs are also at reasonable levels. Collection rates are positive for FTAs with robust processes in place. Pre-tenancy termination visits are carried out when notice is received to discuss debt and the goodbye reward scheme is proving successful in reducing the instance of FTAs occurring. Staff are able to use in-house tracing software. Where addresses are known they have standard letters and will visit to make contact. Where they have no response to contact they will refer to two external debt collection agencies on a 'no win, no fee' basis. This is helping to maximise income from former tenant debt.

- 130 The approach to financial inclusion is mixed. The organisation does not have a financial inclusion strategy to coordinate and focus activity on financial inclusion. However, there are examples of working in partnership to develop the financial inclusion agenda. It is a key partner in the local strategic partnership (LSP), where it is working to reduce poverty in the most deprived areas of Essex. This include helping people compete for jobs through improving skills, the development of credit unions and increasing benefit take-up and access to debt advice. The LSP has recently provided £146,000 of additional financial support to the Essex credit union to this end. This activity is helping ensure financial inclusion for SGCH residents but the lack of a strategic approach means that the organisation is not maximising its impact in this area.
- 131 Debt advice signposting and information is strong. An effective 'Money Matters' booklet is available on the SGCH website, at frontline locations and is promoted by staff to customers through a range of methods. Area Housing staff are trained by an Independent Welfare Benefits Advisor and relevant staff have attended debt negotiation and customer service training. Arrears letters also include appropriate signposting. This helps ensure residents receive appropriate advice to deal with debt and maximise income through benefit entitlement.
- 132 There is an effective approach to providing welfare benefits advice. SGCH works in partnership with an external agency, a cooperative partnership specialising in welfare benefits advice. Under an SLA with Basildon Council the agency provides one-to-one advice and assistance to SGCH tenants by appointment at area-based surgeries. They also provide telephone advice, tribunal representation, benefit take-up campaigns, training to the ALMO staff and policy development. Customers are seen promptly and direct casework resulted in additional benefits of £541,453 being received in 2008/09. Regular reports are produced on the outcomes achieved and positively post codes are monitored to check effective coverage of known areas of deprivation. This is helping ensure SGCH residents receive the benefits they are entitled to which will also assist them in maintaining rent payment.
- 133 Access to specialist debt counselling is not being monitored effectively. The CAB is the main agency providing specialist debt counselling in Basildon which is part funded by the Council. However there is no service level agreement or joint working protocol in place with SGCH. There is no monitoring of the number of SGCH residents accessing this service or the outcomes. This means that SGCH cannot be sure that debt advice is delivering successful outcomes for residents.
- 134 Performance management of the arrears recovery process is positive. Estate Officers are set individual rent collection performance targets. One-to-ones are held with principal housing officers to ensure that procedures are being followed and caseloads appropriately addressed. We saw evidence of reports being produced to assist in performance management such as NOSP's due to expire. This means that performance is being managed to help maximise recovery.

How good is the service?

- 135 Performance management of garage debt has been weak. Although outstanding garage arrears are not high, standing at £23,380 for 2008/09, (1.3 per cent of the annual debit), this debt should be relatively easy to recover. It is not clear how much is debt owed by current tenants and there is no separate reporting on this debt. The policy for the recovery of garage arrears has been reviewed as part of the new income policy and targets have been set for the next three years. However this has not yet impacted on performance.
- 136 It is positive that there is a scheme in place to incentivise rent payment although aspects of the scheme and its evaluation need to be more clearly focused. The tenant reward scheme includes a requirement for tenants to have a clear rent account for six weeks of a quarter to be entered into a quarterly prize draw to win £100. A separate 'goodbye' reward scheme for tenants terminating their tenancy includes a requirement to have a clear rent account. There is also a recently introduced scheme whereby transfer applicants get increased points if they maintain a clear rent account. However we found some confusion among staff on these different activities and the evaluation of the tenant reward scheme found no evidence of how the scheme was affecting rent payment. The evaluation lacked a sophisticated approach and did not make recommendations for improvement apart from a further review. It did not address the weakness that tenants have to hold their tenancy for a year before being eligible for the scheme. This means that while the scheme shows a commitment to use a variety of methods to encourage payment the organisation is not currently maximising the benefits of the incentive scheme.
- 137 There is no corporate debt recovery policy in use by SGCH. Currently the ALMO uses the out of date Council policy. The SGCH income collection strategy is clear that priority should be given to recovery of current rent debt first, but there is no clear policy guidance on how sub-account debts such as FTAs, garage arrears and rechargeable debt should be handled. In addition there no coordinated approach to debt recovery with the Council who will be pursuing debts, including Council Tax debts. While the development of a joint corporate approach with the Council is planned to be developed by December 2009 the current approach is not ensuring debt recovery is effectively coordinated and prioritised.
- 138 There are some inequities in the way service charges are raised: in the leasehold service for example leaseholders are not charged for grounds maintenance. A contribution is being made for this from the Council's general fund which is inappropriate. In addition this contribution has not been increased in line with inflation and therefore £14,000 is being subsidised by tenants.
- 139 There is a positive strategic approach to income management. An income management strategy was approved by the ALMO Board in May 2009 which sets out the organisation's ambitions for service improvement. A restructure of the service is part of that strategy and by December 2009 it is intended to have a dedicated specialist income recovery team which should drive service improvement. The strategy is guiding the development of the service in becoming more focused on a more preventative and early intervention approach to debt recovery rather than reliance on enforcement.

Resident involvement

- 140 In 2008, we found that strengths balanced weaknesses in terms of involving residents in decision making. SGCH provided substantial resources for participation through a Tenant Resource Centre and the resident participation team. Despite the commitment of many residents, especially those in sheltered housing, outcomes were limited, and the current participation structure did not encourage the engagement of hard-to-reach groups. Involving customers was regarded as the role of the resident participation team, rather than as part of the everyday housing management process. Tenants were consulted on proposals, but were not fully involved in developing them, resulting in relatively low satisfaction with opportunities to participate.
- 141 In this inspection, we found that that strengths outweigh weaknesses. There is now a range of ways residents can be involved in shaping services which are well promoted and accessible. Involvement is well resourced, satisfaction is above average and there are examples of resident involvement influencing outcomes. However, the service is still in transition and participation is too focused on formal meetings and a small number of involved residents.
- 142 Opportunities for involvement are promoted and accessible to customers. The new Resident Involvement Strategy provides the overall strategic vision and approach to resident involvement within SGCH, and has significantly moved the approach forward to one that offers greater choice and opportunity and is being used to restructure the framework of consultation. A comprehensive tenant compact set out the methods of participation and the detail of the approach to involvement. Service standards have been established for resident involvement, although these reflect ongoing support rather than measurable standards. It is promoted in the tenant newsletter and in the tenant handbook. There is good coverage and promotion of resident involvement on the website, on posters, and adverts with mail outs on community panels. Customers can express an interest in getting involved in a range of ways including through the website, at sign-up and at promotional events where SGCH's resident involvement team and resident representatives maintain a highly visible presence and provide activities for children. This means that customers can be clear about how they can be involved.
- 143 There is a range of ways in which residents can be involved in shaping and improving services and the number of involved customers is growing. Currently 12.6 per cent of SGCH's customers are on the involvement database. There is a menu of opportunities for involvement in strategic and operational issues, which are set out in five levels within the new Resident Involvement Strategy. These include quality checking printed information and editing the quarterly newsletter through a Correspondence Review Group, nine community panels addressing local service issues, and a quarterly mystery shopping programme in place since mid-2007. At the time of inspection 35 residents had participated in it and been trained independently by external consultants. There are formal opportunities for involvement, including panels for tenants and leaseholder representatives, which provide an opportunity for residents to be involved in developing and influencing key policy decisions before they go to the board; there are five residents on the ALMO board, including one leaseholder. This helps ensure resident influence over services.

How good is the service?

144 Tenant involvement is not currently fully inclusive or meeting the needs of all people who want to get involved. The approach to tenant involvement is in transition and is still focused on formal meetings, some which are poorly attended or overly formal and limited to a small number of involved residents that are not fully representative of all residents. It lacks a local structure of involvement, as community panels cover numerous estates, as well as lacking systematic involvement in developing operational services and delivery in all areas. Groups outside the formal structures have been developed in response to requirements of specific projects rather than part of a systematic approach. Some in-house operational training has been provided but there is a lack of training on best practice. This limits the influence of residents over services.

145 Resident involvement is well resourced. Examples include:

- a dedicated tenant and leaseholder involvement team to support the range of participation and consultation activities, in addition to staff throughout the organisation supporting resident involvement meetings;
- a 'TP Tracker' IT system is used to record outcomes. In 2009/10 SGCH had an annual budget of £327,700 to cover the costs of the resident involvement team and the support they provide;
- SGCH has a tenants' resource centre to further support involved customers at an annual cost of around £13,000. It is based in the town centre and run by volunteers, and is the focal point for residents to receive support, advice and training;
- an annual environmental budget of £180,000 to support the Environmental Champions and deliver local estate improvements; and
- a resident training programme is in place and has been devised on the basis of a skills gap analysis of involved residents.

This ensures customers are receiving support to become involved.

146 Customer involvement in the home ownership service is mixed. At a strategic level the Tenant and Leaseholder Panel meets quarterly but attendance by leaseholders is low and no strategic documents relating to them have been considered at the panel. Leaseholder forum meetings are held regularly, where there is good engagement from the leaseholders attending, and some outcomes evident. For example, they influenced the leaseholder handbook and have suggested changes to service charge invoicing and more flexible payment options. All leaseholders are invited to an Open Forum once a year. Events are well promoted but attendance is low and a recent STATUS survey shows low levels of satisfaction with the way their views are taken into account. Positively a focus group was established of residents including leaseholders, who have been involved throughout the procurement process for a new cleaning contract where they selected the contractor and influenced the specification. This means that leaseholders are influencing services but the impact is not being maximised.

- 147 There is good engagement with residents on sheltered housing schemes. Consultation arrangements are in place through a Sheltered Housing Forum with representation from most schemes. The Forum has been involved in the review of service charges, and the cleaning service which was the cause of high levels of dissatisfaction. A new Sheltered Housing Focus group has also been developed which gets involved in more operational and detailed work with the ALMO. In addition each scheme coordinator holds quarterly consultation meetings and detailed minutes are taken. In both cases there is evidence of resident involvement delivering improvements such as communal area service standards and cleaning standards.
- 148 Tenant satisfaction that their views are taken into account is now comparatively above average. This increased from 50 per cent to 60 per cent from 2007 to 2008. This is above average compared with other ALMOs. This reflects the changing focus to broaden involvement and further supports the transition in the approach to resident involvement that SGCH has brought. In addition, SGCH has responded to the lower levels of satisfaction with residents of Black and Minority Ethnic communities and as a result has also improved significantly since 2007 to comparable levels with all residents. Satisfaction of attendees with community panel meetings was 85 per cent in 2008/09, although this was below the 95 per cent target. Overall this shows that the approach to tenant involvement is increasingly meeting the expectations of customers.
- 149 There is a range of positive outcomes from resident involvement. These are captured through a 'You Said, We Listened' section in the resident newsletter and include local environmental improvements on estates, clearly written information on all services, service standards for all services, and policies that reflect resident consultation. This demonstrates that tenant involvement is having a direct influence on services.

Tenancy and estate management

Tenancy Management

- 150 In 2008, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses in tenancy management and enforcement. The approach to anti-social behaviour benefited from strong partnership working. There was active support for the victims of anti-social behaviour (ASB), and the ALMO had taken successful action against perpetrators. This was evidenced by relatively high satisfaction with this service. However, knowledge of policies and procedures was variable among frontline staff.
- 151 In this inspection, we found that strengths significantly outweigh weaknesses in tenancy management and enforcement. SGCH is effectively focused on preventing ASB and there is a consistent and comprehensive approach. The approach includes strong partnership working and the appropriate use of a range of remedies and preventative measures. There is a particularly effective community warden scheme in operation. General tenancy management is well coordinated and linked with tenancy sustainment activities. Some ASB reporting mechanisms are still underdeveloped, linkages with major works are limited, and introductory and demoted tenancies have not been fully considered.

How good is the service?

- 152 SGCH is effectively focused on preventing ASB. The prevention of ASB is a corporate priority for SGCH and this is supported by a comprehensive ASB policy and an approach that is victim-centred, focused on prevention and early intervention through a range of measures such as support, mediation, parenting contracts, and a range of diversionary activities, as well as enforcement action. SGCH has established an ASB Customer Focus Group, which has helped to develop the service standards and the new policy and procedures for dealing with ASB issues. The tenancy agreement clearly sets out the responsibilities of customers not to participate in ASB and the consequences for them if they do. Responsibilities towards neighbours and SGCH's approach to ASB are explained in sign-up interviews, and during the new tenant visits which take place four weeks into the tenancy, and staff receive training to ensure they provide effective advice to customers. SGCH has signed up to the Respect Standard and has a Respect action plan with the majority of actions complete. This helps ensure staff and residents are clear about the approach to ASB and the importance of this issue for the organisation.
- 153 There is a dedicated and well-resourced cross tenure team dealing with ASB. SGCH has a specialist ASB team that deals with all ASB, domestic violence or hate crime incidents from the initial point of contact through to the process of seeking a resolution, which can include legal action. The team provides a single point of contact for customers and partners and greater consistency through established and standardised procedures. Their work is district-wide and tenure neutral, and SGCH provides this service for the Council under a service level agreement. This is ensuring a strong and coordinated approach to addressing ASB.
- 154 There are comprehensive, user-friendly procedures with clear guidance on early intervention, enforcement remedies for ASB cases and the approach to witness support. Out-of-hours contact for serious and ongoing cases for vulnerable victims and witnesses is via a mobile phone number. IT systems support staff in dealing with ASB and facilitating the monitoring of cases and workload, and although it is not integrated into overall housing management systems the procedures require staff to make the appropriate customer checks, which includes for vulnerability and any needs identified through the customer profile data. This helps provide a consistent and comprehensive approach to dealing with ASB.
- 155 A range of remedies are appropriately used to help resolve ASB:
- joint visits are undertaken by housing staff and the Police to the families of young people involved in ASB;
 - referrals are made to an independent mediation service to help resolve some neighbour disputes at an early stage;
 - since 2006/07 SGCH has issued 197 written and verbal warnings, referred 45 cases to mediation and issued 31 Acceptable Behaviour Contracts - enforcement action is taken by SGCH when support is not accepted or the nature of the incidents is of a serious nature;

- SGCH has also worked in partnership with the Police to obtain three ASBO's and two Closure Orders; and
- since 2006/07, SGCH has issued 14 Notices of Seeking Possession, attended 42 court hearings in respect of ASB resulting in seven injunctions, 10 Possessions Orders and 12 evictions.

Although SGCH has not yet implemented introductory and demoted tenancies it is effectively using a wide range of other mechanisms to tackle ASB.

156 Effective partnership working is supporting SGCH's approach to ASB. This includes:

- active partnership working with the Council, the Police and other agencies to address ASB hotspots, such as the community action zones, where intensive action is focused for three months;
- positive engagement and joint working by SGCH to the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership, which is proactive in coordinating and tackling ASB and promoting community safety through various strategic and operational meetings and multi-agency forums: for example SGCH chairs the multi-agency ASB and Youth Taskforce Group;
- protocols to enable the sharing of confidential information relating to ASB;
- SGCH runs monthly partnership solving meetings with a range of partners to coordinate action to tackle local ASB and community safety issues;
- SGCH participates in police-led operations, such as the recent Operation Bright Shadow where ASB Officers from SGCH undertook joint high visibility patrols with police to target prolific offenders;
- with the police SGCH fits target hardening measures, such as additional locks to windows and doors to properties which suffer from repeat burglaries;
- SGCH supports community initiatives to promote community safety, such as 'Not in My Neighbourhood Week'; and
- the ASB team actively participates in ASB networking meetings within the county and the region.

157 All this partnership working has helped contribute towards a 27 per cent reduction in crime since 2006/07 and a reduction in the fear of ASB since 2003/04 from 46 per cent to 25.9 per cent in 2008/09. The ASB partners we spoke to were complimentary about SGCH's contribution in tackling these issues, not only for tenants but for all residents. This helps to maintain safer communities and target resources more effectively.

158 SGCH is involved in a range of effective diversionary schemes to help prevent ASB, which are pro-actively supported by the Community Wardens. This includes supporting local youth clubs and an award winning junior community warden project that provides an intensive good citizen programme for young people at risk of causing ASB. This is helping prevent ASB.

How good is the service?

- 159 The community wardens provide a responsive approach to support communities in preventing and tackling ASB, as well as a broader role in ensuring local issues are reported and acted upon. They work in partnership with the ASB team as well as key community safety partners to provide a local civil presence on estates, reporting issues, gathering evidence, acting as third party witnesses, undertaking joint patrols with the police, and checking that issues reported have been rectified. Community wardens hold regular, well attended, drop-in sessions at estate-based venues and attend estate inspections as well as community panels to ensure they can respond to issues directly raised by residents. This service is also playing an important role in tackling and preventing ASB.
- 160 ASB successes are effectively publicised. Regular newsletter and local press articles feature anonymous case studies about enforcement action taken. This includes joint working with other agencies, branded under the Basildon Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership logo, and completed with the assistance of a communications specialist employed through the CDRP. There is a 'Making Basildon Safer' booklet produced with partners in 2008 to publicise joint working. This helps to reassure residents that action will be taken to address ASB reported to SGCH.
- 161 The approach to tenancy sustainment is effective. Vulnerable residents are identified at sign-up and referred to floating support provided by Family Mosaic Housing Association. All new tenants receive a visit four weeks into their tenancy that involves checking the tenant has settled in effectively and identifying if any further support is required. There is also support available for vulnerable perpetrators through a range of initiatives to which SGCH staff can refer cases and there is a common referral process in place to Adult Social Care. This helps ensure all vulnerable residents receive appropriate support.
- 162 There is an effective approach to tenancy management. This is delivered by area-based housing staff supported by a specialist tenancy management team. The approach includes:
- a range of up-to-date policies and procedures to help staff deliver a consistent tenancy enforcement approach to customers;
 - the tenants' handbook and tenancy agreement clearly set out the legal rights and responsibilities of customers regarding tenancy management issues and these have recently been updated to reflect current legislation;
 - use of the sign-up process to ensure new customers understand the potential impact of their behaviour;
 - an appropriate range of tenancy management service standards, which are published to customers;
 - a recently introduced five-year tenancy audit process which builds on a pilot scheme to check tenancies and assess vulnerability during the annual gas safety check;

- a tenants reward scheme is in place to provide a financial incentive for customers to adhere to their tenancy conditions through a quarterly draw; and
- a four week post-letting visit.

This helps ensure that tenancies are managed well.

- 163 SGCH deals sensitively with cases of racial harassment, hate crime, and domestic violence. This is supported by clear policies and procedures, specific service standards and partnership working including a Multi-agency Hate Crime Panel to coordinate a response in high risk cases. The approach includes a risk assessment process to tailor the approach to individual cases so highest priority is given to domestic violence and hate crimes where there is an immediate risk. A sanctuary scheme is in place for people experiencing domestic violence and staff are trained to help them to respond effectively. Careline alarms are also available to victims who remain in their home; these were responded to effectively by SGCH or referred to a partner organisation where appropriate. SGCH is effectively supporting residents in these cases.
- 164 There is positive performance on ASB satisfaction. Quarterly satisfaction data from 2008/09 showed that 87 per cent of residents were satisfied with how SGCH handled their case and 84 per cent were satisfied with the outcome of the case work. This is above average compared with other ALMO members of the benchmarking club. This shows that ASB services are generally meeting the expectations of customers.
- 165 SGCH has recently introduced a 24-hour fraud hotline, which allows residents to report potential fraud quickly and easily. In its first week, four calls raised two potential sub-lets and two potential abandonment cases. In addition, SGCH participates in the National Fraud Initiative. This helps to ensure fair and equal access to SGCH homes.
- 166 There are some weaknesses in ASB reporting. The out of hours ASB helpline is not effective as this only provides a recorded message facility, and while the range of ways to report ASB are detailed on the SGCH website, reporting arrangements via the website are not given sufficient prominence. This reduces the ease of ASB reporting.
- 167 Linkages with capital works are underdeveloped. Because ASB information does not systematically inform the capital works programme, crime prevention measures are not effectively built into improvement works or, in particular, used to address hotspot areas. This reduces the impact of ASB prevention activity.

How good is the service?

Estate Management

- 168 In 2008, we found a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. Estate inspections provided a regular check on the estate environment; however, there were no defined standards for estates, and the quality of cleaning during the inspection was not impressive. There was a resident-led budget for environmental improvements, but decisions on works did not involve the wider body of residents and staff. A committed team of community wardens provided a flexible and useful service to residents.
- 169 In this inspection, we found that there is still a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There are effective arrangements for monitoring the performance of the ground maintenance service level agreement with Basildon Council and satisfaction with neighbourhoods is at relatively high levels. However, aspects of the estate inspection process are underdeveloped and customer feedback mechanisms are limited. SGCH has not taken a sufficient leadership role in coordinating the approach with partners to maintain the quality of estates, which results in a mixed appearance on some estates.
- 170 Estates we saw were mixed in appearance. Cleaning and grounds maintenance were clearly being delivered with low levels of rubbish and graffiti observed. However, there were significant problems of excessive weed growth on hard surfaces which created a negative and uncared for appearance. Although this is the responsibility of Essex County Council's highways department, joint working had not effectively addressed this. While some areas had a good external environment others were not of high quality, such as that around the high-rise blocks in Laindon.
- 171 There are effective arrangements in place for SGCH to monitor the performance of the council against the grounds maintenance and cleaning Service Level Agreement (SLA). Estate Officers undertake eight-weekly inspections of estates against the SLA standards and these are reported quarterly. These are attended by a Council representative responsible for delivery of the SLA, residents are invited, and the community warden often attends. There is a clear methodology used to record the outcomes and a pictorial chart is used to judge the condition of the street scene. There are default procedures in place to ensure the Council has to rectify poor performance and the SLA is regularly reviewed to reflect current issues. Estate Officers have received training to monitor the SLA to ensure they provide a consistent approach to grading the elements that make up the grounds maintenance SLA. A and B grades are being achieved on 88 per cent gradings. This helps ensure some aspects of estates are well maintained.
- 172 There are published service standards, agreed with residents, on the range and frequency of estate management activities. There are also pictorial guides on standards displayed on estate-based notice boards to provide visual standards. While these are limited to elements of estate management linked to the SLA with Basildon Council they do provide some indications of the standards to be achieved on estates.

- 173 SGCH has not taken a leadership role in trying to coordinate the approach of maintaining the quality of multi-tenure estates. SGCH has yet to bring together all the key partners who own or are responsible for elements of maintaining the estate environment in order to coordinate action on mixed tenure estates. As a result, staff spend time liaising, monitoring, and chasing up various partners to respond to issues raised by residents or identified either through day-to-day observations or on the estate inspections.
- 174 Customer feedback on estate management is underdeveloped and customers are unlikely to be clear on the assessment of the quality of their grounds maintenance and how this compares. The estate grading system used by SGCH focuses only on SLA items. It is not customer friendly, nor does it provide an overall grading for an estate. Although tenants are invited to the estate inspections, the quality of estates is assessed and graded by Estate Officers against the SLA. Attendance by residents from the inspected estate is low. The results of inspections are not being publicised, and in addition, there is no regular satisfaction surveying of residents to gauge how satisfied they are with the quality of estate management and grounds maintenance on their estate. This limits the assessment of the quality of the service.
- 175 Satisfaction of tenants and leaseholders with their neighbourhood as a place to live is high. This has significantly increased since 2005. Data from the latest satisfaction survey shows an increase from 60 per cent to 80 per cent in satisfaction of general needs and sheltered tenants. This is in the best 25 per cent of performance compared with other ALMOs participating in the benchmarking club. For leaseholders this has increased from 47 per cent to 63 per cent. This shows that the quality of neighbourhoods is meeting the expectations of a large proportion of residents.
- 176 Signage and notice boards are being effectively used on estates. New SGCH notice boards have been erected on all estates to aid communication with residents, and the new block cleaning contract requires the contractor to check this signage on a weekly basis.
- 177 There is a positive approach to recycling on estates. Residents can now recycle certain waste material, which is collected by the council. Bulk refuse is collected by SGCH for recycling, and this is supplemented by local recycling sites located on estates throughout the district. Evidence from the Craylands estate showed recycling levels had recently doubled. Although SGCH does not require the grounds maintenance SLA to deliver any sustainability targets the work on recycling is positive for sustainability and is discouraging dumping on estates.
- 178 Performance on garage management, while improving, has still not addressed the high level of garage voids. SGCH manages approximately 5,700 garages of which approximately 1,500 are void. There is now a more systematic approach to garage management with a member of staff having specific responsibility and a dedicated operative for repairs and condition surveys, and this helped reduce voids from 1,939 at the beginning of 2009. SCGH is working with the council to redevelop unsustainable sites for new affordable homes, but there is no documented strategy for the future of garages and voids level remain high, resulting in lost income and potentially creating a negative appearance in some areas.

Allocations and lettings

- 179 In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses in allocations and lettings. SGCH works effectively in partnership with BDC to ensure that the allocations and lettings process is well managed. Accompanied viewings and sign up processes are comprehensive and delivered well and satisfaction with the lettings process is high. However, re-let times are comparatively below average and the choice-based lettings (CBL) scheme does not effectively use tenancy termination notice periods to progress lettings.
- 180 SGCH works in partnership with BDC to ensure that the lettings process is streamlined, lacks duplication, and is effectively managed. To support this, there is a protocol between SGCH and BDC to guide staff on the process, set out separate roles and agree joint performance targets and service standards. Both organisations use the housing management IT system, which helps to deliver the lettings process. In addition, there are regular void working group meetings between the council and SGCH to ensure this process works effectively, manages emerging issues, and monitors outcomes and performance. There is effective partnership working in place to ensure the lettings process is delivered effectively and is clear for customers.
- 181 SGCH is proactively responding to difficult to let sheltered housing, which is adversely affecting performance against the average re-let times. It is offering prospective tenants incentives, such as increased decorating or level access showers, which is being supported by the development of a show flat. In addition, two bungalow-style sheltered schemes have been decommissioned and are now offered as general needs accommodation.
- 182 There are positive outcomes for customers from the new specialist approach to lettings. This restructure came out of SGCH's response to issues raised in the previous inspection report regarding inconsistent accompanied viewings, but it was devised to ensure feedback from customers on accompanied viewings. Accompanied viewings are now undertaken by the voids management team and have a focus on void repairs and stock condition, which were the key issues for prospective customers. Analysis of reported repairs in the first three months of a tenancy showed that these were limited, which benefits new tenants.
- 183 There is an effective process of accompanied viewing and sign ups. A range of useful information is given at the accompanied viewings and sign ups with a variety of leaflets, and information on repairs and any future improvement works to the property. An explanation of rights and responsibilities under the tenancy agreement is given along with a welcome pack of essential items, including energy efficient light bulbs and power-down packs. The accompanied viewing and sign up process we observed was of a high standard. The staff members conducting the interviews were efficient and effective with a friendly and professional approach. This is ensuring residents receive a positive introduction to their new home.

- 184 Performance against the lettings targets is mixed. In 2008/09 SGCH took an average of 32 days to let its properties. This is three days higher than the target and below average compared with other district councils. However, when the 7 per cent long-term difficult to let sheltered housing is removed this reduces to an average of 21 days. Rent loss due to void periods was below the 1.65 per cent target in 2008/09, at 0.98 per cent.
- 185 The CBL scheme is not effectively enabling use of the tenancy termination notice periods to speed up letting. Properties are not advertised through CBL until the termination date which slows down the process where notice is received and there are minimal works. There is normally a ten day gap from advertisement to viewing to enable the bidding process. In particular there is no link with an early advertisement/viewing approach and the SGCH 'goodbye' reward scheme. This is not focused on minimising void turnaround times.
- 186 Satisfaction levels with the lettings process are high at 97 per cent in 2008/09. This is above the target of 95 per cent and indicates that the service is meeting the expectation of customers.
- 187 Customers are not offered a choice of location for the sign up. These are undertaken at the Central Area Housing Office. While SGCH states that sign ups can be conducted at tenants' homes this is not promoted and sign-ups at other offices are not offered. This limits customer focus in this area.

Leasehold management and Right to Buy

- 188 In 2008, we found that strengths balanced weaknesses. Leaseholders found it easy to contact the home ownership team (HOT), and found staff helpful. However, satisfaction with SGCH's services to leaseholders was lower than satisfaction with the home ownership team, and lower than that of tenants. Income recovery had improved, but target setting was underdeveloped and would not drive further improvements in collection rates.
- 189 Strengths now outweigh weaknesses in RTB and leaseholder services. Performance on processing RTBs is strong and user satisfaction with this service is high. The service can be easily accessed. Arrangements for leaseholder payments are strong and there is effective performance on recovering unpaid service charges. There are some examples of high quality information being provided to customers but leaseholder service standards have not yet been published and there are weaknesses in the administration of service charges. There is no documented strategy for leaseholders and shared ownership services, and leaseholder satisfaction is low.
- 190 There is effective customer access to the homeownership services offered by SGCH. SGCH has a dedicated home ownership team which covers shared ownership (263 units), three leasehold schemes for the elderly (100 units) and 1,954 leasehold properties. There is a direct phone number to the section, which also administers the Right to Buy process. This enables customers to receive professional and appropriate advice easily.

How good is the service?

- 191 Home ownership applicants receive a comprehensive range of information. The Home Ownership Team and website provide advice to RTB applicants including links to the Land Registry for average property valuations. RTB applicants are sent a comprehensive pack of information including government literature and SGCH bespoke literature, and tenants are issued with an information leaflet at sign-up informing them of the procedure and possible costs of home ownership. This helps ensure applicants are clear about the implications of purchasing their home.
- 192 Performance on responding to RTB requests meets statutory timescales and performs well against internal targets. There is a clear set of service standards for performance on RTB alongside the government-set targets for performance. For example SGCH has a target to send an information pack and application form for Right to Buy within two working days of an initial enquiry. Our file checks showed that performance is monitored closely and that targets are being met. This means that applicants receive a timely response to their enquiries.
- 193 There are very high levels of satisfaction with the RTB service. Telephone and exit surveys are conducted with customers which show levels of satisfaction at 100 per cent. While it is a weakness that this only covers residents who complete the RTB process it does show that RTB processes are meeting the expectations of these customers.
- 194 New leaseholders also receive appropriate information. A welcome pack for new leaseholders has been developed by the team and issued to all new customers. This includes a leaseholder handbook which provides details about rights and obligations including how the service charge system works, relevant services and how service charges are calculated. This helps ensure leaseholders have a clear understanding of their rights and responsibilities.
- 195 It is a weakness that there are no published service standards for leaseholder services. Although leaseholder service standards were agreed, following comprehensive consultation, these have not yet been published in a leaflet as with other service standards. The revised leaseholder handbook includes the standards but is also not yet published. The standards were adopted from April 2009 but it is too soon to effectively judge performance although this is to be reported in the leaseholder page of the resident's newsletter. However, currently leaseholders cannot be clear about the standards of service they should receive.
- 196 It is also a weakness that SGCH does not have a strategy for the management of leaseholder and shared ownership services. The Income management strategy 2009-2012 includes leaseholders but there is nothing in the strategy or action plan about developing the income management side of the service. These represent a significant proportion of SGCH's customers but a clear strategic approach to this area of service is not documented. While this is an action in the continuous service improvement plan 2008-2010 the current position means that the service is not developing with a clear strategic direction.

- 197 In general, right to buy and leasehold processes are effectively linked to stock investment processes. When the RTB process starts the responsive repairs system notes the pending RTB and any pending major works are suspended. There are appropriate processes in place to ensure legal requirements are complied with including the issue of Section 20 notices. There are consultation meetings with leaseholders where major works are carried out. It is a weakness that the manual record of all leasehold properties where improvements have been carried out is not part of the asset management database and that there is no systematic audit of leaseholders' properties. However, overall, processes ensure stock investment issues for leasehold properties are being dealt with appropriately.
- 198 The approach to administering service charges is mixed. Service charges for leaseholders are calculated on actual expenditure based on information collected over the year against a block code. It is then analysed to ensure that charges are accurate and customers are billed. However, as mentioned in Housing Income Management section of this report, the charges do not include the cost of grounds maintenance. It is also a weakness that SGCH does not provide estimates of account to leaseholders. Currently service charges are calculated based on actual spend at the end of the financial year. This takes time so accounts are not sent out until July. Customers are therefore expected to start paying from that invoice without warning (although they are offered a quarterly payment option). This means that some aspects of the process are not customer focused.
- 199 There are effective arrangements for leaseholders to make payments. Leaseholders can make payments in a range of ways, similar to tenants paying rent but with the exception of PayPoint or Payzone. There are flexible payment options for major works, including discretionary loans as well as the option to pay service charges by instalments. This provides effective customer service as well as encouraging regular payment.
- 200 There is positive performance on service charge collection and providing debt advice. For the billing period July 2008 to June 2009 there is a 92 per cent collection rate. Final collection rates for the period 2007/08 were 98 per cent. Outstanding service charge arrears are pursued via external solicitors who send out a standard letter costing £10 which has a positive result in raising income. Failure to respond results in legal action commencing or contact with the mortgage lender. All charges are added to the leasehold debt. There is appropriate monitoring of section 125 restrictions to ensure only appropriate charges are raised. All letters and service charge statements make reference to the support agencies for debt and welfare benefit advice and SGCH also has a 'buy back' policy. All staff have received comprehensive training on debt negotiation. This is ensuring effective collection of charging at the same time as providing appropriate support for leaseholders.
- 201 Repairs and property improvement services offered to leaseholders and freeholders are limited. Leaseholders and freeholders are not offered buy-in to major works contracts or other responsive maintenance, although leaseholders are offered gas servicing. Take up of gas servicing is low despite this being well promoted. This means that the potential for assisting residents with value for money improvements and helping with area regeneration is not being maximised.

How good is the service?

- 202 Anti-social behaviour issues are handled appropriately by the home ownership team. The same procedures and policies apply in the leasehold and home ownership service. Leases contain the standard requirement not to cause a nuisance to neighbours and this is enforced exactly the same as with tenants. Serious cases are passed to the ASB team. This helps ensure ASB is effectively dealt with in relation to leaseholders.
- 203 Leaseholder satisfaction with the overall service provided by SGCH is low. A survey in 2008 showed that only 40 per cent of leaseholders were satisfied with the service. Leaseholders were also least satisfied with the condition of their property and the neighbourhood, and the survey identified that there is only 31 per cent satisfaction that their views are taken into account. Some dissatisfaction with services was also reflected in a focus group we held with leaseholders who had mixed views on the service provided. Although satisfaction levels have not been benchmarked to assess comparative performance it does show that the service is still not meeting the expectations of a significant number of leaseholders.

Supported Housing

- 204 In 2008, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses. Sheltered schemes were clean, tidy and welcoming and well managed. Both resident involvement and satisfaction was high. A range of useful services and initiatives were provided through effective partnership working. The emergency call-out service was effective and well regarded by residents.
- 205 In this inspection, we found that strengths continue to outweigh weaknesses in supported housing services. Sheltered housing schemes are clean, well maintained and provide a pleasant environment for customers. Customer information is strong, there is effective support planning and a range of positive features to sheltered housing services. Partnership working at operational level is effective and customer satisfaction is high. However, the strategic approach to sheltered housing is underdeveloped and assessment of support needs for new residents is not carried out in a timely manner. Good practice in ensuring the accessibility of sheltered schemes has not been effectively applied.
- 206 Customer information in sheltered housing is a strength. SGCH promotes the availability of sheltered housing using the website. In addition to the literature all tenants receive such as newsletters, sheltered housing residents receive a bespoke welcome pack designed by residents in partnership with the scheme coordinator. Some schemes also produce local newsletters. There are comprehensive service standards for sheltered housing services set out in a sheltered housing handbook and a specific section on the SGCH website. A dedicated customer booklet provides detailed information about the service with details on each of the 48 schemes SGCH manages. This helps ensure customers have a clear understanding of the services provided.

- 207 There is high customer satisfaction with the sheltered housing service. The 2008/09 STATUS survey identified satisfaction with overall landlord services at 90 per cent. Eight out of ten sheltered tenants were satisfied with their property and environment, and 86 per cent felt they were kept informed. In addition to the STATUS survey, every tenant having had a support plan needs assessment is also asked how satisfied they are with the process and this is showing high satisfaction. All new tenants are also asked to complete a satisfaction survey with the allocations process and this too is high. This shows that the service is meeting the expectations of customers.
- 208 The support plan review process is relevant to customer needs and meets the criteria set to achieve ongoing Supporting People (SP) funding for residents within sheltered schemes. Needs are assessed and reviewed in any change of circumstances and annually thereafter. These targets are also publicised to customers of the service. Satisfaction surveys are carried out of all residents having completed support plans. There is flexibility built into the support planning process to ensure that customers can choose to opt for services such as a visit/daily contact. This is helping ensure residents are effectively supported.
- 209 There are a number of positive features to the sheltered housing service. The service holds an externally validated Centre for Sheltered Housing Studies (CSHS) service excellence award for meeting its Code of Practice, which is currently being re-accredited. A Supporting People assessment against the QAF⁹ identified some A-rating activity. SGCH maintains a falls database and works with healthcare partners to do prevention work. Staff have all been trained and promote the Essex Protection of Vulnerable Adults protocol and policy and were aware of the protection of children duty which was covered in the training. Exercise classes are held on some schemes and community activities encouraged. The Older Peoples Mental Health initiative is offered to ALMO tenants. This is helping provide a comprehensive and customer focused sheltered housing service.
- 210 The Careline service shows reasonable performance. The Careline service is operated in-house and satisfaction with that service is high. It is externally accredited meeting the Telecare Service Association requirements and we found that staff provided a professional and friendly service. However current performance on call answering is below internal targets with 84 per cent of calls answered in 12 seconds against a target of 98 per cent. Performance against the Telecare Services Association Code of Practice standard of answering 98.5 per cent of calls within one minute is also monitored and achieved.
- 211 There are appropriate liaison and monitoring arrangements in place between staff and partner support agencies. For example a bi-monthly meeting with the local block home care provider is held to address issues their tenants have with their home care packages in the extra care schemes. There is joint working with the County Council and shared accommodation with the Supporting People team at one scheme enables improved working relationships. There is monthly engagement with the Primary Care Trust and Social Care through Older People's Planning Group meetings. This helps ensure services to residents are effectively coordinated.

⁹ Quality Assessment Framework - used in assessing Supporting People funded services

How good is the service?

- 212 Sheltered housing schemes are clean, well maintained and provide a pleasant environment for customers. A number of schemes were visited during the inspection and were found to provide positive facilities for customers. This is supported by regular quality checks by scheme coordinators. This means sheltered accommodation provides a pleasant place for residents to live and make the accommodation more attractive to potential new residents.
- 213 There is ineffective assessment of support needs in determining that a care and support package is provided in a timely manner prior to tenancy commencement. Anyone over the age of 60 can apply for sheltered housing regardless of their need for support (which is BDC's policy). As such it is accommodation-led rather than support-led. Where there are known existing medical or care needs this information is passed to SGCH by the Council but support needs are not assessed prior to tenancy commencement. This can result in residents without support needs being housed in sheltered accommodation or in some instances residents who have relatively high support needs which then have to be quickly addressed. This issue is due to be addressed as part of reconfiguration of services commencing in 2010 but currently this means that Supporting People funding is not effectively targeted to meet the support needs of sheltered housing applicants.
- 214 The strategic approach to sheltered housing is underdeveloped. SGCH manages 48 sheltered housing schemes, some of which are proving difficult to let due to first floor bedsit accommodation. Two sheltered housing schemes have been decommissioned over the last four years and two others are being transferred to general needs use. Option appraisals were completed two years ago but progress following these has been limited. The SGCH asset management sustainability model has been applied to sheltered housing and this involved consultation with BDC about likely future demand. As a result of this a number of units have had red or amber 'traffic lights' applied which means they will require a more detailed options appraisal before further investment. However, this is not part of a broader assessment of the future of services for older people and the likely impact that this will have on the sustainability of sheltered housing. The Council has been slow to develop a strategy for older people's services although a draft strategy has now been produced. The number of older people is predicted to increase significantly making it particularly important that there is a strategy to make best use of accommodation and support. Until a clear agreed strategy is in place directing the development of the service the organisation cannot be confident it is making best use of this accommodation.
- 215 Good practice in applying the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) to sheltered housing has not been effectively progressed. Issues relating to DDA in sheltered housing were assessed as part of options appraisals two years ago. Some improvements were carried out at operational level as a result of this work but there has not been a prioritised and coordinated programme of works to address these issues. This means accessibility in sheltered schemes has not been maximised.

Is the service delivering value for money?

- 216 In 2008, we found that weaknesses balanced strengths in value for money. Improvements in value for money were patchy and uncoordinated, and not fully embedded across the organisation. The partnering approach in the voids contract had demonstrated that savings could be made, but this had not extended to the rest of the organisation. There was no specific procurement strategy for the ALMO, and examples of achieving value for money in this area were limited. Savings had been identified through reviews of SLAs, but staff were not fully aware of the content of the agreements, limiting the effectiveness of monitoring. Rent collection levels had remained static, and the level of responsive repairs was substantially above best practice guidelines
- 217 In this inspection, we found that there is still a balance of strengths and weaknesses in the approach to value for money. There is a strong emphasis on embedding a value for money approach, benchmarking has been used to identify high cost service areas and action is being taken to address these areas. High level benchmarking of costs and performance for specific service areas shows generally positive results although only when considered against more recent performance. Work on reviewing SLAs has continued with a focus on higher cost areas although further work is still required in some areas. There is now an effective approach to procurement although the impact of this is developing. Value for money in the delivery of major works cannot be clearly demonstrated and the shift to planned maintenance is underdeveloped. Achieving efficiency through IT is mixed. Detailed benchmarking and value for money assessment in service areas is underdeveloped.

How do costs compare?

- 218 There has been an effective assessment of high level benchmarking of management costs and performance. Reports from the benchmarking club for 2007/08 were analysed and reported to the Board. The high cost area of overheads has been analysed in more detail, with consultants employed to carry out a detailed analysis of three service level agreements with BDC. This information has been used to direct activity in achieving value for money.
- 219 It is positive that total overheads are now at more reasonable levels. High level benchmarking identified that overheads were in the lowest 25 per cent when comparison were made using 2007/08 data. The reduction SGCH has made in overheads since then shows that 2009/10 costs per property are now below average levels compared with the 2007/08 costs. This has primarily been achieved through reduction in service level agreement (SLA) costs with the Council and a reduction in premises costs although some specific areas are still higher than average. While the comparative averages may change when 2008/09 figures become available current figures suggest that total overheads are now providing more reasonable value for money.

How good is the service?

- 220 High level benchmarking of costs and performance for specific service areas shows generally positive results. Comparatively costs were at reasonable levels during 2007/08 with none higher than average. Performance figures were lower than average in a number of areas when this was benchmarked in 2007/08 but SGCH can show that performance has improved in a range of areas since then and further efficiency savings have been achieved. Although not yet conclusive this provides positive evidence of reasonable value for money.
- 221 Detailed benchmarking of specific areas is underdeveloped. Unit cost and performance benchmarking has taken place in some service areas through the benchmarking club. This covered invoice payment, ASB case processing, void servicing and complaint handling. Some overhead costs were also looked at in detail during the review of SLAs. SGCH has also tried to obtain more detailed benchmarking on other central costs (such as marketing, service improvement and equality and diversity) through a questionnaire to other similar ALMOs but only received two replies. However, there are still many areas of the service, such as leaseholder and RTB services and reception and telephone services where more detailed benchmarking has not yet been completed.
- 222 The unit benchmarking for ASB and void servicing shows generally positive results. Costs in these services were found to be at average levels but performance indicators including resident satisfaction showed performance at above average and in some areas in the best 25 per cent. This provides some evidence that value for money is being delivered in these aspects of the service.
- 223 However, unit benchmarking results were less positive in some other areas. Payroll, invoice payment and complaints handling showed high costs. SGCH has deliberately put additional resources in to complaint handling as this was a problem area of the service and some future reductions in payroll and invoicing cost have now been negotiated. However, at the current time costs and performance do not demonstrate value for money in these areas.
- 224 Benchmarking of current direct costs for most major works is underdeveloped. SGCH has compared the cost of major element replacements (excluding windows) against six other organisations which were selected by an external consultant in 2008 when reviewing the SGCH tender process for a potentially larger programme of decent homes works. These show current costs are higher than average for kitchens and rewiring and heating, and well above average for bathrooms and roofs. However, as the organisations were selected specifically for comparison of a larger decent homes programme the comparison is not robust. Positively there has been recent specific benchmarking of window installation costs and this shows the current contract is providing good value for money. However, with the exception of window installation it is difficult to access the value for money achieved in major works.

How is value for money managed?

- 225 Significant progress has been made in embedding a value for money approach. The value for money strategy provides a framework for this approach supported by the financial strategy and benchmarking activity. In particular benchmarking work has been used to focus activity on high costs. There has also been a focus on directing resources to areas of the service requiring improvement. The value for money action plan is being regularly updated. A value for money log is in place, all board reports assess value for money implications and a board champion for value for money has been appointed. Value for money targets are set as part of appraisal processes and we found staff had a strong focus on value for money issues. A zero-based approach to budgeting also seeks to match resources to desired outcomes. This approach helps ensure a focus on value for money across the organisation.
- 226 There is a significant range of examples of more efficient ways of working, securing efficiency savings and reductions achieved in costs, including some SLAs. SGCH has logged over £3 million of efficiency savings since the ALMO was launched which has been achieved against a background of improving performance in most service areas. These include a range of actions such as restructuring of property services saving £157,000 and £94,000 for reducing sickness levels. This demonstrates a focus on increasing value for money.
- 227 There has been a generally positive approach to reviewing SLAs with the Council. There have been negotiations on the cost of specific SLAs since the commencement of the ALMO. A formal review of all 14 Council SLAs was carried out in 2008/09 with more detailed work being carried out on high cost areas. External expertise was employed to carry out more detailed assessment of value for money in three service level agreement areas. Reduction in costs and some operational changes have been agreed as a result of the review process. Overall, SLA charges have reduced from £2.216 million in 2007/08 to £1.730 million in 2008/09 and will be £1.457 million in 2009/10.
- 228 However, more work is still required on some SLAs. The grounds maintenance and cleaning service level agreement has not been robustly reviewed. Although this was included in the review of all SLAs there was no effective analysis of comparative costs and performance. An increased level of service has been agreed for grounds maintenance and an in-depth review of costs is planned for 2009/10 which has a value of £140,000. Although not identified as high cost areas more detailed review work is also required on the human resources SLA and the Customer Services SLA. The SLAs with the main welfare advice agency and the CAB have not yet been assessed for value for money. This means that value for money in these service areas cannot yet be robustly demonstrated.

How good is the service?

- 229 There is an effective approach to procurement although the impact of this is still developing. A clear procurement strategy is in place and guiding activity. Procurement has been centralised and appropriate models are being assessed for procurement activities. A register of all SGCH contracts is being compiled although this is not yet complete. External expertise is also being used to support large procurement processes. This is resulting in a range of procurement approaches being used such as procurement consortia, partnering and schedule of rates with partnering ethos. However, a number of large contracts are currently in the procurement process such as gas and decent homes works. While all these areas are being provided through externally tendered contracts the value for money in the current packaging of works can not be demonstrated. This means the more robust approach to procurement has impacted on value for money in some areas but not yet all.
- 230 Use of IT to improve efficiency is mixed. We found some positive examples of using IT to increase efficiency such as in using handheld IT to collect stock condition information. IT supporting telephone answering is also modern and efficient. However, in other areas such as gas servicing and responsive repairs appointment scheduling, the use of IT is underdeveloped. This means that while IT is increasing efficiency in some areas this is not being maximised.
- 231 The lack of integration between service area improvement plans generally is a weakness in the approach to value for money. Plans for different teams and strategies are not fully integrated. For example the ICT delivery plan is not effectively integrated with plans across the organisations. This makes it less likely that value for money will be maximised.
- 232 The focus on planned maintenance is growing but is still underdeveloped. Programmes of roofing replacement and gutter clearance have addressed high levels of responsive repairs in these areas. In addition window replacement programmes now include a comprehensive upgrade of external elements. However, parts of the capital programme such as heating, bathrooms and kitchens are still being delivered as part of a reactive process to tenant repair reports or feedback from servicing. The packaging of non-urgent repairs into more efficient planned programmes has only recently begun and therefore has not yet impacted significantly on costs. This means that planned maintenance is not yet maximising efficiency of services.
- 233 The performance on the proportion of repairs carried out in emergency, urgent and routine categories is positive. From August 2008 to March 2009 emergency repairs were approximately 10 per cent, and urgent repairs at about 18 per cent. Since April 2009, when new repairs categories began, the split of volume has been 4 per cent emergency and 17 per cent urgent. The Audit Commission recommends that levels of emergency repairs should not exceed 10 per cent and, for urgent repairs, no more than 20 per cent. Minimising the need for emergency and urgent repairs helps increase the efficiency of the repairs service.
- 234 However, there is insufficient focus on monitoring some key indicators for the efficiency of the repairs service. Trends in the level of non-access, cancellations and average job costs are not being closely monitored. These are important indicators of the efficiency of the service and therefore should be more closely monitored.

- 235 There is a positive approach to achieving value for money in void processing. Both the partnering contract in place and the 'goodbye' incentive scheme are focused on reducing voids costs. Costs have reduced by 6 per cent over the last year averaging £1,019 during the last quarter of 2008/09. Fast processing of voids has also assisted in reducing void loss from 1.5 per cent in 2007/08 to 0.9 per cent in 2008/09. The new card-based decorations scheme also resulted in a 10 per cent saving on costs. This has been achieved alongside maintaining high levels of satisfaction. The exception to this approach is that the process for recharging tenants for void repairs has only recently been made effective. Overall, however, the approach is helping achieve value for money in the delivery of void processing.
- 236 There is a positive approach to ensuring value for money in rent payment. There is a strong understanding of rent payment costs and a focus on promoting the most cost efficient methods of payment. Direct debit, the most efficient process, is now being used by 38 per cent of tenants. SGCH has also reduced the cost of possession actions for rent arrears by using online application processes which has reduced costs by £50 per application. This is helping ensure value for money in this area of the service.
- 237 SGCH has an understanding of how their tenancy and estate management costs compare by undertaking benchmarking. It is also making 3 per cent annual efficiency savings and made efficiency savings through better ways of working, such as £37,000 by reducing the number of area housing offices by one. This followed analysis of usage of offices and consultation with residents. This is helping improve value for money.
- 238 There is positive evidence of attracting inward investment. The Careline and sheltered housing service have been proactive in accessing government funding for telecare projects and equipment. A joint bid by the PCT and Careline obtained £40,000 to buy bed sensors for elderly clients which alerts services to a possible fall if the client fails to return to bed within a set time period. The sheltered team also secured £335,000 for telecare to provide free equipment to any vulnerable tenant or leaseholder living in sheltered schemes. Approximately £210,000 grant funding has also been accessed over the last year for upgrading insulation in homes. The Council and SGCH successfully bid to bring forward £1.8 million major repairs allowance from 20010/11 to 2009/10 which is enabling residents to benefit from major works improvements sooner than they otherwise would have done. These additional resources are helping increase capacity.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

What is the service track record in delivering improvement?

- 239 In 2008, we found that SGCH could demonstrate significant progress in its first year of operation. There had been significant improvement in the overall satisfaction of tenants and leaseholders and progress against key performance targets, particularly those relating to repairs. The ALMO had developed a distinct identity, for example through revised and improved publications, and public offices had been rebranded and improved. There was measurable progress against the aims of the annual improvement plan, including the introduction of mystery shopping, development of Equality Impact Assessments and customer profiling. But some performance targets had not been achieved, and performance in some areas has worsened.
- 240 In this inspection, we found that strengths outweigh weaknesses in the track record of improvement. Progress against previous inspection recommendations is generally positive and there is a range of improvements which have directly affected the service for customers such as the improvement in repairs performance. Performance indicators also show a positive trend although this has been limited in rent collection. Tenant satisfaction has increased although leaseholder satisfaction has declined. While improvement has not been consistent in all service areas the majority do show improvements being delivered.
- 241 Overall there has been positive progress against recommendations from the previous inspection. More details on this progress can be found in Appendix 2. There are still some areas where progress has been limited. There is a strong focus on these recommendations and these are regularly reported on and linked to improvement plans. This has resulted in improvement in a number of key areas.
- 242 Overall, there has been effective improvement in aspects of access and customer care. The range of information has been improved including the increased range of service standards. The organisation's website has been developed further, and complaints handling is much improved. Tenant satisfaction with the overall landlord service, as measured in a bi-annual STATUS survey, has increased from 68 per cent in 2006 to 79 per cent in 2008. Performance on telephone answering has improved significantly with average call answering time reduced from 109 seconds in April 2008 to an average of 19 seconds in the last quarter of 2008/09. The main area where less progress has been made is in the overall approach to telephone access which is confusing, with too many numbers and limited availability outside of normal hours.
- 243 There has also been improvement in the approach to diversity. The organisation now has a well developed understanding of its customers and this is being used to tailor the delivery of services, and support for vulnerable people is more effective. A number of specific improvements have been delivered including customer care kits in local office reception areas.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 244 The delivery of improvements in major and planned works has been mixed. A range of improvement works to residents' homes have been effectively delivered. For example since April 2007 270 new kitchens, 509 new bathrooms, 800 window replacements and 1,300 improved heating systems have been delivered. Customer satisfaction has also risen from 92 per cent in 2006/07 to 99 per cent in 2008/09. The approach to asbestos information has significantly improved with systems now in place to make all information available to contractors. However, the major works programme is still too reactive and not sufficiently driven by stock condition information and a focus on achieving decent homes, and the level of non-decency remains high at 60 per cent homes. Electrical testing and cyclical decoration have also not been delivered effectively.
- 245 There have been some significant improvements in the repairs service. Repairs completed in target since the change in contractor in August 2008 have been 99 per cent for emergency repairs, 99 per cent for urgent repairs, and 95 per cent for routine repairs. Performance in 2007/08 was 84 per cent for emergency repairs and 79 per cent for urgent repairs and 86 per cent for non-urgent. The average time to complete a non-urgent repair has reduced from 21 days in 2006/07 to 10 days in 2008/09. Performance on making appointments for eligible repairs has improved from 65 per cent to 76 per cent over the last six months.
- 246 Gas servicing performance has been maintained at high levels and there has been an improved performance on the length of time overdue cases are out of date before being resolved. Legal action is now being progressed where required.
- 247 Void management has improved with a revised lettable standard agreed and better performance against the standards. Overall re-let times have reduced from 39 days in 2007/08 to 31 days in 2008/09 with 93 per cent now being let in 21 days. There has also been increased take up of the 'goodbye' tenant incentive scheme. Allocations and letting services have also become more customer focused.
- 248 There has been a significant improvement in aids and adaptation services. When the ALMO was set up major adaptations were taking approximately 18 months to complete following referrals from the Occupational Therapy service. Resources for the service have been increased and major adaptations are now delivered in two months following referral.
- 249 Improvement in income management has been mixed. There has only been a slight improvement in the level of arrears as a percentage of debit, which was 2.41 per cent in 2006/07. This reduced to 2.38 per cent in 2007/08 and 2.35 per cent in 2008/09. Similarly there was a small increase in the rent collected from 97.68 per cent which is a slight improvement on out-turn for the previous year of 97.64 per cent. The level of evictions due to rent arrears has reduced from 47 in 2005/06 to 31 in 2008/09 with a corresponding reduction in served notices seeking possession for arrears from 20.57 per cent of tenants in arrears in 2007/08 to 13.97 per cent in 2008/09. Performance on Former Tenants Arrear levels and write offs is showing good progress.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 250 The approach to resident involvement has improved. There is now an increased range of opportunities for residents to influence services and increasing positive outcomes from involvement activities. The service is still in transition but the progress that has been made is also reflected in the increase in the proportion of residents who are satisfied with opportunities with involvement.
- 251 Anti Social Behaviour (ASB) services have continued to improve. New initiatives have been introduced such as the junior community warden scheme and partnership working has continued to develop. Satisfaction levels with ASB services have also increased.
- 252 Improvements in estate services have been more limited. Performance against the SLA with the Council is being closely monitored, delivering some improvements, but partnership working in this area is still underdeveloped resulting in some issues about the appearance of estates. Positively there is an increased level of resident satisfaction with neighbourhoods.
- 253 It is a weakness that leaseholder satisfaction has deteriorated. Only 40 per cent of leaseholders were satisfied with the service compared to 61 per cent in the previous survey carried out by SGCH in 2007.
- 254 Value for money has improved. Efficiency savings of £3 million have been achieved over the life of the ALMO and performance in a number of areas has improved. There has been a focus on reducing high overhead costs and there has been significant reduction in SLA costs.

How well does the service manage performance?

- 255 In 2008, we found that SGCH had a robust system of performance management. This operated at four levels - individual, team, organisational and strategic. At individual level, all staff had received appraisals and one-to-ones, and managers had completed appraiser training. However, not all plans were SMART¹⁰ and plans were not integrated with value for money targets.
- 256 In this inspection, we found that there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in how the service manages performance. There is a clear vision for the organisation and a robust approach to prioritisation. There is a range of plans in place that are informed by learning from others and cover some key issues for improvement, including improving value for money. Performance monitoring is generally robust. However, the strategic approach to planning is weak with an absence of some key strategies to direct improvement and in particular the integration of plans is limited. Plans are not consistently SMART and there are also some weaknesses in performance management including a backlog of individual appraisals. The organisation does not have a longer-term business plan.

¹⁰ Specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time-bound

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 257 There is a clear vision for the organisation, agreed with residents. An overall vision statement has been agreed and is supported by strategic objectives. There is recognition of the agreed priorities throughout the organisation. The delivery plan reflects the agreed priorities; there is a strong focus on this document and related improvement plan which is linked to the delivery plan's strategic aims. This helps ensure there is a focus on delivering key improvements.
- 258 SGCH has a robust approach to prioritising service improvement. There is a developed method of prioritising the focus of improvement based on an appropriate weighting to reflect what they must achieve, what their customers want them to achieve, and what they can deliver with the given resources to ensure it is focused on key issues. There are 17 key operational priorities for 2009/10 and ten service improvements. The latter are then appended as the ALMO's Improvement Plan. This also helps ensure improvement activity is focused on key areas.
- 259 There is a focus on meeting efficiency targets and improving value for money within plans. Key operational priority nine is to obtain value for money within the whole organisation. Within the team plans it clearly states the corporate target to achieve efficiencies of £300,000 and individual team targets of 3 per cent against budgets. We found a range of actions within plans focused on achieving value for money. These range from major procurement projects such as in decent homes and responsive repairs to smaller items such as plans to reduce costs in respect of covert surveillance by training ASB officers to carry out installations of equipment. There is also a corporate value for money action plan in place supporting this activity. This helps ensure improvement actions deliver better value for money.
- 260 The organisation is effectively seeking out good practice and learning to inform improvement plans. This is evident in a number of areas. For example visits to other organisations have been used to develop plans for an improved approach to repairs appointment scheduling and a decision to purchase additional software to support this. The organisation also maintains a learning log to ensure information and internal and external learning is shared in the organisation to inform improvement plans. This is helping ensure improvement plans are well informed and increases efficiency through using proven successful activities from other organisations.
- 261 The use of strategies to inform planning is weak in a number of areas. These are evident in some areas such as asset management and income management but this is not comprehensive. For example there is no strategy for financial inclusion, affordable warmth, or leaseholder services. There is a draft strategy for customer access but this is weak, only providing overarching aims rather than an analysis of the current position, the future direction and priorities. The strategic approach to sheltered housing, in partnership with the Council, has also been slow to develop although a draft BDC older person strategy is now out for consultation. This means that improvement actions are not linked to a clear strategic direction in a range of service areas.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 262 Plans are not consistently well coordinated. Links between actions in the Delivery Plan and other strategies are not always identified, and team plans are not consistently linked to the delivery plan despite there being sections within the format specifically for this to take place. There is also a range of action plans which sit below team plans but these do not follow a consistent format and it is not clear how these are linked to the delivery plans. We also found discrepancies between what managers understand to be target delivery times for projects and what is in other plans. This reduces certainty around delivery of plans.
- 263 Plans are also not consistently SMART. While plans have timescales and identify responsible persons, some targets are not easily measured and many, including the resident involvement and ICT strategies, do not have resources clearly identified. This makes monitoring of delivery more difficult and, significantly, there is no clear integration of improvement plans with human, technological and financial resource requirements. The current financial projections provided are based on the organisation providing an unchanging service between now and 2011/12. This raises concerns that plans may not be effectively resourced.
- 264 There is a lack of longer-term plans for SGCH beyond the current annual Delivery Plan and the Financial Strategy. SGCH does not have its own business plan. While the improvement plan has projects running up to 2011 there is still insufficient focus on longer term plans. The development of a SGCH business plan is scheduled for 2009/10 but at the present time the organisation cannot be sure that improvement plans are directed by longer term agreement about how the organisation should develop.
- 265 SGCH is identifying a range of required service improvements and has a wide range of plans in place and actions do cover some other key issues including:
- improving the level of stock condition information through increased surveying of homes and enabling repairs staff to have better access to property component information;
 - the procurement of a new repairs contractor is ongoing and will incorporate a number of key improvements including appointments at first point of contact, appointments setting software and handheld devices for operatives. The target is for the new contract to begin in November 2009;
 - a shift to batching a range of non-urgent responsive repairs into more efficient programmes;
 - a programme of electrical testing is being put in place and resources are available to complete outstanding works during 2009/10;
 - plans to continue development of resident involvement groups to reflect the more inclusive approach that accommodates both informal and formal structures and improving the coordination and quality of satisfaction surveys - pilots are currently ongoing for 'TP tracker' and will be rolled out during 2009/10;
 - actions to ensure full compliance with equality and diversity legislation and guidance;

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- enhancing resident involvement in estate inspections - 54 residents have expressed an interest in being resident estate inspectors. There are plans in place to begin quarterly feedback meetings with residents who attend the monthly estate inspections; and
- plans for developing services to leaseholders including service charge estimates, service charge statements online and the development of a strategy for leaseholder services.

This will help to address identified weaknesses.

- 266 Importantly, plans for delivery of the decent homes programme are being progressed. This is a key issue for the organisation and there is now an agreed approach for the future delivery of decent homes works and an indicative programme agreed with resident representatives. A 'worst first' whole house approach, split between external and internal programmes, was agreed by the Board in June 2009. A procurement process for decent homes contractor partners is currently ongoing and there are plans to confirm a clear decent homes plus standard with residents. This increases certainty in the ability to deliver improvement in this service area.
- 267 SGCH responded quickly and positively to on-site feedback, and plans have been developed in a number of areas following our feedback. For example SGCH has responded to issues raised regarding estate management by developing plans to improve feedback and publicise estate performance figures on notice boards and the website. Also, SGCH and the council have met with Essex Highways to respond to the excess weed growth and action to remove weeds has been progressed. In response to concerns about lack of progress in addressing DDA issues in sheltered housing, SGCH confirmed that a prioritised audit plan will be produced this year and implemented during 2009-2011. This shows a commitment to using feedback to improve services.
- 268 There is robust performance monitoring in place. Performance is monitored through the meetings of the senior management team and the management board, and at the Board Sub-Committee for Service Improvement and Performance. Performance data is reported by exception, and actions set against each performance issue. Information is fed back to staff through team meetings. Core group meetings monitor the performance of different aspects of the repairs and maintenance service. There is a clear trail of comments throughout documentation which indicates that key issues are picked up and actions set out. For example, the Service Improvement and Performance Committee papers show a detailed scrutiny of a range of national and local indicators and discussion around failure to meet targets. The same data is reported to the Tenants' and Leaseholders' Panel. Performance is also reported to customers through the resident newsletter. There is an annual report to customers and stakeholders providing a range of performance information. This helps ensure weak performance is identified and addressed.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 269 There are some weaknesses in performance management arrangements. The Performance Management Framework clearly explains how performance is reported through four levels from board through to individual staff performance, but the comprehensiveness of the data monitored and analysis of performance is not consistent. For example, aspects of estate management performance are monitored through SLA monitoring between service heads and BDC but there is only limited feedback to the ALMO Board, who do not see routine performance reports. Service standards compliance is not currently being reported although this is planned. The effectiveness of IT to aid performance management is weak. Current systems can report on performance but cannot assist in the monitoring of plans or the integrated management of plans and links to strategies. This reduces the ability to monitor the delivery of improvement.
- 270 Some additional structures have been set up to ensure performance management in key areas. For example, there is an asset management steering group and an ICT steering group. These groups are made up of SGCH's senior management team, representatives from BDC and customer representation. The groups review progress against the strategy and update the Executive Management Team. Both of these groups are relatively new but do provide increased focus on performance management in these two key areas.
- 271 There are effective structures in place to enable monitoring and liaison between the Council and SGCH. There is a range of strategic and operational meetings between SGCH and BDC which review performance and delivery and develop joint working. In addition there are also quarterly housing partnership meetings with board committee chairs, council committee chairs, senior management, and the chair of the board to review partnership working overall. The Council reports quarterly to housing overview and scrutiny committee on housing performance. This report is based on 20 key performance indicators chosen by the committee. On occasions the committee has asked ALMO staff to present personally on how they are addressing particular issues such as the approach to tackling rent arrears. This is helping ensure the performance of the ALMO is effectively monitored.
- 272 Targets are generally challenging. For example there is a target to improve the number of repairs jobs completed in one visit from 80 to 90 per cent by the end of this financial year. Targets are generally focused on improving on the previous years performance. However, we did find a small number of targets which were not focused on driving up improvement. For example, the target for achieving A and B grades in the performance of the grounds maintenance SLA has remained at 80 per cent for two years despite performance being higher than this. Most targets are driving performance improvement.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 273 The performance on individual staff appraisal and supervision is mixed. Staff confirmed that they had regular one-to-one sessions and twice-yearly individual performance reviews. Objectives are set and links made to the 'bigger picture' and how they fit in. There is a human resources strategic aim to ensure all staff receive an individual performance review and personal development plan. However, individual performance reviews have not been consistently carried out and there was a backlog at the time of inspection. This means that while some aspects of the approach to individual performance management are driving improvement the approach is not comprehensive.
- 274 There are appropriate structures in place to support risk management. An Audit and Risk Committee monitors actions from internal audits and actions to minimise red and inherent risks. Board members have received training on risk management and board papers contain standard sections covering risks. A risk management strategy is in place and a risk register identifies key risks and mitigating controls. The register includes strategic, corporate, operational and project risks and opportunities. These risks and opportunities are scored with and without controls and are linked to any 'actions to be taken' to assist in further mitigation of the risk. This helps to ensure risks are identified and appropriate actions taken.

Does the service have the capacity to improve?

- 275 In 2008, we found that there was good capacity at management level and within the Board, there was a constructive relationship with the Council, the training plan was robust and linked well to organisational aims, and partnership working had improved capacity to achieve progress. However, there had been limited progress in procurement and partnering, and there was no ICT strategy.
- 276 In this inspection, we found that that there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in the capacity to deliver improvement. Governance structures are generally effective and partnership working and the approach to procurement is also having a positive impact. The overall approach to training is positive although management development training has not yet been delivered. There are some weaknesses in strategic leadership, there is no appraisal process for board members and permanent appointments have not been made to senior positions in the organisation. The human resource strategy is underdeveloped and aspects of IT capacity are not being effectively developed.
- 277 Governance structures are generally effective. The board is supported by four sub-committees which provide appropriate coverage of SGCH business operations. The board meeting we observed was generally run well and board papers were structured well. On some occasions discussion was limited and one paper had insufficient feedback from consideration by a tenant and leaseholder panel. Board reports include details of the author of the report and members have been encouraged to call and discuss the report if there is anything they want clarification on prior to the board meeting. There is evidence of the board making difficult decisions and challenging officers. Examples include office closure plans, de-pooling of heating contracts and requesting further consultation on the new approach to estate cleaning contracts. This is helping support the development of the organisation.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 278 The approach to ensuring board members are well skilled and perform effectively is mixed. Board members had a range of training when the board was established following on from initial identification of skills gaps. Additional training has also been provided as issues have arisen. However, there is no appraisal process in place for board members. This means there is insufficient individual assessment of performance and development issues. The board is working with external consultants to develop a system for appraisal but mechanisms for board development are not comprehensive.
- 279 There are some weaknesses in strategic leadership. There is insufficient focus at senior level on ensuring strategies are developed and integrated well and address the short-, medium- and long-term. This was evident at board and senior officer level. This has resulted in some gaps in strategy development, insufficient integration of plans and strategies and lack of longer term business planning.
- 280 It is a weakness that there have been no permanent appointments to the senior management team. Since the start of SGCH senior management positions have been held on an interim basis. Three members of the team have substantive posts identified and are protected through the TUPE legislation, and a fourth if not confirmed could revert to another permanent post. However, this has resulted in a range of staff acting up into different positions for over two years which creates uncertainty for staff. In addition this issue has not been formally reported to the board to discuss the potential impact on retention and leadership and make a decision on the issue. It is also a weakness that an annual appraisal of SGCH's Chief Executive, carried out by the chair of the board, was not reported to the board who were unaware of the appraisal process. This does not maximise support and confidence in the management team.
- 281 There is a positive relationship between SGCH and BDC although arms length relationships need to be maintained. Senior council officers are confident about SGCH's ability to deliver a good service to its customers and make a significant contribution towards the priorities of the district. There is strong political support for the ALMO and the ALMO's contract has been extended to 2015 which is also seen as an indication of the confidence of the Council in the ALMO. SGCH branding activity has enabled progress in the organisation developing a separate identity from the Council. This is an ongoing process and SGCH and the Council need to ensure this work is continued. The lack of permanent appointments to the senior management team, mentioned above, has not helped in respect of developing a strong separate identity and there is still work to be done in ensuring the arms length relationship is consistently maintained, for example in the operation of some Service Level Agreements. The relationship between SGCH and the Council is assisting in service development although it is not yet maximising capacity.
- 282 Wider partnership working is increasing capacity. The strongest example of this is in anti-social behaviour activity where partnership working is particularly effective. By working well with partners the organisation is increasing the effectiveness of its services.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 283 There is a positive approach to procurement. There is a procurement strategy which is guiding procurement activity and there is appropriate assessment of procurement options as they arise. This includes the use of external expertise to advise on procurement options and processes for major contracts. Modern procurement methods with long-term contracts, partnering elements and procurement consortia are being utilised. A number of large procurement exercises are currently ongoing which will have a significant impact on capacity. For example re-procurement of the gas servicing contract is in process and looks likely to bring savings of £400,000 at the same time as the delivery of electronic CP12s, stock condition information collection, legionella risk assessment and examination of cold water storage tanks. Procurement is now centralised in one team with a register of all contracts, their nature, value and expiry date being compiled. Procurement is being used effectively to increase capacity.
- 284 There has been consideration of how capacity would be expanded to deliver a larger programme of major works. Existing contracts have the flexibility to be extended to spend an additional £10 million in 2009/10 which it has been agreed would be allocated if a positive outcome to inspection is achieved. Procurement is currently being completed on new decent homes contracts which will begin from April 2010. There are also plans to tender elements of the project management of the decent homes programme to quickly bring in the additional capacity and expertise to deliver the enhanced programme. This provides increased confidence in the ability to deliver decent homes works.
- 285 Some aspects of IT are effectively supporting service delivery. For example, the work of estate and ASB officers is enhanced by IT systems which allow them to access information and communications at any SGCH site. There is an integrated housing IT system in place, which is linked to the customer insight database to allow staff to respond to the access preferences of customers. Vulnerability and potentially violent person flags are automatically generated and displayed on the front screen. The CRM system records calls to ensure staff respond, store and monitor communications and actions with customers. Capacity through IT has also recently been improved in leaseholder and home ownership services and in resident participation. Both of these service areas have recently implemented new IT software which is increasing capacity and efficiency.
- 286 However, further expansion of IT capacity is limited in the short-term and there have been delays in preparation for the delivery of a new housing management IT system. The current manufacturer of the housing management IT systems will only continue development of the system to April 2010 and only deliver training and bug fixing until April 2011. EMT approved a project in December 2007 to produce a product specification which has been done. In August 2008 EMT decided to review all available housing management products as well as the replacement through the existing manufacturer and this is still not well advanced. The ICT implementation plan has a target delivery date of quarter four 2010/11. During this period there is limited scope for improving the capacity of the current system. For example, the current CRM system is not a fully integrated system and the introduction of a fully integrated system is linked to the delivery of the new housing management system. In response to this feedback SGCH has confirmed recent committee approval to employ a consultant to drive forward this process to ensure completion by 2011 but the current ability to use IT to increase capacity is still limited.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 287 Support to deliver IT reviews and improvements has not yet been confirmed. An external review of the IT support services SLA with BDC found that while the support was 'generally very sound and reflects the good working relationship between the two organisations' the support services were overstretched, with high dependency on key individuals which may limit the capacity to move forward on IT development quickly. The general will and drive to improve the support was also identified but the recommendations from the review presented in October 2008 were not finally agreed with the Council until March 2009 and as it is not clear how these will be addressed.
- 288 Overall there is a positive approach to staff training. There are a number of areas where training has been driven by corporate requirements such as equality and diversity and customer care. In other areas it is linked to the particular requirements of teams such as welfare benefit training for arrears recovery staff. In other areas training is developed from appraisal processes which identify particular training requirements. There are also 13 externally recognised National Vocational Qualifications. Staff confirmed they find it easy to access appropriate training. The sheltered housing and Careline training plan is a positive example of how the organisation is building capacity. This is helping to increase the capacity of the organisation.
- 289 There is a focus on restructuring human resources to increase capacity. SGCH is enhancing capacity by developing dedicated specialist teams, such as the dedicated home ownership team based within the ALMO. Staff are well trained on issues relating to home ownership and also customer care and dealing with debt negotiation. This means that customers can receive a professional and responsive service. A specialist ASB team has been created and SGCH are establishing a specialist tenancy and estate management team in late 2009/10. A new resident involvement team structure has been put in place which is delivering savings and is also expected to deliver more efficient ways of working and service improvement. This focus is helping make best use of staff. .
- 290 However, it is a weakness that a management development programme has not been delivered in 2008/09 contrary to the strategic aim in the human resources strategy. Managers acknowledge the need to take this forward but this means that so far there has been insufficient focus on maximising the capacity of managers.
- 291 Staff demonstrated strong commitment and high morale. Staff seen during the inspection showed a high level of commitment and this was also the perception of partners who work with SGCH. A staff focus group thought the leadership of the organisation had improved and referred to senior management being approachable with open door policies, and senior managers being much more visible in response to criticism in previous staff feedback. There are regular briefings, team meetings and one-to-ones to aid communication and provide support. This is all helping develop commitment and high morale which helps to increase the capacity of the organisation.

What are the prospects for improvement to the service?

- 292 There are positive relationships between staff trade union representation and management but there is room for improvement. SGCH is perceived as good at picking up issues like sickness and stress and taking early intervention. However it is felt that sometimes human resource procedures are slow and some issues can be protracted. There is not a programme of consultation meetings with formally adopted staff representatives. However, the Chief Executive holds a monthly staff focus group to bring together a cross-section of staff to discuss staffing and organisational issues. This means that positive industrial relations are currently supporting the development of the organisation although some areas need further attention.
- 293 The 2007-2012 human resources strategy is weak. Although intended to be a five-year 'framework' strategy it focuses on key immediate priorities to ensure SGCH meets its business objectives in the short-term. It has not been updated, so, for example, there is still an ALMO objective to achieve two stars by 2008. There is a section that states what an employee's responsibilities are which is not relevant to strategy and more related to contractual terms. The strategy states that it will be reviewed regularly and at least annually but this has not happened. This means that SGCH cannot be sure HR activities are supporting the organisation's longer-term business objectives.
- 294 SGCH has reduced the level of sickness and the use of agency staff. These are both key themes in the human resource strategy. The use of agency staff has reduced from 49 in April 2007 to a current level of ten. When the ALMO was set up average sickness levels were 15 days. This has improved considerably to less than nine days in May 2009 which is best 25 per cent performance compared with other ALMOs. Intensive training has been provided to managers which is impacting on the improved performance, and the Chief Executive acknowledges good attendance records by writing to individual staff. Reducing sickness levels directly increases capacity and permanent staff can be more effectively developed and may have a higher level of commitment.
- 295 It is positive that the viability of the ALMO has been assessed in relation to the overall management of the Housing Revenue Account. The future operation of housing revenue accounts is being reviewed by central Government and changes are likely which will alter future projections. The analysis of the HRA on current assumptions shows that the HRA is sustainable at least until 2018. This is reliant on annual efficiency savings of £200,000 which are viewed as achievable by SGCH and BDC and is supported by the track record on delivering savings.

There is positive evidence of attracting inward investment. The Careline and sheltered housing services have been proactive in accessing government funding for telecare projects and equipment. A joint bid by the PCT and Careline obtained £40,000 to buy bed sensors for elderly clients which alerts services to a possible fall if the client fails to return to bed within a set time period. The sheltered team also secured £335,000 of funding for telecare to provide free equipment to any vulnerable tenant or leaseholder living in sheltered schemes. Approximately £210,000 grant funding has also been accessed over the last year for upgrading insulation in homes. The Council and SGCH successfully bid to bring forward £1.8 million major repairs allowance from 20010/11 to 2009/10 which is enabling residents to benefit from major works improvements sooner than they otherwise would have done. These additional resources are helping increase capacity.

Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

Table 1 Basildon performance from 2005/06

Performance indicator (BVPI ref)	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08	2008/09 unaudited	Districts top 25% 2007/08
63 Average SAP rating	69	72	75	67.2 ¹¹	72.8
66a Percentage rent collected	97.63	97.61	97.64	97.68	99
66b Percentage tenants with > 7 wks arrears (gross)	9.55	6.06	5.73	5.80	3.3
66c Percentage tenants in arrears with NoSP served	27.32	21.3	19.48	13.97	14
66d Percentage LA tenants evicted for rent arrears	0.4	0.36	0.31	0.28	0.1
74a Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	68	68	68	79	84.9
75a Percentage tenants satisfied with TP	40	57	57	60	71
184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	44	40	47	NA	7
184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	9.1	-22.5	4	NA	38.3
212 Average re-let time (days)	40	31	37	32	24

Audit Commission

¹¹ A new method of measuring SAP rating was introduced in 2008/09 and therefore this figure cannot be effectively compared with previous years figures

Appendix 2 – Previous inspection

Table 2 Recommendations from Audit Commission report 2008

Recommendation	Progress
R1 Develop strategic approach to achieving value for money. SGCH should:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • embed awareness of VFM issues across the organisation and in its plans; 	significant progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • widen the impact of partnering and joint procurement; 	progress made and impact of a number of ongoing procurement exercises is imminent
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • identify and address areas of high spending through the ALMO benchmarking process; 	identification completed and action to address is ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensure that there is early personal intervention in arrears cases; 	some progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • encourage residents to maximise their incomes through welfare benefits campaigns, and through early access to welfare benefits advice; 	significant progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reduce the period for re-letting of empty properties; 	significant progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • set realistic but challenging targets for the collection of service charges; 	complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop and publicise a range of payment options for leaseholders; and 	some progress - range of payment methods
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increase the proportion of planned works in relation to responsive repairs. 	increased but more progress required

Appendix 2 – Previous inspection

Recommendation	Progress
R2 Improve processes for identifying and supporting vulnerable residents, and addressing cases where residents are not allowing access by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> systematically updating IT systems to include accurate and up-to-date information on vulnerable residents; 	Effective systems now in place
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sharing information with contactors about vulnerability and access; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> progressing legal action to deal with non-access issues around gas servicing, and publicising this action; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> carrying out a tenancy audit to identify unauthorised occupation; 	Ongoing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> addressing extended waiting periods for the installation of aids and adaptations, in the light of best practice; and 	Significant progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> developing a separate hate crime and harassment policy and procedure. 	Complete
R3 Steps should be taken to fully involve all residents in decision making. SGCH should:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> develop a strategic approach to involving hard-to-reach groups in decision making; 	Significant progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> involve residents in setting priorities for the organisation- for example in major works and Decent Homes works, and in other areas of business; 	Significant progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> offer a menu of involvement, so that the wider body of residents can, for example, contribute to decisions regarding the Environmental Improvement Budget; and 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> improve and standardise the way in which surveys are carried out. 	Progress but still ongoing

Recommendation	Progress
R4 Frontline services should be improved to meet the needs and aspirations of customers. SGCH should:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> improve office procedures to allow issues to be discussed confidentially; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> improve answering times for telephones at the repairs call centre; 	Recent performance shows significant improvement.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> improve correspondence to ensure that it is clear and comprehensive; 	Significant progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> develop a culture of learning from complaints; and 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> develop a user-friendly dispute resolution procedure for leaseholders. 	Still not complete
R5 Processes and outcomes should be improved for responsive and planned repairs by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> addressing the use of numerous Schedule of Rates categories; 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> reviewing the high level of post inspections; 	Complete but physical inspections now too low
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> measuring and increasing the proportion of repairs completed right first time; 	Measurement in place but more progress on levels required
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> providing systematic repairs and maintenance training for call centre staff; and 	Complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> resolving issues affecting the interface between different IT systems. 	Contractor now uses SGCH systems

Appendix 2 – Previous inspection

Recommendation	Progress
R6 Cleaning and maintenance of the estate environment should be improved by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> developing a quality standard for estates with customers and other stakeholders, and publicising this fully; and 	Standard is still underdeveloped
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> completing and implementing the recommendations of the cleaning review in conjunction with customers. 	Complete
Improvement planning should be reviewed, ensuring that:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> service and team planning are SMART; 	Plans are still not consistently SMART
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> VFM considerations are integrated into planning; and 	There is a focus on VFM in plans
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> an ICT strategy, setting out the long term vision of the organisation, is developed. 	ICT strategy is weak

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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:
- interviews with officers, Board members, Council officers and Councillors;
 - visits to public office;
 - estate visits;
 - focus group of residents;
 - focus group with frontline staff;
 - focus group with ASB partners;
 - shadowing of staff;
 - interviews with partners and stakeholders;
 - inspection of empty properties;
 - document reviews; and
 - file checks.

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)

Home safety checks for older people

- 1 SGCH offers customers over 60 years old a free home safety check to help reduce fall hazards and assist in remaining independent in their home - should adaptations or support be required, customers are referred to appropriate agencies and support provided.

Tackling worklessness

- 2 SGCH is actively contributing to the worklessness agenda in Basildon - painting and decorating experience is provided to ex-offenders in partnership with probation and the Trade School at the local college - work placements are also provided to people seeking work through a partnership with a local recruitment agency.

Effectiveness of community warden service

- 3 SGCH is providing a particularly effective community warden scheme. A wide range of activities are undertaken which enables strong integration with local communities, partners and related SGCH operations. This includes involvement an award winning junior community warden project which provides an intensive good citizen programme for young people at risk of causing ASB.

The Audit Commission

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

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

Tel: 0844 798 1212 Fax: 0844 798 2945 Textphone (minicom): 0844 798 2946

www.audit-commission.gov.uk
