

# 2010 Rotherham

**Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council**

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## Arms 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 and national services for the public.

Within the Audit Commission, the Housing Inspectorate inspects and monitors the performance of a number of bodies and services. These include local authority housing departments, local authorities administering Supporting People programmes, arms length management organisations (ALMO) and housing associations. Our key lines of enquiry (KLOEs) set out the main issues which we consider when forming our judgements on the quality of services. The KLOEs can be found on the Audit Commission's website at [www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing](http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/housing).

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

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

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

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

The Housing Inspectorate has published additional guidance for ALMO inspections.

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

## Summary

- 1 Rotherham Borough Council is a metropolitan council in South Yorkshire and has a population of 249,400. The Council comprises 63 councillors. The Labour party has overall control with 53 seats. A leader and cabinet style system governs the business of the Council. Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council's revenue budget is over £297 million. It employs 7,500 full-time equivalent staff across all services.
- 2 2010 Rotherham Ltd is an arms length management organisation with delegated responsibility for the management and maintenance of the Council's 22,000 homes. It manages the Council's £21 million budget for repairs and neighbourhood management and receives an annual management fee of £7.6 million from the Council. It employs 640 staff.

## Scoring the service

- 3 We have assessed 2010 Rotherham 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.

**Table 1 Scoring chart<sup>1</sup>:**

		Prospects for improvement?				
Excellent						'a good service that has uncertain prospects for improvement'  A good service?
Promising						
Uncertain			☀			
Poor						
		Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	
			★	★★	★★★	

Source: Audit Commission

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

#### 4 The service is good because:

- customers find it easy to access services through a choice of methods, office and call centre opening times are broad and repairs appointments allow for evening and Saturday work;
- written information is generally of a high standard and is useful in explaining services to customers;
- equality impact assessment have been carried out on a wide range of strategies and policies leading to culturally sensitive services being developed;
- stock investment decisions are based on a sound understanding of the condition and future viability of the stock and links into the wider regeneration agenda. Decent homes work is carried out to a high standard through use of modern procurement methods;
- responsive repairs are carried out to a high standard with target times being consistently achieved and a high proportion of jobs are carried out in a single visit; tenant satisfaction with responsive repairs is high;
- empty properties are relet quickly and to a high standard. An empty property standard has been agreed with and is monitored for compliance by tenants;
- a high proportion of gas appliances are serviced on an annual basis and servicing procedures are supported by robust quality assurance systems;
- flexible payment options make it easy for tenants to pay rent and collection performance is relatively strong supported by an emphasis on arrears prevention;
- there is a clear framework for resident involvement and a learning from customers ethos within the organisation;
- anti-social behaviour is being tackled robustly through strong partnership working supported by a clear strategic approach;
- estates are kept clean and tidy and are maintained to a consistently high standard;
- a new choice based lettings system has extended choice for housing applicants and support is provided to enable vulnerable people to access housing; and
- there is a positive relationship between the cost and quality of services provided, with improvements delivered alongside efficiencies.

5 However, there are some areas for improvement.

- Service standards vary in quality of detail with some having insufficient measurable targets for customers to hold their landlord to account.
- The organisation has a limited understanding of the profile of its tenants and does not monitor contracts for compliance with its equalities policies.
- Current investment programmes do not go far beyond the decent homes standard and cyclical painting programmes have been suspended.
- Incentive schemes are not used to maximise rental income and rent statements are not sent out to all tenants.
- The tenant participation compact lacks some significant detail, particularly in relation to levels of financial commitment to support resident involvement and the sanctions available in the case of a breach of the agreement.
- Service charge arrangements for leaseholders do not fully comply with legislative requirements, consultation and accountancy arrangements are inadequate and there are weaknesses in the co-ordination between the various parties involved in providing the leaseholder service.
- Focus on value for money is insufficiently detailed, there is not a formal value for money strategy and senior managers and Board members do not receive sufficient information to allow strong cost comparisons to be made.

6 The service has uncertain prospects for improvement because:

- there has been a lack of focus in delivering continuous improvement in areas which were judged to be strong in previous inspections;
- delays in establishing stable leadership are affecting the organisation's ability to assert its arms length status;
- there are significant areas where the organisation has yet to articulate its own future direction and is dependent on the wider strategies of the Council;
- there are gaps in the capacity of the senior management team and uncertainty about future staffing structures;
- there is an over-reliance on support from the strategic landlord and consultants; and
- financial management arrangements do not demonstrate that the ALMO is independent of the Council.

7 However, there are some drivers for improvement.

- There is a track record of improving services which have delivered noticeable benefits for residents.
- There are effective performance management systems.
- The organisation benefits from learning from a range of diverse organisations.
- The Board is developing into a cohesive body able to challenge performance.

## Recommendations

- 8 To rise to the challenge of continuous improvement, organisations need inspection reports that offer practical pointers for improvement. Our recommendations identify the expected benefits for both local people and the organisation. In addition, we identify the approximate costs<sup>1</sup> and indicate the priority we place on each recommendation and key dates for delivering these where they are considered appropriate. In this context, the inspection team recommends that the organisation shares the findings of this report with the ALMO Board, the local authority and customers; and takes action to address all weaknesses identified in the report. The inspection team makes the following recommendations.

### **Recommendation**

*R1 Address leadership issues by:*

- *deciding on the future structure of the management team which maximises the capacity to address weaknesses identified within this report.*

- 9 The expected benefit of this recommendation is strengthened leadership and direction within the organisation.
- 10 The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs (as funding will be from existing budgets). This should be implemented by July 2006.

### **Recommendation**

*R2 Further strengthen customer-focus by:*

- *reviewing service standards with customers to ensure that they all include measurable targets and address omissions identified in this report; and*
- *ensure that the tenant participation compact is thoroughly reviewed and that commitments in terms of financial support for resident involvement are explicitly communicated to residents.*

- 11 The expected benefit of this recommendation is greater accountability to customers.
- 12 The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with low costs. This should be implemented by July 2006.

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

**Recommendation**

*R3 Strengthen the focus on equality and diversity by:*

- *developing a comprehensive understanding of the diverse profile of all tenants; and*
- *implementing robust monitoring procedures for ensuring contractors comply with equality policies.*

13 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:

- the organisation will be in a better position to ensure that it is delivering equitable services; and
- improved opportunities to tailor services to meet the diverse needs of customers.

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

**Recommendation**

*R4 Integrate value for money into working practices by:*

- *ensuring that the Board receives regular progress reports on delivery of the housing elements of the Annual Efficiency Statement targets; and*
- *ensure that all service level agreements contain specific and measurable targets which are easy for both parties to measure compliance against and that Board members and customers are involved in reviews from an early stage.*

15 The expected benefit of this recommendation is improved opportunities for ensuring that value for money is secured across all services.

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

**Recommendation**

*R5 Strengthen financial management by:*

- *ensuring that there are robust financial management systems which provide detailed and up-to-date records of all expenditure by cost centre.*

- 17 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:
- reduced risk of either over/under expenditure at cost centre level; and
  - greater opportunity to review the cost effectiveness of all services.
- 18 The implementation of this recommendation will have high impact with medium costs. This should be implemented by June 2006.

**Recommendation**

*R6 Ensure that an ALMO-specific approach is taken in key areas where 2010 is currently dependent on the Council by:*

- *developing specific strategies in areas including IT, human resources, value for money, procurement and equalities and diversity.*

- 19 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:
- services will be developed to meet the specific business and customer needs of 2010 Rotherham Ltd; and
  - it will enable the organisation to articulate its own distinct future direction.
- 20 The implementation of this recommendation will have medium impact with low costs. This should be implemented by July 2006.

**Recommendation**

*R7 Ensure that arrangements for consultation with leaseholders over service charge expenditure fully comply with legislative requirements.*

- 21 The expected benefits of this recommendation are:
- improved customer relations; and
  - reduced risk of the organisation not being able to recover expenditure.
- 22 This should be implemented by April 2006.

**Recommendations**

*R8 Address all other weaknesses in the report in such a way that the benefits outweigh the costs.*

*R9 Share the findings of the report with tenants, board members and councillors.*

- 23 We would like to thank the staff of 2010 Rotherham Ltd and Rotherham MBC who made us welcome and who met our requests efficiently and courteously.

Dates of inspection: 28 November to 9 December 2005

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# Report

## Context

### The locality

- 24 Rotherham Borough Council is a metropolitan council in South Yorkshire and has a population of 249,400<sup>i</sup>. The population is falling overall, however, the number of people over 75 is rising as a proportion. Of the population, 3.1 per cent are from black and minority ethnic communities<sup>ii</sup>.
- 25 The main urban centre is Rotherham itself with a number of large villages and towns surrounding it to the north, south and east. However, the borough is predominantly rural in nature.
- 26 Unemployment stands at 2.6 per cent and is falling. The economy of Rotherham was built primarily on traditional industries such as coal and steel but since their decline, a growth in employment has been seen in alternative sectors including the service industry, information technology, tourism and construction.
- 27 In terms of the 2004 published indices of deprivation, Rotherham lies 58th out of 354 local authorities<sup>iii</sup> with 19 of its 166 'super output areas' falling in the 10 per cent most deprived. Super output areas are areas smaller than a ward but bigger than an electoral district which have replaced the use of wards in making up the indices of deprivation. They are a useful way of highlighting pockets of deprivation amidst average wealth. In Rotherham, a consistent pattern links ill health/mortality with deprivation - those in the most deprived areas suffer higher death rates and experience more ill-health than those in the least deprived areas. Teenage pregnancies are much higher in Rotherham than in England and Wales generally, and there are rising levels of drug abuse among the 14 to 25 age group. Rotherham has a lower than average percentage of households with access to the internet.

### The organisation

- 28 The Council comprises 63 councillors. The Labour party has overall control with 53 seats, the Conservative party hold 7 seats and 3 councillors are independent. Currently, a leader and cabinet style system governs the business of the Council.
- 29 The Council's revenue budget is over £297 million. It employs 7,500 full-time equivalent staff across all services, excluding those funded through individual school budgets.
- 30 The Council's overarching vision is 'to make Rotherham a prosperous, inclusive and attractive borough, where people choose to live, learn and work'.

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<sup>i</sup> Office of National Statistics 2002.

<sup>ii</sup> Not white British - Census 2001.

<sup>iii</sup> Rank of average rank - Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2004.

- 31 The Audit Commission judged the Council overall to be 'weak' in its Comprehensive Performance Assessment (CPA) in 2002, this rating improved to 'fair' in 2004 and in December 2005 the CPA scorecard rated the Council as 'three star and improving strongly'. The Council was the only metropolitan council and one of only eight councils overall to receive the 'improving strongly' rating. It scored three out of four in the housing block.

### **The service**

- 32 The Council established an arms length management organisation (ALMO) called 2010 Rotherham Ltd (2010) which became operational in May 2005. The ALMO has delegated responsibility for providing housing management and maintenance services to 22,000 tenanted and 350 leasehold homes. It manages the Council's £21 million budget for repairs and neighbourhood management and receives an annual management fee of £7.6 million from the Council. It employs 640 staff.
- 33 The main ALMO Board consists of five tenants, five councillors and five independents. It also has four sub-committees which oversee resources, business development, community development and partnerships and performance and service delivery.
- 34 The functions delegated to 2010 are set out in the section 27 application and can be summarised as:
- stock investment decisions and repairs ordering;
  - rent collection, dealing with arrears, debt counselling;
  - consulting and informing tenants on matters which are the ALMO's responsibility;
  - promoting tenant participation, including involving tenants in monitoring and reviewing service standards;
  - enforcement of tenancy conditions;
  - similar functions for leaseholders;
  - managing lettings, voids and under-occupation; and
  - estate management, caretaking and housing related support services under the Supporting People programme.
- 35 The functions retained by the Council include:
- overall housing strategy and enabling;
  - determining policies on lettings and anti-social behaviour (in consultation with the ALMO) and rents;
  - managing the Supporting People programme;
  - homelessness, general housing advice; and
  - administration of the housing register.

- 36 If the standards of 2010 Rotherham Ltd meet Government criteria, the Council will receive Supported Borrowing of £52.5 million initially and be allowed to seek up to a further £163 million if the ALMO progresses well.
- 37 In early 2004, the Audit Commission re-inspected Rotherham's repair and maintenance service and judged it to provide a fair, one-star service, with promising prospects for improvement. Later in 2004, we also inspected the rest of the housing management service, and gave it the same score. We refer to these previous inspections at the start of each section of this report.

## How good is the service?

### What has the service aimed to achieve?

- 38 The HRA Business Plan and 2010 Rotherham Ltd Delivery Plan 2005 to 2008 clearly sets out the ALMO's Mission, aims and objectives. The Delivery Plan demonstrates how these have been developed through consultation with tenants, leaseholders, the Board and staff. It also shows how the work of 2010 fits into the Council's overall strategic framework as set out in the Community Strategy, Corporate Plan, the Housing Strategy, Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy and Rotherham's Regeneration Plan.
- 39 2010's mission is:
- 'working with our diverse communities and our partners to improve the quality of life, and making every neighbourhood safe and proud'.*
- 40 Its vision is described in the Delivery Plan as:
- 'creating better homes, neighbourhoods and communities'.*
- 41 The ALMO has established the following core values:
- respecting all our customers and their diverse needs;
  - being open and honest;
  - listening, learning and doing;
  - continuous improvement;
  - working for a better future;
  - value for money; and
  - being a good employer.

**42** The key objectives for 2010 are to:

- become a good (two-star) ALMO housing service in terms of cost, efficiency and service delivery by 2005 and achieve an excellent (three-star) service by 2006 to draw down funding to deliver decent homes;
- achieve the Decent Homes Standard for all Council properties by 2010 and ensure that all Council properties achieve Secured by Design standards by 2010 to reduce domestic burglary;
- support the neighbourhood management agenda facilitated by a customer-focused, accessible one-stop shop approach by 2006;
- provide an externally recognised value for money, high performing repairs and maintenance service by 2007;
- reduce void relet times to become best in class by 2007;
- through partnership arrangements contribute to reducing by 25 per cent the incidents of Anti Social Behaviour by 2008; and
- increase the number of active tenant and resident participants, which is representative of the make-up of the borough by 100 per cent by 2007.

**43** 2010 has also set the following objective which forms a part of the Neighbourhood Service Plan.

- Deliver services fairly and in a way which recognises equality of opportunity and choice for every resident in every neighbourhood by contributing to the Council achieving Level 5 of the Local Government Equality Standard by 2008.

**44** The HRA Business Plan and 2010 Rotherham Ltd Delivery Plan forms an integral part of the Council's corporate plans and strategies. The Rotherham Vision which is set out in the Community Strategy and Corporate Plan sets out five priority areas. The ALMO sees itself as making a significant contribution to two of these key themes.

- Rotherham Safe - Rotherham will be a place where neighbourhoods are safe, clean, green and well-maintained, with well-designed good quality homes, and accessible local facilities and services for all. There will be attractive buildings and public spaces. Communities will be peaceful but thriving, relatively free from crime and the fear of crime, drugs and anti-social behaviour. Environments, people and businesses will be protected and nurtured. Children will be safe from harm and neglect. A preventive approach will be taken to minimise crime, accidents and hazards; and to further strengthen resilience and thus safeguard all Rotherham citizens.

- Rotherham Proud - Rotherham people, businesses and pride in the borough are at the heart of our vision. Rotherham will have a positive external image and its people will be renowned for their welcome, friendliness and commitment to the values of social justice. Active citizenship and democracy will underpin how Rotherham works. Achievements and diversity will be celebrated. Rotherham will be a caring place, where the most vulnerable are supported. It will be made up of strong, sustainable and cohesive communities, both of place and interest and there will be many opportunities for people to be involved in civic life and local decision-making. The means to do this will be clear, well-known and accessible.
- 45 The ALMO identifies in its Delivery Plan how it contributes to the key themes within the Housing Strategy. These are:
- building sustainable neighbourhoods;
  - ensure decent homes;
  - renew the housing market; and
  - provide fair access and choice.
- 46 The Delivery Plan also makes reference to the wider contribution it can make to the three strategic priorities in the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy: which are:
- improving the life chances of children and young people;
  - enabling everyone to achieve functional skills for life (basic skills); and
  - improving the position of the economically disadvantaged through sustainable employment.

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

### Access and customer care

- 47 In our previous inspection, we found that access and customer care was an area in which the service demonstrated some considerable strengths. While there was some room for further improvement especially in relation to service standards and office opening hours, strengths outweighed weaknesses overall.
- 48 In this inspection, we found that there have been further improvements to access arrangements with the introduction of service standards and changes in office opening times to reflect customers' needs. However, two neighbourhood offices are inaccessible to wheelchair users and not all service standards are sufficiently detailed. Strengths continue to outweigh weaknesses in relation to access and customer care.

- 49 The Council's commitment to improving access and the quality of its services for all users is recognised in the Audit Commission's 2005 Access to Services inspection report. The report concluded that the Council has a good understanding of customer needs and is endeavouring to provide services in line with these needs. It noted that staff demonstrate a strong commitment to dealing with customers efficiently. Physical and telephone access was recognised as being good in services provided by Rotherham Connect. Customers of 2010 benefit from the overall approach taken by the Council as it shares many of the same access points.
- 50 It is easy for customers to make face to face contact with 2010 staff. Services are delivered through a network of eight neighbourhood offices. These offices are open from 8.00 am to 4.30 pm on Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, 9.00 am to 6.00 pm on Wednesdays and 9.00 am to 12.00 noon on Saturdays. These hours were agreed following consultation with all tenants and took into account an analysis of usage. Changes in opening times have increased the opportunities for customers to have face-to-face contact with 2010 staff. The organisation's headquarters are temporarily in offices on an industrial estate. Although these are not centrally located this does not present a barrier to access given the wide network of offices.
- 51 Neighbourhood offices have appropriate facilities and are welcoming. Staff are professional and friendly. They treat customers with respect and behave in a professional manner. Customers can report all issues relating to their tenancy to these offices including repairs requests and complaints. All 2010 offices have clear signage and display the corporate logo. All display opening times, an emergency phone number for repairs and a homelessness contact number. All offices have a direct line in reception areas to report repairs and contact council offices. Staff wear name badges. There are interview facilities which enable privacy to be upheld. All offices had a box of children's toys in the reception area.
- 52 However, two of the neighbourhood offices are not accessible to wheelchair users. The Council's access audit carried out to measure compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act confirms that there are two offices that do not meet the standard. This is despite the fact that 'reasonable adjustments' to buildings should have been completed by October 2005. Offices are provided by the Council through a service level agreement. A commitment within the ALMO's delivery plan that works should be completed in the year 2005/06 is not going to be met. The latest plans indicate full compliance by 2007.
- 53 There is easy telephone access to the service. A broad range of services can be accessed through the call centre including repairs reporting and choice-based lettings bidding and there is a switchboard for general enquires. Rotherham Connect call centre is open from 8.00 am to 8.00 pm on weekdays. Emergency repairs can be reported outside of these times. An increasing number of tenants use this point of access with 75 per cent of repairs calls being made this way (up from 57 per cent in 2003). Staff receive comprehensive training prior to being accredited to handle particular types of calls. For example, call centre staff carry out job shadowing with contractors and training in use of the repairs diagnostic manual is provided.

- 54 IT is used effectively to deliver quick and accurate diagnosis of repairs reports. A diagrammatic version is accessible to call centre staff through the computer system. Caller waiting time and volume is monitored. Team leaders check quality of call response by silent monitoring and by shared listening. These are recorded and are used to inform improved performance. An increase in the number of calls received led to an increase in the number of abandoned calls which stood at 5 per cent in October. However, this issue has been addressed through extending the number of staff at busy times and changing rotas. Satisfaction surveys indicate that 98.5 per cent of tenants find it easy to report repairs. Two hundred tenants are randomly selected each month and they are contacted by call centre staff to check levels of satisfaction with work carried out.
- 55 Effective use is beginning to be made of new technology to widen access to services. 2010 has its own interactive website. This has been evolving during the period of this inspection with more services becoming available online. Tenants can now use the website to report repairs and rent payments can be made online, via email and through digital TV.
- 56 Repairs appointment arrangements are effective. The appointment time is agreed with the tenant during the call and the tenant is given a job number as a reference. The appointment system has four slots for customers per day, during 8.00 am to 6.00 pm Monday to Friday and 8.00 am to 2.00 pm on Saturdays. Operatives are also empowered to do additional works and a high level of jobs are completed in a single visit.
- 57 Customers are encouraged to make suggestions and complaints. A customer suggestion scheme encourages tenants to make positive suggestions about the housing service. It includes a freepost reply card and prize draws as an incentive to become involved. A customer complaints procedure has been developed specifically for 2010. The customer complaints procedure leaflet is accessible by a variety of methods and can be downloaded from the website. It is well-written and describes the timed stages clearly and without jargon. It signposts complaints about the Council to an alternative procedure. In addition to formal complaints, expressions of dissatisfaction are also recorded on the computer system. All staff have received training on dealing with complaints and a customer care DVD has been developed for staff which includes information on dealing with complaints. A weekly email reminder goes out to prompt complaint responses. Compensation is being paid by 2010 to some tenants for failures in service delivery, however, this is not publicised through the complaints procedure and there is a lack of guidance to staff on when it is appropriate to make payments.

- 58** Written information is generally of high quality and is useful in explaining services to customers. Customer developed service standards are published across the full range of services. These standards were introduced in March 2005 and reviewed in September 2005. These are tested for compliance by tenants through a customer inspection service. Monthly reports on the inspection service results are received and acted upon by the management team and the Board. Information leaflets for each service standard are displayed prominently in all the neighbourhood offices. Leaflets are generally well written, the wording is clear and there is little use of jargon. The writing style is friendly and informative, the leaflets are attractively designed and all display the organisation's logo. Leaflets are tenant approved and display a tick logo to indicate this. A stock of other pertinent information on housing matters is also displayed. All neighbourhood offices hold a corporate list of available information and this helps to ensure that information is offered consistently across the borough.
- 59** Not all service standards are sufficiently detailed to allow measurement of compliance and vary in the quality of detail. Some are very specific, for example, the commitment to cut grass to 60mm in open spaces. However, generally there are few measurable targets. For example, there is no published commitment to provide translated information within a set number of days. A commitment to send out rent statements to all tenants is inaccurate as it is policy not to send statements to those who pay rent at cash offices. Without clear and measurable service standards tenants have less opportunity to hold their landlord to account.
- 60** In most cases, information leaflets for tenants are not dated and it is unclear when they will be reviewed. Although most leaflets give a commitment that they will be periodically reviewed and this has been the practice. The lack of editorial dates will make it difficult to verify what amendments and improvements have been made.
- 61** A comprehensive welcome pack is provided for all new tenants. The handbook gives a clear explanation of the services provided and clearly explains the rights and responsibilities covered by the tenancy conditions. An informative newsletter is sent to all tenants every quarter. This has kept tenants informed of relevant issues including preparations for this inspection.
- 62** Information posters are used to publicise events and trends in performance. Current housing management performance of the organisation. Posters are eye-catching and give information about a wide range of performance indicator data. They show whether targets are being met. Forthcoming estate walkabouts are well publicised on notice boards in neighbourhood offices.
- 63** Some innovative methods of delivering a customer care approach have been implemented. An example of a customer-sensitive service is the introduction of a policy which requires all staff to put covers on their shoes when they enter a tenant's home. This reflects an understanding of the needs to respect tenants' homes.

- 64 Only limited use is made of computer systems to tailor services to reflect the needs of the service. A flag has been introduced which identifies vulnerable tenants and callers with disabilities. This makes it possible for 2010 to issue special instructions to contractors. However, this is only available in the case of new tenants. There is no flag to identify if gas servicing is currently outstanding.
- 65 Arrangements for carrying out satisfaction surveys of new tenants are not robust. New tenants complete satisfaction surveys by answering questions verbally to the housing officers who then write down the answers. This process devalues the validity of the survey as the process lacks confidentiality and some tenants may not be confident enough to be openly critical. Although neighbourhood managers carry out a 10 per cent validity survey of these results, this does not overcome the issue of confidentiality.

## Diversity

- 66 In our previous inspection, we found that there were more weaknesses than strengths in this area, although there was evidence of a corporate commitment to improve the Council's approach to diversity. The fact that historically there had been little consideration of this aspect of the business meant that significant improvement was needed before the Council could be sure that it was responding to the needs of the diverse communities which it served.
- 67 In this inspection, we found that further progress has been made to embed equality and diversity issues in the operation of the organisation, particularly through the use of impact assessments. There is a commitment at board level to address equality and diversity issues. However, the organisation has a limited understanding of the profile of its tenants and does not monitor contractors for compliance with their policies. Overall there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area.
- 68 2010 feeds into the Council's corporate strategies relating to diversity. The Council has recently developed a new Corporate Equality strategy and BME Housing Strategy. 2010 has adopted and is contributing to the Council's Race Equality Scheme and Equality Policy. The ALMO has its own equality action plan, which includes a commitment to undertake systematic equality impact assessments on all services.
- 69 The BME Housing Strategy sets out how the organisation will address current weaknesses in relation to some significant diversity issues. It highlights how BME owner-managed contractors will be encouraged to bid for work in relation to the decent homes programme contracts.
- 70 Without a full understanding of the profile of its tenants, it is unlikely that 2010 fully complies with the CRE Code for rented housing. However, a systematic approach is taken to ensuring compliance with the code. A compliance plan has been developed which lists all the Code's objectives. This is linked to the measures which have been taken and tasks which have been identified to be completed. A task manager is accountable within the plan which also shows clearly where tasks have been completed or not. The plan is reviewed by 2010 and audited by officers of the Council.

- 71 Equality impact assessments have been undertaken for a broad range of housing services. Impact assessments have been undertaken on a range of strategies and policies including the Housing Income Strategy, managing introductory tenancies and service standards. Impact assessments have led to steps being taken to promote greater awareness of religious festivals. For example, a Ramadan calendar was produced in consultation with local communities and this has been circulated to neighbourhood offices. This has resulted in staff knowing when it is inappropriate to visit tenants. An impact assessment of the furnished homes procedures has resulted in more appropriate furnishing packs being made available for minority communities. In particular, cooking appliances are provided which are sensitive to individual's needs.
- 72 The organisation carries out effective monitoring of equalities performance indicators for the workforce and monitors these against the Council's performance and targets. Indicators cover disability, ethnicity and women in senior posts. Customer satisfaction surveys routinely measure responses by diversity. All satisfaction surveys include a question seeking the ethnic background of the respondent. Monitoring of performance has led to some specific action to address under-representation within the workforce. Through the Equip programme the organisation employs young people from BME communities in trainee roles within the workforce.
- 73 The Board demonstrates that it takes account of equalities and community involvement issues in its work. Minutes of Board and Sub-committee meetings indicate that consideration is given to equality issues. For example, the Board meeting in July 2005 received a presentation on diversity and community involvement. The outcome of this presentation was that the Board instructed the Chief Executive to pursue a radical review of policies, practices and development of community and tenant involvement.
- 74 Board members are required to follow set standards in terms of equality issues. The Code of Conduct for Board members states that Board members and staff should be aware of the company's Equal Opportunities policies and that they must follow established procedures to prevent discrimination. The company monitors the ethnic origin, gender and disability profile of board members with the aim of ensuring it reflects the communities it serves.
- 75 The organisation promotes its commitment to diversity and equality to its customers. 2010's Equality and Diversity Policy is clearly communicated to customers. A leaflet summarises the service standards in relation to the policy is widely available in neighbourhood offices. It clearly explains the policy, the aims of the ALMO, its vision and a list of commitments to customers.

- 76 It is easy for customers whose first language is not English to receive information. Information leaflets include a strap-line indicating that the information is available in other languages. For example, all service standards leaflets include on the front cover a translation that says the document can be translated or an interpreter provided in Urdu, Arabic and Chinese; the three most common community languages in Rotherham. All documents are made available in large print, Braille and in audio format. A translation service is used to facilitate viewings with tenants who speak languages other than English. This helps tenants to make a choice based on full understanding of the tenancy.
- 77 However, minority languages strap-lines translations have not been included in some significant areas of communication with tenants. Although strap-lines have now been included in information leaflets they have not been included in arrears or rent increase letters. Without an indication of the importance of these letters to tenants whose first language is not English there is a high risk that tenants will be unable to act upon this important information.
- 78 Staff know how to access translation facilities for a non-English speaking customer. Language Line posters are visible in all neighbourhood offices and staff receive training in how to use this system. All have access to Language Line prompt cards to help them communicate effectively with non-English speakers. Housing income champions are able to access interpreters for deaf customers. The debt advice service has two bi-lingual members of staff, one of whom is a woman, which enables them to respond to the needs of the Asian population.
- 79 2010 is developing more culturally sensitive services. In relation to the repairs service, female operatives are made available where requested. To ensure that a wide audience was involved in the introduction of choice-based lettings (CBL), engagement opportunities included road shows and staffed stalls. Groups attended included the Learning Disabilities Partnership Board and a BME conference where CBL was a theme. Access to the CBL system for vulnerable groups is helped through a large circulation list of the weekly property paper with around 1,000 copies going directly to vulnerable individuals and their advocates and support agencies. In a bid to increase access by BME groups, a member of staff visits the local mosques every week with the property paper. The number of BME applicants on the housing register has increased since the introduction of CBL.
- 80 A new racial incident reporting procedure is having an impact in encouraging the reporting of incidents. The procedure allows racial incidents to be reported online or to any of the neighbourhood offices. Service standards have been published for reporting racist incidents which includes a summary of the procedure and an overview of the steps for dealing with racist incidents. Copies of the document are available in Urdu, Arabic and Chinese. A rise in racial incident reports has been recorded with the number of cases rising from 13 incidents in 2004/05 to 19 in the first three quarters of 2005/06. The increase is accounted for by the wider publicity being given to the procedure. This is important as it indicates that customers have greater awareness of the steps they can take when faced with racial incidents.

- 81 Steps have been taken to increase knowledge of diversity-related issues. All members of staff and Board members have received awareness training in diversity and equality issues. Innovative methods of awareness raising have been used such as an e-learning package for frontline staff. Forum theatre has also been used as a method of engaging operatives in understanding diversity issues.
- 82 There are still some important weaknesses. The organisation does not employ its own officer with responsibility for equalities and diversity issues. Services are purchased from the Council through a service level agreement with one Council officer apportioning half of their time to work for 2010. Although this has allowed the organisation to draw on significant areas of good practice within the Council it means that services distinct to the ALMO have not yet been fully developed. An outcome of the lack of a dedicated officer has been that the organisation has not developed its own equalities and Diversity Strategy; an issue which is considered in the prospects for improvement section of this report.
- 83 The organisation has a limited understanding of the diversity profile of its tenants and leaseholders. Although the Council has been collecting this information for all new tenants since 2002, it has not undertaken an exercise to collect profile information for existing tenants. This means it does not fully understand the ethnicity, disability and vulnerability of its tenants and therefore cannot tailor services or monitor provision accordingly. For example, 2010 records the proportion of notices of seeking possession on BME tenants but cannot say whether the numbers served are higher or lower than expected. As a result it is not possible to consider the need for any targeted action with any particular groups.
- 84 Although the debt advice service complete diversity profiling, this information is not passed to the ALMO who are not in a position to know whether or not all groups are accessing the service. As a result, they cannot undertake any targeted awareness raising to ensure that all tenants have equal access opportunities.
- 85 The Council does not carry out profile work relating to people on benefit and as a result there is no solid information to inform accessibility and benefit take up. There has been no request from 2010 to co-ordinate work in this area to benefit their customers. As a result, there is no mechanism through which 2010 can assess whether any marginalised groups are not accessing benefits in general and housing benefit in particular.
- 86 Despite some positive steps to address the issue, the workforce and the Board does not fully reflect the wider population. The organisation employs significantly fewer staff from ethnic minority communities than the Council as a whole. BME employees represent 1.75 per cent of the whole workforce compared to an overall BME population of 3.1 per cent in the borough. 1.52 per cent of employees are recorded as having a disability. Of the top 5 per cent earners within the organisation 34.78 per cent are women. This is below the 45.81 per cent within the Council as a whole. Only 4 out of 15 Board members are women.

- 87 Contractors are not monitored for compliance with their obligations in relation to equality and diversity. Despite a requirement within the tendering procedures to ensure that all contractors have equalities and diversity policies, no steps are taken to ensure that the contractors comply with these commitments. 2010 does not scrutinise whether contractor's employees reflect the diversity of the population.

### **Stock investment and asset management**

- 88 The Council has legal responsibilities as a landlord which include keeping in good repair the structure and exterior of dwellings and any installations provided for heating, sanitation and supply of services (section 11, Landlord and Tenant Act 1985) and contributing to the Home Energy Conservation Act Strategy (HECA). The Government's 'Decent Homes' target also requires local authority landlords to bring their stock up to a defined standard by 2010. The ALMO is responsible for ensuring the day-to-day delivery of services to meet these requirements and for procuring all refurbishment work, acting as an agent on behalf of the Council.

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

- 89 In our previous inspection, we found that the Council had a long-term plan to resource repairs and to meet the decent homes programme, which was mainly through their stock option of bidding for ALMO status. There were well developed and managed decent homes programmes with a good standard of work.
- 90 In this inspection, we found that a broadly sound approach is taken to asset management with a proactive approach being taken to reviewing the future use of stock and ensuring this is linked to the wider regeneration agenda. Decent Homes Standard work continues to be carried out to a high standard and on a partnership basis. Customers are fully involved in investment planning processes. Decisions are taken on the basis of a sound understanding of stock condition. However, current investment programmes do not go beyond the basic Decent Homes Standard. There has been recent slippage in the programme to procure new decent homes work and cyclical maintenance work has not been carried out in the current year. Standards vary between the two partnering contractors. Overall, there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in relation to asset management.
- 91 The approach to asset management is based on an understanding of investment needs. 2010 has developed a detailed investment plan to meet the decent homes standard. The investment plan has clear drivers in place to achieve local, regional and national priorities in relation to sustainable communities. The plan is clear in its aims and is closely aligned to the ALMO's delivery plan, business plan and the Council's Community Strategy. It also makes reference to the aims of the South Yorkshire Housing Market Renewal pathfinder. This long-term plan is specific in detail showing timescales for meeting all works up to 2010. The decent homes programme has been formulated using an established model for prioritising investment that takes account of sustainability issues and crime levels.

- 92 The Council and 2010 take a strategic approach to the long-term sustainability of the housing stock. Following a wider housing needs assessment carried out in 2003 which identified an over supply of some housing provision, a review has been undertaken of the future of sheltered housing in the borough. The over-supply of sheltered housing is being addressed with five schemes being decommissioned. Future plans for demolition and improvement are closely linked to housing market renewal. The Council has a policy of divesting itself of non-traditional stock based on assessing investment needs and resident consultation. An example of this policy is the decision to dispose an estate of 86 Taran properties in Maltby. Further examples include the 'trickle' sale of void non-traditional properties such as Airey houses, and the clearance of former Coal Board 'Reema' estates at Kiveton Park, and Laughton Common.
- 93 Customers are fully involved in the investment planning process. 2010 has acted upon the result of a tenants survey carried out by consultants which identified security as the main priority. The programme has been designed to ensure that security works are carried out first in areas where there is a high incidence of burglary. The standard of works to be undertaken are defined within a document entitled The Rotherham Standard. This makes it easy for tenants and other stakeholders to understand the level of work they can expect to receive.
- 94 Targets to meet the Decent Homes Standard are being delivered on a partnering basis. 2010 are currently coming to the end of the first phase of decent homes improvements, which were procured through the OJEU process and a framework partnership agreement. This led to the formation of the Decent Homes Partnership Company between the successful two contractors, the project managers EDS (the Council's design services) and the client. The procurement process for partner selection includes tenant involvement and reality checking of prospective partners along with pilot works before the main programme is started. The high level of non-decent homes is being tackled with the proportion having reduced from 78 per cent of the stock in 2003/04 to 72.68 per cent now.
- 95 Procurement of the second phase of the decent homes programme is in accordance with a clear Procurement Strategy. 2010 draws on the Council's resources in terms of its Procurement Strategy and procurement officers to deliver the next phase of the programme. Tenders are currently being evaluated for works which are due to start in May 2006.
- 96 Investment decisions are taken on the basis of a sound understanding of stock condition. The ALMO has up-to-date stock condition information. Over 2,500 properties have been surveyed which represents over 10 per cent of the stock and the sample has been carefully chosen to ensure a representative mix of property types and geographic locations. The survey work was undertaken during late 2003 to build upon a previous survey carried out in 1999/2000. The stock database is routinely updated after new works are completed. The database incorporates an asbestos register.

- 97 However, opportunities are missed to update the stock condition database. Although the database is updated after completion of major works, the same does not happen following completion of day to day repairs or voids work. Furthermore, surveys are not being carried out when access is gained to properties when they are void.
- 98 2010 is successfully working with the HMR pathfinder to deliver improved and sustainable homes. There are regular meetings between the HMR and 2010 to discuss programming and joint investment to support sustainability both within and outside the pathfinder area. An example of this is the White Bear estate where the decent homes programme has been enhanced by environmental improvement works funded by the pathfinder.
- 99 The overall quality of improvement work delivered is high. Ninety-one per cent of tenants have expressed satisfaction with the quality of the decent homes work. Works are carried out in a way that is sensitive to customers needs. Vulnerable customers are given help with storage and moving heavy items. Any adaptations identified are completed as part of the work. Environmental and security work is incorporated into the decent homes work. Tenants reported that the rate of work by the contractors is excellent and follows a cohesive pattern.
- 100 A high emphasis is placed on customer care. A tenant liaison officer visits all tenants involved in improvement schemes to check if there are any safety, diversity or vulnerability issues. Information packs are issued to tenants which cover time scales, advanced warning about which days are going to be noisy or very dusty, phone numbers for all of the team and emergency numbers for after hours. Information is backed up in a printed booklet which is well-written and very practical. It contains photos of staff and contact phone numbers. Plans of layouts are discussed with tenants in planned schemes and their preferences for kitchen facilities taken into consideration. Tenants are given a choice of kitchen styles, work surfaces, handles, tiles, secure front doors and wider back doors. Materials used are of a good quality. Contractors employ female operatives which enables a culturally sensitive service to be delivered.
- 101 The Rotherham Standard does not provide comprehensive details of additional work which may be carried out beyond the basic decent homes standard other than in relation to security. This means that an opportunity is being missed to carry out further enhancements to estates such as environmental improvements at the same time that the contractors are on-site delivering improvements to dwellings.
- 102 Stock investment is supported by robust arrangements for project and financial management. Through services provided by EDS, there is strong financial management of the capital programme. This is demonstrated by 100 per cent spend in accordance with available budgets. Reporting mechanisms ensure that the programme is regularly monitored by the Decent Homes Board, 2010's executive management team and the Board.

- 103** The organisation complies with legislation relating to asbestos. Full surveys to assess the presence of asbestos are carried out prior to decent homes work being undertaken. To complement the information that the company already has in its asbestos register, asbestos surveys are undertaken on all properties prior to capital works being carried out.
- 104** The procurement timetable for the next phase of decent homes work has recently slipped. Steps are being taken to address this concern through acceleration of the original programme and 2010 and the Council maintains that the slippage will be fully overcome by the year-end. Nevertheless, this remains an area of concern.
- 105** Tenants are not given sufficient notice of when work is to start. Although consultation over the broad programme and customer liaison during the programme is handled well, there is a gap in the middle of these processes. A programme of work is not published more than a year in advance. The programme is published annually in the tenants' newsletter although as a three year programme has been agreed more general advanced notification could be provided. The lack of a clear calendar for future work means that tenants can not plan ahead for events such as redecorating or taking holidays.
- 106** Standards of work vary between the two decent homes contractors. Inconsistencies in delivery relate to various issues including the provision of daytime facilities to support tenants who need to move out of their home. Although one contractor provides this the other does not. This is the result of insufficient specification of the level of customer care to be provided.
- 107** Cyclical redecoration programmes have been cancelled for the current year. A programme of redecorating all properties externally every seven years has been suspended. The reason provided for this is that there are decisions pending over the future decent homes work. However, a clear strategic approach to future decent homes work should enable 2010 to continue with a revised cyclical programme which ensures that external elements of properties do not become neglected with the possible need for additional work in future years.

### **Responsive repairs**

- 108** In our previous inspection, we found that there had clearly been an improvement in the way responsive repairs were ordered, carried out and completed. Greater monitoring of the service was helping to identify problems at an early stage, allowing the Council to react accordingly and responsively. Tenants were generally happier with the service and spoke positively of the new relationships they were experiencing with the Council. The Council had undertaken work to address the absence of an asbestos policy and ensure information was available to tenants. However, the overspend projected on this budget was particularly concerning and the impact of this on other repairs and the service to tenants was worrying. The absence of a robust budget commitment process was concerning, as was the lack of budgetary control and expertise at a local level, to monitor and manage budgets effectively.

- 109 In this inspection, we found that 2010 provides a customer-focused approach to delivering responsive repairs. Customer satisfaction levels are high. Target times for completing repairs are being achieved. New working practices have resulted in a high proportion of jobs being completed in a single visit. Computer systems are used effectively to diagnose repairs and to advise contractors of special circumstances. However, a high proportion of repairs are carried out in the most expensive categories and management of responsive repairs budgets is under-developed. Strengths outweigh weaknesses in terms of responsive repairs.
- 110 The approach taken in delivering the responsive maintenance service is customer focused. The main point of contact for reporting repairs is now the Rotherham Connect call centre. The opening hours of the call centre have been increased. Call centre staff have the assistance of diagnostic software to ensure repairs orders are made accurately. The tenants' handbook contains diagrams to assist tenants in describing faults. Satisfaction surveys indicate that 97.5 per cent of tenants find it easy to report repairs.
- 111 Service standards make it clear what tenants can expect from the repairs service. The standard provides a clear definition of the respective priority categories of emergencies (four hours), urgent (five working days), normal (four weeks) and other non-urgent works which may be batched into a planned maintenance programme. The service standard also describes the level of courtesy tenants can expect from contactors. In common with other service standards, compliance is monitored by the customer inspection service.
- 112 However, there are some omissions from the published service standards for responsive repairs. The service standards do not provide commitments to tenants in terms of setting and publishing measurable targets for issues such as appointments or the number of jobs to be completed in one visit. This means that customers cannot measure the quality of the service or hold the company to account as effectively as it could.
- 113 Satisfaction levels with responsive repairs are high. Satisfaction slips are left for all repairs work carried out and in addition call centre staff carry out follow-up telephone surveys. In June 2003, the Council recorded satisfaction levels of 72 per cent. This has increased to 95 per cent in June 2005. Increased levels of satisfaction are linked to some significant changes in the way repairs are delivered.
- 114 An effective appointment system is in place for responsive repairs. Performance on making and keeping appointments has significantly improved over recent years. In 2003/04, only 65.35 per cent of responsive repairs were carried out by appointment. In 2004/05, this had increased to 76.8 per cent and in October 2005 performance had reached 92.74 per cent. Appointments are available in the evenings and on Saturdays.
- 115 A high proportion of repair jobs are completed within target times. In 2004/05, 97.32 per cent of urgent jobs were completed within the five day target. Performance in October 2005 showed 98.29 per cent of jobs met the target. This means that 2010 is slightly exceeding its overall target for the year which is set at 98 per cent.

- 116** New working practices have been introduced which have resulted in a high proportion of jobs being completed in a single visit. Eighty-six per cent of jobs are being completed in a single visit compared with 76 per cent in 2003/04. This has been achieved by a combination of reducing the number of items on the schedule of rates to 200, ensuring that most operatives are now multi-skilled and equipped with the necessary stock to complete work without needing to leave the property. Operatives are empowered to carry out repairs work where no job ticket has been raised. A bonus scheme has been replaced by an annual salary scheme.
- 117** The repairs ordering computer system is used to advise contractors of special circumstances. The location of asbestos is flagged up on the repairs system when repairs are ordered. Similarly, contractors visiting vulnerable tenants are informed in advance that they may require extra time or security checks in order to respond sympathetically and appropriately.
- 118** There remain some weaknesses in the responsive repairs service. 2010 carries out too many repairs in the most expensive categories of either emergencies or urgent. In 2004/05, a total of 58 per cent of all repairs were carried out in these two categories. This is significantly above the maximum good practice level of 30 per cent. 2010 justifies the high-level of ordering in these categories because non-urgent work is increasingly being batched into programmed maintenance schemes. Nevertheless, the proportion of work being ordered with a completion date of five days is high.
- 119** The repairs ordering system does not flag up if future work is programmed to be carried out. This means that call centre staff cannot inform tenants if work which relates to the repair they are reporting is due to be carried out. It may also lead to unnecessary work being ordered.
- 120** Management of responsive repairs budgets and expenditure is under-developed. A budget monitoring report to the Board in November 2005 by the company's accountants indicated that while they had confidence in the overall income totals for the DSO, there was some contention as to the allocation of income and expenditure across income type and cost centres. As a result, detailed analysis of variances may be misleading. The report indicated that of an annual budget of £7,957,200 for housing maintenance, the DSO had received an income of £5,037,658 for the year up to 31 October 2005. This represented a variance of £878,258 but it is unclear how accurately these costs have been apportioned.

### **Empty (void) property repairs**

- 121** In our previous inspection, we found that there had been significant improvements in the way the Council had undertaken its void management process and improved its lettings. Generally, we found a very high standard, both in the internal and external presentation, and there was a void procedure and standard which had been developed with tenants. A multi-skilling approach to repair voids in the 'Going Local' pilot had resulted in a reduction in the time taken re-let properties, but this had not been introduced across the rest of the borough.

- 122** In this inspection, we found that performance on reletting properties has further improved since the last inspection. Properties are let to a high standard and there is a high degree of customer care. Void management procedures have been enhanced to speed up turnaround times. Although overall tenant satisfaction is very high, there are concerns over checks to heating systems. Overall, empty property management is an area where strengths considerably outweigh weaknesses.
- 123** Empty properties are relet quickly. Performance in reletting properties has continued to improve and is now among the best in the country. During 2004/05, it took an average of 16.33 days to relet a property. This compares with performance in 2001/02 of 98.5 days. In the first quarter of 2005/06 it took an average of 15.01 days to relet properties. This performance placed 2010 among the top performing landlords on this indicator. Quick reletting of voids is minimising rent loss which is recorded at 0.97 per cent of debit for 2004/05. Positive performance in this area also makes a valuable contribution to delivery of the wider Council objective of Safe and Proud Neighbourhoods.
- 124** There is a defined lettable standard for voids. The Houseproud standard has been developed in consultation with tenants. The comprehensive vacant property standard includes rechargeable responsibilities and tenants right to compensation. The standard covers both internal and external areas including gardening where required. All voids are post-inspected using the 'houseproud guarantee' check list.
- 125** There is a clear process to determine decoration allowances for newly let properties. The system is transparent and is publicised to all tenants. Although, at £25 per room the standard decoration allowance may not be sufficient to cover costs, the policy allows sufficient flexibility for the housing officer and tenant to negotiate a higher amount. This is linked to a clear and time-bound appeals process.
- 126** Tenants are involved in checking that the lettable standard is consistently being met. Results from monthly voids property inspections against the Houseproud standard are provided as part of the performance reports received by the Board. The reports are detailed and give a clear impression of the condition of the property. Tenant inspectors score the property in terms of its compliance with the standard. This exercise has recently been extended with exchange tenant inspections taking place with a neighbouring ALMO. This is a positive approach as it has the effect of driving up tenants aspirations and expectations.
- 127** 2010 works proactively to keep void turnaround times to a minimum. A void management procedure is in place which aims to pre-allocate tenancies and co-ordinate work at the earliest opportunity in order to improve void turnaround and re-let times. Pragmatic initiatives have been introduced to speed up the process such as the use of key boxes which reduce the need for journeys to collect keys. Repairs champions take photos for voids for marketing through the choice-based lettings system at the pre-termination visit.

- 128** Empty properties are let to a high and consistent standard. Properties are let in a clean and tidy condition, floors are swept and paintwork cleaned, windows are lockable and keys are provided. Gardens are left tidy and graffiti is removed. New kitchen units, work surfaces, sanitary ware and tiling are fitted where the lettable standard is not met. Satisfaction of new tenants with the condition of their property is high. Post letting surveys show a satisfaction rate of 95 per cent with the overall condition of the property.
- 129** Safety checks are routinely undertaken as part of the voids process. All void properties are checked for gas and electrical safety as soon as possible after the keys are handed in. The gas is capped off and in winter the boiler is drained. Contractors are not allowed in to undertake any repairs until this has been completed in order to ensure the safety and security of the property and staff.
- 130** However, central heating systems are not always checked satisfactorily prior to reletting of properties. An analysis of satisfaction survey results indicate that although overall satisfaction is high it is lower on the specific point of heating systems. Of all survey forms completed during May and June 2005, 12 per cent of tenants reported that they thought the central heating system had not been tested and left in working order. Furthermore, although safety checks take place when the property first becomes void they are not consistently carried out promptly prior to new tenants moving in. An analysis of gas safety certificates indicates delays between tenancy commencement dates and a new gas safety certificate being issued.
- 131** There is a high level of customer care in relation to the voids process. A welcome home book with helpful information about the tenancy together with a welcome pack of cleaning materials is left in all void properties as a gift to new tenants. Battery smoke alarms are also provided as part of the welcome pack. All new tenants are visited by a housing officer within four weeks of the start of the tenancy and this is used as an opportunity for the landlord to check whether all outstanding repairs have been completed or whether any new repair items had been discovered.
- 132** It is a weakness that tenants are not provided with a written list of any outstanding repairs which are to be completed after the property has been let. Without providing a list of outstanding work with clear target dates for completion, tenants will be uncertain as to when or if work will be completed. This could result in unnecessary enquires or duplicate repairs orders being made.

### **Gas servicing**

- 133** In our previous inspection, we found that the Council continued to provide a good service for gas and solid fuel servicing with high standards. There was a measure of customer satisfaction for gas servicing and the sweeping of chimneys was a positive development. However, we had concerns that the Council's procedures to gain access to a property to carry out gas servicing were too lengthy, due to the length of time taken to execute an injunction. Additionally, the target to achieve 98 per cent servicing within the cycle was not sufficiently challenging.

- 134 In this inspection, we found that performance has further improved. There are robust quality assurance systems in place and access procedures have been enhanced. However, not all steps are being used to ensure access and access and enforcement policies have not been clearly communicated to tenants. There are more strengths than weaknesses for gas servicing.
- 135 Performance in servicing gas appliances has improved since the last inspection. In November 2005, there was a valid gas servicing certificate in place for 98.95 per cent of properties with gas appliances. In January 2004, performance stood at 98.11 per cent. Customers recognise the quality of gas servicing with 98.6 per cent of tenants indicating satisfaction.
- 136 The ALMO has robust quality assurance systems in place for gas servicing and gas installations. These systems have been accredited by CORGI. Systems are in place to monitor individual operatives and private contractor performance. This is important as it provides assurance that gas servicing and installation is properly carried out.
- 137 Random quality assurance checks are undertaken on gas servicing work. Ten per cent of servicing work is checked by mechanical and electrical engineering staff, a separate division within 2010. However, there are few fully independent checks. As part of the quality assurance process CORGI undertakes a limited sample but this involves less than 50 visits per year.
- 138 Access procedures have been enhanced. Improvements include the offering of evening and weekend appointments. Servicing is now carried out on an eleven-month cycle. Injunctions are being used as an effective method of securing access. Awareness of the importance of servicing has been promoted through the local media and posters in local offices.
- 139 However, not all available options are being used to maximise opportunities to gain early access to properties. Access to make appointments for gas servicing is restricted to standard office hours and is not available through Rotherham Connect the main point of contact for reporting general repairs. The availability of weekend appointments is not referred to in standard letters to tenants and the calling cards provide incorrect times for Saturday appointments, omitting to state that Saturday afternoon appointments are now available. The housing computer systems do not contain a flag which would prompt call centre and neighbourhood office staff to remind tenants of the need to arrange a service where this was outstanding. Housing management staff do not become involved in the access procedure until the legal stage is reached. Early intervention by housing management staff would maximise opportunities to ensure prompt servicing takes places.
- 140 Access and enforcement policies for gas servicing are not communicated clearly to tenants. There is no specific leaflet or other publication to explain in detail the arrangements for gaining access and the sanctions that may be applied. The inspection team received conflicting information about the use of capping to cut-off supplies where access has not been gained. 2010 state that this would not happen without the tenants consent but this commitment is not publicised. This increases the risk that gas supplies may be cut-off without consent.

## Aids and adaptations

- 141** In our previous inspection, we found that there were more strengths than weaknesses in this area. Processes had been analysed to identify more efficient ways of delivery and staff were focused on ensuring customers' homes met their needs. Performance management arrangements were having an effect on improving performance from a poor baseline position. However, a significant weakness related to the fact that the installation of adaptations varied according to tenure.
- 142** In this inspection, we found that 2010 plays only a limited role in the adaptations process. It has not developed a role in terms of supporting and advocating on behalf of tenants. Adaptations take too long to be completed. There is insufficient publicity about aids and adaptations and what tenants can expect from 2010 and customer care is under-developed. However, a database of adapted properties has been developed and there is a clear prioritisation scheme for occupational therapy (OT) assessments. Overall, this is an area of weakness.
- 143** 2010 takes only a limited role in the aids and adaptations process. With aids and adaptations being a retained service within the Council, the organisation sees its role as acting as building contractor. It has not developed a role in terms of supporting and advocating on behalf of tenants to ensure appropriate adaptations are delivered. There is no single officer with responsibility for aids and adaptations within the ALMO. This means that no one within the ALMO is championing adaptation issues within the organisation.
- 144** It takes too long to complete adaptations and public sector tenants must wait longer than private sector tenants. In 2004/05, it took an average of 202 days for work in public sector properties to be completed and 127 days in the case of private sector homes. Performance has improved recently; work completed in public sector properties in October 2005 took an average of 162 days. It is recognised that 2010 has limited influence over the delivery of this service but so far it has not been proactive in seeking improvements to the service.
- 145** There is insufficient publicity of the availability of aids and adaptations. The ALMO has only limited information within its handbook on adaptations and there is no specific leaflet setting out how 2010 can help tenants to secure adaptations. Adaptations are therefore insufficiently promoted. Although the Council has service standards for adaptations, these are limited and do not include commitments in terms of time taken to carry out occupational therapy assessments. This means that tenants cannot fully hold their landlord to account for the time taken to complete work.
- 146** Procedures for ensuring that adaptations are incorporated into decent homes improvement work are not robust. Although in practice adaptations are being included in improvement work there is no set procedure as to how this is carried out. This presents the risk that 2010 will not act consistently in carrying out adaptations and that services will therefore be inequitable.

- 147 There are weaknesses in aspects of customer care. Tenants' satisfaction with adaptations is not routinely monitored. Surveys are not sent out following completion of work. The last survey was carried out over a year ago. Without regular monitoring 2010 and the Council are limiting opportunities to learn from customers. Customers on the waiting list for adaptations are not kept informed of when adaptations might be undertaken.
- 148 Minor adaptations are not being completed as quickly as they should. The OT priority system is a barrier to getting minor adaptations carried out quickly. All adaptations including minor ones must go through the OT referral process. 2010 has not challenged whether it may be more appropriate for it to take on the full responsibility for minor adaptations from the Council.
- 149 2010 has an improved understanding of the location of adapted properties. Following the last inspection, the organisation has developed a property database which identifies those properties which have been adapted. This information is used to enable appropriate reletting of properties.
- 150 There is a clear prioritisation scheme to ensure urgent requests are assessed first. OT visits are prioritised according to one of four categories according to need.

### **Housing income management**

- 151 In our previous inspection, we found that there were more strengths than weaknesses in this area. The service was widely publicised and accessible, the choice of rent payment methods for tenants had been increased, there was an increased focus on arrears prevention and performance on income collection and arrears recovery were in the top 25 per cent. However, more work needed to be done to encourage tenants to take up alternative and cheaper forms of paying their rent such as the use of standing orders and direct debits and more use should have been made of satisfaction surveys to inform future service improvements.
- 152 In this inspection, we found that there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses. Performance in collecting rent is relatively strong. Flexible payment options are available and information about the rent service standards is widely available. Prevention is promoted through access to advice services and a positive relationship with housing benefit staff. Steps have been taken to promote the most cost effective methods of rent payment. Systems are in place to ensure routine monitoring of arrears cases although limitations in the use of IT mean that this is not fully robust. Some tenants do not receive routine rent statements. Incentive schemes are not used to maximise income. Information about rent setting and corporate debt policy is not publicised to tenants. Service charges are not applied for cleaning and caretaking.

- 153** Performance in collecting rent is still relatively strong. During 2004/05, the Council collected 98.60 per cent of rent due. This is within the best performing 25 per cent of councils for all England which was 98.19 per cent for the same period. Performance has shown a slight improvement from 98.10 per cent in 2002/03 and 97.10 per cent in 2003/04. Cumulative performance for the first six months of 2005/06 was 96.29 per cent. This can only in part be accounted for by the greater emphasis now being placed by 2010 on prevention work and avoiding eviction wherever possible.
- 154** The Council achieves high service charge collection rates from leaseholders. Any outstanding service charge arrears are recovered at the time of sale. The Council ensures that the terms of the lease are enforced and that where there are arrears these are routinely recovered on assignment of the lease. This is important as it ensures that the Council is not left in a position where it must pursue arrears from former leaseholders. However, performance on service charge collection is not currently part of a suite of indicators reported to the Board or the senior management team.
- 155** Flexible payment options are available to make it easy for tenants to pay rent. Rent can be paid by direct debit, bank standing order, on-line through the website, by automated telephone payment, by post, at a post office or at neighbourhood offices and the civic building. These methods of payment are clearly communicated to tenants through publications including the handbook and service standards.
- 156** Steps have been taken to promote the most cost-effective method of rent payment. The number of dates on which direct debits can be paid has been increased from two to three per month. Active campaigns are undertaken to sign-up tenants to this form of payment with road shows being undertaken. There is an incentive of a one-off payment of £10 to provide encouragement. Collection by direct debit currently stands at 18 per cent with a target to increase by 2 per cent to 20 per cent by April 2006. However, the effectiveness of promotion of direct debit to new tenants is not being evaluated nor targets set. This means that opportunities to sign up new tenants to the most cost effective method of payment may be being missed.
- 157** Published service standards make it clear to tenants how rent matters are dealt with and who to contact to resolve any problems. The service standard leaflet makes it clear how rent can be paid, how rent arrears are dealt with and the steps taken to prevent arrears. There are some specific commitments in terms of ensuring that advice is always provided prior to any legal action being taken. The leaflet also provides some useful contact addresses and phone numbers including housing benefit and the Council's money advice service. The sign-up procedure and the early tenancy visits are used effectively to ensure that tenants have a full understanding of rent payment matters.
- 158** Overall tenant satisfaction with the service is positive. Results from surveys undertaken in 2004/05 indicate that 75 per cent of tenants were satisfied with the level of help and advice given. Overall satisfaction with the rent service was rated as excellent or good by 80 per cent of respondents.

- 159 It is clear to service users how to contact officers from 2010 if they want to discuss rent matters. The service standards leaflet makes it clear that Neighbourhood Income Champions are the designated staff responsible for responding to rent queries. Office addresses and telephone number are clearly printed on these leaflets.
- 160 Service users are clearly sign-posted to other agencies if they require advice or support. In addition to information provided in service standard leaflets, standard rent arrears letters provide the contact details of the debt advice service. Benefits advisers employed by the Council carry out surgeries at the neighbourhood offices and also conduct home visits. Two money advice workers provide a cross-tenure advice service. In the first six months of 2005/06, 64 of 2010's tenants have accessed the service either directly or through referral from the landlord. 2010 advertise the housing benefit visiting service at all offices with dates and times of the surgeries. However, it is a weakness that the debt advice service does not have published service standards. This means that customers cannot be sure of the level of service they can expect to receive.
- 161 However, limited use has been made of benefits take up campaigns. The Council carries out benefit take up campaigns which have been specifically aimed at people over pensionable age. There have not however, been specific campaigns for other groups such as young people or minority groups.
- 162 Frontline staff are equipped to deal with housing benefit claims and to provide basic debt advice. 2010 staff carry out verification of housing benefit applications and this has an impact on speeding up assessment. The debt advice service has provided training for the housing income champions. As a result income champions are more empowered to make arrangements on rent arrears debts themselves and positive referrals based on knowledge of the service are made. 2010 staff are able to use income and expenditure forms to help tenants prioritise debt. This enables tenants to make informed choices on debt prioritisation. The debt advice service runs a consultancy telephone line four days per week. 2010 staff use this facility in order to confirm advice and information to tenants.
- 163 Relations between 2010 staff and the housing benefit section are positive. The relationship is specified through a service level agreement (SLA). 2010 has quarterly liaison meetings at which performance information against the SLA is discussed. However, although there are performance measures within the SLA these are couched in terms which are not helpful for ensuring compliance. For example, determining claims within 14 days 'or as soon as reasonably practicable thereafter'. This makes it difficult for either party to use the SLA proactively to ensure that the agreed outputs and outcomes are achieved.
- 164 Housing benefits staff take a flexible approach to overpayments. Where a tenant has been overpaid housing benefit, housing officers and debt advice workers find that housing benefit staff will agree to reduce the level of claw back amounts and will use their write-off provision. As a result, tenants are placed in a better position to manage their debts including rent payments.

- 165** There has been a significant reduction in the level of former tenant arrears being written off. In 2003/04, £439,000 was written off compared to £49,000 in 2004/05. Former tenant arrears continues to be the responsibility of the Council's sundry debtors section. It is not, therefore, an area that the inspection covered in detail other than to confirm that policies for dealing with former tenant arrears are clearly communicated to tenants.
- 166** Systems are in place to ensure routine monitoring of arrears cases but this is not as robust as it could be and action is not always timely. This has the result of arrears escalating without appropriate action being taken. However, there are good relations with the courts and no delays in cases being heard.
- 167** Rent arrears are monitored from a patch level through to area and district level and ultimately borough level. Arrears are monitored on a banding system and when key performance indicators are not being met, performance is called in to a performance clinic. This has recently happened with one area where targets had fallen into the red. Through actions from the performance clinic, performance is now improving. Neighbourhood managers chair mini performance clinics in areas where performance is not on target. If action from these meetings does not result in improved performance, action is progressed up to the 2010 performance clinic. Neighbourhood managers do not systematically review arrears in their area on an exceptions basis and as a result it is not possible for them to confirm whether action on individual cases has been timely.
- 168** Satisfaction surveys are not robustly used to inform future service improvements. Satisfaction surveys are undertaken to measure some aspects of performance including satisfaction with quality of advice and overall satisfaction of the service. It is not clear however, how these survey results are being used to inform future improvements. Although the surveys asked the method of payment used, it did not indicate levels of satisfaction with individual rent payment methods.
- 169** New technology is not being fully utilised to assist the organisation to collect rent and recover arrears. Rent arrears letters have been manually prepared by income champions. System generated letters are currently being introduced but as yet it is too early for any outcomes from this change. Customers are unable to make payments using swipe card technology with bank giro still in use with transaction costs of £1.50 payable by the tenant. Plans to introduce swipe cards are to be considered by the Board in January but one option to restrict this payment option to those living over two miles from cash offices appear to restrict options to customers.
- 170** 2010 does not maximise income by collecting rent in advance from new tenants. The tenancy agreement states that rent is due weekly in advance but payment is not requested at sign-up even when there is no entitlement to housing benefit. This would help to introduce the culture of compliance with tenancy conditions as well as maximising income flow.

- 171 Rent statements are not universally sent to all tenants. 2010 has started to send statements out to tenants every six months. However, statements are not being sent to tenants who make payments at cash offices. 2010 explains that the rationale for this is that receipts are provided when cash payments are made. However, a receipt provides a poor substitute for a full statement and this makes it more difficult for those tenants to keep a full track on their payments. This practice is also in breach of the service standard which provides a commitment that all tenants will receive a statement. Best practice indicates that all tenants should receive statements every quarter.
- 172 The organisation is not taking full advantage of all tools at its disposal to maximise income through rents. For example, incentives to encourage service users to stay out of debt or to reduce their arrears are not used.
- 173 Appointment arrangements for 2010 staff to see tenants on rent matters are unclear. Housing income champions have appointment slots in the district offices but these are not co-ordinated. For example, in the city centre they are not on a particular day. More formal arrangements for appointments would allow an enhanced service through the introduction for example of advertised drop-in sessions.
- 174 There is a lack of information to inform tenants how rents are set. The tenants' handbook makes a limited reference to the dates of rent increases and notice arrangements but neither the handbook nor the service standard for housing income management makes no reference to how rents are set. This means that the method used to set rents is not transparent.
- 175 There are no specific service charges for cleaning or caretaking services. All tenants across the borough pay whether or not they receive the service. This results in a lack of full accountability for the services provided. Service charges are in place for communal facilities provided in sheltered schemes.
- 176 There is a corporate debt recovery policy but this is not publicised. There is no reference to the debt policy within the service standards or the tenants' handbook. This means that it is not clear to tenants how the Council and 2010 will prioritise various debts that are owed.

### **Resident involvement**

- 177 In our previous inspection, we found that there was a balance of strengths and weaknesses. There was a well developed framework for tenant involvement with some highly capable tenant representatives involved. There was some evidence of tenants being able to influence service outcomes but limited evidence of tenant involvement in the development of a comprehensive set of service standards and in the monitoring of performance. There was also considerable scope for improving the number and diversity of tenants that are involved.

- 178** In this inspection, we found that there remains a balance of strengths and weaknesses in this area. The new structure of 2010 supports the framework for tenant and resident involvement and there is a broad range of mechanisms to enable participation. Work is undertaken to facilitate engagement with minority, hard to reach groups and young people. There is a 'learning from customers' ethos. However, an opportunity has been missed to ensure early engagement in a fundamental review of the tenant compact and the compact lacks some significant detail. Funding of resident involvement is not sufficiently transparent and there is only limited devolution of budgets. Consultation over planned maintenance schemes does not always start early enough.
- 179** There is a clear framework for resident involvement. The community empowerment strategy was developed as part of the stock options process. It sets out clearly the borough-wide objectives for promotion and delivery of tenant and resident involvement. It provides a formal structure based around area panels and tenants and residents groups. The strategy has not yet been updated to reflect the establishment of 2010.
- 180** 2010 has created a structure which supports resident participation. A team of three community development managers (CDMs) have formal responsibility for the promotion of resident engagement. The team is based at the current tenant resource centre at Greencroft. The CDMs link with the three constituencies and therefore fit closely into the organisation's staffing structure. The CDMs provide a source of advice and specialist knowledge for front line staff. They signpost neighbourhood-based staff, local tenant and resident associations (TARAs) to sources of information and support within the wider voluntary and community sector. CDMs play an active role in 2010's management structure, attending weekly operational development board meetings along with Neighbourhood Managers. This is important as it demonstrates the central role that community development plays within the organisation.
- 181** There is no formal tenants' federation although the housing futures group which was set up during the stock options appraisal continues to be the high-level vehicle for engagement between the Council, 2010 and tenants. It has recently taken on the role as shadow federation and is working towards forming a company limited by guarantee. Membership of the futures group is inclusive and covers all parts of the borough, although most members are linked to area housing panels this is not a formal requirement. This means that membership is open to all.

- 182** There is a broad range of mechanisms to enable service users to participate in the management of the service in ways that suite different levels of engagement. In addition to encouraging the establishment of TARAs (targets are set for the establishment of new ones) tenants and residents are encouraged to become engaged in the broad civil renewal agenda and neighbourhood management. 2010 supports engagement through community planning which feeds into the community strategy. The Key Player initiative is a method of involving tenants and residents at a level they want to be involved at. A database of some 175 people holds details of the preferred level of engagement by those individuals. This system has been widely promoted during the summer of 2005 through a series of road shows, a bus tour and an exhibition at the Rotherham Show. Two tenant conferences were held during 2005.
- 183** Neighbourhood housing staff take a broad role in encouraging engagement with the community. Neighbourhood Champions meet with TARAs every month and their work is not restricted to supporting TARAs, they are also involved in other community groups. They work with parish councils, community partnerships and neighbourhood watch groups. A positive outcome from such work has been the support provided to encourage a community partnership to develop a garden project which was able to benefit from available council budgets to tackle a problem of overgrown gardens. 2010 also supported a residents group in applying for housing market renewal pathfinder (HMRP) funding to complete a local environmental project. Tenants are involved in HMRP steering groups.
- 184** 2010 works with component communities to facilitate the engagement with minority and hard to reach groups. Some effective links have been developed with minority communities. There has been engagement with a visually impaired group and actions following concerns raised by the group have been publicised in the borough's talking newspaper. A specific TARA has been established for asylum seekers and refugees. Neighbourhood staff have worked with a new lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) group and 2010 supports this group by providing a safe base for meetings and social events. Focus groups are held with specific groups to capture their views. For example, neighbourhood co-ordinators have held focus groups with disabled tenants and tenants with visual impairment.
- 185** The organisation is actively involved in engaging with young people. neighbourhood champions have attended citizenship classes at local schools. As a result of this a junior area assembly is being established. Young people have been engaged in clear-up campaigns, the design of play areas and in an allotment project. Young people are also engaged in the community warden scheme through a junior warden project. Involvement with a local comprehensive school has resulted in vulnerable young people being offered work placements in the DSO as a step to learn practical skills and encourage reintroduction to mainstream education.

- 186** Tenants are engaged in wider strategic and planning issues involving the management and maintenance of their homes. Tenants of sheltered housing schemes have formed a part of the review group which has carried out a strategic review of the future use of sheltered housing within the borough. Tenants are involved in contractor selection, development of specifications and sit on the contract monitoring panel for the two decent homes contracts. They take an active role in inspecting and reporting on the quality of the work. Plans of layouts for planned maintenance schemes are discussed with tenants and their preferences for kitchen facilities are taken into consideration. Tenants are given a choice of kitchen styles, work surfaces, handles, tiles, secure front doors and wider back doors. The choice of styles was limited but they were of good quality. Neighbourhood Champion action plans are directly endorsed by TARAs. Tenants groups were involved in the development of the choice-based lettings scheme.
- 187** A 'learning from customers' approach developed by the Council has been maintained by 2010. A monthly forum takes place within the Council to examine feedback from customers. Members of the panel include representatives from 2010. Improvements which have arisen from this approach include the development of a repairs appointment system, development of greater awareness of the role of Rotherham Connect, introduction of the new tenancy visit, changes in office opening times and development of a consistent standard for void properties.
- 188** Effective use is made of estate walkabouts to engage tenants and residents in improving services. Walkabouts are well-publicised in advance and are held on a monthly basis regularly throughout the year. They are attended by appropriate representatives from housing and related services including community police and community wardens. Outcomes from walkabouts include improved provision of dog waste bins, street lighting, removal of graffiti, successful prosecution for fly-tipping and the provision of community skips to tackle bulk waste problems. Results are collated and monitored so tenants have clear evidence of improvement from their intervention.
- 189** Residents are involved in setting and monitoring service standards. A customer inspection team which includes a broadly representative group of tenants including some with disabilities carries out regular inspections of estates, empty properties and neighbourhood offices. Tenants are provided with suitable training before undertaking inspections. Reports from the inspections are acted upon by 2010's management. For example, tenants told 2010 that reception areas were untidy, disorganised and inconsistent across the borough. As a result, all offices have been painted in corporate colours, fitted with the same carpets and supplied with a free phone access point to report repairs. Leaflets are now consistently displayed across all offices.

- 190** Steps are taken to publicise the impact of lessons learnt from customers. A large poster entitled Learning from Customers is displayed in each neighbourhood office reception. The poster lists all the methods of learning including tenant involvement, satisfaction surveys, walkabouts and the customer inspection service. Outcomes listed on the poster include the introduction of shoe covers for staff, improved repairs receipting systems so tenants now have a better indication of when work will be carried out and checks to ensure that operatives wear name badges. The poster encourages tenants to become involved through joining estate walkabouts or the customer inspection service. A second poster called Your Changes lists further changes that have been made as a result of listening to customers. For example, tenants said they were confused about which services were provided by 2010, as a result clearer branding has been introduced.
- 191** Customers are involved in the production of the tenants' newsletter. Service users make a significant contribution in terms of contents and style. Content of the newsletter is up-to-date, relevant, user-focused and presented in innovative ways to promote interest.
- 192** It is a significant weakness that the tenant participation compact which provides the strategic framework for resident involvement has not been the subject of a fundamental review. Although in the previous inspection we were broadly complimentary about the compact it has not been fully reviewed since 2002/03. An opportunity has been missed to fundamentally review the document on formation of the ALMO. A limited review took place in November 2005 but this was mainly to include reference to 2010, new commitments to customer involvement and to address some previously identified weaknesses in terms of performance management and monitoring arrangements.
- 193** The compact lacks some significant detail. There is a lack of sanctions where partners to the agreement do not meet their commitments. The compact is insufficiently detailed about the levels of financial commitment for supporting the various aspects of tenant and resident involvement. It does not set out in detail the criteria for auditing TARA accounts. The compact does not include details of recognised TARAs. The action plan within the document does not provide firm details. There is no commitment within the document to training or auditing arrangements. There are no up-to-date area compacts which devolve arrangements for resident participation. Although there is a criteria for recognising TARAs, there is no procedure for derecognising or appeals systems for these circumstances.
- 194** Tenants were insufficiently engaged in the revisions to the compact. The review of the compact was undertaken on behalf of the Housing Futures group. TARAs and other community groups were not provided with an opportunity to review the documents. Although there are now plans to undertake a further review, by not instigating wide community involvement from the start there is a risk that the wrong message will be sent out about 2010's willingness to engage. This approach may partly explain why overall satisfaction with opportunities to participate was only 61 per cent when the last survey was undertaken.

- 195** Funding for resident involvement is not sufficiently transparent and has yet to be fully allocated. A budget of £200,000 has been allocated to support tenant and resident involvement. This represents £8 per tenancy, which is below the guidance figure of £10.20 suggested by TPAS. There is no publication which tells tenants what resources are available for TARAs. Only broad headings have been identified for areas of expenditure. This is a particular concern given that representatives of TARAs told us that they were unaware that grants were available and that TARAs were being lost through lack of support. Without clarity on this issue there is a high likelihood that TARAs will not be sustainable.
- 196** There is only limited devolution of budgets to support active tenant involvement in decision-making in relation to environmental and security works. Each housing area gets a grant of £20,000 and decisions on expenditure are taken by area housing panels. Although funding has increased from £12,500 last year, this is still a relatively low proportion of the overall environmental improvement budget and provides limited scope for tenants to influence improvement works.
- 197** The current tenant resource centre at Greencroft is unsuitable. The building is difficult for visitors to access and does not meet the requirements of the DDA. The resource centre will however, be moving to a new town centre location in the new year with suitable access and facilities for people with a disability.
- 198** Consultation and involvement does not always start early enough. Notice of planned maintenance schemes is too short. Tenants are informed of the planned schemes via public roadshows between one and four weeks before work starts. There has been no calendar of dates issued to tenants so they can plan ahead for events such as decorating or taking holidays.

## **Tenancy and estate management**

### **Tenancy management**

- 199** In our previous inspection, we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths within the overall tenancy and estate management services mainly due to the considerable weaknesses in the Council's strategic planning, service delivery and performance management of its services to tackle anti-social behaviour (ASB).
- 200** In this inspection, we found that tenancy management is now an area of strength. There is a clear strategic approach to tackling ASB. Through working in partnership with other agencies ASB is being tackled robustly. Arrangements for tenancy management comply with statutory requirements.
- 201** The Council and the police have developed a clear ASB reduction strategy in conjunction with other strategic partners. The Safer Rotherham Partnership strategy was adopted by the crime and disorder partnership of which the ALMO is a member in June 2005. 2010 benefits directly from the partnership through access to the ASB team employed by the Council. The strategy sets clear and ambitious targets for reducing incidence of crime by 25 per cent by 2008 and fear of ASB by 20 per cent by 2008. The approach is beginning to deliver beneficial outcomes to residents through creating greater confidence that complaints will be dealt with effectively.

- 202** Partnership is being used effectively to reduce incidence of ASB. Safer Neighbourhood Teams have been established in two of the seven neighbourhoods with plans to extend these across the borough. There is very close liaison between 2010 officers and other agencies with the neighbourhood champions attending daily briefings with police and neighbourhood wardens. Action plans for neighbourhood champions defining local priorities are agreed with partners. Fifty Neighbourhood wardens are employed by the Council and co-located with police. Monthly safer estates meetings are held with the police and housing officers.
- 203** There are strong relations between all parties in terms of tackling anti-social behaviour on housing estates and across the borough. Neighbourhood Action Groups (NAGs) act as local problem solving groups, bringing together local neighbourhood staff and the police. At a higher strategic level a Joint Action Group (JAG) ensures that strategic decisions relating to ASB can be taken quickly.
- 204** Partnership working to tackle ASB is beginning to demonstrate tangible results. Satisfaction surveys indicate that 89 per cent of customers feel that the involvement of 2010 and the Council in ASB issues has had a positive effect on their quality of life. Satisfaction with the neighbourhood as a place to live stood at 80 per cent in the first quarter of 2005/06. Across the borough performance indicators show crime and the fear of crime has reduced.
- 205** 2010's policies in relation to ASB and tenancy enforcement are clearly publicised. A leaflet entitled 'Standing up to Anti-Social Behaviour Service Standard' is displayed in neighbourhood offices. It provides a clear definition of ASB, explains the Council's (the document had not yet been printed with the 2010 logo) commitment to tackle ASB and sets out the tenants obligations under the tenancy agreement.
- 206** The tenancy agreement contains clear and comprehensive conditions relating to nuisance and ASB. The agreement has been updated to reflect recent changes in legislation by outlining that injunctions, demoted tenancies and possession orders will be issued in cases of serious or persistent ASB. The agreement clearly expresses the landlord's expectations in terms of behaviour of tenants. Checks of files confirm that the Council and 2010 take a robust approach to enforcing tenancy conditions.
- 207** Steps have been taken to ensure it is easy for people to report incidence of breaches of tenancy. Cases of ASB can now be reported on-line as well as through the more traditional routes. Posters displayed in neighbourhood offices encourage the reporting of such incidents.

- 208** Protocols are in place with all members of the Safer Rotherham Partnership to share information to tackle cases of ASB. Monthly Safer Neighbourhood meetings bring Neighbourhood Champions together with community police officers and other relevant agencies to ensure frequent sharing of information. A newly formed Community Information Unit run by the police and the Council but with no direct representation from 2010 picks up information on crime and ASB. It makes good use of a GIS system to map 'hot spots' of crime, showing the main areas of concern, time of day and type of behaviour.
- 209** The ASB reduction strategy puts an emphasis on high profile prevention. The expansion of the neighbourhood warden scheme has created a very highly visible system of warden patrols. This has had a significant impact in instilling community confidence. Examples of schemes undertaken by the wardens include a 'Toxic Campaign' by looking at the schools where there were high complaints of litter and graffiti. Wardens patrolled the area around the school and handed out fixed penalty notices to school children. Eighty-five per cent of residents noticed a significant impact.
- 210** A broad range of remedies are used to address ASB. Mediation is available and is now more widely used than before. A service level agreement with Mediation Rotherham allows for 90 referrals per year. Thirty-six cases were referred during 2004/05 and 42 cases have been referred in the first eight months of 2005/06. This is important as it provides an opportunity to tackle ASB and neighbour nuisance before having to resort to legal remedies.
- 211** Extensive use is made of Acceptable Behaviour Contracts (ABCs). Last year 224 agreements were signed, so far in 2005/06 a total of 154 agreements have been entered into. Increasing use is made of ASBOs. In the first eight months of 2005/06 a total of 19 have been served compared with nine during 2004/05. Less use is made of tenancy condition enforcement with only one case of an introductory tenancy being terminated in the last two years. There have been two cases of suspended possession orders during 2005/06 for breach of tenancy conditions and there was one eviction during 2004/05. These measures have had an impact as records show that where ABCs and ASBOs are in place victims have not made further contact with the ASB team.
- 212** A wide range of methods are used to gather evidence against perpetrators. The Community Information Unit is instrumental in carrying out targeted observation of hotspots. CCTV and sound monitoring is made available to tenants to facilitate the gathering of evidence. The Anti-Social Behaviour Unit staff are trained to carry out the role of professional witness along with the seconded police officers attached to the unit. In addition, all the Anti-Social Behaviour Officers are trained in surveillance and in giving court evidence.
- 213** Support is provided to victims of neighbour nuisance. A wide range of external support agencies are used to provide support for vulnerable tenants. Part of the role of the neighbourhood champions is to ensure that tenants and residents get the necessary support to ensure tenancies are sustained. Tenancy files provided evidence of extensive use of external agencies to give support to vulnerable people.

- 214** Preventative and diversionary work is carried out with young people. A youth liaison officer works within the ASB Team. Community wardens have introduced a number of youth diversionary activities including 'graffiti walls' and fishing clubs. Of relevance during the period of this inspection was the emphasis over the period leading up to 'Mischief Night' on the 4 November when young people were encouraged to attend the organised 'Big Bang Night' that preceded Guy Fawkes night. There was a significant reduction in reported ASB compared with the corresponding period of previous years. Young people are becoming engaged in the warden service through a 'Junior Warden' scheme.
- 215** Tenancy conditions are clearly explained to all new tenants. Tenancy conditions including requirements in terms of ASB, litter and other obligations are discussed at the tenancy sign-up interview and at the follow up visit which is carried out after four weeks. Interviews and visits are carried out in a professional manner and ensure that new tenants are aware of their responsibilities. This ensures that tenants are aware of the action that can be taken to address ASB and of the support mechanisms available.
- 216** There are clearly defined lines of responsibility for different parts of the housing management service. The new staffing structure has served to clarify respective responsibilities for services. Neighbourhood champions have a high profile on estates and are the main focus for tackling tenancy and estate management issues and for liaison with partner organisations. Since the formation of 2010 neighbourhood champions have been given greater responsibility for tackling tenancy management issues. They are empowered to use remedies such as ABCs.
- 217** Cases are managed according to procedures. A sample of files confirmed that all cases are comprehensively recorded; files are well-kept and up-to-date. IT systems are used to record ASB, monitor actions and trends and evaluate outcomes. They detail clear courses of action and it is clear where cases have been closed. Tenants are kept informed of progress on cases and notified where cases have been closed.
- 218** Tenancy management services meet statutory requirements. There are clear procedures for dealing with all aspects of general tenancy management such as mutual exchanges and successions. These are understood by staff and are clearly publicised to tenants. A leaflet entitled 'Moving On' explains arrangements for transfers, exchanges and succession. Information is also readily available to tenants to explain how problems such as dealing with environmental health type issues can be reported and dealt with.
- 219** Furnished tenancies are provided to support the sustainability of tenancies. The furnished home scheme was introduced to assist customers setting up a home for the first time. It assists with the sustainability of tenancies by helping people avoid going into debt and having to take out loans to buy furniture. The scheme also assists customers in moving into their home quicker, speeding up entitlement to Housing Benefits. There are 198 furnished homes. Tenants pay for the scheme through an additional service charge. Monitoring of the success of the scheme shows that since the scheme started in March 2004 only seven furnished homes tenancies have been terminated.

- 220** 2010 do not undertake adequate verification of tenancies. Arrangements for checking for unauthorised occupation of dwellings are not systematic. Although some checks have been undertaken they have usually been carried out following prior notification in writing to tenants. This means that the results of checks are unlikely to be robust.

### **Estate management**

- 221** In our previous inspection, we found that estate management services such as communal area cleaning, removal of bulk rubbish and abandoned cars and removal of graffiti were areas where the Council demonstrated strength in service provision.
- 222** In this inspection, we found that strengths continue to outweigh weaknesses in estate management. Proactive estate management services continue to have a positive impact on improving the environment.
- 223** Estates are maintained to a consistently high standard. Estates are kept clean and tidy. Estate cleaning and grounds maintenance services are provided through the Council's Street Pride service which has been nationally recognised as providing quality services through several accreditation schemes. The service is responsive, for example, abandoned vehicles and graffiti are dealt with very quickly in accordance with set service standards.
- 224** Action is taken quickly to deal with estate management problems. A full-time post has been created to deal with off-road motor vehicle problems. Abandoned vehicles are removed quickly. Unroadworthy cars on drives and front gardens are targeted and removed. This has a positive effect on the overall street environment. Estate caretakers have been provided with the necessary equipment to ensure that graffiti is removed quickly. Street wardens and caretakers take away dumped rubbish quickly and take steps to identify perpetrators. This is having an impact as reported incidents of fly-tipping and graffiti are reducing.
- 225** A team of 25 mobile caretakers and 5 estate specific caretakers provide a high profile service. Their role is clearly defined through published service standards agreed with tenants. All staff have been provided with appropriate training on issues such as removal of sharps, first aid and identification of toxic substances. Caretakers also provide a gardening service for vulnerable tenants which helps contribute to the overall attractiveness of estates. The caretaker service plays an important role in ensuring that communal areas such as garage sites are well maintained.
- 226** Systematic estate inspections are carried out with local residents. The regular estate walkabouts have a significant impact on the quality of estate environments. Walkabouts cover environmental issues and communal areas. This provides a high level of accountability to customers as agreed actions from walkabouts are recorded and reported to local tenant and resident association meetings.

- 227** Local residents can contribute to decision making on investing in environmental improvements. Area housing panels use their devolved budgets of £20,000 for environmental improvements. These improvements encompass a wide range of items often related to improving security issues. Materials are used which are durable and less prone to vandalism.
- 228** The service standards leaflet for estate management lays out what customers can expect. It provides a commitment to carry out estate inspections, timescales for removal of graffiti, abandoned vehicles and fly tipping. It is also specific about grounds maintenance issues such as the removal of litter prior to grass cutting and specifies the exact height to which grass should be allowed to grow. The service standard also provides details of how well the Council performed against each standard in the previous year.
- 229** There are some omissions in the service standards for tenancy and estate management. The service standards do not specify the frequency of estate inspections. There is no commitment to undertake inspections of the safety of play equipment. There is no reference to any commitment to tackle problems with animals causing environmental damage. Without a comprehensive set of service standards for estate management tenants are less likely to know what to expect from the service and are therefore less able to hold 2010 to account.

### **Allocations and lettings**

- 230** In our previous inspection, we found that strengths outweighed weaknesses in the Council's allocations and lettings service. The allocation policies provided an element of choice through local lettings policies although the Council had yet to extend choice to its overall lettings scheme. There was an effective process for letting dwellings and a range of information and support to new tenants.
- 231** In this inspection, we found that a new choice-based letting scheme has extended choice for housing applicants. Access to lettings is widely publicised and supported by clear service standards. Support is provided to enable vulnerable people to access housing. However, transfer applicants are not visited in advance and the service level agreement in relation to the service is out-of-date. Overall, this is an area of strength.
- 232** Choice has been extended to the overall lettings scheme through the introduction of a choice-based lettings (CBL) scheme and opportunities to bid are open to all. The CBL scheme known as Key Choices which is run by the Council, was introduced by the in June 2005. Feedback from customers indicates that the new scheme has improved arrangements for the letting of properties with 95 per cent approval being recorded from lettings surveys. The housing waiting list for Rotherham is not restricted to Rotherham residents. This will ensure that when a sub-regional CBL system is introduced the policy will be able to facilitate this change.

- 233** Introduction of the new lettings system is kept under careful review. A Solutions and Development group has been introduced to address operational issues connected with the introduction of CBL. For example, the group identified that initially adaptations in properties were not alerted to the allocations team and as a result training in identifying aids and adaptations has been carried out and appropriate information is now being passed through. Processes have been streamlined based on customer and staff feedback.
- 234** Extensive consultation was carried out with tenants and partners prior to introduction of the new lettings policy. Tenants groups helped to develop the CBL system. All TARAs were consulted. Road shows were held using a wide range of venues including supermarkets and a bingo hall. There was a CBL theme within a conference held relating to BME issues. A wide range of groups including those representing the Learning Disabilities Partnership Board contributed to the establishment of the policy.
- 235** The CBL scheme is having an impact in supporting the wider priority of regeneration. CBL bidding has resulted in an increase in demand for previously low-demand areas. A period of 11 weeks after the scheme was introduced saw an increase in applications of 2,000 households. The scheme has had a positive impact on reducing the time that properties remain empty.
- 236** The organisation understands the diversity of people applying for housing. Applications and lettings are monitored by ethnicity in compliance with the CRE code of practice. Earlier monitoring indicated that there was a low level of BME housing applicants. Records indicate that this has significantly changed as a result of CBL and better publicity about access to housing.
- 237** Advertisements for vacant properties are of high quality and high profile. Advertisements are eye-catching and are placed in suitable locations. Adverts are placed on the main thoroughfare from the bus station to the town centre, and the property paper is circulated in the housing advice centre, doctors surgeries, housing benefit offices. They are also circulated to staff involved with supporting people and to the furnished lettings team. A town centre location has been identified for a new property shop which is due to open early in 2006.
- 238** Service standards for the lettings policy are well publicised and easy to understand. The service standards which were developed in consultation with tenants are widely available in neighbourhood offices and other points of access. In common with other service standards, these are subject to review by the customer inspection service. The Key Choices Letting service standard explains in clear language how the lettings system works, and lists where advertisements can be viewed. It states the time that new adverts will appear and how requests for properties can be made. There are specific commitments to support vulnerable groups.
- 239** There is a broad range of access points for applying for a property. These include by telephone to the Council's call centre, Rotherham Connect, in person to council offices and all 2010 neighbourhood offices, by text message and via the website. Vulnerable people can use a proxy to make their bid.

- 240 Support is provided to enable vulnerable people and new tenants without furniture access to housing. First time tenants are able to access a starter pack of essential items for their new home which they are able to pay for weekly. Fully furnished homes are available. Neighbourhood champions are able to access floating support for vulnerable new applicants funded through Supporting People grant.
- 241 Arrangements are in place to ensure local lettings policies are applied fairly. There are a high number of local allocations policies. All have been formally adopted and have been developed with the involvement of local communities and key stakeholders with the objective of making neighbourhoods sustainable. The policies do not reduce choice. All local policies are subject to review during 2006 when re-profiling of the areas will be carried out with a re-justification for any policies required. Management lettings are centrally managed with formal reports required for each case.
- 242 A pro-active approach is taken to risk assessments as part of the lettings process. Risk assessments which are within the allocations policy are carried out for applicants on the waiting list. The assessment starts with a desktop assessment and where necessary moves to a multi agency meeting with the applicant invited to attend the assessment meeting. The assessments are consistent with the approach used for Multi-Agency Public Protection Agreement (MAPPA) cases. There is also a risk assessment of the properties. Local neighbourhood staff undertake an assessment of whether a local lettings policy may be appropriate.
- 243 2010 analyse reasons for refusal, which has highlighted a need for better information about specific areas with which applicants are unfamiliar with. Bespoke brochures for each area are to be produced in response to this analysis.
- 244 Transfer applicants are not visited in advance of being short listed for an offer. This reduces the opportunity for tenants to be made aware of any blocks to their transfer at an early stage and misses the opportunity for additional contact with tenants in their homes. It also reduces the opportunity for tenants to be made aware of any restrictions on their transfer due to management issues.
- 245 The SLA between 2010 and the Council in relation to lettings is out-of-date. The SLA has not been reviewed to reflect the changes introduced within the past six months. This may mean that respective responsibilities are not as clear as they should be or that costs are not being fairly distributed.

### **Leasehold management and right to buy**

- 246 In our previous inspection, we found that weaknesses outweighed strengths in the Council's service for leasehold management and right to buy. Information for leaseholders, procedures and systems all required updating and there had been little involvement of service users in the development and monitoring of services.

- 247** In this inspection, we found that there are still more weaknesses than strengths in the services provided to the Council's 367 leaseholders. Leaseholder service charge administration is delivered primarily by the strategic landlord but processes are not tightly co-ordinated between the respective parts of the Council and 2010. (2010 is responsible for providing estate management and repairs services while the Council retains responsibility for service charge collection and accounting.) Services do not fully comply with legislative requirements. Weaknesses in information and consultative arrangements are beginning to be addressed but actions taken have yet to have a significant impact on customers. Right to buy services remain the responsibility of the strategic landlord and comply with legislative requirements.
- 248** Customer satisfaction with leaseholder services is low. A performance report for the period from December 2004 to May 2005 shows that overall satisfaction with the service stood at just 59 per cent. Sixty per cent of respondents were satisfied with cleaning services and 73 per cent were satisfied with security but satisfaction with repairs and maintenance at 49 per cent and satisfaction with opportunities to participate at 38 per cent were particularly low.
- 249** The organisation is not complying with statutory requirements in terms of leaseholder consultation. The Council does not comply with the minimum statutory requirements regarding consultation about repairs work. No section 20 notices have been served to leaseholders prior to expenditure being incurred on blocks of flats. Failure to undertake consultation on major repairs in accordance with legislative requirements exposes the Council to not being able to recover the cost of works.
- 250** Accounting systems for leaseholder service charges are not sufficiently robust to ensure accurate service charge estimates and billing. Estimates are not always consistently applied to all dwellings. There are cases where two flats in the same block which have identical services received different estimates with one including an element for door entry systems while a neighbouring leaseholder was not being charged for this. An inconsistent approach to service charge accounts resulting from the lack of robust accounting systems causes anxiety to leaseholders and is time consuming and difficult for housing officers to resolve. This is putting an additional and unnecessary burden of staff.
- 251** Infrequent review of service charge estimates has led to the Council holding large amounts of leaseholders' funds which are not being spent. Although service charge accounts are sent out every year, service charge estimates are only reviewed every five years. In some cases, the Council has significantly over-estimated its future expenditure. For example, based on a five year forecast of expenditure in 2000 the Council had made charges over a five year period of £1,311 to six leaseholders in one block of flats. However, by 2005 only work to the value of £503 had been carried out. Commitments to carry out works such as replacement of guttering and down pipes had not been met. Although refunds are made after the five year accounting period, no interest is payable to the leaseholders. Many leaseholders are on low incomes and this approach has a negative impact on their ability to afford their housing costs.

- 252** Service charge processes are not tightly co-ordinated between the respective parts of the ALMO and the Council. The right to buy (RTB) section within the Council is responsible for preparing the service charge accounts in October each year. The accounts are then sent out by the Council's Sundry Debtors section. The covering letter sent out with the accounts provides the contact details of the right to buy section but there is no reference to the responsibilities of the ALMO as the principle service provider for leaseholders. Neither the officers responsible for leaseholder services within 2010 nor the RTB section have any information about service charge arrears levels which are dealt with exclusively by the sundry debtors section.
- 253** Leaseholders do not receive regular service charge statements. Although a statement is sent out as part of the annual accounts, no other statement is sent out to notify leaseholds of the balance on their accounts. This means that leaseholders are not provided with information to highlight where over or underpayments are made and cannot, therefore, take corrective action.
- 254** Recently produced publications help to improve leaseholders' understanding of what to expect from their landlord. A leaseholder guide provides details of what is included in the service charge. The guide includes a typical lease together with a summary of what each section means in plain English. A leaflet summarises the service standards leaseholders can expect to receive. The leaflet also encourages involvement in the Leaseholder Forum and explains how leaseholders can complain if they are dissatisfied with the service they receive. The publications are sent out to new leaseholders who have bought their properties on the open market as well as those who have bought from the Council. This is important in ensuring all new leaseholders receive the same level of information.
- 255** Leaseholder Forum meetings have not been well attended. Two meetings were held in July 2005 to which all leaseholders were invited. Only three leaseholders attended one meeting and only ten attended the other. Attendance is not helped by late notice of meetings. The autumn tenant and leaseholders' newsletter stated that Forums would be held in late October but did not specify dates. Despite the low attendance, the meetings offered an opportunity for leaseholders to raise challenging questions with the Council and 2010 representatives on a wide range of issues including service charges, the quality of cleaning and gardening and the impact of the formation of the ALMO and decent homes standard works.
- 256** A guide for staff helps inform them of leaseholders' rights and responsibilities. The guide explains in simple terms for non home-ownership specialists what leaseholders can expect from the Council and the ALMO. It sets out how service charges are calculated. It gives an insight into the key issues which are important to leaseholders and enables staff to answer simple questions about the lease.
- 257** Flexible options are available for leaseholders to pay service charges. Leaseholders have two payment options; either to pay the full amount within 28 days of billing or in instalments by agreement with the Council's accounts section. Payments can be made at any council office, by post, at a bank, post office, by telephone or via the internet. However, direct debit is not available.

- 258** Advice is provided to leaseholders who have difficulty meeting service charge payments. A section in the leaseholder guide emphasises the importance of paying service charge bills and explains the possible consequence of non-payment. Options for obtaining a loan are explained including the possibility of obtaining a secured loan from the Council. Information about debt advice agencies is also supplied within the guide. The annual service charge letter contains a paragraph which gives the telephone number of the Council's Welfare Rights and Money Advice Service.
- 259** There is insufficient promotion of the offer to carry out gas servicing. Although 2010 offers to carry out gas servicing and safety checks in leasehold properties this is not widely publicised. The service is offered to new leaseholders who have bought in the last 12 months but is not promoted to all leaseholders. There is no reference to this service in the leaseholders guide. However, the Council does offer its home insurance policy to leaseholders and this is promoted within the guide.
- 260** Relationships between leaseholders and the landlord are improving. Leaseholders now have greater confidence that 2010 is prepared to listen and respond to their concerns. There is a commitment among staff responsible for the service to resolve some longstanding complaints held by leaseholders.
- 261** Satisfaction levels of those who have exercised the right to buy is high. Satisfaction surveys have been undertaken on all sales completions since October 2004. In the period from October 2004 to September 2005, a total of 588 surveys were sent out and 189 were returned. This represents a respectable return rate of 32 per cent. The results indicated that 86 per cent of respondents found the service to be as they expected or better than expected. The survey form allows customers to add comments and these are responded to the RTB officer.
- 262** Applicants are provided with clear information about the right to buy process. A leaflet which explains the new legislation and discount arrangements was sent out to all tenants in September 2005. A service standards leaflet sets out the Council's legal statutory timescales for processing applications. The leaflet explains in clear language what the right to buy is and who is entitled to purchase their home. The process is explained and tenants are informed of their legal rights to serve a notice of delay in the event of the Council not meeting its obligations. Contact details of the Right to Buy Officer are provided as well as all the addresses of the Neighbourhood offices. These leaflets supplement the Government information booklet which is sent out at the same time.
- 263** The Council usually meets legislative timescales for right to buy sales but performance is not routinely scrutinised by managers. There is a lack of robust performance information on the RTB process. Reports are not routinely produced to show the number of cases where statutory timescales are met. Although the officer responsible for RTB administration can draw off computer-based reports these are not routinely produced nor circulated to all parties involved in the process such as the neighbourhood offices, legal services and the surveying services. This means that it is not easy to identify if there are any areas in the process which might be delaying the sales process.

## Is the service delivering value for money?

- 264** In our previous inspection, we found that there were more weaknesses than strengths in this area. Although Rotherham had had a procurement strategy since April 2003, it was only now just starting to develop its corporate approach to value for money. The Council was uncertain of the commissioning costs across all aspects of the housing service, although some peripheral services had been outsourced. While there had been some cost/benefit work, there were no outcomes from this work, or from benchmarking to demonstrate transparency and competitiveness.
- 265** In this inspection, we found that there is a balance of strengths and weaknesses in relation to value for money. Overall management costs are in line with similar organisations while the quality of service is comparatively strong, meaning that there is a positive relationship between cost and quality. But information on service costs at a cost centre level is not detailed enough to allow strong comparisons to be made. The Board and senior managers do not receive sufficient cost comparisons particularly in relation to revenue budgets. 2010 benefits from the Council's approach to value for money and efficiencies are being delivered across a range of housing services. The organisation is embracing the principles of partnership and is seeing benefits in terms of the delivery of the decent homes programme. Service reviews are beginning to lead to some cost efficiencies. External funding opportunities are being secured. Although value for money is one of the organisation's core values it has yet to develop a full value for money (VFM) strategy.

### How do costs compare?

- 266** Supervision and management costs are broadly in line with similar organisations. Analysis of CIPFA statistics shows that Rotherham's Supervision and Management estimate for 2005/06 is £68.26 per tenant. This is an average position compared to other councils and lower than many neighbouring ALMOs. Given that performance across a range of service areas including rent collection, repairs and maintenance and voids management compared well with similar organisations there is a positive relationship between cost and quality of service.
- 267** Information on service costs is not detailed enough to allow strong comparisons to be made. The focus of financial management is at the borough-wide trading level with priority being given to the overall position of the company. Financial and other management information is not currently readily available at cost centre level. The company recognises its problems with financial and other management information and the company's external auditors have been commissioned to prepare and validate the budget setting regime. This means it currently has insufficient information at a unit cost to be able to fully review cost effectiveness across all areas of the business.

- 268** There is only limited use made of cost comparisons in terms of reporting performance to the Board. Little use is made of detailed cost comparison analysis. Although 2010 has recently undertaken some benchmarking exercises in relation to its repairs and maintenance service, the results of this were not available in time for this inspection. This differs with the general performance reports where good use is made of comparisons with other landlords. This means that reasons for differences in costs with other organisations are neither fully explained nor fully understood.
- 269** The company has a well managed capital programme. There is a track record of completing capital works on time and in accordance with available budgets. Last year, 100 per cent spend was achieved against budget. Savings achieved in decent homes work have resulted in work being completed on a 465 more properties than was initially planned.

### **How is value for money managed?**

- 270** Efficiencies are being delivered across a range of housing services. For example, savings of £3,000 have been achieved during the year through the promotion of direct debit as a cheaper form of rent collection. Early intervention in rent arrears cases is leading to a reduction in evictions. 2010 predict efficiencies of £3,000 per year through fewer evictions. The reduction in the time taken to let void properties has generated £67,000 additional rent income. Overall, the mid-year update indicates estimated cashable efficiencies achieved for local authority social housing of £207,000 for the period from April to September 2005.
- 271** The Council has an increasingly strong track record in delivering value for money. The Council achieved total corporate savings of £1.1 million during the second year of its long-term innovative partnership with RBT a joint venture between the council and BT. 2010 benefits from these efficiencies and has opened separate negotiations with RBT to procure additional services including new technology and consultancy services.
- 272** The Council's overall approach to value for money has been assessed as being a strength. The Audit Commission use of resources assessment which forms a part of the CPA framework rated value for money as three out of four. The same score was also achieved for the overall assessment for financial management. This positive approach is to a degree reflected in some positive performance by 2010 in achieving value for money. The annual efficiency statement mid-term update indicates that the Council and 2010 are on track to delivery efficiencies in line with plans. A fundamental review of housing services as part of the establishment of the ALMO has resulted in overall savings of £750,000.

- 273** The ALMO and the Council have embraced the principles of partnership. The Council set up a decent homes partnership with two construction contractors in 2002. The partnership has delivered the first phase of the decent homes programme. The partnership which is due to complete in March 2006 has delivered decency works to approximately 4,000 homes. The partnership is based on Egan Construction Excellence principles. The Council also developed a strategic partnering strategy for the repairs and maintenance service following market testing. The strategy drew on external consultancy expertise and has been subject to an advertisement in the OJEU. The process is now at the long list bid evaluation stage. The partnership is on schedule to be in place for the start of 2006/07. 2010 has joined other bodies in South Yorkshire to form the South Yorkshire Decent Homes Consortium as part of the trailblazer initiative from the ODPM's National Change Agent. The consortium has become one of three 'trailblazers' delivering a plan of efficiency savings for Decent Homes.
- 274** Service reviews are beginning to lead to some cost efficiencies. The review of some service level agreements has resulted in reductions in costs to the ALMO. The Board approved changes to some SLAs in December 2005. Outcomes have included an agreement to transfer the management of the transport portfolio from the ALMO to the Council which will result in estimated savings of £96,000. Savings of £50,000 have been identified in financial support services, £143,000 in neighbourhood development support services and £25,000 from improved rates from legal services.
- 275** Reviews take account of benefits to customers. Some aspects of the work of the DSO are being reviewed to ensure that operations are customer focused and delivered to maximum effect. A review of transport provision is being undertaken to identify the appropriate balance between hiring through contract leasing and 'spot' hire arrangements. The review is also considering whether sub-contracting of the transport facility would be more efficient. A review of hand-held technology is being undertaken in response to recognition that the mechanism for recording staff work allocation through timesheets is inefficient. Business process re-engineering techniques are being used to ensure the review encompasses all necessary processes involved in service delivery. This is in addition to efficiency gains which have also been achieved in relation to the repairs service through the review of working practices such as streamlining the supply of stock to operatives.
- 276** External funding opportunities are secured from a range of sources to supplement income and enhance service provision. 2010 has benefited from a broad range of external funding to support its objectives. The local strategic partnership has enabled a greater focus to be placed on tackling anti-social behaviour. Funding from the housing market renewal pathfinder has been used to supplement budgets particularly in terms of improving estate environments. ODPM funding has also been secured through the South Yorkshire partnership to pilot new procurement initiatives. 2010 is expected to meet the LPSA target for voids which will result in a performance award of £500,000 from the ODPM.

- 277** Value for money is identified as one of its seven core values. Staff development and supervision arrangements reflect this priority. As part of the personal development review, staff are issued with impact plans. These plans highlight how individuals are expected to contribute towards delivering value for money. Specific reference is made in these plans to elements of the Audit Commission's value for money KLOE.
- 278** 2010's approach to value for money is not yet fully developed. The organisation has yet to develop a robust value for money strategy. An interim strategy has been developed but this is limited to broad strategic objectives. Other indications that value for money is not yet fully embedded are that board members did not become involved in service reviews until a late stage and do not receive routine and regular progress reports against the housing related commitments set out in the Council's annual efficiency statement. 2010 has been dependent on an officer from the Council's Chief Executive's department to manage the service review programme which had slipped. Below the Interim Chief Executive, there is not a designated officer on the organisation's management team who is specifically championing value for money issues.
- 279** Some services are being procured directly from the Council without market testing. Work is undertaken on behalf of 2010 by Street Pride although there is currently no service level agreement and costs have not been measured or compared against other contractors. Valuation services provided by the Council for right to buy sales have not been market tested. This means that the Council and 2010 cannot be sure that these support services are delivering value for money.
- 280** Some aspects of the repairs service do not ensure optimum value for money. There is a high level of emergency and urgent repairs. Analysis of the data since April 2005 shows that 58 per cent of repairs were categorised as emergencies or urgent in comparison to good practice levels of 30 per cent. This does not provide value for money in view of cost uplifts applied to the schedule of rates for emergency repairs. The level of variation orders is not monitored to ensure effective cost control. Too much revenue funding is being spent on responsive repairs. The revenue budget for 2005/06 shows that 38 per cent of expenditure is planned and 62 per cent is responsive. Planned maintenance represents better value for money as jobs are batched together and work can be procured more competitively. The current ratio of planned to responsive works does not, therefore, represent the best use of resources.

## Summary

- 281** Tenants receive a good service from their landlord. In most areas, 2010 Rotherham Ltd have either maintained the level of service or have improved it since the last inspection. Access to services is a particular strength and tangible improvements have been delivered through developing service standards, widening office opening times and repairs appointment availability. A broadly sound approach is taken to asset management and the quality of the responsive repairs service is high and this is reflected in levels of tenant satisfaction. Empty properties are re-let quickly and to a high standard and gas servicing is undertaken effectively. Performance in terms of rent collection is still comparatively strong but has declined. There is a clear framework for resident involvement and a strong ethos of involving customers in reviewing the quality of services. Anti-social behaviour is being tackled through a strong strategic partnership working. Estates are maintained to a high standard and a proactive approach is taken through high profile caretaking services supported by regular estate walkabouts. A new choice based lettings system has extended choice for housing applicants.
- 282** There are some areas where insufficient progress has been made since the last inspection. The approach to diversity is not fully developed, there are still two offices which are not accessible for wheelchair users, the organisation does not have a full understanding of the profile of its tenants and it does not play a full role in the delivery of aids and adaptations. Some methods for maximising rental income are not currently being used. Funding for resident involvement is not fully transparent and the tenant participation compact lacks some significant detail. There remain significant weaknesses in terms of the administration of service charges for leaseholders.
- 283** There is a positive relationship between cost and quality and service improvements have been secured at the same time that efficiencies have been made. Modern procurement methods are being used to secure efficiencies. However, a lack of detailed information on service costs means that insufficient use is being made of cost comparisons to ensure value for money in delivering housing services.

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

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

- 284** In our previous inspection, we found that there was a focus on addressing the weaknesses identified in the earlier repairs and maintenance inspection report and in taking forward recommendations from their own service reviews. There had been discernible improvements in service access and delivery.
- 285** In this inspection, we found that the track record in improving services has been sustained over the last three years, delivering noticeable benefits to residents. However, some earlier inspection recommendations have still to be fully implemented and, therefore, improvement is not as advanced as it could be. The focus on delivering improvements in areas that were previously judged as weak has been at the expense of continuous improvement in other areas. The organisation cannot yet demonstrate a long-term approach to achieving value for money across all areas of operation.
- 286** The Council and 2010 have made considerable progress on meeting most of the recommendations from our earlier inspections. Of 15 recommendations from the repairs and maintenance re-inspection, 13 have been complete and 2 remain partially complete. There were 13 recommendations following the indicative ALMO inspection, of these 10 are complete and 3 are partially complete. The tables in Appendix 2 indicate the progress made to implement our previous recommendations. All recommendations have been incorporated into the Excellence Improvement Plan which has ensured that progress has been routinely monitored. Although overall progress on implementing recommendations is positive, some weaknesses in implementation are summarised later in this section of the report. However, overall the implementation of the recommendations have had a positive impact in the quality of service provided to tenants an example being the changes in office opening times.
- 287** Results from inspections indicate a record of improvement. When the repairs and maintenance service was originally inspected in 2002 it was judged to be poor. The subsequent re-inspection in 2004 found that the service had improved in many areas and was rated as 'fair'. The stock investment and asset management section of this report highlights further improvements in this area since 2004.

- 288** Improvements have been implemented which have delivered clear benefits to service users. The external auditor's annual management letter for 2004 recognises that the Council has made significant improvements in housing. The management letter refers to the improvements made in the repairs service. The annual audit and inspection letter for 2005 highlights that improvements have continued and makes specific reference to the time to relet council property and housing repairs completed on time. The repairs service has been improved with a range of measures including better arrangements for making appointments which has led to an increase in appointments being made and kept from 72 per cent to 92 per cent in 2005. More flexible working practices are enabling more jobs to be completed in one visit. Changes to allocations and lettings procedures have delivered significant improvements in performance. Void re-let times have reduced from 98.5 days in 2001/02 to 16.33 days in 2004/05. Performance during the first six months of 2005/06 averaged 11.47 days.
- 289** Improvements have contributed to meeting the organisation's service aims and to the wider aims of the Council. A key objective for the ALMO is to 'support the neighbourhood management agenda'. The ALMO has raised the profile of its presence on estates. A new staffing structure has resulted in the introduction of neighbourhood champions. This post has street based rather than functional based responsibilities. This is helping the organisation to deliver its stated aim as being 'someone who gets things done'. Customers now have a named officer who they can contact to resolve estate management issues. This is helping to further improve the image of the estates. Consequently there has been an improvement in the way that anti-social behaviour issues are dealt with which is recognised by local residents.
- 290** A best value review of housing services has led to changes being implemented which are having a positive impact on customers. The review, which was carried out in 2003 resulted in the key recommendation to establish the ALMO. It also led to a refocusing of the housing management service around neighbourhood management principles and to an extension of opportunities and means by which tenants could be involved in the management of their homes. Although the principles of best value were not fully applied to the review there have been tangible outcomes for tenants on issues such as the establishment of the customer inspection service.
- 291** The Audit Commission's assessment of the Council's direction of travel is very positive. The direct of travel assessment for 2005 has rated the Council as improving strongly. In some areas this is having a direct impact on the quality of services to tenants. It emphasises that the Council has delivered significant improvements to services for the public in line with priorities. With reference to housing it states that tenants have experienced substantial improvements in the housing management service and the neighbourhood warden service has contributed to reducing the number of domestic burglaries, robberies and thefts involving motor vehicles. Rotherham Streetpride has received national recognition for its innovative approach to tackling environmental issues. The Council's Benefit Service has been rated as excellent. The Council's overall performance has improved significantly over the recent past.

- 292** Performance indicators show a trend of improvement and performance that is broadly consistent with other service providers. Appendix 1 shows that of six national performance indicators five have improved. The most significant improvements have been in the indicator measuring the number of repairs appointments which has risen from 10.2 per cent in 2002/03 to 76.82 per cent in 2004/05. There has been a gradual improvement in SAP (energy efficiency) ratings from 57 in 2002/03 to 59 in 2004/05. Comparisons with the top 25 per cent of metropolitan councils show that only two Rotherham indicators were in the top 25 per cent (repairs appointments and rent collection). No indicators were significantly worse than top performing councils.
- 293** There has been a lack of focus in delivering continuous improvement in areas which were judged to be strong in previous inspections. The organisation has focused heavily on addressing weaknesses identified in previous inspections but this has been at the expense of developing other areas where services have stood still since previous inspections. Parts of the rents service remain under developed including the use of new technology, swipe card payments and rent statements. The organisation has been comparatively slow in developing a tenants' federation and the tenant participation compact has become outdated. Although gas servicing performance is strong, further improvements could have been made through developing robust access procedures.
- 294** The ALMO is not able to demonstrate that it has a track record of improving value for money over a sustained period and across all areas of operation. Although there are examples of improvements in value for money in some areas such as the development of partnership contracts for decent homes work, this is not as far developed as was planned. Although value for money is listed as one of the core values of the organisation it has not yet developed its own value for money strategy but instead contributes to the Council's strategy. The Delivery Plan includes an ambition to establish a value for money framework in which a VFM culture will be embedded throughout the organisation but this has yet to be fully achieved. An earlier commitment to have a formal strategy in place by October 2005 has not been met although there is a basic interim strategy which provides insufficient detail.
- 295** Target dates for implementation of some earlier inspection recommendations have not been met. A key target to undertake a thorough review of options for the future procurement of the repairs and maintenance service by September 2004 has still to be fully implemented. A recommendation to complete consultation with customers over office opening hours by January 2005 was missed and was not fully achieved until November 2005. Equalities and diversity training should have been complete by March 2005 but full implementation was delayed until November 2005. In some cases, recommendations could have been followed more robustly. For example, the recommendation to improve customer profiling on diversity has been implemented for new tenants but this does not yet apply to existing tenants. This means that the organisation has not moved as quickly as it could to tailor services to meet the specific needs of the diverse communities it serves.

- 296 A commitment to develop three area boards has not yet been delivered. As part of the section 27 application to the ODPM, there is a commitment to develop area boards. Progress on the development of these boards has been slower than expected. 2010 is awaiting the outcome of decisions within the Council on future neighbourhood management structures which will have implications for the development of area boards. While the commitment to deliver area boards remains outstanding there is a risk that the organisation will not meet its full obligations within the original section 27 application.

### **How well does the service manage performance?**

- 297 In our previous inspection, we found that there was a clear mission, vision and values and these were understood internally; the ALMO Excellence Plan was SMART and challenging targets had been set in most areas; and there were robust performance management arrangements. The Council had started to proactively learn from its own experience and from others and had robust systems in place to capture and implement learning from a wide range of sources. However, the Council's approach to best value reviews had not been comprehensive especially in relation to the application of the 'four Cs'.
- 298 In this inspection, we found that delays in the appointment of a permanent Chief Executive has meant that progress in developing stable leadership has been slower than it should have been and this is affecting the organisation's ability to assert its arms length status. The Council and 2010 have effective performance management systems. The Board is developing into a cohesive body able to challenge performance but has had insufficient involvement in managing value for money issues. 2010 benefits from learning from a range of diverse organisations.
- 299 The company's aims and future plans are well co-ordinated with national and local priorities. The company's overarching strategic plan is known as the Delivery Plan. The plan is integrated with the HRA business plan and is part of the range of strategies and plans developed by the Council to underpin its core principles and meet corporate objectives. These include the community strategy, corporate plan, housing strategy and neighbourhood renewal strategy and Rotherham's regeneration plan. Housing is at the centre of the community strategy - making effective links between housing and other key themes around health, community safety, neighbourhood renewal and social exclusion. 2010's role in managing the housing stock is part of a wider strategy of reshaping public services in Rotherham to move towards the Council's vision.
- 300 The organisation has a clear vision of what it wants to achieve in the short and medium term. The delivery plan sets out in detail what the company and the Council want to achieve over the five years from 2005. It includes clear ambitions, relevant aims and objectives for the future of the service. Aims are based on a sound knowledge of the community's needs and the condition of the housing stock. These ambitions are closely aligned to wider partnership, corporate and community aims.

- 301** The Excellence Plan is helping to drive continuous improvement. This over-arching improvement plan is clearly set out against the company's eight strategic objectives. It lists a range of actions against each objective. The plan draws on recommendations from previous inspections; it is linked to the Audit Commission's KLOEs and addresses priorities which have been established by customers. Each action is clearly indexed with a reference number. Target dates, task managers, milestones and outcomes are all clearly set out. The status of each task is clearly colour-coded to indicate whether a task has been completed or whether or not it is on-target. The clarity of the Plan makes it easy to understand what the organisation is aiming to do to meet its strategic objectives and whether it is on course to achieve these tasks.
- 302** The long-term aims of the organisation are not clearly articulated. Although visions and aims are clear in the short and medium-term the longer-term objectives beyond 2010 have not been clearly communicated. The HRA business plan and the delivery plan looks only as far as 2010 and delivery of the decent homes standard. Operational staff are unclear about the longer-term objectives of the organisation. Senior officers and board members are clearer in their understanding that the long-term future was as a neighbourhood management company.
- 303** Priorities are based on an understanding of local needs and views of customers. The delivery plan has been developed by drawing on a wide range of research including analysis of the stock condition survey and the housing needs survey. The organisation is planning to improve the things that matter most to customers. The Delivery Plan is largely shaped by the product of extensive customer consultation over the past two years. The options appraisal process was led by tenant representatives. Practical priorities which arose from the consultation have been ranked in order of importance with the top four priorities being: keeping rents low, dealing with crime and anti-social behaviour, improving houses to modern standards and improving the appearance of the estates.
- 304** Aims are stretching and if achieved will make a measurable difference to service users. The Excellence Plan sets a milestone of achieving a three star excellence service by December 2006. Targets to reduce the refusal rates on voids are also particularly challenging.
- 305** Some targets within the Excellence Plan have not been met. Targets to circulate a draft Annual Maintenance Plan to the Council in May 2005 and to have it signed-off by the Board in June 2005 were not met. The target to appoint a Chief Executive by November 2005 was also not achieved.
- 306** There are some areas where the organisation has yet to articulate its own future direction and is dependent on the wider strategies of the Council. For example, the organisation does not have its own diversity and equalities strategy. It does however, link into the Council's recently published BME housing strategy. Plans for development of IT systems within 2010 have not yet been consolidated into a clear IT strategy for the organisation. Although the company has recognised that it has too many independent IT systems which are not integrated an internal review of these systems has not been translated into a comprehensive plan for future IT procurement.

- 307** Operational plans and strategies are well co-ordinated. The Excellence Plan makes reference to a range of the ALMO's and the Council's strategic plans. For example, under the strategic objectives relating to tackling anti-social behaviour the plan sets out how 2010 will deliver against the targets set out in the Safer Rotherham Partnership ASB Strategy. The Plan also demonstrates how 2010 will work in partnership with the Council to review and scope the delivery of the Neighbourhood Management Agenda. The Interim Chief Executive is a member of the local strategic partnership which indicates engagement by 2010 in the wider community agenda.
- 308** The ALMO has been established with a structure which helps to deliver the Council's wider neighbourhood agenda. The structure encompasses three neighbourhood co-ordinators which mirror the three constituencies and seven neighbourhood management areas which reflect the Council's area assemblies. This is important in ensuring consistency of approach as these areas are co-terminus with police and other community structures.
- 309** Proposals for meeting efficiency targets and improving value for money are not fully robust and specific. There is not yet a full value for money strategy in place. A formal strategy has still to be developed and an earlier commitment to have this in place by October 2005 has not been met. An interim strategy sets out how services will be reviewed but is only a high-level document with insufficient detail. For example, it states that there will be a review of all internal and external suppliers by March 2007 but does not provide a plan for how this will be delivered. An efficiency target of 1.25 per cent has been included in the management fee but it has not been specifically allocated to individual budgets.
- 310** 2010 does not have its own annual efficiency statement. The ALMO aims to have developed its own statement by March 2006. It has set a target for achieving 2.5 per cent efficiency savings by the same deadline. The Board approved a schedule for undertaking business process re-engineering of all services in September 2005 and the Board is monitoring the findings of these reviews every month. Partnership arrangements for the decent homes programme are currently being renegotiated and potential savings within the programme are being explored.
- 311** The organisation does not routinely monitor progress on meeting all aspects of its commitments to the Council's annual efficiency statement. Although the ALMO is able to identify where some significant efficiencies had been achieved, such as in void turnaround times, it does not produce regular reports highlighting all aspects of projected efficiencies. For example, although there is a predicted efficiency gain of £30,000 through reducing the number of evictions, it is not clear what progress had been made at the half-year stage.

- 312** Leadership within 2010 is not fully effective. Although the organisation formally started operating in May 2005 it had still not appointed a Chief Executive. Recruitment for the post started earlier in 2005 but was suspended when recruitment policies were not followed correctly. The organisation has been operating under the interim leadership of a consultant who was originally commissioned as a change manager. This means that the critical first period of the organisation has been a time of some uncertainty. Minutes of meetings between the Council and 2010 provide evidence of the concerns expressed by the Council at the unduly long time taken to fill this key role. 2010 announced the appointment of a new Chief Executive during December and it is expected that the post holder will take up her position in the new year.
- 313** Progress on the organisation's move towards becoming genuinely arms-length from the Council has been slower than could be expected. In the absence of a permanent Chief Executive there is a natural reluctance for the Council to distance itself from some aspects of operation. The organisation has been slow to recruit to some key posts such as an equalities and diversity officer and remains dependent on the Council's officers for support in this key area of work. It is apparent also that Council officers are less open to negotiate over service level agreements with an organisation which is currently under interim leadership.
- 314** The Interim Chief Executive is not being formally managed by the Board. Although informal links between the Chairman and the Interim Chief Executive are strong with regular monthly meetings and weekly telephone conversations no formal supervisory meetings take place. This means that the Board are not undertaking their role of managing the performance of the senior officer through the process of performance and development appraisals.
- 315** Members of the Board are not formally appraised by the Chairman. On the instruction of the Chairman, the Interim Chief Executive undertook appraisals and training needs assessment on all board members shortly after he started in May 2005. This arrangement is inappropriate as the Chief Executive's role is to serve and support the Board.
- 316** Progress in the development of the Board's role in leadership was hindered by an early disciplinary issue with a board member. This had a negative impact on all members of the Board. Although the issue has been successfully resolved, this was a major distraction for the Board at a time when it should have been developing clear leadership.
- 317** The Board has overcome its early problems and is developing into a cohesive body with a commitment to delivering improvement. Various events have contributed to the development of the Board. A series of away days and training events has allowed an opportunity for members to understand each other outside of the formal setting of the boardroom.

- 318** Mechanisms are in place to ensure that Board members have clear guidance on standards of conduct and behaviour. A code of conduct sets out how board members should act in terms of a range of issues such as disclosure of interests, relationships with residents, gifts, hospitality, confidentiality, political activities and equal opportunities. The code also draws attention to the findings of the Nolan Committee and the Code is clearly summarised. This makes it easy for board members to understand what is expected of them.
- 319** The Chairman of the ALMO takes a hands-on and proactive role. He demonstrates a clear commitment to the delivery of high standards of service and to the development of the wider neighbourhood agenda. There is a clear recognition of the links between the work of the ALMO and supporting local communities through improved quality of life and creating safer neighbourhoods.
- 320** Effective performance management arrangements are in place to drive improvement. Quality management systems support the organisation's ambitions to improve. The award of various quality management accreditations provides evidence that the organisation is committed to supporting staff to perform to the best of their abilities. Charter Mark was achieved by the ALMO and the Council's retained housing function in August 2005. Investors in People accreditation was retained as part of the Council in August 2005 and secured for 2010 in December 2005.
- 321** A personal development review (PDR) process is used to develop training and work programmes. All staff have formal six-monthly performance reviews. The PDR process has been inherited from the Council but 2010 has supplemented this with its own system of impact plans. These plans identify a series of work programmes for every member of staff to underpin the PDR process and ensure key linkages to the strategic objectives of the organisation, the development of the service through the 2010 excellence plan and the Audit Commission's key lines of enquiry as well as their individual job descriptions. Progress on these plans is closely monitored and is illustrated by a system of traffic lights.
- 322** Monthly key performance indicator (KPI) reports enable the management team, the Board and the Council to firmly monitor the management and maintenance performance of the company. The reports track progress on 14 KPIs against agreed control targets which are linked to the delivery plan objectives. The report provides a clear summary showing the percentage of KPIs which are on track to achieve targets and lists those which are not on target during the month. The reports highlight where remedial action has been necessary. The report shows comparisons with national indicators, the performance of all ALMOs and that of landlords in Yorkshire and Humberside. The KPI report also provides a wide range of other information including details of customer complaints, Rotherham Connect, councillor surgeries and customer inspection results. 2010 has recognised that the current suite of indicators is too narrow and is about to widen the suite to 33 indicators which picks up current omissions such as leaseholder services and staff management issues.

- 323** Good performance by Neighbourhood Officers is recognised and celebrated. The monthly KPI report highlights a gold, silver and bronze award winner in relation of neighbourhood office performance. The organisation has developed new ways to recognise good performance. 2010 is recognising the hard work and commitment of its staff by holding a Manager and Employee of the Month award. These are presented by the Chair of the Board at the monthly Board meetings.
- 324** Customers play a part in monitoring the operational performance of the company. The customer inspection service carries out regular monitoring of compliance with the published service standards. Void property inspections are carried out by diverse teams of inspectors including customers with physical disabilities. Customers carry out mystery shopping using scenarios such as a teenage housing applicant requiring advice and assistance. Reports from these customer reality checks and inspections are reported to management team, the Board and the Council through the monthly key performance indicator reports. This is important as it provides a detailed description to senior officers and Board members of how customers experience services. Customers are not involved in performance management in a wider strategic capacity.
- 325** Performance clinics provide a robust approach to tackling under-performance. Monthly clinics are used to review and evaluate performance against objectives and targets. Officers responsible for particular service areas in neighbourhood offices are required to present details on progress towards objectives and present details of the actions they propose to make to address areas for improvement. Clinics are attended by the Interim Chief Executive and other management team members. Meetings are structured to cover specific issues including investigating whether performance problems are caused by lack of capability. The clinics are also used as an opportunity for the management team to formally recognise good performance. Written records of clinics are maintained with performance areas which are causing concern being clearly identified with a red flag.
- 326** The Council takes a robust approach to scrutinising the performance of the ALMO. The arrangements set out within the management agreement are fully utilised to ensure that issues of under performance are addressed. Monthly meetings are held between the senior officers, councillors and Board members of the respective organisations and minutes of these meetings show evidence that there has been strong challenge. For example, the Council identified that performance on the reletting of void properties was starting to dip. It dealt with this by requesting more frequent performance reports and action plan was requested which ensured that processes were improved. This has led to the downward performance trend being successfully overcome. Quarterly performance reports are provided to the Council's Scrutiny Committee and the ALMO's Chief Executive is required to attend these twice a year to ensure high accountability.

- 327** Board members have clear guidance about their role in performance management. Terms of reference for the Performance Sub-Committee make it clear how Board members examine performance. The sub-committee's level of involvement is at an appropriate strategic level of looking at the company's performance against key performance indicators. This ensures that members do not become over-involved in individual operational matters. The Sub-committee makes recommendations to the Board on areas of performance that cause concern, and it is responsible for reviewing the implementation and contributing to the development of policy. The terms of reference also give it powers to commission service reviews.
- 328** The system of sub-committees is helping the Board to focus on high-level and key issues. Since the sub-committees were introduced, the amount of paper work received with the Board agenda has been significantly reduced. The governance arrangements for each of the sub-committees are clearly outlined. Terms of reference for each of the four committees set out the objectives and duties, their overall responsibility, frequency of meetings and arrangements for review of the terms. This ensures that the Board is able to focus on strategic issues as the sub-committees deal with more operational information.
- 329** The newly formed sub-committees are still bedding down but there are signs that they are actively providing a challenge in terms of service delivery issues. The minutes of the early meetings provide evidence that the sub-committees are challenging the management of the organisation on a wide range of issues including performance, the extent of resident involvement and the commitment to equalities and diversity issues.
- 330** Reports to the Board are generally clearly presented and are sent to board members with sufficient notice for them to be read and fully considered prior to the meeting. All reports provide an executive summary and list of recommendations at the head of the report. Reports also as a matter of course explain the consultation, financial, legal, personnel, environmental and equalities implications. The reports also give details of any links to other plans and name the accountable officer. Supporting documents are also referred to. Generally agendas and supporting papers are sent out at least a week prior to the meeting. On occasions where the papers have been sent out at short notice the Board has requested that the item be deferred. Until very recently, sub-committee reports have not been formally presented to the Board but this has now been addressed.
- 331** The company has developed a sound approach to risk management. It uses an IT software package to manage risk. It has developed an initial risk register and this forms part of the Excellence Plan. This has ensured that risks have been formally identified and that the register is frequently reviewed and updated as a designated officer is responsible for its maintenance. The risk owner is in all cases identified as the Chief Executive with an individual risk manager identified for each risk. Each risk has a separate risk assessment sheet which makes it clear what tasks must be undertaken with responsible officers and target dates identified. It also categorised the level of risk and the relative impact of each risk.

- 332** High levels of sickness absenteeism, identified in the indicative inspection are being addressed. A new electronic method of monitoring and prompting sickness interviews has been developed through the service level agreement with the Council's human resources provider. Monthly returns are produced detailing sectional sickness levels, this is analysed via the management team for areas of concern and action.
- 333** Board members are insufficiently involved in performance management of value for money. Board members confirmed at a recent Board meeting that they had not been consulted or involved in the review of service level agreements until a very late stage. The Development Sub-Committee which has a responsibility for the overview of cost performance does not receive reports showing comparisons with other landlords.
- 334** There are robust systems in place to capture and implement learning from other organisations. Rent procedures were reviewed following consultation with the Rent Excellence Network. A neighbouring ALMO has provided support to introduce online reporting of a range of services including ASB. This has resulted in improved access for people who want to report incidents of anti-social behaviour. The lettable void standard was developed with help from another ALMO. Satisfaction surveys indicate this has led to improvements in the quality of decoration, repair work and conditions of gardens.
- 335** The company has developed a 'learning from customers' culture within the workforce. There is a systematic analysis of customer feedback, comments and complaints. Examples of learning which have led to real benefits include the development of the repairs by appointment system and the introduction of the Houseproud standard for letting empty properties.
- 336** The organisation draws on the experience of other service providers in reviewing its practices. Prior to changing its office opening times 2010 looked at the opening times of three other ALMOs. It also compared its opening times with local post offices and drew on the experience of a review of the opening times of a local library.
- 337** Benchmarking with other ALMOs and landlords is used to improve access to services. 2010 benchmarked with three other landlords to establish a range of service standards in relation to access and customer care. As a result, customers now have better information about how to access services and how to complain when standards are not met. Comparisons were made with two other landlords to create a 'user-friendly' website. This has resulted in customers having online facilities for repairs, rent payments, customer suggestions and complaints.

- 338 The organisation has not demonstrated full self-awareness through its pre-inspection self-assessment. The self-assessment indicates that the organisation is not fully open about its weaknesses. The capacity section of the self-assessment makes no reference to the vacant posts within the senior management team nor does it identify where there are current gaps within the management structure. In other areas of the self-assessment, there was greater openness. For example, it identifies that income management can be improved through analysing the causes of debt, offering incentives to tenants to maintain clear rent accounts and carrying out an evaluation of procedures to ensure that there is not a reliance on evictions.

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

- 339 In our previous inspection, we found that the PDR process had recently been revised and, therefore, had yet to be fully embedded within the organisation, sickness absence was an issue and investment in IT systems had been insufficient and was, therefore, a priority.
- 340 In this inspection, we found that there are gaps in the capacity of the senior management team and uncertainty about future staffing structures. This is a very significant issue given the organisation's plans for increased investment in the housing stock. There is an over-reliance on support from the strategic landlord and consultants. Human resource and financial planning is under-developed. Board members bring a range of skills and there is an understanding of training needs. On balance, there are significant weaknesses in this area.
- 341 There are gaps in the capacity of the organisation's senior management team. The staffing structure provides for two equal posts of property manager to cover the respective responsibilities for construction and development. Both posts report directly to the Interim Chief Executive. One of these posts is vacant but until recently has been filled by a temporary consultant. Given the plans for major investment in the stock it is a significant omission that there is not a single accountable officer responsible for asset management. The current structure causes confusion in terms of responsibilities and the salary grade of the posts does not reflect the level of capabilities that are necessary for an individual to drive forward such a large investment programme. This means there is a significant risk of non-delivery of the planned investment programme.
- 342 A vacancy for the third neighbourhood co-ordinator, a post at management team level has never been filled. This vacancy potentially places further pressure on the existing management team members. Having been unsuccessful in attempts to recruit to the post on three occasions the organisation is undecided about whether to retain the post.

- 343** The crucial post of business manager has become vacant and has not been fully developed since the formation of the ALMO. This has left a significant gap in terms of corporate services management on a wide range of issues including finance, human resources, IT, health and safety and performance management. 2010 does not currently have a company secretary employed within the organisation but uses a specialist firm of solicitors. The gap in the capacity in relation to this post has had a negative impact in terms of developing financial management arrangements within the organisation and in terms of developing a robust approach to renegotiations of service level agreements.
- 344** Gaps within the staffing structure have left the organisation over-reliant on support from the retained housing service and consultants on significant activities. The ALMO does not employ an officer with specific responsibility for performance management. Individual officers within the ALMO prepare performance indicators for their areas of responsibility but these are forwarded to the strategic landlord's performance and quality unit for co-ordination and assembly into a full performance management report. Similarly, in the area of health and safety, the ALMO is reliant on the Council's Economic Development Services department for support. Without a degree of independence in these critical areas the organisation is not able to fully assert its arms length status from the Council.
- 345** Lack of management capacity within 2010 led to delays in the review of service level agreements. After the establishment of SLAs in April 2005, it was expected that the review of all agreements would start immediately on the formation of the ALMO. The review process started in August but did not progress quickly as the business manager who has since left the organisation did not undertake the programme of reviews as planned. 2010 has seconded an employee from the Council's Chief Executive's department to act on behalf of the ALMO in taking forward the review. Although the officer is acting in an impartial capacity this arrangement does not fully assert the independence of the organisation.
- 346** Board members have a wide range of skills and experience and provide a broad representation of relevant stakeholders. There are five service users including a leaseholder. There are five council representatives, all from the Labour group and the five independent members bring a balance of skills from a maintenance manager from another ALMO, a consultant in resident involvement, a specialist in human resources and training and a civil engineer. Although board members bring some financial skills this is an area identified by the Board for further development. There is no Board member with a legal services background.
- 347** There is an understanding of the skills and training needs of Board members. A skills audit and training needs assessment of Board members has been undertaken. The current training programme includes a wide range of subjects including governance, code of conduct, equalities and diversity and various housing management issues.

- 348** All learning and development requirements are timetabled and published into a schedule, and sent out to all staff on a quarterly basis. A range of methods are used to develop staff including learning and development awaydays, subject specific workshops and work shadowing. To compliment the investment in learning and development, all staff are issued with a learning and development passport which includes core competences training, workforce development and personal development. In addition, 2010 has developed a comprehensive learning and development programme with the objective of growing 'the managers of the future'. The recent accreditation of 2010 with Investors in People confirms this is an area of strength. However, induction programmes for new staff are not fully structured.
- 349** The partnership with RBT is helping to improve capacity to manage the ALMO's IT systems. The housing management IT system had been allowed to become outdated and several new releases of modules had not been implemented. Initially the staffing structure included an IT manager but this post has been deleted with responsibility for this passing to RBT who have now implemented the latest modules. The IT support provider has reviewed the ALMO's IT requirements with a view to integration and consolidation of the various systems. A further benefit of the partnership has been the provision of new hardware throughout the organisation.
- 350** Human resource planning is not sufficiently clear. The leadership of the organisation is not clear how it will proceed with recruitment to current senior vacancies. There is not clear direction on whether to fill the vacant posts of property manager or neighbourhood co-ordinator. While it may now be more appropriate to await guidance from a new Chief Executive these posts have been vacant for a long period giving a sense of a lack of clear direction. At the time of the inspection, recruitment to the vacant post of business manager had not started.
- 351** The ALMO feels it is being held back in developing its approach to human resources due to its procurement of services through the partnership agreement with RBT. The ALMO reports that it finds the processes operated in terms of capability issues to be longer than it would expect. There were further delays in the re-advertising of the Chief Executive post. Although the Resources Sub-Committee decided to appoint consultants in July 2005 it took until October before the vacancy was advertised.
- 352** The organisation has yet to develop its own comprehensive HR strategy and framework. 2010 uses the existing Council policies such as for sickness absence and bullying and harassment. In other, areas such as competency assessment, it has developed its own policies and guidance.
- 353** Financial management arrangements do not demonstrate that the ALMO is independent of the Council. 2010 has little control over the Housing Revenue Account. Budgets have been devolved for the decent homes work but this is not the case across all HRA budget headings. Financial and other management information is not currently readily available. The company recognises its problems with financial and other management information and is addressing this through a consultant.

- 354** The company does not have its own procurement strategy but relies on the Council's strategy. 2010's has produced an investment and procurement strategy but this falls short of a full procurement strategy. It outlines how 2010 will approach the decent homes investment programme, having regards to value for money, quality and the capacity to deliver a major investment programme up to 2010 and beyond. However, it is solely focused on the investment programme and mirrors the content of the organisation's investment plan.
- 355** The Council has had significant success in attracting inward investment into its housing estates. Regeneration work funded by SRB2 and the housing investment programme has delivered improvements over several years in areas of deprivation such as Eastwood Middle. Housing market renewal pathfinder funding is being widely used to ensure sustainability; examples of work undertaken include improvements to garage and parking areas. Resources from the Safer Neighbourhood team are effectively used to supplement housing management services on estates.

## Summary

- 356** Prospects for improvement are uncertain. There has been a lack of focus in delivering continuous improvement in areas which were judged to be strong in previous inspections. Delays in developing stable leadership are affecting the organisation's ability to assert its arms length status. The long-term aims of the organisation are not clearly articulated and the organisation has yet to develop its own strategic plans in some key areas. Board members are insufficiently involved in performance management of value for money. Gaps in the capacity of the senior management team and uncertainty about the future staffing structure present significant barriers to improvement. There is an over-reliance on support from the Council and consultants on significant activities.
- 357** There are however, some positive drivers towards improvement. There is a strong track record of improving services over the past three years. The company's aims and future plans are well coordinated with national and local priorities. The Excellence Plan is helping to drive continuous improvement. Effective performance management systems are in place and quality management systems support the organisation's ambition to improve. Learning from others is captured and used to inform decisions on service delivery.

## Appendix 1 – Performance indicators

<b>Performance indicator</b>	<b>Rotherham 2002/03</b>	<b>Rotherham 2003/04</b>	<b>Mets top 25 per cent 2003/04</b>	<b>Rotherham 2004/05</b>
BVPI 63 Average SAP rating	57	58	60.5	59
BVPI 66a Percentage rent collected	98.10	97.72	97.23	98.60
BVPI 74 Percentage tenants satisfied with overall service	73	75.5	Not applicable	Not applicable
BVPI 75 Percentage tenants satisfied with TP	n/a	61.7	Not applicable	Not applicable
BV184a LA homes which were non-decent at start of year	51.3	47	40	78
BV184b Change in proportion of non-decent homes	12.9	18.8	15.45	11.3
BV185 Percentage repairs appointments made and kept	10.2	65.3	67.7	76.82

## Appendix 2 – Progress against previous recommendations

**Table 2 Repairs and maintenance re-inspection**

Recommendations	Progress
Ensure that the repairs and maintenance service improvement plan is updated to reflect the recommendations of this report especially in relation to procurement and future service delivery, ensuring full customer involvement in prioritising and producing a realistic and achievable service improvement plan with clear milestones, that covers the short, medium and longer-term. A copy to be forwarded to the Housing Inspectorate by the end of July 2004.	Complete.
Explore the improvement of the call centre systems to automatically flag information on vulnerable tenants.	Complete.
Develop an action plan to introduce evening and weekend appointments for repairs.	Complete.
Ensure that all members, staff and tenant representatives are trained on equality and diversity issues and that a clear strategy is developed to increase customer involvement from black and ethnic minority communities and other hard-to reach groups.	Complete.
Introduce closer management and monitoring of budgets to ensure budgets are spent appropriately and systems are in place to forecast overspends and reported to senior managers and members.	Complete.
Immediately review gas procedures to gain access to homes to reduce the ten week process to no more than three weeks.	Complete.
Review the decoration allowance policy and procedure and introduce an equitable system of decoration allowances using value for money schemes such as vouchers.	Complete.
Examine and review the offer procedure for voids to reduce the level of refusals.	Complete.
Review the representation of tenants on forums and panels and put in place support mechanisms for tenants to participate.	Complete.

<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>Progress</b>
Develop wider tenant participation to support the Council's objectives.	Partially complete.
Review the PDR process to ensure consistency in its application and objectives.	Complete.
Examine in the short-term monitoring of sickness levels within the Housing Service and develop robust reporting systems and mechanisms.	Complete.
Progress the implementation of the salary scheme and improve the percentage of multi-skilled operatives as a proportion of the total number of operatives.	Complete.
Undertake a thorough review of options for the future procurement of the repairs and maintenance the service that is both transparent and ensures that value for money is achieved and can be demonstrated by the end of September 2004.	Partially complete.
Implement all recommendations specific to the repairs and maintenance service as highlighted in the Annual Audit and Improvement Letter 2003/04, especially in relation to district audit's analysis of the Council's responsive repairs which was completed in 2002.	Complete.

Source: Audit Commission 2004

**Table 3 ALMO indicative inspection**

<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>Progress</b>
<b>Service access</b>	
Develop clear service standards in conjunction with customers for all elements of the housing service. This should be completed by the end of January 2005.	Complete.
Develop and implement systems to facilitate systematic learning from customer complaints, and ensure this is used for quality assurance purposes. This should be completed by 31 March 2005.	Complete.
In consultation with customers, determine whether the current office opening hours including those of support agencies are appropriate and are maximising service access. This should be completed by 31 January 2005.	Complete.

<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>Progress</b>
Ensure that information is routinely collected about customers and analysed to improve the customer information available, identify and address any potential barriers to access and improve the overall satisfaction with the service.	Complete.
<b>Diversity</b>	
Ensure training on equalities and diversity is delivered to all staff and members by 31 March 2005.	Complete.
Ensure that all survey data is monitored by ethnicity and develop a framework by which improved customer profile data will be used to analyse service access and delivery issues and develop a framework for reporting the monitoring of service usage by different groups to Cabinet.	Complete.
Implement the principles within the Commission for Racial Equality Code of Practice for Rented Housing, and ensure these are integrated fully with the equalities and diversity action plan.	Complete.
Complete the development of strategies which articulate the council's agreed approach to addressing the needs within the borough eg, Older Persons and BME Strategy by December 2004.	Partially complete.
<b>Value for money</b>	
In consultation with customers, explore the relative costs and benefits of current service delivery approaches such as neighbourhood offices and the alternatives, and use this to inform the establishment of appropriate service access arrangements. This work should be completed to inform a clear plan for resulting changes by April 2005.	Complete.
Undertake a review of existing SLAs in consultation with customers using a process that addresses both VFM and customer needs by April 2005 and develop SLAs for all services procured by November 2005.	Partially complete.
With residents, agree targets to reduce the transaction costs associated with rent collection until such costs demonstrate value for money when compared with similar organisations.	Partially complete.

Recommendations	Progress
<b>Housing income management</b>	
Develop more efficient systems to profile rent arrears with a view to organising the effective targeting of action.	Complete.
Complete a review of the arrears write-off procedure with a view to agreeing challenging targets and robust monitoring of individual cases in order to reduce the levels of write-offs which have been approved over the last three years.	Complete.

*Source: Audit Commission 2004*

## Appendix 3 - Documents reviewed

- 1 Before going on-site and during our visit, we reviewed various documents that were provided for us. These included:
  - corporate strategies;
  - policies and procedures;
  - performance reports; and
  - publicity material.

## 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:
  - inspections of estates;
  - visits to the offices;
  - visits to estates;
  - file checks;
  - inspections of empty homes; and
  - interviews and focus groups with tenants and staff.

## Appendix 4 – Positive practice

- 1 *'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.)*

### **Equality impact assessments**

- 2 Impact assessments have been undertaken on a range of strategies and policies including the housing income strategy, managing introductory tenancies and service standards. Impact assessments have led to steps being taken to promote greater awareness of religious festivals. For example, a Ramadan calendar was produced in consultation with local communities and this has been circulated to neighbourhood offices. This has resulted in staff knowing when it is inappropriate to call tenants.

### **Furnished tenancies**

- 3 Furnished tenancies are provided to support the sustainability of tenancies. The furnished home scheme was introduced to assist customers setting up a home for the first time. It also assists with the sustainability of tenancies by helping people avoid going into debt and having to take out loans to buy furniture. The scheme also assists customers in moving into their home quicker, speeding up entitlement to Housing Benefits.

### **Partnership to tackle anti-social behaviour**

- 4 There is very close liaison between 2010 officers and other agencies with the Neighbourhood Champions attending daily briefings with police and neighbourhood wardens. Action plans for neighbourhood champions defining local priorities are agreed with partners.